

MY
CHILDHOOD
HOME

(VISUAL
MEMORY
EXCAVATION #2)

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We remember vividly events and places from our early life, which often are reinforced or improved through recounting them. But how accurate and detailed can such memories be? In particular, how much of our recollecting is visual? Could I dig out of my mind's folds, half a century later, a point by point reconstruction of a place as familiar to me as my childhood home, so that somebody else could visualize it?

Our house in Larissa was a north-facing, small square building with four rooms, divided by an entrance hall in front and a narrower corridor further back, with an added smaller space in the middle back (one tall step lower), which contained the kitchen and toilet. There were two windows on every side of the house except the west wall that adjoined a neighbor's yard; and each window had movable mosquito screens (for the summer) and double wooden shutters, slatted in the front and solid on the other sides.

In the front of the house as you entered there was the "salon" at the left and the daily dining/living room at the right – the only rooms equipped with wood-burning stoves

for winter heating. I remember only vaguely the initial living room, because it was converted into my father's office after the 1941 bombing – and our entrance hall became his waiting room, although, like all doctors, he visited patients at their homes too, as well as at the hospital and at a private clinic. In the entrance hall, immediately to the right, there was a *portemanteau* with a mirror on its upper middle, a white marble shelf and a drawer under the mirror, brass hangers for coats on either side, umbrella brass hangers below them, and a hat shelf of brass tubes topping it all. (After the War we also squeezed into this space two folding chairs for my father's waiting patients.)

The living room had only one double window at the front, to the right as you entered. On its right, there was a green enamel heating stove and on its left, across the entrance, a soft divan covered with a colorful woven spread and pillows (which served as a guest bed for occasional visiting relatives from my father's village). On the left wall, across the window, stood a walnut buffet that contained glasses, bowls, marmalade jars and other such eating and serving items, and in the

middle of the room was the everyday dining table with several straw-covered chairs. There was also a folding lounging chair, a low straw-covered stool and, of course, early on, my baby chair with its enameled metal potty and a little table in front. One of my earliest specific memories in that room is sitting on the divan with my mother and Marianthe on New Year's eve, awaiting Santa Claus (*Aghios Vassilis*) with awe and delight, first the bad Père Noël who took away bad children – and my mother would assure him that I had been well-behaved without opening the door; then the good one (my father dressed up in his red bathrobe and white cotton beard), whom we let in to unload his presents. Memories of my playing in that room with balloons, and with Marianthe, when my parents were out during evenings, blend into a generic haze.

After the War, the divan and table were moved into Marianthe's bedroom, to the back right of the house (and the buffet into the basement). My father's desk (its crystal top broken from a German bomb) with his rolling arm-chair and his tall bookcase were placed against the wall across from

the entrance – right and left; his patients' couch and his polished wooden stool were put against the left wall, and his machine for electric treatments on a small table to the left of the entrance (he was a neurologist). A couple of chairs for patient and accompanying relative were on either side of his desk.

To the left of the entrance was our salon, which became our living room after the War. It had two windows, both curtained, one at the front of the house (left wall as you entered) and one across the door (on the east side of the house), which was usually kept shuttered. To the left of it, in the corner, was placed a massive brown leather couch with rounded arms and back, with two matching armchairs on either side. Embroidered cushions were placed on each of these pieces of furniture, one of which was quite distinctive – round with crochet red front, with a gold-threaded middle and a long gold tassel (from my grand-mother's national costume hat) hanging in its center. A massive walnut table of late Art Deco style dominated the center of the room, surrounded by straight-back dining chairs with brown leather seats, while a matching carved

walnut buffet, with red marble sideboard and crystal-enclosed upper cases right and left, filled over half of the right wall, barely allowing room for passage through a side door communicating with the master bedroom, and for an aqua enameled heating stove to its right. The buffet, quite an elaborate affair, contained our fancy dish service and, inside the crystal cabinets, my mother's "china" tea set and glasses (many of which were broken or stolen during the 1941 earthquake and War). At the left corner behind the couch was an Art Deco floor lamp with a metal stand and a massive translucent crystal globe, matched by a tall flower stand at the corner opposite it, to the left of the entrance. Next to the armchairs stood small round side-tables; and a predominantly red oriental rug, with a rhomboid central pattern, covered the floor under the table and chairs.

