The Charioteer Nos. 22/23 (1980/1981)

ELLI ALEXIOU: An Informal Portrait

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

How did a woman born in Crete in 1894 become an outstanding figure in Greek letters, the author of some 100 stories, 6 novels, and countless articles, plays, studies, translations, and memoirs? Today, at 84, Eli Alexiou is the center of left-leaning literary activity in Athens. Her Thursday evening salons attract aspiring and established participants in all the arts. She divorced her writer husband, Vaso Daskalakis; she set off at the age of 51 to study in Paris. Then, instead of returning to Greece, she lived for thirteen years in the Eastern bloc countries, supervising school for Greek children there after the bitter Greek Civil War. I was excited at the prospect of meeting this woman, as I approached the building where she lives in Athens.

I was surprised to see the name, ELLI ALEXIOU, printed neatly under the plastic nameplate by the bell. I had expected the secrecy of American celebrities; Alexiou must be inundated by curious admirers, full of questions about herself, her work, her sister Galateia, her brother-in-law Nikos Kazantzakis. The door was already buzzing as a voice came fuzzily through the speaker: "Push it!"

I had an image of old Greek women who are heavy and wrinkled, who wear formless black dresses and black stockings. The woman who opened the door for me fit that image. Short and rotund, she moved with difficulty under the burden of barrel-like weight around her middle. Her eyes were red under thick glasses, and her face whiskered. I extended my hand to greet her, but she did not unclasp hers. Instead, she led to a sitting room, calling, "Mrs. Alexiou. . . ."

In a moment Elli Alexiou comes across the room to greet me; her soft cheeks puffing out in a smile show a neat row of small teeth slanting slightly inward. She is heavy, too, under the ill-fitting black skirt and fraying dark grey sweater, but the

weight seems not to burden her at all. She takes my hand and draws me to her study.

In the small room, piled with books and papers, are several desks and surrounding shelves. Letters and cards are strewn about, from London, from Moscow. On the walls are framed, handwritten manuscripts and letters, and some paintings. Many are portraits of Alexiou, where I look for a glimpse of the young Alexiou. All show the same face, the same short pony-tail tied with a ribbon at the top of her head and separated into three parts pinned down; only the hair framing her face was thicker and browner then.

Alexiou brings me a cup of hot milk with sugar. In response to my questions, she enunciates carefully, deferring to my foreigner's Greek, but she is quick to move on once she has understood my question. Clasping her hands and drawing up her shoulders decisively, she says, "Yes, good," impatient to launch her response.

Alexiou hates to waste time. During my second interview, she places a pan of beans on her lap ("*koukia*," she explains, "from Crete") and shells them as we talk. She complains a certain chore "ate up" her whole day! On one occasion I woke her by calling at 9:30 a.m.; she cut short my apology: "It's late! My goodness! I MUST get up!" On another occasion, she dismisses with a wave of her hand a critic's assertion that the fame of the Alexiou family as writers has been overshadowed by Kazantzakis: "*Dhe variese*," meaning something like, "Isn't there too much to do without fussing about THAT?"

On my last visit before my return to the States I bring a plant as a gift. This time I meet the granddaughter of the real-life Zorba, the daughter of the old woman who had let me in on my first visit. Alexiou explains to her niece that this is a bulb which blooms only once. As they hover about the flower, the niece warns, "Don't keep it in your room when you sleep, Aunt."

"You're right," says Alexiou. "The radiator isn't good for it."

"Not for the plant, for you!" the younger woman tells her, with the conviction that comes of having heard the warning repeated all her life. "It's heavy."

"Ach," scoffs Alexiou, her eyes twinkling in my direction.

Alexiou must have heard the same warnings, growing up on the island of Crete when the population was still half Turkish. Where did she learn to question accepted truths? What thought could the Greeks have had for women's rights when the nation was so recently liberated from centuries of Turkish rule? Alexiou's father, who gave up a medical career to become a writer and publisher, used to make fun of Elli's older sister Galateia, calling her "George Sand" because she was always scribbling. But Galateia wrote anyway, encouraged by the young man she later secretly married, Nikos Kazantzakis. And her youngest sister Elli wrote, too. I try politely to ask about these matters.

But Alexiou is not interested in talking about herself. "My life didn't present anything earth-shaking that would be worth stressing particularly. And those things that are usually characterized as significant, like my divorce from Daskalakis, or my 17-year self-imposed exile or the successive deaths of my loved ones during my absence, which separated for so many years four siblings that loved each other so much—and I lost them one after another, without finding myself near them at the last moments—all this is sad and cost me days and nights of great sorrow, but all is basically part of the natural course of life. Of course, expatriotism and its consequences are tragic circumstances suffered everywhere, and to an infinitely more tragic degree in the countries dependent on the criminal Anglo-American hypocrisy and distortion. Consider Indonesia, Korea, Vietnam . . . our suffering is nothing compared to the extermination of these heroic peoples."

