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ALLE GUTEN WAREN TOT

English sample translation © Sylvia Franke

[pp. 9 –20]

α

Pentelic marble may have aesthetic appeal, but as flooring it has its limitations. The world has the early Athenians to thank for this painful realization. They experienced first-hand the risk of injury posed by walking on wet floors. After the first unfortunate deaths the problem received prompt attention, but chiselled warnings of “Caution! Slippery When Wet” did not serve as a deterrent. Their pedagogical efforts fell short – people paid no attention, or if they did, continued nevertheless to slip and fall. And aesthetically speaking, the inscriptions carved into the stone temples, pillars and walls constituted a brutal attack on Athenian architecture. Indeed, the Board of Tourism saw this coming (having consulted the Oracle of Delphi), but could do nothing about it (also predicted by the Oracle).

Public displeasure grew. The media talked of government mismanagement and failure. The rulers, fearing an angry revolt of their citizens, acted decisively – having no idea that in so doing they would change the course of events forever.

In a seventeen-hour emergency meeting of the Council of Athens, a concept was developed that, even today, serves as a foundational tenet of society. This concept underpinned Greek civilization, making it great and ultimately destroying it: *competition*.

The residents of the Attica Peninsula were invited to present their best ideas for getting the situation under control – a situation that Herodotus would later dub the “Marble Incident” in his long-lost but then-found writings. Notable aristocrats from the leading families of Athens tried their hand at finding a solution. Hypotimus (who had come into wealth and prestige thanks to his father’s merchant fleet) proposed that uniformed and well-trained slaves be placed at the ready as sidewalk escorts for Athenian citizens. The project failed during beta testing – it was labour intensive and the logistics were complex. Hypotimus was exempted from business taxes for a decade as compensation for his efforts and for the uniforms. He had a monument erected to commemorate his important charitable contribution. To this day the statue can be seen in the National Garden, not far from the Greek Parliament building – it is incorrectly attributed to Euripides.

By the way, this is not unusual. The statue and bust industry in early Athens was flourishing. This called for innovation in production processes. After a few setbacks – a prototype for the assembly line (later to be introduced by Henry Ford) proved mostly useless for sculpting –

the industry switched over to mass-producing five standard models. Any Athenian could pick out the model that most resembled them and, for a small additional charge, have it customized. This launched a new fashion trend, for if you had a beard that mostly hid your facial features it was easier to find a suitable standard model. Made-to-order busts were very much the exception – they were offered by only a few manufacturers and cost a fortune.

The contest for the best idea to avoid slips and falls on marble ran for several months and led to the invention of the cable car, the glider, and cleated running shoes. Marble stayed slippery. Amongst the many contestants who tried to develop sustainable alternatives, Rumelos was a standout. The one-time singer and poet (he ended up in politics by capitalizing on his celebrity) came up with the idea of a non-slip mat made from hemp fibre that could be carried with you or permanently installed at known danger points. The mat was acclaimed by experts as an important breakthrough. It was easy to produce and biodegradable. Prototypes were sold under the table for astronomical prices. Before this approach could be properly tested in everyday use, it came to light that Rumelos had bought up all the hemp supplies in Attica (and as far away as Mykonos) to secure a monopoly and make a mint from booming sales. Although Rumelos had broken no laws, people were outraged by these speculative profits. His rivals seized the opportunity to force his exile to the island of Aegina where, until an advanced age, he ran a nightclub popular with Athenians and where he would sing his greatest hits. He wrote a song about the Marble Incident called “Whenever It Rains”, and though it could not match his early successes, it was used aeons later as the musical accompaniment for the premiere of the Aristophanes play *The Birds*.

Moon after moon passed. In the summer months nobody worried about the problem as it hadn’t rained and few Athenians remained in town – most having fled to cooler homes on the coast. Incidents of slipping and falling were few and far between. Besides, it was far too warm to come up with any ingenious ideas. Then came autumn, and with autumn the first rains, and with the first rains the shepherd boy Kommenos. He arrived from the Arta Mountains to pick up some orders for his father who ran a meat processing plant back home. On his way to the Agora of Athens Kommenos was walking by just as an elderly man slipped. His firm grip saved the man from falling and, overcome with gratitude, the man invited him to his home for a reward. Kommenos declined out of a sense of duty, for he needed to sort out his father’s business as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, he was somewhat surprised that nobody had done anything about the slippery marble. He then learned of the contest and of the many failed attempts to take the shine off the widely-used flooring.

