

MY
CHILDHOOD
GARDEN

(VISUAL
MEMORY
EXCAVATION #1)

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Not unlike Proust's "*madeleine*," a flowering *bush (boule de neige)* that I noticed in several Oberlin gardens last May brought back to my mind the front yard garden from my childhood home in Larissa, and I realized that I had a very clear mental image of it -- perhaps because I played there all my childhood and adolescence. Most of my memories date from the early '40's to the early '50's, since I remember very little before the War (I was four when it started), and I left for Athens after I graduated from high school in 1954.

At the front entrance of our house, there was a covered balcony elevated by four steps (which became a feat for me to jump, first down 2, then 3, and finally all 4 at once -- at age 10?). The bottom three steps were made of various kinds of sandstone. The top of the balcony was covered with marble, a geometric

pattern of black and beige in the middle, with white marble slabs along the front and sides. That pavement was very cold to sit on, and I remember once getting a belly-ache from sitting on it too long, which my mother had warned me not to do.

The balcony was flanked at the front by two square, lime-washed columns supporting a pediment. On each side of the steps we had flower pots with begonias and red cala-lilies. Below the steps and in front of the columns we had several other pots: a gardenia, a fern, a "coral", a "spider", a purple and red bleeding heart; and in front of the bottom step at the right, there was an iron shoe-cleaner to scrape off mud from one's soles in the winter.

To the right of the balcony as you faced the house, under the window of our dining room, there was a flower bed with a tall "canary" bush

in the back. A passage of sandstone slabs behind the bed, with a small basement window opening to it, was the most humid spot of the whole yard, being north and shaded by a high wall enclosing the garden on the west side. Further to the right, along that wall, there was a narrow flower-bed with a tall mock-orange closest to the house, a large lilac tree towards the street end, and a glorious *boule de neige* in the middle. Blue violets bordered, I think, both of those beds, as well as a smaller one towards the west front of the yard, by the street, under the front fence. A water faucet with a slate slab under it (instead of a basin) was next to the lilac, and to its right, at the corner under the fence wall, was the water meter box -- a wooden crate sunk in the ground, where toads often nestled. A hole in that wall under the fence, in front of the water meter, drained water from

the fountain into the street gutter outside. That part of the front yard, between the three west beds, was packed earth, and we often sat there in summer afternoons and evenings.

The middle of the yard, in front of the entrance steps, was paved with some kind of cement tiles scored into smaller rectangles. A light gray, wrought-iron gate, also flanked by two square columns, was lined up with the house's entrance. Wrought-iron fence of the same design (with pointed poles connected by curlicues) enclosed the front of the yard on either side of the gate. Before the War, the metal grill continued along the entire frontage. But much of it got torn down during the earthquake and bombing in 1941; so, when my father rebuilt the house upon returning from the army, he replaced most of the east section with a thin brick wall set on top of the wider,

slate-covered lower wall on which the iron fence used to be attached. From the inside, this formed a kind of long, narrow balcony where we kids climbed and played a lot. Before the War, I think the gate's columns were plastered and lime-washed, but afterwards they were rebuilt in plain brick topped with a slanting slab. A second, plainer iron grill gate at the east end of the frontage, also flanked by two square brick columns, was supposed to be a service entrance, as well as an entrance to my father's medical office. But since he never managed to rebuild his office after the bombardment, the square patch of earth inside that gate was most often planted with vegetables and flowers. I remember along its edge chrysanthemums and asters in the fall. I loved the smell of the mums' leaves and the beautiful blue of the asters' blossoms.

The garden at the east front of the house was divided by a wide cement path into two long beds, one along the metal fence and the "little balcony" wall, the other in front of the living-room's window, with a narrow stone passage between the house and the flower bed (and a basement window opening onto it). I remember that wide cement path from before the War, for practicing on it the tricycle that my uncle Alekos had given me.