Again and again, I want to discuss the personal, but Alexiou turns the discussion to the political. On one visit I left with her four questions that reflected my interests: (1) How did she manage to become a writer in a society that expected women to be only wives and mothers? (2) Did she experience any conflict with her husband because of her writing? (3) Did she find conditions for women different in the Communist countries? (4) Did she find the condition of women in Greece changed when she returned?

On my next visit I saw that she had typed out four pages for me, which she read aloud. She had dispensed with my ques-

tions in one page: (1 and 2) No, she had encountered no obstacles to her writing career; (3) in the socialist countries, sex plays no role; (4) woman's place in Greece is better now but not good. Then she launched into lyrical praise of the countries where she had lived, in contrast with what she found on returning to Greece. She read a fifth question: "What position do you take on the Solzhenitsyn issue?" She added, "Well, you didn't ask me, but it's very important."

The capitalist press, she says, has seized on the Solzhenitsyn issue for lack of more concrete criticism to heap on the Soviet Union, there being no Watergate nor street crime there. Solzhenitsyn doesn't appreciate the accomplishments of the Communist system which made a "Superpower" of a country that was "the scapegoat of Europe" only fifty years ago. "Solzhenitsyn only knows how to talk about his little books," she says. "The poor fellow doesn't see beyond his own nose."

Alexiou has posed and answered sixth and seventh questions, too, about the perfidious foreign influence in Greece: "Whiskey, coca-cola, chewing gum and pizza have supplanted our famous wines, our pure lemon and orange drinks from fresh fruit, the aromatic *masticha* from Chios." She also complains about the materialistic values she abhors in Greece: "He's found a good wife," people say; "she has two apartment houses aside from her villa in Lagonissi."

Alexiou's words are harsh, but no bitterness is in her voice as no heaviness is in her step. She "was shaken," she says, by only one incident in her life: her arrest and incarceration on charges related to her activities during the Civil War. The government of Caramanlis had fallen, and its successor had amassed a "swelling file, full of acts that I had perpetrated" and "statements I had made," all fabricated by who-knows-what infernal types, of "treasonous activities I had carried out." One prosecution witness, a policeman swearing about some statements Alexiou had purportedly made in Bulgaria, testified that he had heard a woman's voice, and his superior had said to him, "Do you hear that voice? It's Elli Alexiou's."

After producing witnesses and evidence proving that she had not even been in Greece during that time, she was acquitted. However, she says, "There has remained with me an impression

of the jungle. That we live in a jungle and that our lives and honor are in the hands of unscrupulous monsters. Since they didn't hesitate to fabricate such groundless lies about me, whose life and convictions were always in the spotlight and known to everybody, I perceived how they sent many thousands of patriots of the resistance to the firing squad."

The only other time a note of cynicism colors her speech is when Alexiou tells of having sold her jewelry because she and her husband were having financial troubles. "I've always loved jewelry," she says. "It's a human weakness. I got it from my mother. Even now, I never go out without rings on my fingers." She holds out her hands, now bare, as if they were ringed. She does not regret having sold the jewelry, she says, except that she went alone, without telling anyone, and received less than they were worth. "And Daskalakis didn't appreciate it," she says. "Men never do. They only value what they can see and touch and show, so they can say, 'This was a gift from Alexiou.' " She illustrates her meaning by moving a small statue towards me, pressing it firmly against the table to make her point about its solidity.

This tone does not prevail when she answers whether her husband resented her writing. "Quite the contrary," she says, surprising me, as usual. "I owe everything to him. Even the fact that I write. He insisted, he *ordered* that I write down a story I had told him, threatening that he wouldn't return home if I didn't write it. That was my first story. That's how I started." As to the same question about Kazantzakis and Galateia, Alexiou asserts that Kazantzakis admired and encouraged his wife's writing. It was Galateia who disdained his. "She didn't respect him so much as a writer," her sister tells me. "She called him only a great scholar and student, determined in his work, dedicated to his work. But his work is not inspired by real situations. While life is full of heroes, he chases heroes of the past: Buddha, Moses, Constantine Paleologos. She said to him, 'Life is overflowing with heroism and heroic elements. You—what are you doing? Make up your own heroes! You find them ready-made—like Christ!' "

Elli, however, does not agree with her sister's judgment. "Writers are varied," she says, "and there are various kinds of

inspiration. Even Shakespeare used old stories. You can take an old story, if you're this kind of writer—I'm not—and put modern ideas in it. Because ideas are repeated in different form: want of tenderness, enmity, determination, callousness, egoism, jealousy. But we're going to consider them in a modern way."

