

*Ομιλία της φιλόλογου Πιερέττας Διαμαντοπούλου στην εκδήλωση που οργάνωσε το Κλασικό Τμήμα του Πανεπιστημίου του Ελσίνκι στις 19 Μαΐου 2011 για τη λήξη της απόσπασής της.*

**Dear all,**

I am very happy to see you all in front of me: people from the university...from the Greek embassy...from the classroom...or just dear friends...whom I have felt as my precious companions during the nine years that I have happily stayed and worked in Finland...

Dear all...

Thank you for having come here to listen to me.

When Leena-Pietilä Castrén had the kindness to ask me if I would like to speak to you about my experience in Finland, I quickly realized that, yes... I would like it, and very much indeed.

But please, let's not consider this as a farewell speech. It would be painful. Lines in general have proved to be a dangerous practice... like lines in between countries and nations, for instance. Equally well, lines between two periods of time, may be useful when we study history, but in real life it is another way to make ourselves unhappy.

So I decided to avoid it. Even though these lines are drawn by themselves, I decided to cancel them, and consider the time that I have spent in Finland not as a period of my life, but as my life itself seen from a different point of view. It may be a trick, but it makes things easier.

So it is not a farewell speech, but rather, an opportunity for me, before I go, to speak to you about my experience in Finland.

**During my stay here,** Finnish people have repeatedly been asking me: Why did you come to Finland? Aren't you disturbed by the darkness or the cold? Don't you get frustrated that we, Finnish people, are not very talkative?

Here are my answers. First of all, I like changes. I like to get to know other people, other countries, different ways of seeing the things or facing life, different colours and cultures. I have travelled a lot, I have also lived and worked for some time in other countries... in England, where I attended workshops on puppet theatre...and in Egypt, where I worked as a teacher in a greek high school, in the Hellenic Foundation of Culture and in the University of Alexandria ... So when, in 2002, I was again given the opportunity to teach in a university abroad, I had a quick look at the vacancies, and straight away I made up my mind. Among more than eighty universities all over the world, the University of Helsinki was my first choice. Why?

Because Finland had always been a charming place for me. The dreamland of my childhood... The place of Santa-Claus...the mysterious misty landscape depicted on Christmas cards...with the sledge and the reindeer...and Santa-Claus's magic presents...and also Finland of the present, the country that in less than one hundred years of full independence

has achieved so much, in economy, in organizing the state, in culture, in education... The country of shy and gentle and polite people, the country of reliability, order and serenity.

And...on top of that...

I do not mind the cold... interiors here are very well equipped to face it...

I do not mind the darkness...it makes me more introvert and...it doesn't last long...

I do not mind lower tone in conversation... it makes me concentrate more to what I want to say.

All these are nice alternatives to the heat and continuous sunshine and loud sounds. I like all of them, so, if I could, I would be happy to share my time between Finland and Greece.

**I came to this country** first loving the idea of Finland...but, when I arrived here and started living my everyday life in Helsinki, I got to love the real one...And this feeling was reinforced by the attention and help that I received from the Finnish people.

I did not expect such a warm reception.

Jussi Korhonen (who started the Modern Greek Section more than thirty years ago) was waiting for me in the airport, to show me my office, my flat, the shops... and gave his time to introduce me to the system of the university, to the regulations, to the teaching expectations... He

proved to be a precious presence for me all these years and our co-operation has always been more than excellent.

Erkki Sironen too, from the very beginning, behaved to me like a good old friend. He informed me about Finnish aspects of life, habits and customs, (as I had questions about everything), he also showed me the way to start my Finnish courses.

Paavo Castrén was also very polite and helpful to me and..., of course, I will always remember Maarit Kaimio's behaviour when I urgently had to leave Finland, because my mother got seriously ill - and eventually died. No obstacle to my going, no difficulty, she only asked me to send the test papers for the students, whenever it would be convenient for me.

Maarit and Jussi, from practical point of view, made it as easy as possible for me to face that painful situation.

I spoke about the beginning of my staying here. But the following years too, all the other researchers of the Classical Department, everybody, were behaving towards me in the same friendly and warm way...Mika Kajava too, who always fervently supported the Modern Greek Section.

The University of Helsinki on the whole, offered me a nice flat to stay, a nice office to work and all the equipment I needed.

So I had everything to make me feel nice and comfortable.

I had also something extremely important: marvellous students.

**Most of my professional life** I have been teaching in high

schools, so I can say that there is much difference in teaching to high school students (who some times go to school against their will) as opposed to teaching students whose studies are their own choice and nobody else's.

