

George Ioannou

The Bed

Translated by M. Byron Raizis

WE MOVED this single bed upstairs to our place, the day they took away the Jews from our neighborhood; and from that very night, if I am not mistaken, I started sleeping in it. Meanwhile others had grabbed the quilt, the mattress, and its soiled sheets. The bed was the only thing that had been finally left in the savagely looted apartment. The only thing, too, that we took after a long hesitation—I swear it.

Izo used to sleep in it. He was two or three years older than I, but a friend. Often, while playing hide-and-seek or other games in their apartment, we would hide or crawl under it to retrieve a ball that had rolled there. Once indeed, when my family was away, they had made us sleep in that bed, in each other's arms. Then I saw for the first time the juvenile hairy wreath of puberty. True, the bed had quite a few bedbugs, and despite the extermination campaign we later launched on them, they were never completely annihilated. The time came when I thanked God for that survival. Something had survived from Izo's blood, and was probably mixed with my own.

Izo, along with his sobbing and screaming people, left one horrible morning dressed-up and solemn as a bridegroom. The yellow star of David was attached to his chest almost with pride. I was with him until he crossed the threshold of the gate. Outside a loudspeaker was howling: "Attention! Attention! All Jews . . ." They grabbed him and dragged him into the line. Someone pulled me forcefully inside and banged the door decisively, as if in a funeral. Only a god knew what might happen to you that hour, if they were to grab you as well, by mistake, or if they were to see you embracing a Jew.

Soon afterwards, the whole building dried its tears, went puffing upstairs to the second floor and fell, as if in a trance, on the belongings of the Jews. Their rich home was cluttered with garments and furniture. The Germans were, of course, threatening to execute whoever would take or seize Jewish property, but that night hardly anyone remembered the order that was stuck on the door. Outside, they were still counting them, shouting their names, kicking them. Inside, their household was being raped with admirable courage and skill, indeed. The same thing was happening, I figure, to the other homes of our ghetto, too. It isn't even unlikely that the Jews were witnessing, in their confusion, the rape of their belongings. Especially when the curtains were violently pulled down—that must have been visible from the street.

The neighbor woman, who shortly before had taken the most solemn oaths and had ostensibly crossed herself—they had trusted her with something precious it seems—fell, as I recall, on Izo's sheets which were still warm from his youthful sleep. Then she turned toward more important things. Some started dragging the walnut table, others the dressers, the cupboards, the night-tables, the mirrors, and a cracked porcelain stove went to pieces in the hands of an old woman and an old man as they were dragging it down the hall.

The floor was covered with pumpkin seed skins. For days the Jews hadn't cooked or cleaned up. Always dressed and ready they were waiting for the sudden order, telling comforting stories and secretly watching the street from behind their hermetically closed and covered windows. None of them showed any disposition to escape, which was rather easy. The few who dared it were almost all saved. Of course, they had been threatened with family extermination, thus one would prevent the other. They were also duped by various fairy-tales. The greatest worry of Madame Cohen, Izo's mother, was the fact that in Cracow, where they would supposedly be taken, the local Jews spoke another language and not the dialect of Castille. "But we'll manage," she kept saying with considerable courage, "as we did during the time of Ferdinand and Isabella." Of course, they

hadn't heard anything about Auschwitz, nor about gas chambers. Was it, though, possible that they hadn't understood the intensity of hatred?

We went upstairs to our apartment weeping. We couldn't further witness the stripping of the house. We didn't even accept a few more things that the new, and satisfied, occupants offered us. We half-closed our window-shutters and watched with horror the captive legions pass. This ferocious uprooting didn't look like a trip at all. Old men and women, sick people on foot, people who had been operated on and were bent with pain, were following at the end of each formation. How long could all these people possibly suffer? Probably they were the more fortunate ones, if one just thinks of the others' end. Sometimes stretchers were also following behind the formations. On them lay cripples, those about to die, women ready to give birth, and in general all those seriously ill whose relatives had foreseen the need and had been able to prepare a stretcher. Otherwise, they would have had to drag themselves on foot. A wild wind sweeps in my memory that Egnatia Street.

The Jews, however, had sensed the danger the night before. Late into the night the whole neighborhood was filled with the melody of psalms. Their neighborhood, I should've said, since they were the majority. That's why it had been declared a provisory ghetto. In the moonlit spring night we were listening to the humming. From all over fervent prayers were ascending toward the hard-hearted Jehovah. The streets were completely deserted, and large groups of gendarmes were posted guards at the corners of our ghetto. Above the roofs, one could think, something indefinite was hovering like smoke.

