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# Family /War: A Cautionary Tale

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# DISSIDEN**CES**

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## *Family / War: A Cautionary Tale*

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The origins of this essay lie in at least two narratives, one personal, one professional. Because it is precisely the personal and the public that comprise my subject, I'll relate both.

When I was very young I knew things about my father that had no plot, no narrator, no audience. I don't remember being told these things. They were just there, like unwelcome relatives installed for the long haul, sponging off my parents and preventing our family from living completely in the present. They existed with a level of substantiality equal to that of my ancestresses who had thrown themselves off the cliffs of Souli rather than be taken by the Turks and of my forefathers who had fought the Trojans. Whereas it was easy to want to make room in our crowded house for the heroines and heroes from Greece, it was a lot harder to live with the War Experiences. They took up space, had to be fed and placated. In Their presence one was supposed to

be grateful and shut up. They had names like trapped, abandoned, cheated, terrified, betrayed, and starved. And they were barely kept in check by one called saved.

(Kacandes Daddy's War, 1; N.B. bold in original)

*While studying texts written by children whose parents had experienced major traumas, particularly traumas related to the European catastrophes of the mid-twentieth century, I found myself puzzling over the seamlessness and apparent completeness of the accounts these adult children offered of their parents' lives. My family, too, was connected to those disasters, but unlike the authors I was studying, I did not know much about what had happened to my own parents, especially my father. It didn't seem fair to me to scrutinize the coherencies of those Holocaust family memoirs, as I came to call them [1], when I had never seriously tried to pursue my own family history. A detailed narrative of my search subsequent to that realization is offered in the book I eventually published about my paternal family's mid-century experiences in Greece: Daddy's War: Greek American Stories (2009). To summarize that account here, after conducting a certain amount of historical research and a large number of interviews with family members of two generations, I still felt incapable of rendering a coherent tale. For this reason, and others, I asked my editor to include a generic designation on the cover: "A Paramemoir," in order to point at the ways that my book foils many readerly expectations for memoir, especially those for chronology, coherency and omniscience.*

The first narrative is highly personal, in the sense of relating to an individual's private world.

Specifically, I was trying to capture what I believed to be my earliest postmemories of the Axis occupation of Greece and the beginnings of the Greek civil war as my father had experienced

them. Though the first passage is not written in the language of a young child, it is trying to capture the inner world of a toddler, of me as a toddler. The subsequent pages try to relate how my sense of my father's war experiences changed as I grew into a child, adolescent and then young adult. The revenants—referred to by words appearing in bold above and throughout the book--as I first encountered them turned into narratives, and eventually those vague narratives acquired more detail; finally through the research I did as a middle-aged adult they were juxtaposed to and analyzed in light of verifiable historical accounts of the world war, occupation and civil war. I had not had any real preparation for trying to compose an account of my earliest postmemories. Even after numerous conversations with my close friend and collaborator Marianne Hirsch, the coiner of the term postmemory [2], it was still not clear to me how to describe verbally what I instinctively felt were my postmemories of atrocities I had not witnessed myself. I wrote and rewrote this passage and when it achieved the form in which it is printed here, I felt it accorded with my earliest consciousness, at least as I could tap into it as an adult.

The second narrative is one that most probably has analogs for all readers of this journal and therefore does not need much glossing here; it's a project narrative like those often found in prefaces of academic books or sometimes in shorter form at the beginning of essays or scholarly talks: how I came to be doing this work. It is my personal conviction that all professional work we do has some connection to our autobiography; still, I'll admit that this project had more obvious ties to my private being than many others. To demonstrate this point, I have asked the editors to intercalate the two narratives. My goal in what follows is to illustrate this entanglement further by sharing two categories from my analysis of the stories I had gathered from the eyewitness generation for Daddy's War. For those readers who are unfamiliar with both me and the book, the only other preliminary remark I want to make is that I had been

researching and writing about memory, trauma, witnessing, and the Holocaust for years before I attempted to apply some of the things I had learned through that work to the ghosts who had lived at our house.