I see some of my students among you. One may wonder: why have these people chosen to learn modern greek? Why have they spent their time (much time), their energy (very much of it), their money (generously spent to travel to Greece over and over again, to buy Greek books, cds, dvds and, back to Finland, to organize events on modern Greek culture, lessons, societies, to do everything possible to promote modern Greek culture to the Finnish public?)

Why have they been making this effort, why are they still making it ceaselessly? What's the reason for it?

Is it because of admiration for the achievements of ancient Greek culture? Is it because of love for the modern version of Greece.. love for the islands, retsina, raki? Is it adoration of the sun that caused this interest? Is it because of their previous classical studies, because of the charm of a language spoken and written continuously for 3000 years?

Is it because of a love affair?

Whatever the reason is, the students who have made this choice are really brave. They belong to the minority of people for whom practicality is not the most decisive factor to plan their studies and life. They have the strength to follow their inner urge and give their precious time and energy to it, in spite of the fact that they know that modern Greek language is spoken only by a few millions of people, living on some sunburnt rocks in

the outskirts of Europe.

**It is in this brave minority** that also people who follow and serve humanistic studies belong to.

Our era does not favour that kind of studies. There is a tendency for mathematics and physics, for business administration and computer science, which are very important, but not on their own. They need humanistic aspect of life, to give them meaning.

Exact sciences alone, cannot help us face our existential problems. We are more complicated than that, more prone to develop our capacities towards all the possible directions that human mind is capable of. We need to really become renaissance people...

Governments do not seem to be especially interested in supporting the equal development of humanistic and exact sciences...And also many of us have not understood how important this equal development is for our evolution in a balanced way and for our philosophical and moral advancement, which would lead us to a more fair world on this small planet of ours...

So the people who follow humanistic studies are few.

But the ones who follow modern Greek studies are even fewer.

**They are few but they produce miracles.** It is amazing how quickly they advance. They are very serious with what they do, they know what they want and how to go about it, they are systematic in their studying. In one year they start as beginners, the next year they can competently communicate in Greek and also attend classes on prose and poetry. The third year they manage to astonish me with their knowledge!

From the very first moment, there was a full acceptance between them and me, which soon was transformed into a warm friendship. As there was lots of flexibility given by the university, we could decide together the date of their exams and other issues. I listened to their needs, which sometimes affected the way of teaching a certain subject or even the content of the subject itself. And they honoured my country by their deep respect for modern Greek culture so much that I was often trying to invent new subjects to teach them, even if I might have never taught them before and I would have to make a bigger effort to prepare the lessons.

It was a wonderful relationship.

And it is very sad that during these nine years that I spent in Finland I had to lose two of them. Marjata Sulevo, who died in 2004, and Anja Tolonen, who died just two days before last Easter. I will never forget Marjata's sweet and gentle character and her stoicism... neither will I ever forget Anja's sense of humor, intelligence, philosophical attitude.

The students, both categories of them, both the ones who were attending Greek lessons as a complement to their main studies and the ones who had years ago completed their studies and now they were just attending some classes... both categories of them... wanted to learn everything about modern Greek culture!

**Culture is the soul of a country.** Kostis Moskof, poet, writer and cultural counselor in Cairo during the last decade of the 20th century, used to say that Greece, from cultural point of view, is a super power. Since the country was established about one hundred and eighty years ago, it has gone through numerous political and financial misfortunes, it has also gone through bright periods in between, but it is amazing that during all this time it has never stopped producing important poets, writers, scholars, artists, philosophers, scientists. If all these treasures came from a bigger country it would be well known worldwide, but Greece shares the fate of all the small countries: there are not a lot of representatives of its culture known abroad.

**Part of this culture,** I was called, like other teachers also appointed to other universities all over the world, to introduce to Finnish students.

Big responsibility but happiness as well, because I had the

opportunity to speak and introduce my students to something that I really loved, appreciated, admired. So my work was never a routine. It was always a creative occupation which gave me the satisfaction that I was doing something important: an offer to the students, as it was something they really wanted to get, and a contribution to the culture of my country who, this way, had an additional opportunity to go out of the greek boundaries.

There were of course some poets and writers who had already, long ago, been known worldwide and therefore needed no introduction: Such as Kavafis, Kazantzakis, Seferis, Elytis... But there were also some others who had appeared in the Greek prose or poetical pantheon just a few years ago. For them I had the honour to be the first to let Finnish students know about.

The criterion for choosing the novels and poems to be taught was mainly their acknowledgement by the critics and the public, their artistic value, their deep, analytical look into human relationships, their social, historical and political background. Which ones would be chosen was a responsibility which weighed heavy on me, as I had to choose some and leave the rest out.