“But it’s quite simple. All you have to do is chisel lots of small holes into the flooring. That’s how we do it in the mountains – otherwise we’d never make it to the top in one piece.” The idea seemed no worse than the ones that came before, and so a trial was conducted on a test stretch. It met with immediate and resounding success. Kommenos was awarded an olive branch from the most sacred tree of the City of Athens, together with honorary citizenship for life. Despite his youth, he was offered a seat on the Council of the Sages – which he declined. He wanted to get back to the Arta Mountains to help out his father. In 1221 B.C.E. Sopholith the Elder issued the so-called “Marble Decree” requiring that all public marble floors be equipped with tightly-arranged notches, so as to put an end to slips due to moisture, be it from rainfall or other natural event. Today this decree is viewed as the precursor to DIN standardization.

From then on there were strict guidelines for marble floors in the polis of Athens. Though the Opposition (formed from the Council of the Contrarians) tried to depict the decree as a blatant make-work scheme, the number of pedestrian injuries shrank in the first year to a fraction of previous years. The reduction in surgeries due to walking accidents allowed doctors in Athens to spend their freed-up time relaxing and researching. This served as impetus for new healing practices, including ushering in the era of the Asclepieia. That all this could be traced back to a shepherd boy from the mountains was soon forgotten, even by those who had been there at the time. There was no time to look backwards. Civilization had reached its high point. When you are standing at the top, you only look ahead.

After that, collapse was only a question of time. Hellenism flourished for a short time and then faded agonizingly slowly. Internal conflicts, global migration and wars accelerated the decline of Greece. This had devastating implications. Romanization, Christianization, Ottomanization, nationalization, Balkanization, Europeanization. Within two millennia – in an Olympian blink of an eye – every achievement had been abandoned, every success destroyed. All that remained of Greek hegemony were the ruins of buildings. Through painstaking work, survivors of the catastrophe tried to restore at least a fraction of what humanity had once been capable of, but much was lost forever.

By the end, modern Greeks no longer knew what was up and what was down. They lived confident in the knowledge that the heap of rubble below them must have once been a splendid palace. They took pride in their past and feared for their future. In such cases, who has time for the present? Only the marble remained as testimony to their previous greatness. But the marble decree was forgotten and along with it, all knowledge of the proper way to handle the material.

It is our hypothesis that the civilizational dementia of the Greek empire is the primary cause for the following incident: an incident that – though not relevant to the course of world history – may nevertheless serve as a cautionary tale for future generations.

One Friday morning in early September 2016, a young German-Greek, Greek-German, temporarily-Franconian migrant by the name of Aris Kommenos-Stein, slipped on the marble path by the side gate to the First Athens Cemetery and, failing to soften the impact with his hands, landed on his head. One eyewitness compared the resulting sound to the splat made by an overripe melon when it falls off a truck and bursts open. A mourner, who passed by directly after, recognized the face of the Mother of God in the pattern of the spilled blood. Within minutes the emergency responders were at the scene of the accident. The young man was responsive but incapable of moving until the ambulance arrived.

Instead of sirens Aris heard a muffled voice in the distance calling out: “It’s not always about you.” Then he lost consciousness.

It would doubtless be too simple and not worthy of serious discussion to attribute all the fault for this unfortunate incident to the Greeks. Here too, the issue is complex and demands a thorough and careful analysis of multiple factors in a chain of events. It is only possible to understand the origins of this misadventure by reflecting on another. For it began with the end of Mrs. Xenaki.

β

The first Aris ever saw of Mrs. Xenaki was the indentation made by her teeth – prominently displayed on Claudia’s left tricep in shades ranging from lilac to deep purple. The teeth hadn’t sunk all the way into Claudia’s salon-tanned skin – yet, there was no mistaking them. Permanently marked. “It’s not all that bad. A bit like a tattoo,” said Aris. “Maybe another one on the other side?”

Claudia opened her mouth to answer, but then let it pass. She wasn’t in the mood for a battle. Her eyeliner was still smudged, betraying recent tears. Pain and fury – four parts pain, one part fury, the usual. She had seemed steadier when she first entered the room.

She sat at the white oval plastic table in the break room on the fifth floor, working away at advanced Sudoku puzzles, filling numbers into empty squares with a ballpoint pen rather than her usual pencil and eraser. It wasn’t that she’d grown any more confident; it was just that it wasn’t her own book.

There was lots of bustling about in the hallway beyond the frosted glass doors. The fifth floor was chronically understaffed. That's why so few managed to take their breaks, which was most convenient for colleagues, like Aris or Claudia, who worked on other floors. They could spend their break in peace and quiet on the fifth, without attracting attention or being interrupted by idle chatter or emergencies.