My father, John George Kacandes, was born in Newark, New Jersey in December 1929. His Greek immigrant parents had four more children, one of whom died at age three months. In July 1937, my grandmother headed to Greece with the four surviving children, my father, his brothers Harry and Nick, the latter just an infant, and their sister Pearl, ostensibly to visit family while my grandfather saved money so that they could buy their own home in America. My grandmother managed to return with all four children to the United States in October 1945, having survived war, occupation, famine, and the first two rounds of the Greek civil war [3]. Because my father was the oldest male child, he bore the brunt of the responsibility, along with my grandmother, for trying to feed himself and the other children, despite the facts that he was only ten years old when the war in Greece began in October 1940 and fourteen when it ended in September 1944. His experiences included long periods of living in Athens cut off from his mother and siblings, begging, selling cigarettes, working for the Italian and German occupiers, running messages for the Greek underground, probably being arrested at least twice, once for stealing food and once as a result of being mistakenly identified as a Jew because he was circumcised, and fighting with the British and their Greek allies against the Greek Communist partisans for control of Athens and the Pelopponesus after the war against the Germans was over. The first part of my paramemoir is the most memoir-like in that it traces my own trajectory in relation to these events; the bulk of the book contains versions of various events as they were told to me by numerous members of two generations of my immediate and extended family; then I analyze

some aspects of those stories; and in the volume's perhaps most unusual last part, I address my father to co-witness to some of what he had gone through to the extent that I now understood it [4]. Two of my analytical observations about my corpus of traumatic stories concern how the storytellers situate anecdotes in interpersonal relationships rather than in a chronology, and how details which the eyewitnesses in all likelihood did not experience first hand are nonetheless incorporated into their memories of things they did live through themselves. I hope it is clear even from these brief descriptions how the personal and the public or extra-personal are enmeshed.

### **Situating stories in interpersonal relationships**

In the majority of interviews I conducted, informants do not remember very many dates per se, nor adhere to chronological narrating very often. To put it differently, no one but me seemed to be particularly concerned about when something happened. However, my family raconteurs were quite strikingly consistent in embedding "events" in interpersonal connections. Sometimes these connections then led to discovering a date by either the teller or the listener. For instance, when I was trying to find out whether she might have an explanation for why my father expressed more hatred toward the Italian occupiers than toward the Germans, my father's first cousin Zoé immediately responded not with facts, an opinion or an analysis, but rather with a story about the Italians executing the mayor [πρόεδρος] and burning the village in which her nuclear family had taken refuge. She explained in vivid terms how she had grabbed her baby brother Harámbos and had fled with him in her arms to the furthest corner of the house, which the Italians left untouched, Zoé believed, because the owner had drawn a swastika on the door. The Italians departed the house Zoé was hiding in and set the house next door on fire. I asked

her when this frightening event had occurred, but she couldn't answer that question. She knew it was summer, but she had no idea about the year. In a different part of the interview she told me that her youngest brother had been born in June 1941. It fit. I knew that the Italians had occupied Roúmeli [5] in Summer 1941 in the wake of the successful German military campaign of April and Greece's division among the Axis powers. But Zoé did not and perhaps could not say to me: the Italians tried to burn down the village in Summer 1941. The shaping of memory through relationships was underscored by two other things Zoé told me in that short sequence: She went to grab the baby because she was the oldest sister. Also, having established why Zoé hated the Italians, I asked for her opinion of the Germans, and she told me, “Δεν είχα επαφή μαζί τους” [I didn't have any contact with them].

The focus of family stories is rarely on what happened and much more often on who was involved and how the speaker is connected to that person or those persons. Zoé did not offer an opinion of the Germans because she didn't interact with them. In yet another example, my father couldn't tell me when they closed down his school, but me mentioning his school triggered his narration of a series of anecdotes about a few people he had known there and in turn memory of those relationships took my father's narrating to other places and times. In one sequence, mention of his schoolmate, Giórgios Papandréou, the son, leads to an explanation of Andréas Papandréou, the politician brother, then of Giórgios Papandréou, the politician father, and of Zoé Kavéli, the actress mother, which leads to the thought of seeing Giórgios the son with Giórgios the father in a limosine at the end of the war, which leads back to playing hooky with Giórgios the son before the war. Thus this quasi reflex to explain interpersonal relationships can lead to much jumping around chronologically.