The front east bed, which was the sunniest, had another large lilac by the main gate, also clipped by my father into a tree, but smaller than the west lilac because it had been broken by the collapse of the columns during the 1941 earthquake. I also remember a sweet-smelling honeysuckle and several rose bushes to the east of the lilac (particularly a red climber along the balcony wall), as well

as annuals, such as xenias, carnations, marigolds and an occasional cock's comb. We planted annuals in the west beds too -- petunias and marigolds in the summer and pansies in the spring.

The back east bed had several rose bushes: a heavenly-smelling, large "old-fashioned" intense pink to the left of the entrance, an intense red at its east end, and a white or pale pink in the middle. Along the back, that bed was edged with blue hyacinths and columbines. In-between the roses, I remember white "virgin" lilies and chrysanthemums -- and perhaps occasional annuals. There was no great order in our garden, because both my mother and Marianne planted as much as they could wherever possible. But they watered and weeded regularly, so things usually grew well.

The cement path between flower beds curved around the east of

the house and, after two steps, led into the back yard. (My father had installed a red metal sheet gate at the end of that path, to close up our back yard, but it was removed after his office was destroyed.) Lined up with the two steps was a cement bench-like ledge, under which we planted mint, oregano and such herbs for our cooking. At the end of that small herb garden, by the east wall of our yard, a wild plumb tree grew by itself during the War.

After the house was fixed from the earthquake, in 1941, a pile of sand was left in that area, by the wall, where we loved to dig as children. I also used to play a lot on the foundation platform that had remained from my father's medical office. Climbing the wall of the destroyed neighbor's house along that east side of the yard, and playing in the abandoned lot, were great adventures for us kids, as

was stealing the forbidden sour plumbs of the tree, and climbing on top of our service gate's brick columns -- a pretty scary affair for me who was no good at such climbing.

Our back yard was considerably larger. Behind my father's medical office, on the left as we came out of the house, were the washing shed and the chicken coop (at the back left, south-east, corner). The washing shed was a low building with an inclined ceramic tile roof over wood frame, rough adobe-brick walls and a packed dirt floor, a step below the main yard level (I used to sit at the semi-circular brick ledge in front of its door). Beside the door, it had a small window towards the yard and a larger window at back right towards the chicken coop, behind a waist-high cement table that supported the oblong wooden basin for washing clothes (*kopana*). That built-in washing table

had at its back right corner a drain hole emptying the water from each wash outside, into an earthen trough that led the water to our septic tank's drain hole in the middle of the yard.

To the left of the washing area, in the back right corner of the shed, there was a fire pit where we heated water for the washing in a very large copper bowl (*kazani*), or baked bread and large pies in a round copper baking dish (*tapsi*), under a metal tray covered with burning charcoal (*gastra*). A chimney over that fire pit let the smoke out. Wood and bramble for lighting the fire was stored against the opposite corner, across from the door, behind a central wooden roof pole. Scorpions often nestled under the wood pile or under the wash basin.

The chicken coop was an enclosure about 10 x 10 ft. with a wooden door at the left (by the washing shed), fronted with chicken

wire and surrounded on the back and sides by walls. Near the back there was a wooden roosting "house" with hay on its floor and a bucket with hay for the hens to lay eggs. We usually had half a dozen hens and a rooster, and my mother fed them grain a couple of times a day, trimmed occasionally the feathers of their wings (to prevent them from flying over the walls) and removed the eggs whenever the hens announced them. We usually had one or two fresh eggs a day, and my mother used to beat for me the yokes with sugar, to fatten me up (I never was able to suck a whole egg raw from a needle hole, like my father used to do as a child).