"I manage a story like a house," she says, using the Greek verb for "manage" that also means "to keep house." The stories come from her life experience, "organized as required." The early stories and novels are based on her years, teaching children in Crete and Athens. It is hard to believe that this smiling, lively woman is, indeed, the author of the piercingly sad stories I have read. If in our discussions she was reticent about her personal struggles, preferring to talk about political struggles, her stories are intensely personal, portraying the private agonies of everyday heroes—especially children. Her early collection of stories about school children in Crete is called *Hard Struggles for a Small Life*. Even if she declines to characterize it that way, Elli Alexiou's has been a hard struggle and no small life.

THEY WERE ALL TO BE PITIED: A Short Story

BY ELLI ALEXIOU
translated by Deborah Tannen

Our driver's daughter, Elpida, a little girl with a heart condition, sometimes managed to sneak in to play with me: the daughter of the ones who climbed into the carriage, leaving Elpida, weak and sickly, to stare at us from below.

I was very mean then. I was always doing spiteful things. I remember them: I even remember my words, but second-hand, as my nanny told them to me over and over, and I listened with relish because she made them sound like fairy tales: "And the good little girl went up the kitchen stairs and threw kisses to the maids. . . ."

I wasn't throwing kisses. Na, na, na—that's what I did from the stairs.

Where the stairs led I do not know. But as soon as the maids sat down to eat lunch, I sat on the landing and waited. Before starting, they crossed themselves and said something about God.

"Na, na, na to God!"

"God forgive us, God forgive us," said my nanny, and leaving the table, she knelt and crossed herself, and then sat down, changing the conversation. "Sit down, my darling. Pull your little skirt down."

Na, na! I pulled my skirt way up.

My nanny loved me very much. Look how affectionately she's embracing me in the photograph. My parents would have loved me, too, but they were just children themselves and had been forced to get married.

"What do you think I do all day in this cage?" Mama said to Papa. "I look for an opening somewhere, so I can escape."

"Don't worry, I do the same thing. . . ."

They also had me.

"Kiss me," Mama said to me, "so Papa will see us and be jealous."

"Mama is jealous," Papa said to me, "because you love me more."

They brought me toys—sometimes Papa, sometimes Mama. "See what I brought you? Now do you love me more?"

But I did not care about the toys at all. They did not interest me. From the window I saw children in the street, holding dolls, kissing them, talking to them. I knew they were fake. I envied the children who held real kittens, live puppies. But these were not permitted in our house. So the only thing I enjoyed was bothering people, kicking, and saying bad words, so there would be a fuss in the house.

In the afternoon bells rang. The maids, who were holding thread and mending their aprons, immediately pinned the thread to the cloth and hid the sewing in the drawer. I could not understand what the bells had to do with the thread. Why did the maids get so scared and run to hide it in the drawer in such a hurry? At the same time Nanny took the censer and filled the whole room with incense. Then, before leaving it with the icons where it belonged in the company of the saints, she took down an icon, sometimes a woman, sometimes a man, sometimes a horseman, sometimes a figure holding books or holding the Infant . . . so as not to always take down the same one, I said to myself, and make the others jealous. She brought it close to her lips and crossed herself.

"Why are you crossing yourself, Nanny?"

"You do it, too, my darling. Tomorrow is the feast of Saint Barbara, who saves people with her blessing. Cross yourself, my precious, and kiss it." She brought the icon close to my lips.

"Na, na, Saint Barbara!" I spit and cursed at the icon as she started in:

"Dear Christ and Holy Mother and blessed saints. . . . Please forgive us!" And she crossed herself twice and knelt and begged forgiveness while I laughed and made fun of her.

I did not play with toys because I did not know how—the tiny furniture and serving sets. I ripped the dolls open to see what they had in their bellies. I wondered a lot about my own belly, where the lollipops and chocolate went and what happened to them. I liked the tiny glittering eyes of the rabbits; I collected them in a box.

"And now how will the rabbit see?"

"But they aren't eyes; they're beads."

One day Mama brought me a toy rabbit that jumped by itself. She cried when she gave it to me; its fur was wet from her tears. That afternoon Papa brought me a little bear.

"See what a pretty bear?"

"It's not pretty. Its ears are too small!" I took a pair of scissors and cut them off.

"Darling, why are you cutting its ears off?"