On previous nights psalms were heard, naturally, but they were smothered and long-drawn. They didn't have this mass fervor, this pressing urgency for immediate help. On the other hand, previously songs were often heard, even applause. Their young people were getting married at a rapid rate. Under the threat of uprooting, lovers were united earlier than before. Moreover, a rumor had circulated persistently that married people would be treated in a different way. They did their best to be-

come our kinsmen, but they couldn't find Greek brides or bridegrooms at that time even in insane asylums. Yet some such weddings are said to have taken place.

When the formations from our neighborhood disappeared, I started for school. The gendarmes at the corner wouldn't let me go through. I had on me an old National Youth Organization identity card; I showed it to them and got out. Couldn't I have been a Jewish child?

At school most children knew more or less what had happened. But I can't say that there was any particular feeling of grief, though we had Jewish classmates. Classes were held normally. During recess some children sang the Jewish anthem that they had concocted during class. It was a mocking song that they sang to a well-known tune, of course, in broken Greek and drawn-out voice, as the Sephardic Jews spoke. I still remember its first strophe:

When ve go back to Salonika
 Ve'll find house embdy,
 Old job vill begin again-ka
 For to live dhe Jew-dy.

These children were few and rather foolish. But foolish and not so few were those grown-ups, mostly merchants, who felt relieved at that time. I leave aside the various traitors and the half-insane admirers of the Hitlerites, who, thank God, were always among us. Fortunately, I suppose, certain acts of ultimate sacrifice have cleansed us of this shame.

At noon, when I was coming home, there was a commotion and crowds in our neighborhood. The Germans had withdrawn, but not so the gendarmes. It was now the turn of the poor and the Gypsies. Once in a while, though, a shot was heard; that's why all of them were in a hurry and quite scared. I saw a Gypsy running in the square with an empty drawer in his hands, another with heavy books, and a third one with a window-shutter that was coming apart. What did they want these things for? In our house they had taken even the doors out of the apartment of the Jews. And with the opportunity offered, they had even

stolen all the bulbs and window-shutters of the staircase. For years rain and cold got in through there.

I entered the widely open apartment with apprehension. It was completely stripped. Rubbish, papers, fillings, feathers were scattered on the floor. In the kitchen all the tiles had been torn out. The beasts had been looking for a treasure.

I went to the bathroom. Perhaps because of my fear I had a strong bellyache. Many textbooks had been thrown into the tub. I picked them up not without some satisfaction. I was extremely poor in books. Quite a few had Izo's name on them.

In Izo's room only the brownish iron bed had been left. Undoubtedly, they hadn't grabbed it because many of its springs were broken. When I saw it, I thought I saw Izo before me again. I went upstairs and told them that I wanted Izo's bed. Reluctantly they came downstairs to help me. They had all been in bed, upset because of the commotion of the morning. We brought it upstairs, tied its springs tightly, and then we poured boiling water on it to kill the bedbugs. I started sleeping in it that very night, that is, ever since Izo's great tortures began.

I used to sleep in that bed for many years. I passed all the joys—what joys?—of my youth and its endless sufferings in that bed, alone and unassisted. Here I was later caught by agonies, insomnias, sweatings, pains; and the bed started to break under my restless tossings. In an attempt to cure myself—something I believe I have almost achieved—I had staged in it innumerable orgiastic scenes and tableaux. An invisible, you would think, presence threw me to an endless erotic paroxysm. Every night something different, something new and more daring or, in exceptional cases, new variations on the same basic motif. When that sort of trouble went too far, and eroticisms, auto-eroticisms, readings, poverty, religious crises—that were prematurely inspired by some sinister characters—were all mixed up, I reached the point of blaming even Izo's bed for my deplorable state. That accursed bed had destroyed Izo and was now going to destroy me, too.

The other day, a peddler of used merchandise, whom we brought to relieve us of some of our discarded things, refused,

fortunately, to take it. It's a piece of junk, he said, not worth the trouble. The same has happened several times; we haven't been able to get rid of it; so the bed continues getting rusty in our storeroom. But I have started thinking seriously that I should perhaps have it repaired and start sleeping in it again. It is futile and almost funny for me to insist on sleeping in a double bed. So the evil hasn't been exorcised at all. I have seen no other human being breathe gently beside me. Let me, at least, find again my fantasies and old visions, whatever they may be. That would be something after all.



Eleni Vakalo

The Mythology of Taste

Translated by Kimon Friar

—In particular it does not come from birds—

The diaphanous embryo of fishes
 Goes by as thick as milk without changing in the light,
 Lesser than a shape,
 And it imparts no fear
 When as you swim you see the dark shape
 Of the fish below.
 It is of no significance that, slipping from the touch, it escapes.
 It is only a little thicker than the taste of the sea,
 Coagulates the sea-water,
 And in struggling to cast it off, slowly takes shape;
 Afterwards it plays,
 And in moments of tranquillity leaps out of the water,
 Glittering,
 As though the sea were tasting the sun once more.