Aris poured filter coffee into the **I ♥ LUTHERSTADT WITTENBERG** mug, careful not to look too closely. Last time he'd peered inside the thermos, it made him think of a bird's eye view of the Amazon rainforest – billows of dark mould. If you don't have time to take a break, you don't have time to do the dishes. Claudia didn't mind. Dirt cleans you out, she liked to say. When we were kids we'd have chicken droppings for breakfast, didn't hurt us one bit. To console her, he threw together what he could find in the refrigerator, slapping gorgonzola and baloney on a slice of bread, garnishing it with limp watercress. But Claudia had no appetite. The bite wound was too deep for her to continue working, but not so deep as to warrant signing off work.

Straight teeth, hardly any fillings, uniform bite force – unusual in a woman of Mrs. Xenaki's age, thought Aris – as he leafed through her file. Claudia tapped her feet to the hits on the local radio station, took a drag from the butt of her third F6, shoved her puzzle book to one side and turned to Aris.

“To hell with it. YOLO. YOLO. You only live once. Isn't that how it goes? No pain no gain, that's what we used to say.”

Aris was astonished by Claudia's sudden change of heart. She would routinely cry her eyes out to him, playing up every little injury with the enthusiasm of a sports reporter covering the internationals. She could turn any small scratch into an illegal slide tackle, with instant replays from every camera angle.

The last time Claudia suffered a mishap – she was drawing a blood sample when Mrs. Keller grabbed the needle from her and jammed it in her chest – she was furious for a week and able to talk of little else. This time she seemed almost cheerful and, without pausing, lit up her fourth F6.

“You know what that X-woman said to me?” she said, exhaling slowly out of her nose.

“What?”

“I couldn't understand her. It was probably Greek.”

“Well, what did she say?”

“Something really short. One word. Monolaffay, Mololaffay, something like that.”

“Molón lavé?”

“Yeah. That’s it. Why are you laughing? Is it a swear word?”

“Haven’t you seen *300*? It means: Come and get ’em! That’s how the Spartans responded to the Persians when they were ordered to lay down their weapons or die.”

“Oh great, that’s all I need. A history lesson. Well, I see you’re going to have fun with her.”

“What do you mean? I never go on the seventh floor. You know that.”

“The X-woman insists on having a Greek, otherwise she’s going to keep on biting. So great that we’ve got one for her.”

The last time Aris was given a special assignment on account of his Greek origins, it had ended up in a urine shower and nose bleed because he had refused to buy a lottery ticket from his own money for Mr. Panagiotopoulos in exchange for 10% of any winnings.

“They can’t just offload this shit on me,” protested Aris.

Nevertheless, he would go see Mrs. Xenaki. Aris never turned a job down. He just tried to do the minimum, hoping that this approach – which he thought of as passive resistance – would eventually lead to his release from unpleasant tasks. The strategy had not yet paid off, at least not with respect to his duties in the geriatric psychiatry ward of the Würzburg Silvaner Nursing Home.

“When the East German woman screws up, send in the Greek guy, that’s how it goes?”

“At least you’re good for something from time to time.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m going to remember that, once my arm is better. Anyway, Dr. Allister already knows about it. He even thinks it was his idea. So you’re stuck with the X-woman, and you better get a move on, my young friend. You’re to go up to her in 6A right away.”

Aris looked down at the patient file, resigned.

“Hey, did you scribble something in Russian? It’s illegible. So tell me, why is Mrs. Xenaki even here?”

“Oh, that’s how you pronounce it? What a crappy name. Well, why is that? Self-harm, she tried to off herself. I can’t blame her. First they thought it was dementia, then they found the tumor. In her brain and who knows where else. It’s spreading like crazy.”

“How much longer does she have?”

“Till tomorrow, or next week. Summer at the latest. She’s 89 you know, cancer grows a bit slower. But she looks great.”

“Why’s she here and not at home?”

“Did you really just ask me that?”

“Committed?”

“Well, duh! As sure as Ouzo in a Greek restaurant. Hey, don’t you have to go to work?”

“I’m flipping the patients in 6A, as we speak. Can’t you tell?”

There was pride in his voice for he’d managed to figure out how to save some time in his tight schedule, while at the same time doing something for the benefit of everyone in Ward 6A. Most patients there could barely feel or move their bodies, and within hours they would get bedsores that were easily infected if Aris wasn’t there to regularly flip them. In his first weeks on the ward this would take him a half hour every day, for the patients were often heavy and he had to be careful when lifting them, to make sure that they didn’t get ulcers from his grip rather than from lying still. But now, at the beginning of the week he would shove a bag of ping-pong balls under each patient, and then carefully apply skin cream after every third breakfast. This saved him time that he could then use for his work breaks. And there were fewer open sores than before. Open sores were the worst. Claudia was the only one he told about his innovative methods – after all he was breaking plenty of rules.