Behind the salon was my parents' bedroom with twin beds separated by a night-table, set against the back and right walls. (Both its door from the entrance hall and the double door communicating with the salon were on the same, front wall.) A large walnut wood cupboard for clothes, with three

doors and a large mirror in the middle, stood against the back wall to the left of the beds. Across from the beds, to the immediate left of the main door, was a large wood chiffonnier with a linen closet at the top and four drawers below; and to the left of it, between the second door and the east window, was my mother's dressing table and chair – actually a large mirror with a low shelf in front of it and two small dresser tables on either side with three drawers each. The chair had a rounded back and was cloth-covered. My mother put her cologne bottles, etc. on the middle shelf, her powder box, lipstick, etc. on the right, and a standing “ivory”-backed hand mirror, with her brass-woven jewelry box, on the left. She also had a manicure set inside a folding leather case that I remember sitting on top of the chiffonnier, with the sewing box, the family photo album, a box of other photos and postcards, a pile of newspapers and other objects. My mother was not especially tidy, so the drawers of her dressing table contained a mess of miscellaneous items that I sorted out from time to time. On the white marble-topped bed table stood a reading lamp, a round alarm clock

and a large ashtray (in the shape of a folded newspaper) on my father's side (he was an inveterate smoker). In its bottom closet was a white enamel round bed pan; on the open shelf above it were my father's reading material, mostly dictionaries and magazines (e.g., *Helios*, a Greek equivalent of *Scientific American*); and in the little top drawer were kept my father's sleeping pills, a small nail scissors, and some rags that my mother had told me not to touch because “they were dirty” (I think she used them to wipe semen – there was no Kleenex in Greece in the 1940's!).

In my early years, and perhaps for a year after the house was rebuilt from the War, I slept in my parents' bedroom, primarily in my own white metal crib, next to my mother's bed. I remember wetting it from time to time and going to tell my mother, shamefaced. I also remember being ill in it, and my grandmother bringing me a couple of tangerines during a recovery (one of my most beloved early memories). And I remember my parents making love – or rather some vaguely suspicious activity and mumbling in my father's bed that caused me to wake up. But I must have also loved

creeping in my mother's bed when I felt scared, because I remember saying to the ear doctor who operated on my infected left ear: “How am I going to be able to sleep with mummy now?” (I always slept on the left side of her bed, towards my crib, and apparently I could not conceive sleeping with my back to her.)

When I got too tall for my crib (age five or six?) my parents settled me in Marianthe's bedroom, behind my father's office (to the back right of the house). They installed for me a white metal army bed that my father had gotten from the hospital, I think, while Marianthe slept on the divan. Our bedroom had a door at the front right of the narrow corridor that led to the kitchen from the entrance hall (separated from it by a swinging door), and a window on the back wall towards our back yard (I used to jump out from it to go play during siesta, when my mother wanted me to nap.) My bed was against the left wall, to the left of the door, and Marianthe's divan across from it, with the window, and the old dining table, between us. Against the front wall, to the right of the entrance, there was a large chest (*baoulo*) for

blankets, rugs and quilts, and at some later point, when we both grew up, a cheap white wooden closet for clothes. Over my bed, under the far left corner of the ceiling, was placed a triangular shelf that served as our home altar, with several icons and an oil lamp that we lit every evening. My mother used to put between the icons the first Easter egg that she dyed red every year, and other sacred minutiae, such as holy bread, basil blessed by the priest or holy water from special masses.

The narrow corridor leading to the kitchen had a door at its end that was kept closed only in the winter. Descending its step, one walked into a small hall facing the kitchen and, to the right of it, the door into the toilet, both rooms with large black-and-white tile floors. The bathroom was a narrow little space in which stood a portable bidet on the left and a Turkish toilet at the end (across from the door), with a custom-made, tan wooden backrest. Over the toilet there was a small window that was kept usually open and was screened, so mice and animals could not get in, but lizards were often stationed on it at night and gave me the shivers. (In early

childhood, when I was reading a lot of fairy tales and horror stories, I also was scared to go to the toilet alone at night in case a wizard or dragon might appear in that window!) We had no water closet, so we poured water into the toilet with a large enameled metal pitcher that stood next to it, together with a wire basket for soiled toilet paper (which in those days consisted of cut newspaper hanging from a hook on the wall). There was no bathtub or shower either. In the summer, we took cold showers with a watering can propped on a shelf over the toilet. In the winter, every Saturday night we heated water on the stove in the living room and washed ourselves in parts (hair and neck, underarms, feet, etc.) in a metal basin or in the bidet, taking turns behind a screen and helping each other pouring water. Once or twice during the winter we would go take a real bath at my aunt Aspasia's, who had a bathtub with water heater, but meanwhile our body skin peeled dirt-rolls when rubbed.