For the sake of comprehensibility of the published book, I often began or cut-off from the longer interview what I decided retrospectively constituted a story segment in order to minimize some of that achronology. Despite these efforts, as I was working on the family stories section, I felt so concerned about a reader's ability to follow the narration within an individual snippet or the order within the story section as a whole, that I stopped what I was doing and created a section I called "A Possible Chronology." [I note a parallel phenomenon, that in writing this section of this essay, I felt I could not go straight to my analysis, but rather had to orient my readers through a barebones chronology.] In other words, regardless of my sense that I could not produce a family history and, as mentioned in the outset of this essay, had determined that I would not try to create a coherent narrative where there was not one, I couldn't even proceed myself to present these stories without providing some kind of chronological framework which would structure them for myself and eventually in stylized and shortened form for readers (Kacandes Daddy's War 48-50). To put it another way: As told by my relatives, stories are structured, but they are structured by situations or by networks of personal relationships. I tried to reflect these principles by my invention of the overall achronological genre of the paramemoir and by organizing the story section by "topic": "School Closing," "Family Deaths and Near Deaths," "Arrest and Deportation," etc. Still, the American part of my identity yearned for comprehensibility even if comprehensiveness would elude me, and so I imposed a chronological supraorganization on the thematically organized snippets, commencing with the topic of how my grandparents first met and what led my grandmother to return to Greece in 1937 and concluding with versions of stories related to the family's departure from Greece in 1945 and their return to the United States.

## **The Fragility of Memory, Introduced Details**

In her foundational study of Eyewitness Testimony, which first appeared in 1979 and was reissued in 1996, psychologist and adjunct professor of law Elizabeth F. Loftus comments that “People’s memories are fragile things. It is important to realize how easily information can be introduced into memory, to understand why this happens, and to avoid it when it is undesirable” (1996 ed: 87). Loftus’s concern in summarizing more than a century of research on memory, including research she conducted, is mainly directed toward clarifying the limitations to eyewitness testimony in legal proceedings. Her explanations about how easily information (accurate or inaccurate) can be introduced into an individual’s memory of an event personally witnessed or experienced should serve as sobering warnings to any would-be oral historian, memoirist or biographer: “In real life, as well as in experiments, people can come to believe things that never really happened” (62). My reading of Loftus helped me identify some aspects of family stories as traceable to introduced information. I realized that even hypothesizing about this process could in itself provide me with further insight into my family’s experiences.

For example, I have no reason to doubt that at some point in 1940-41, my grandmother did, in fact, try to leave Roúmeli with her children and get to Athens for the purpose of departing Greece. It seems logical to assume that the event that pushed her to take this step would have been the invasion by the Italians at the Greek-Albanian border (end October 1940), since Greece had basically been unaffected by the war in northern Europe until that invasion and funds sent by my grandfather were getting through to my grandmother up to that point, and that the circumstance that prevented her/them from succeeding to depart would have been the invasion of Greece by the Germans (April 1941), since the German army defeated the Greek and British forces and arranged for an Axis occupation of the entire country.

The failed attempt to leave Greece, like so many anecdotes, came up more than once during the main interview I conducted with my father (30 April 2005), when I was trying to figure out when and under what circumstances he left private school, and when I posed a question about what he had told me the first time. Here is the first mention:

IRENE: So what do you remember about the day they actually dissolved the school? Were you just kind of going along-

JOHN: The school? no

IRENE: How did that happen that?

JOHN: I think probably that probably Italy had started the war in Albania and um when we got to--When my mother got notice to report to the American embassy, whatever date they invaded Greece, I don't know

IRENE: October 28, 1940, yup?

