CHAIM SHOSHKES

“Old-New Greece”

(non-fiction)

Translated from the Yiddish by William Gertz Runyan
Athens, the capital of Greece, even possesses an underground railway line, and over three hundred thousand inhabitants, most with crooked noses and eyes as if glossed with oil. Athens is inundated with sun and also with dust, despite the gleaming asphalt of its streets. But who looks at this setting in the first moments after arrival? All eyes are drawn to the great mountain, to the Acropolis where 2,400 years ago monumental temples were raised to the almighty gods, gathering places and theaters arranged for the demos, grandstands for the Greek sages and rulers, and for the rebellious—prisons.

Under the burning southern sun we climb up to the ancient temples of Zeus, the almighty “god in chief,” to the separate temple of his heavenly consort, the goddess Zika.

We enter the stone amphitheater, where five thousand ancient Greeks used to admire the marvelous tragedies of their inspired dramatists.

And here to the side stands the temple of Vesta, where the gods were served intimately indeed. Just as, for example, in a covert love parlor forbidden by the law in our great cities . . .

And just cast your glance from this high mountain down to the underlying new city and its streets, which look like narrow lines, and to the streetcars that give the impression of playthings—you’ll understand why the old residents of the Acropolis were so proud of themselves and their gods: on this mountain one must feel far above the average cut of human.

And now at a distance you see remnants of the lockup where Socrates ended his life. And off to the side stand the ruins of the academy that bestowed Greek philosophy to the world.

Marble columns, thousands of columns in varied decorative styles, massive with the finest nuances of color, give testament to the great, proud people that lived on this mountain; this was a mighty democracy that heard Demosthenes speak, bent beneath the biting satire of Diogenes, placed its trust in the lawgivers Dracon and Solon—but a democracy that was later broken by the mighty fist of barbarian rulers.

An intermixing of peoples occurred here, tens of races and lineages crossed here and created a new Levantine type.

The ancient columns remained, but the ancient Greeks cannot at all recognize the inhabitants of today’s Greece as the descendants of the classically molded Athens of old. You need only observe the city below,
the facial features so distant from the old type that remains forever in marble, to be persuaded.

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The sun, the climate breed indolence, and although it’s midday the coffee houses are full of people spiritedly conversing and gesticulating no less adeptly than our Jews. Nothing more, everything here costs half, they sit and chat because there’s nothing else to do. They broker and deal, hatch harebrained schemes and mostly talk politics.

How do I know this if I don’t understand Greek, either the ancient Homeric language or the new one of the nimble merchants?

The story is that a tall graying man at a nearby table, hearing our Polish, addressed us asking whether we understood Russian. It turns out that this is the current attaché of Yugoslavia in Greece. Once he held the same position in Russia. He has little to do himself and is pleased at the opportunity to converse a bit. Here they love to do so with a cup of coffee and four glasses of cold water.

Our Yugoslavian doesn’t have a high opinion of the Greek’s political reliability.

“You see,” he says, “the whole public, today they’re ardent republicans; all of Greece has sent only twenty monarchists to parliament out of two hundred and eighty deputies, but when another breeze starts blowing, the situation will be the other way round. The former premier Pangalos, so beloved a year ago, was just released from prison—don’t be surprised if a year from now Pangalos’ place in prison is taken by another premier. They even say there’s a special cell for the premier with every comfort . . .”

Leaving the coffee house we notice a sign in Russian and Greek: “Russian bar.”

We go in. A typical big city bar with hot and cold fare, full of plates and covered in a host of flies.

At the register a fat Russian with a broad smiling face, we give a cordial greeting. He hasn’t been a restaurateur his whole life either, all told he was the chief of a military court in Crimea under Wrangel, now he dishes out other orders, but it makes no difference: he’s not doing too badly, thank God. There are several hundred Russians here, mostly former White officers and their families, who after the great collapse also sailed to Greek shores.
A young Russian waitress serves the table. It’s enough to see her hands with their long fingers to be convinced that fate intended her for something other than working in a dirty bar serving guests who aren’t overly clean.

A short chat: the daughter of a Cuban military doctor, her father died on the way from Crimea to Constantinople—the young girl wanders homeless, becomes a dancer at a cabaret, goes through hell . . .

“Oh, my friend, things are good for me now, I’m earning an honest bit of bread . . .”

Tears appear in her weary but still beautiful eyes: Exile!

The few Russian Jews who migrated here are quite well established, but distant from and ignorant of Judaism.

It’s enough to mention that none of them could tell me if there was a synagogue, a rabbi or Jews at all.

The Russians at least have a communal club—but the Russian Jews convene either at the stock market or in the nightclubs.

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But I found no rest until I clarified one of the facts of which contemporary Greece can be proud and which is very instructive, especially for us Jews. That is the question of how they accommodated the million Greeks who emigrated from Turkey and how the resettlement of a million Turks who emigrated from Greece was arranged.

A whole day I searched for someone who could explain this to me. I even went to a newspaper office to this end, but the only language understood anywhere was Greek.

Once I had already lost hope of learning anything, chance came to my aid: in the evening we were sitting in the large garden Zasion, which is outfitted with the greatest luxury and where for one of our zloty you can drink good beer while also taking in music and a variety show.

The garden was full and it occurred to me to ask the waiter, who understood French, if there wasn’t a journalist or state official here with whom I could converse in French or German. A half hour later the waiter approached me with a gentleman whom he presented as an official from the Ministry of Justice.

This official spoke fluent French and turned out to be one of those Greeks driven out by the Turkish government.

It wasn’t at all long ago, in 1923, that the Greeks wanted to take
Anatolia from the Turks, and another couple provinces to boot. At the outset this was going very well. They made it all the way to Constantinople. Then their luck turned and Kemal Pasha broke the Greek army, drove it out deep into the land and later said: “You want our Anatolia because more than a million Greeks live there; but I’ll make it otherwise: I’ll leave Anatolia for Turkey and you can take back your million Greeks—eat them in good health and bon appétit.”

“And perhaps you’d like the Greeks of Constantinople, from Angora—here, take them back and may it do you good.” In other words, he “pulled a Turk” as they say, began to drive the Turkish Greeks to their old fatherland.

So what does Greece do? She also has around a million Turks and Macedonians, she answered with the same sentiment and began driving them to Turkey.

All this transpired in recent years—we all read about it in the papers. But none of us had any concept of the awful calamity that erupted here.

Moving two million people from one place to another—that is something that occurs seldom in history.

But this effort did not turn out badly. A Greek Resettlement Commission was created, as was an American aid committee.

And the homes of the Turks in Macedonia were settled and aid was received by the Greeks who poured in, the Turks did the same in Anatolia.

With the help of America and an internal loan, the government provided land and implements with which to work it.

For the urban population, small but comfortable houses were built in various areas.

I saw this new city, which extends for several kilometers from Port Piraeus to Athens and, all told, is populated by around a hundred thousand formerly homeless Greeks.

The resettlement has gone on for six years already—it hasn’t ended yet, but in ancient Greece too they built temples for the gods of Olympus and in that brought humanity pride. Contemporary Greeks may take pride in the great humanitarian work of sympathy and brotherly love that will remain forever in history.

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Late at night a small ship carried us from Paleron harbor to the ship *President Wilson*, where we reside.

The moon lit the enchanted mountain of the Acropolis, where the pagan temples were brilliantly crafted.

So many gods, so many cults—cold marble without soul, without life.

We Jews haven’t left the world even one column. We don’t possess even one temple more than two thousand years old—but did bestow an *amud haesh*, a column of fire to humanity . . .

Don’t ask me why I parted so coldly with the land of the Olympians . . .