The kitchen was also rather primitive and minimum size. Across its entrance, there was a cement sink to the right and a couple of charcoal burners (*fouvou*) on the left

(later replaced by a gas and an electric cooker), with all surfaces around them tiled dark red and a shelf in front of them made of dark gray slate. To the left of the cooking area there was a screened window (no shades), with three horizontal metal bars on which we dried wet towels. In front of it stood a small wooden icebox (the old fashioned kind, for blocks of ice) and on its left, was a low cabinet for cooking supplies (flour, salt, spices, etc.), topped by open shelves for dishes (*piatotheke*). Several times when a mouse appeared in the kitchen it hid under that cabinet and my mother had to scoop it out with a long, thin, rolling pin for our cat to catch, both of us screaming and jumping around all the while. (One of the times I remember stepping myself on the mouse by mistake!)

Pots and pans were put on the top shelf, near the ceiling, and dish towels and flatter utensils (frying pans, aluminum baking pans) were hanging against the right wall. Over the sink we used to suspend from the ceiling a rectangular box made of window screen with two shelves, where we kept left over food that did not have to go in the icebox (it functioned only during

summer, anyway, when blocks of ice were available). This screened box (*fanari*) protected the food from bugs and mice. Under the cooking burners we kept large jars with oil and butter, larger water-heating pots (*kazania*), and tinned copper pie and bread baking pans (*tapsia*), while dirty laundry was kept in a basket under the sink. Cockroaches often appeared at night from under the sink (and sometimes in the toilet) and they were literally my "bêtes noires": I had a standing war with them and tried to squash as many as I could.

In the little hallway in front of the kitchen and toilet, a round metal table (the kind that old outdoor Greek cafés used to have) stood in the right corner across from the toilet door, covered with a plastic table cloth on which was placed the bread box and phyllo-making board. Across from it, on the left wall, our solid-wood back door opened into a small slate balcony with an iron rail and corrugated tin roof. As you came out, on the left we had the brooms and dustpan and a couple of square garbage cans, as well as the dish where we fed the cats, with a ceramic yogurt bowl for their water.

We always had at least one cat (and once a dog, Mentor), free to roam in the yard and neighborhood or enter the house; but they always ate outside and slept in the basement. I think Marianne also charcoaled fish or chops on a small metal portable broiler on that little balcony, instead of going up and down into the back yard.

Under the kitchen and toilet there was a small dirt-floored basement sunken almost waist-high underground, entered from under the balcony and with a tiny window on its left wall. We used it from time to time to keep in the Christmas turkey (which my mother used to fatten by force-feeding it with entire walnuts), or allow a hen to sit on eggs (*klossa*) and sleep there with the chicks while they were little. We even kept an Easter lamb there when we had the rabbits in the back enclosure. But this basement was often unused and I played in it with other kids.

Under the rest of the house was our main basement, with an entrance (down three slab steps) from the back of the house, next to the kitchen balcony. It had three small windows, two in the front and one in the rabbit enclosure, under

my bedroom window. A lot of items were stored in the basement: large clay pots with flour for the year's bread and pies (in the middle, next to the wooden support poles); a small barrel or large tin with the year's feta cheese, and another one with olives; large glass jars with the year's supply of melted butter and olive oil, and bottled tomato juice that my mother made fresh in the summer to preserve for the winter (all on a large table at the left); the winter's supply of fire wood for the stoves (against the right wall, next to the entrance); and my father's carpentry and gardening tools – some in the drawers of the large table, some hanging from the ceiling's rafters, such as a large saw and a hatchet for breaking wood into kindling to light the fires (one of Marianne's jobs). The floor of the basement was dirt, and rather humid, so we had scorpions under the wood and other piles. We often found them also in the washing shed and under flower pots, and occasionally in the house, especially on the walls and ceiling of my bedroom. They were quite a fright. Once one of them hid inside a rubber raincape that I had hanging behind the back door, and I almost got

bitten by it when I got to school and unbuttoned it!

There were also mice in the basement (which the cats used to catch), usually small house mice. However, one year my father decided to store in the basement a pile of dry clover bales from our farm (either because he could not sell them or as feed for our lambs - I can't remember), and inside them came large field rats that multiplied and filled the entire basement, scaring even our cats. They were so large that when we caught them in traps, their entire hideous tails stuck out of the trap door. My mother used to kill them by throwing boiling water over the wire trap (the cats would not eat them). But some of them were so tough that they survived the boiling, so she had to poke into their brain with a metal stick through their eye - a horrible sight, but inevitable. We finally exterminated them all by getting rid of the hay bales and killing them one by one.

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