“Don’t get caught! I have a bunch of paperwork and then I’m off to see the medical officer. Who cares if he gives me a hard time again. Remember to turn the smoke detector back on when you leave.”

[...]

Summer 1943

[...]

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Stylianios could have lived a life with no grand plans. But he made a different choice. The herd of goats his Uncle Lefteris had left him would have brought in a proper income. But that wasn't for him. He wanted to go to America like the others. Uncle Tassos was already there and had written to say that some day he'd bring him out. To Chicago. That was a proper city with imposing buildings. Uncle Tassos promised to send photos as soon as he had enough money for a camera. From the rooftops people looked like ants, he wrote. If the Germans hadn't come and if the war hadn't come, maybe Stylianios would already be there. But now the ships had stopped coming.

For the time being, Athos was the right place for him. That's what his mother had said, and she usually knew what was best. His father was fighting in the mountains, his mother was taking care of the house, and the boy was to go to the monastery to pray for them all. She was so convinced that she knew best that there was no point in contradicting her. In any case, Athos had to be better than his village, which didn't even have a proper name. Truthfully, it wasn't even a village. It lay between Peranthi and Kommeno and there was not much more to know about it. At some point near the beginning of the Ottoman Empire somebody stumbled on it and thought, "Oh, a mountain spring. I'll build a house here." Then somebody else wandered by and thought, "Oh somebody built a house there, I'll build one too, and I'll always have fresh water and neighbours too." And so it went. People married. Babies were born. Then of course they had to have a church. At some point, nobody knows exactly when or why, no more houses were built and no more weddings took place. The village became a way station for old people and a few young people who were only marking time until they could get away. Travellers and merchants would pass through and tell stories of the exciting world out there. And so the children's eyes widened and they planned their escape. But Stylianios was not one of these children. He was not on the run. He discussed everything with his family and they made the decision together. After all he was not heading out to sea to drink himself into a syphilitic stupor (he wasn't even sure what that meant) and he was not on his way to a factory in the city where people were turned into machines, only to die, stooped and exhausted. It was a good plan to go to Mount Athos and become a monk – nobody could say anything against it. Except for his grandfather who held the

view that the church was an invention of the devil in order to dull people's minds. But not even Grandpa Stylianos spoke out definitively against the plan.

"If there's one thing those long-bearded old men can manage, it's to live a good life while the world goes under. And right now the world is going under, so be on your way. You will be safe there, my child," he said. And then he ran his fingers through his own full beard, his glance lingering on the wedding photo on the wall of his first-born, whom he'd probably not see again "because this headstrong manchild decided to bring misfortune upon the family." That's how Grandpa Stylianos had once put it in the presence of his daughter-in-law Maria. Secretly he was proud of his lionhearted son for his manliness – but part of being a man is taking on the responsibility of fatherhood and not looking for adventure at every turn. Maria came from a well-to-do family in Lefkas. Grandpa Stylianos had funded the expansion of his farm with the dowry she brought and she helped out in the fields like any man. For what choice did she have but to take on the role of the husband who was never there when he was needed? Over the years she grew ill and bitter. No woman married thinking she'd be sleeping alone. It was some consolation that her husband had joined the partisans in the mountains to fight for the freedom of Greece. But it didn't solve her problem. The whole family suspected that were he to outlive the Germans, there would soon be new enemies to take on. Stylianos always paid close attention. Besides Aunt Tasia, his Grandpa was the only relative that he really knew. And the old man's days were numbered. Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, was waiting in the wings to take him away.

The olive oil burned on the way down – Aunt Tasia had probably had to hand over the better oil to the soldiers – and the coffee was so thin and so sweet, he could barely drink it. Still it had enough a kick that he was able to drag himself outside, push the goats to one side and stick his head in the ice-cold water trough. But not for long. The water was pleasant, but he was under attack from mosquitoes. Aunt Tasia didn't need to look outside to know what was going on. He could hear her peals of laughter from the kitchen.

"Sweet blood", she called out, "you got that from your father. When we were children, all I had to do was lie down near him to get myself some peace from the mosquitoes. Come inside, I've made you some beans. That'll put you back on your feet."

Just the thought of the beans made him nauseous again, but he didn't put up a fight. When Aunt Tasia cooked, you ate. The only choice he had was whether or not he wanted to be yelled at first. Eating would follow, regardless. "Do you think I picked these beans, shelled them and cooked

them with my own hands, so that you could leave them on your plate for the dog to finish off?" she would rail at him.