Every spring we would allow a hen to lay a dozen eggs, so that we were able to raise younger chicken for occasional eating (which my mother or Marianne used to slay over the septic tank's slab). At some point, in my mid

teens, my father experimented with raising up to 50 chicken in the entire back yard as a possible side income, but they caught a disease (something that made them dumb and thwarted their development -- they walked sideways!) and we had to eat them all, even though they did not taste good. Earlier on (during the German occupation) we tried to raise rabbits in an enclosure at the extreme forward right of the back yard, a recess between the kitchen and the second bedroom (my room). We had up to a dozen rabbits of different colors and sizes, but they started digging holes into the house's foundations and we had to get rid of them. In the same recessed enclosure we sometimes raised a lamb (*manari*) before Easter, and one year we had up to four, because the peasants brought them to my father instead of cash payment. At a later point (during my student

days?), my father tried to raise bees as a side business, and we had over a dozen bee-hives in our back yard; but I guess the honey did not prove good enough to be profitable or worth the trouble. I also seem to remember that my father had for a short while a small pigeon house over the chicken coop.

The back and right side of our yard had an upward tilt due to the accumulated rubble from the medical office and house destroyed in 1940-41. The entire back yard, from the back of the chicken coop to the rabbit or lamb pen, was enclosed by a six-foot brick wall plastered with uneven mortar (*petachto*), with a slanted mortar top (on which were embedded broken glass bits?) and with a brick ledge all around the bottom. Near the far right (north-west) corner of the yard, my father had planted a peach-tree that was rather sickly and never grew up or made much fruit. Against

the middle of the back wall, a fig tree grew on its own. My father grafted it and it became huge and made wonderful figs that my mother loved to pick. We also had two apricot trees in the right area of the yard, one of which died during or soon after the War, while the other one (closer to the middle of the yard) kept in good shape and always made plenty of marvelous apricots. To the contrary, a much larger tree that was supposed to make larger apricots (*kaissia*) never produced more than a few fruit per season, if any at all. Standing in front of the chicken coop, this was the tallest tree of our yard and I never managed to climb it, or at least not without help (I was no good at all in climbing trees). Behind that tree, to the right of the chicken enclosure, a pile of spare ceramic tiles were set against the wall for future roof repairs. (The house and the washing shed had

the old fashioned semi-cylindrical red tiles, while the kitchen had the larger, flat, double-fluted ones.)

During the War, my father used to cultivate the raised back and right areas of the yard. We planted vegetables, from lettuce and green onions in the spring to tomatoes, peppers, beans and eggplants in the summer, but they never grew easily because of the rubble under the top soil. I recall even some artichoke plants along the back right wall at some point. Later on, the bee-hives were placed where the vegetables used to be, and a mock orange grew by the apricot tree. Earlier, we also had a lemon tree in a barrel pot at the south-east corner of the house, across from the medical office, but it never did well, although my father covered it with sacks every winter to keep it from freezing.

The septic tank (*katavothra*) for washing and kitchen water, near the middle of the yard, was covered with two large slate slabs that had a drain hole in the middle. (A separate, invisible septic tank for the toilet was located behind the bathroom.) Slugs used to live under the slabs and come out for feeding at night, leaving their glistening tracks crisscrossing all over the yard. They used to eat our lettuce and vegetables, so we often killed them by covering them with salt (which dehydrated them and shrunk them) -- a horrible slow death. Besides the trough from the washing shed, another trough at right angles came to the septic tank from a built square basin (*chavouza*) with a faucet over it, outside the corner of the kitchen. We used that fountain a lot -- for watering and outdoor washing of food (say, cleaning fish, or peeling the feathers of slaughtered chicken, or

washing the intestines of the Easter lamb to make *kokoretsi*). Half a dozen stone steps from the kitchen's back door and balcony led to a small cement area in front of the fountain; and a cement path led diagonally from it to the washing shed. The rest of the yard, between the house, medical office, washing shed, chicken coop and back/right cultivated areas was packed earth (which we used to broom almost every day), except for the enclosure at the extreme forward right, which was earth during the rabbit era but paved with cement, I think, by the time we raised the four lambs. Two or three clothes' lines (wire) crossed the middle of the yard, between the house, the kitchen and the apricot trees.

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