JOHN: And then we. We were already on our way to Athens to leave with the last of the Americans before the German occupation. But we got as far as Θήβα--Thebes is a big city before Athens-

IRENE: Yup

JOHN: -and from those plains we watched the Germans parachute into Athens.

IRENE: Uhhum; you actually saw that yourself?

JOHN: Oh yeah. (Kacandes, *Daddy's War*, 86-87)

My father can't tell me a date, but he associates the message from the embassy with the "date they invaded Greece." This is ambiguous, since he could have meant when the Italians invaded, as I obviously was assuming at the time by offering the date of late October 1940, or he could have meant when the Germans invaded six months later. But in either case, he tells me

something I had never heard before: that from Thebes he sees Germans parachuting into Athens. A few moments later, I try to return to this report. I note that even though dates had come up just minutes prior, the issue of when the attempt to leave Greece occurred is contested again:

IRENE: So, um, you lived there [in Kolopetinítsa, his paternal family's village] for a while and then you referred to going to Thebes and trying to get out of the country; that was after that period.

JOHN: [raises pitch and volume] Oh no! I never mentioned going to Thebes! No- when we were called by the American Embassy to get ready to leave, Greece, in nineteenthirty- -1939, we got as far as Thebes and the Germans had invaded.

IRENE: No, the Germans- that's why I'm asking you Dad, the Germans didn't get there until early in '41. In '39 they had invaded Poland. And so the Americans might have been wanting to get you guys home.

JOHN: Let me try to get this- [sounds very annoyed] From Thebes I watched the Germans parachuting into Athens.

IRENE: Okay, good. So I can figure out when that was. [6]

Here, as in my earlier examples, chronology is secondary to my witness. The main issue for my father is what he saw, his personal relationship to events. For me, the problem or rather point of interest, is that I actually could not "figure out when that was," because not a single history book nor historian nor Theban eyewitness I consulted, mentioned anything about parachutists being part of the invasion of Boeotia (the region of Thebes) or of Attica. Why is it, then, that my father insisted to me not once, but twice that he had seen parachutists? Why did he insist the Germans were parachuting into Athens, when one can't see Athens from Thebes? Was he trying to aggrandize the situation the family was in?

I now don't think so. Rather, I believe my father was remembering just how serious the threat to them was. If my grandmother were trying to get her children out of the country because she thought they were in danger, she would not have abandoned the effort unless a more immediate danger threatened them. That is to say: I'm sure my father and his family saw with their own eyes some aspect of the German advance toward the capital that made them fear for their lives and frightened them into turning around and retreating to their village. That my father has that "something" entrenched in his memory as "parachutists" is due, I hypothesize following Loftus, to introduced information about events that occurred in the following weeks: the use of parachutists to try to secure the strategic Corinth canal on April 26 and/or the German invasion of Crete on May 18. My father might have seen something of what occurred at Corinth since it is close to his area of Greece, though he told me he did not. He could not have personally witnessed any aspect of the Cretan invasion. However, both events were reported widely in Greece, with the Cretan invasion being discussed all over Europe and beyond for its scale, its loss of life on both sides—and its 10,000 parachutists. It would have been virtually impossible for my father not to have heard something about the German-Greek-British debacle in Crete, and he may even have seen images diffused in newspapers, magazines or broadsheets. The fact that this information would have come to him closely following his eyewitnessing of some aspect of the German invasion in Thebes would have facilitated adding the parachutists to his memory of that traumatic occurrence. As Loftus puts it: "Postevent information can not only enhance existing memories but also change a witness's memory and even cause nonexistent details to become incorporated into a previously acquired memory" (55). Once the idea of parachutists participating in the German invasion had been introduced to my father's memory of his family's

attempted escape, it never left, as my subsequent attempts to present the historical evidence to him have proven.