I just hope though that I gave a spherical idea to my students about what the modern Greek literature is

**What was very charming** was the variety of subjects.

According to what direction the university gave me, I had to teach Modern Greek: Prose, Poetry, Elements of the Ancient World

Surviving in Modern Times, Institutions, History, Folklore, Conversation... and, due to the Helsinki University's trust and flexible attitude, I took the initiative to also teach: Introduction to: the Modern Greek Literature, Song, Painting of 19th and 20th Centuries, Cinema, Shadow Theatre, Proverbial Expressions and their origins....

There were many of the above subjects that I would teach for the first time...but...even the subjects I was very familiar with, like poetry and prose, needed additional effort to be prepared, because I wanted to have new material to offer to the students who attended lessons for more than the two years officially needed.

Which means that, even though the name of the subject might be the same, poetry for instance, each teaching period we would have either a different poet to read and analyze or different poems of the same poet. It was rarely that we repeated the same subject and use the same material that was used in a previous teaching period.

For two years I had also to teach Introduction to the Modern Greek Literature in English, in order to meet the needs of some students who were interested in the subject but their skills in Greek language were too limited to attend the lesson in Greek. That proved to be very time-consuming, because when there was an important text for which I could not find an English translation either in the internet or in the library or from a friend in England, I had to do a rough translation from Greek into English myself !

So often my work demanded more time to be done than usually expected but it was always interesting as there was always a challenge ahead. And what was more : the enthusiasm of the students made it seem to me not like a task I had to complete but like a pleasant and rewarding occupation, for which the time I was giving was given back to me in satisfaction and joy.

**During the lessons we had the opportunity** to speak about Finnish literature too, as, in spite of the differences in background, there were some common elements between Greek and Finnish Literature and many times students were bringing some photocopies of Finnish poetry to give me. It was their turn to introduce me to their literature.

When we look back to history, all countries have had wars and various misfortunes to talk about, Greece is not an exception. When the subject of the lecture was history, it was easier to examine the facts in cold blood and draw conclusions. But when personal stories were more prominent and history was just the background, as it happens in literature, then the lesson was carried out through emotions and memories. And on various occasions the people's fate in Greece described in a Greek novel, had so many similarities to the fate of Finnish people described in a Finnish Novel, («Tuntematon Sotilas» for instance –The unknown Soldier- by Väinö Linna) that students and I were sharing same tearful emotions.

Which means that what was happening in the classroom was not a mere teaching of facts or periods of literature or history but often also an exchanging of emotions. Step by step, page by page, we wandered through history and personal life adventures, drew conclusions, made comparisons and I was glad to see knowledge and emotions reflected in the brightness of my students eyes. They were not only attending a lesson...they were also participating...!

**So this was a very important reason** why I stayed nine years in Finland and I would happily continue if the Greek Ministry of Education asked me to and if I had not decided to retire... I stayed here because I loved the people, I loved the country, I loved the conditions under which I worked. Because work for me was not just work but also a very warm human relationship.

Finland is the other extreme to Greece. If it is true that people can be very contradictory, Greece corresponds to one part of myself, Finland corresponds to another. I take the airplane, I go up and down in Europe between these two extremes, I travel from one part of myself to the other... I try to achieve a synthesis.

And there is no end in my living in Finland. I intend to come back again and again. But even if life decides differently for me, I will always be here in a way. Everything we experience stays inside us in the

form of emotions and thoughts, especially the experience that we do want to preserve. And nothing is more ours, nothing is more close to us, than what stays with us wherever we go, than what has become part of our soul.

**People and nations are so different,** but so similar too. Every single one of us, person or nation, is unique. But every single one of us is so movingly related to one another ! Related all of us, more or less, to unpleasant situations... like wars, exploitation, ecological abuse...

But.. we are also related to culture. It is all of us, together, who have contributed to the beauty and richness of the global culture. Some times I think that all of us should consider ourselves like trees: with our roots deep in the ground, but our branches spread all over and entangled with other branches, of other trees, which have their roots deep in the ground of other areas. And the branches exchange information and ideas with one another. And from this exchange new ideas are born and this is our glory... our pride... and our hope.

**Thank you, Greece,** which, in spite of the huge expense, you have all these years been sending thousands of teachers to schools and universities all over the world...to communicate with other cultures....

Thank you, Greek Ministry of Education, for giving me the opportunity to come to Finland and have this wonderful experience....

Thank you, Finland, for your hospitality and the peaceful days I spent on your land...

Thank you, my dearest students, for offering me your smile....

Thank you, University of Helsinki, for always giving me whatever I needed and most of all for the freedom to develop my own initiatives....

Thank you also for organizing this nice gathering for me...

Thank you for this honour !!!

