

STORIES OF THE SPONGE FISHERS

by Yannis Yérakis, with preface by Spiro Ampelas

Preface:

[This is the first page of the translation – other pages will be added shortly.]

At some point in the 1960s, Yannis Yérakis (1887-1971) felt the need to write down some of his youthful memories in a school notebook, to bear witness, and also, as he said, "so as not to take them with him".

Born in Kalymnos, then under the Ottoman Empire, into a sponge-fishing family, in 1900 (at the age of 13) he was sent to Russia, to work in a factory. This was common practice at the time, because parents wanted to protect their children from poverty, and from jobs at sea, with their terrible associated dangers. But the working conditions in Tsarist Russia were so dreadful that after two years the young Yannis preferred to quit and return to his island, where he became a naked diver during three fishing seasons, in the summers of 1903 to 1905. Again, the results were not up to his hopes and in 1906, he was obliged to return to St. Petersburg, where he was to live the experience of the October Revolution and its dramas. In 1921 he fled to Athens, and had to stay there, given that Kalymnos had fallen under Italian rule. He was only able see his beloved home again after the Dodecanese became part of Greece in 1947.

His "*Sfoungaradhikès istories*" ("Stories of sponge fishermen") were published in 1999 by the Kalymniot Association of Athens. Yannis Yérakis had married a sister of Jean Ampélas, my father, who, although he became a doctor to escape the fate of the sponge industry, was for several years owner of a *gangava* in Sfax (Tunisia) where he had settled, as had many of his island compatriots.

I wanted to translate this document into French first of all for my descendants who do not read Greek. Maïa Fourt has strongly encouraged me and helped me in this process. Daniel Faget, a maritime historian at the University of Aix-Marseille, to whom I submitted my work, was impressed by the quality of Yérakis' testimony, and prompted me to publish it in France, with the edition of a preface of my own. (The manuscript – *Sponge Fishers : Kalymnos 1900 – St Petersburg 1917* has been submitted for publication to the Presses Universitaires de Provence.)

The following is a preview of some excerpts describing the fishing campaign of the summer of 1903. It is translated by Ed Emery, to whom I express my thanks. My hope is that these short extracts will awaken the interest of an English-language publisher, with a view to publishing the book in its entirety.

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[Born in Sfax, from a father born in Kalymnos and a mother from Hydra]

Translated by Ed Emery