"Because they're too little. If they were big I wouldn't cut them off."

"But that's how bears are. They have little ears."

"Na, then let them not have any!"

Mama and Papa did not talk to each other any more. Nanny said Mama did not go to sleep; she just stayed up all night in the dining room. And she cried all the time. I told her she should not cry; she should laugh. She stared at me and started again. She kissed me and covered me with tears. She wanted to go to her mother but my grandmother would not allow her.

My aunt Hermione used to come, if my grandmother did not, and would keep her company.

"Who ever heard of marrying us, without asking us if we loved each other?"

"What do you think love is? That's how the best and most aristocratic marriages are made. What do children know about people? But the parents inquire; they investigate. Each of you is an only child, with a lot of property. What did you want, to break up your property?"

"What best marriages?"

"Kings, my dear, all marry that way."

"And shall I never love?"

"You will love your husband . . . in time. Don't be in a hurry."

"What do you mean, in time? Since I haven't started to love him by now, I'd better go back to my mother. . . ."

One cold and rainy evening, as the maids were preparing sweets because the next day would be Papa's nameday, and my grandmother had sent us a cake as big as the table, Mama put on her black fur and left us. She wept and cried aloud as she

was kissing me, Nanny said, but I was sleeping deeply and did not wake up.

"I'm going, Nanny, and as I told you, as soon as she wakes up, bring her to me . . . and every morning, as soon as he leaves, take her and bring her to me."

"Sit down, my lady, my lovely little lady; be patient, wait at least until dawn," Nanny pleaded with her, and she cried, too. "Wait for the rain to stop, for the cold to pass."

"If you only knew how cold it is here, what winter! Here in my heart. I feel the frost of the house."

"Let's pray together."

"Since I left my mother, I haven't felt warmth."

The loneliness in the house deepened. Nanny never took me to Mama. One afternoon of those first days of our loneliness when Papa came home, I had hidden behind the door as I did every afternoon, to scare him. I would shout, "Boo!" and he would put a doll in my hands. This time the doll seemed almost alive. It was a big smiling little girl dressed in lace and ruffles. He had ordered it from Germany. Its eyes opened and closed, and if I tipped it forward and straightened it up, it cried, "Mama." I wanted to be its mother, because it did not have one either. Its hands held a gold harp. I wound up the key in the back under the little vest, and the tiny delicate fingers moved up and down along the harp; a sweet song, Shubert's "Little Rose," filled the room. Days passed; I grew accustomed to the doll's company. At night I took it with me, and Nanny made it say "Mama" one or two times as she covered me. I would say goodnight to it and go to sleep.

One afternoon the driver's daughter, Elpida, came to our house. During those days Nanny let her come. My name was Elpida, too, but my mother called me *Eda* and my father called me *Elpis*, so as not to confuse us. Elpida saw the doll and was beside herself. I made it call me "Mama" and play the harp. She was bewildered. Something must have happened to her weak heart, because her bony little face turned completely white. With a trembling hand she reached to caress the doll's cheek. What got into me then. . . . What got into me!

"You like it, don't you? You like it, eh?" I asked her roughly.

"I like it. I like it very much," she whispered timidly.

"It's pretty, isn't it? It's pretty?" I asked more roughly.

"Very pretty . . . ," and her purple lips trembeld.

"Eh, na, na, since you like it! Na, na, na, since it's pretty!" I threw the doll down, and as Shubert played, I jumped on it, stamping and kicking. I pulled its gold curls, its blue and gold silk lace.

Elpida let out a strange, strained, inhuman noise and flung herself over the doll. Frightened, I ran to Nanny. They came and took Elpida in their arms. They took her to the driver's house at the edge of the garden, but she was dead. She had died as she lay on top of the doll.

When they took Elpida away, I started to cry, too. I picked up the doll and held her in my arms. I turned her on her stomach and straightened her up; I wanted her to call me "Mama," but she did not make a sound. Again I tipped and straightened her. Nothing. Her voice was gone. The next day I tried again. The first night Nanny had said to me, "Go on, sleep now. By tomorrow she will have recovered. She will have forgotten." But the doll never spoke again. Never again did she call me "Mama." She played "Little Rose" on the harp, but I did not want to hear it.

Some sixty years have pased. They have all died: Papa, Mama, Aunt Hermione. . . . They'll be giving their gifts to the goodnatured daughter of the driver in the other world. I'm an old woman, too, always lonely and helpless. No one has ever called me "Mama." Many nights, sleepless nights, my mind returns to those buried, grief-stricken years.

They were all to be pitied: Papa, Mama, Nanny, Elpida. I often cry for them, but even more for myself.