The idea of something that may not have occurred empirically becoming part of a personal story has been, of course, an important concept for psychoanalysis for decades (think of Freud, but also of Donald Spence's work on narrative truth and historical truth). There is a by now well-known clash between historians and psychoanalysts about the value of Holocaust video testimony and specifically about the crematoria destroyed in the attempted Auschwitz revolt reported by Dori Laub in his widely read coauthored book Testimony (59-63). I have used Laub's conclusion that his witness may not know the correct number of chimneys blown up, but that she can and does testify to something important for herself and the historical record by talking about those chimneys, that is, she is testifying to an act of resistance that broke the frame of death that was at the core of the Nazi extermination camps. Along these lines I can reinterpret the value of what my father says he witnessed by remarking not its historical inaccuracy, but rather its ability to testify to the quality of the fear engendered by what my family had seen; the sight must have been as terrifying to them as that of thousands of German parachutists to the Greeks and their British allies on the ground in Crete. It cut off my family's advance toward "Athens," the place that meant: escape, America, their spouse and father, and safety. Furthermore, this obstacle between the family and Athens meant that they were now "trapped," a word my father has used over and over again, a word I "knew" from my earliest childhood.

I believe the anecdotes related above illustrate well the entanglement of the personal and the historical/public/factual for the eyewitness generation. But surely they also illustrate that oral testimony can have a variety of impacts on the work of any researcher. With regard to my first set of observations, the fact that my informants structured their stories by interpersonal

connection rather than by chronology meant that I had to figure out a way to keep chronology itself clear for me and my readers. In my second point about the fragility of memory, a disparity between what my informant was telling and the historical facts as they have come down to us eventually led me to reevaluate the importance and quality of a specific event—trying to escape from Greece--for the informant.

Observant readers of this essay will have also noticed the hints of what was at stake for me personally that prevented me from reacting more quickly and sympathetically to the exigencies and value of the oral testimony I was receiving. The interview transcripts became unexpected mirrors where I saw myself reflected, not always as attractively as imagined. I expressed interest, support, excitement, to be sure, but I also interrupted, contested, corrected, and worst of all, sometimes failed to listen carefully enough, thereby occasionally missing hints of topics I so desperately wanted to learn about. Fortunately, being confronted with my ultimate inability to reconstruct the personal past of previous generations with any certainty or completeness has produced a certain humility in me that I'm thankful for acquiring. And learning some things nonetheless about the actual struggles and pain endured by my paternal family in Greece helped dissipate the rage I had carried for so long about the emotional baggage I felt my father had saddled his children with. To come to a close, then, if not a conclusion, I would relate my cautionary tale here to the central topic of this issue in yet another way by observing that it is precisely in the nature of civil war among other kinds of interpersonal violence to bring the personal and the public into direct conflict and to destroy relationships; stories like those I have related here witness to both types of tragedy if only we let them.

## **Notes**

[1] I use this term, Holocaust family memoir, to describe a small but noteworthy number of personal texts produced by those who count themselves as familially connected to the Shoah because they are narratives drawing on the personal experience of their authors and of members of those authors' families.

[2] In Hirsch's conception "postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (22).

[3] How could it be otherwise than that the periodization of the Greek civil war is highly contested? The framework I am drawing on considers conflicts among resistance groups during the Axis occupation as the first phase; the second as urban fighting set off by police violence during December 1944 demonstrations organized by the Greek communists against the Greek government supported by the British and installed shortly after the Germans leave Greece; and the third, most protracted and most geographically extensive from 1946-1949, this schema is followed, for instance, by Clogg 2002. For a different periodization and one more sympathetic to the left than Clogg's, see Panourgiá 2009.

[4] I developed my idea of cowitnessing from a similar concept used by psychotherapists but for the purpose not of psychotherapy but rather for of reading literature of/as trauma (see Kacandes Talk Fiction 89-140). In Daddy's War I wrote an extended letter to my father to produce a story of his war trauma, not so much through a mastery of the facts, but rather to testify to what can and cannot be known about what happened to him, to what went wrong, to cause and effect, and to appropriate affect (262-335).



[5] Roúmeli technically refers to all of Central Greece, however, the inhabitants of current Fokída, the area near and around Delphi, refer more narrowly to their region as Roúmeli.

[6] This comes from the same interview as the previous quotation, however, this section has not been published previously.

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