Stylianos went inside, sat at the kitchen table, putting a piece of sheep's cheese on his plate. Aunt Tasia had already tidied up the kitchen and cleared off the gas stove. She lit a cigarette.

"So come on, tell me all about the wedding. How did Alexandra look? She's such a beauty."

"What's there to tell, Aunty? It was a wedding. The bride was more beautiful than ever. All were cheerful."

"Did you dance?"

Stylianos reddened.

"Who with? Lambros's daughter?"

"Jeez, Aunty." Stylianos stuffed his mouth with beans and cheese, so he wouldn't need to talk.

"Life is so beautiful, you are still so young. You'll waste away, hanging out with the old men of Mount Athos. I just don't get it. You don't even have a full beard yet, but you want to shut yourself away in a monastery. Your father was totally different at your age. If there was a skirt, that's where you'd find him: Aris, the skirt-chaser."

"Oh, do you hear that, Aunty?"

Aunt Tasia slapped her hand on the table.

"You can't distract me that easily, young man. Explain yourself. Why the monastery? Why not wait a few years?"

She paused. Now she heard it too. The sound of an engine getting closer, but not an airplane engine, the sound came from the road, not from the sky, the putter of a small motor. The rattle of a motorbike. Stylianos was happy for the excuse to stand up and escape the beans. The two of them ran to the door. The noise didn't seem to bother the goats, they were totally relaxed. So, it must be Thodoris then, one of the few neighbours who had not yet had his motorbike requisitioned. Indeed, that's who it was, turning the corner in a cloud of dust, coming to a stop just in front of them, calling out to them both while his engine was still running, so they couldn't understand him.

"What's going on, Thodoris? Why so much noise so early in the morning?"

"God help us."

"See, Aunty? Those who work for God, never lack for work," joked Stylianos.

Thodoris paid him no notice. He squinted and scanned the horizon.

“Speak up. What’s happened?” Aunt Tasia asked sharply. Thodoris was known for easily panicking. Even Stylianos knew this about him, though he’d only been helping out his aunt for a short time, now that Uncle Lefteris was gone. The whole village considered Thodoris to be a bit thick, and that’s why the soldiers figured he posed no danger and let him hang around and ride his bike. He took a deep breath and started to talk, still panting heavily.

“I was in Koprena to see if I could find some crabs. My wife likes them and there are no more to be had around here.” Thodoris turned off his engine and looked back and forth from Aunt Tasia to Stylianos. Aunt Tasia shrugged her shoulders, patted him on the arm and went back in.

“Did you get any, Mr. Thodoris?” she called from inside.

“Yes...no...I mean maybe tomorrow, but who knows if we’ll still be alive tomorrow.”

“What are you going on about? You’re the picture of good health.”

Aunt Tasia returned with a glass of water that she handed to him. Completely covered in sweat, Thodoris took a gulp and then climbed down from his bike, breathing heavily.

“So, what did the crabs do to you?” grinned Aunt Tasia.

“Enough with the crabs. It’s on fire. Kommeno is on fire.”

“The forest?” she asked, cautiously.

“The village! The village of course. I could see it from the river bank. The sky was black. At the marina in Koprena there were some people in from Sikies. They said that they could see across to Kommeno and that it had been burning since dawn. I have to be off now, I have to tell everybody. Kommeno is on fire!” Before Aunt Tasia could stop him, he pressed the glass into her hand, jumped on his motorbike and rattled off.

For a brief moment it was quiet. Aunt Tasia seemed to be pondering the news, while Stylianos didn’t understand at all what was going on.

“But how can that be, Auntie? I was just in Kommeno.”

“My boy, get your things and go. Now!”

“But Auntie ...”

Aunt Tasia wasn’t listening anymore. She grabbed his shirt from the clothesline and threw it to him. Then she waited in front of him while he buttoned up and put his bag in his hand.

“See that you get away from here and stay clear of all soldiers.”

Stylianos rolled his eyes. His aunt, who did not like good-byes, left him standing there and went back into the house. He turned in her direction and then back to the path. With his right

hand he clumsily petted the white goat which had planted itself in his shadow and was grumpily avoiding his hand. Then he headed east. Aunt Tasia had emptied a bucket of water behind him for good luck on his journey, and the sound of water spilling still rang in his ears. A few steps later and he'd left the village behind. He stopped for a moment, stretched, and breathed in. He could smell hay, but no trace of smoke. First things first, just get away, he thought, nagged by an unfamiliar sense of unease – there'd be time to think things through once he reached the monastery.