

MY
YOUTHFUL
PHOTO-ALBUM

(VISUAL
MEMORY
EXCAVATION #3)

BY
ATHENA
TACHA

OBERLIN
OHIO
2001

*"...The past is never dead; it's not even past."
William Faulkner*

The earliest photo of me, as a hairless baby (only months old?) in the arms of my smiling young mother, looks remarkably like me, eyes wondering. I was born bald, I am told, and I may end up bald too, since my hair has always been baby-thin and weak. In my second picture, with a little hair on my skull and puffed cheeks, I look like a generic baby in a fluffy knit dress, sitting on my mother's lap at a friend's front porch, with 8-year-old Marianne standing by, holding my doll and happily smiling. She wears a white apron (the official little maid's outfit) and her hair is sheared, so the photo must be soon after she arrived at our family from her village.

Three other photos show me around two years old. In one of them, I am standing on a straw chair dressed as a "red poppy" for Carnival, in a red multi-layered tulle dress and a red cap. (I must have been baptized, because my gold cross is hanging on my chest.) In another, I stand on a formal chair all bundled up in a red winter coat,* mittens, long socks and boots, with a red beret jauntily slanted on my head, holding my new large plastic doll (which lasted me through my childhood and teens, even though it had been broken, and rescued, during the War). In both of these photos my hair is still short like a boy's. I believe my father shaved my first baby hair, thinking it'd grow stronger that way. In the third photo, where I have started to have more hair, I am sitting on a little table with my earlier (blond-haired) doll on my lap, and Marianne

standing next to me holding me protectively. One can already sense the bond between us forming.

Two more photos of me exist from before World War II, when I was 3 1/2 to 4 years old. In one I am sitting crossed-legged on a stool in front of my smiling mother with her hands over my shoulders, while my father stands next to us. My hair is cut short all around, with a bun at the top over the forehead (a common hairdo for small children at the time). I am wearing a nice winter dress with fancy pleating in front of the shoulders. I believe it was Victorian rose and I remember it because I wore it several years later too. In the second photo, I am sitting alone and very composed on a low table or tall stool, with my hands crossed over my crossed knees. I am wearing my best, ivory silk summer dress with embroidered hem border, white sandals, and a huge white bow tied on top of my head. I also wear on my wrist a golden I.D. bracelet with my name engraved on it, which my uncle Alekos had given me before he was killed in the War. (I can't remember what happened to it.)

Both of these were formal studio photos, which families took from time to time, as nobody much owned a camera in pre-War Greece. I have memories related to the period of these photos (for instance, those white sandals lasted me for years), whereas all the previous photos I just remember from seeing them in the family album throughout my childhood (although I wore the red beret until my teens). Most remarkable about all my early photos is my fully serious look – I never even bear the hint of a smile.

A gap for the years of War – only two pictures from four years of occupation, both taken by an old German officer who stayed at my aunt's house and befriended us because we reminded him of his family and grandchildren: my cousin Danae and me, aged about nine and seven, each holding a rose, stand in her garden, smiling and hugging each other's shoulder. By this time my hair is parted in the middle with two smaller ribbons on the sides, and the embroidered silk dress from the pre-War photo has been dyed red and pieced-up with other remnants to accommodate my longer legs. In the second photo we are both standing on either side of the seated old German, still holding our roses. Neither of us was tall, and we both were skinny like locusts. The background is full of blossoming rose bushes, the old fashioned kind that made huge pink flowers of great fragrance.

Two tiny snapshots from around the end of the War, when I was eight or so: I am sitting over the wheel of a jeep between the spread out legs of a British soldier with three other soldiers next to us. The soldiers, both the German and afterwards the British (and American?), used to give chocolate and other food or candy to us little neighborhood kids who gathered like flies around their stationed vehicles. I used to be a favorite because I could speak a bit of English. Once one of the soldiers took me in the front seat of his truck, I suppose to give me the thrill of a ride, and drove with me out of town, I believe on an errand. I got really scared because my mother did not know where I was, and I guess I vaguely feared that he might molest me. I doubt

that he had such an intention, but he sensed my fear and he laughingly reassured me and drove me back.

The second snapshot shows me dressed for carnival as a gypsy, with an old flower-print bathrobe of my mother's, silk scarves on my head and shoulders, a red satin apron, and lots of fake jewelry necklaces around my neck. Marianthe, now in her mid teens with her hair braided, must have taken me to the central square to be photographed. We stand next to each other and both look rather gloomy.

There are numerous school group photos from after the War – mementos of festive events or excursions, with an entire class or with a small number of classmates and friends. I had had some private lessons of French and English as a child, but after age ten, when my father went to prison, my mother inscribed me at the Alliance Française for language classes. My best friend from primary school, Athenaitsa, and several other kids of educated middle class families also studied there. At Christmas and end of the school year, the French teachers organized theater plays and shows, to train us in language but also publicize their achievement to our parents. There is a nice photo of a Nativity scene, with Athenaitsa's older brother as Joseph and our beautiful neighbor Eleni Anastasiou as Virgin Mary. Most of the younger girls are dressed up in white as angels with paper wings and ribbons of flowers on their forehead, and all the boys are adoring shepherds, except for the three dangliest ones who are bearded and crowned Magi. My pretty friend

Athenaitsa with her long dark curly hair, and an angel-like girl, Roula, with long blond curls and blue eyes, are standing on either side of the crèche. I am at the end of the left upper row, with the least attractive or less showy angels. Over fifty years later, I still recognize everyone of the two dozen-plus girls' faces and a good many of the boys' profiles, even though I can recollect few of their names.

Many of the same students from primary and secondary schools also took music lessons with a private professor of music, Miss Tsapoulari, who organized a choir, too. My mother sent me there for singing (I had a correct and clear soprano voice), and there is a large group photo of all of us (nearly 70 kids) with our teacher and with the military band director, Mr. Mingos, who later became my main professor of theory and harmony at the Conservatory of Music. Again, I recognize almost every face and remember a good deal of the names (Pigi, Eriñili, Pipitsa, Xenì, Tatiana, Eleni, Annika, Veta, Mary, Katy, Danae, Toulà, Kiki, Lilian, Thelma, Zita, sisters Lena & Loula, and Athenaitsa – the latter four or five being my classmates and friends). Again, a flat-chested and skinny ten-year old with two bows tying my hair on either side, I look straight into the camera stern and unsmiling.

A comparable group photo comes two years later, the 40 girls of the graduating class of my primary school with the school's nine teachers. Miss Lily, who was my teacher in fourth grade, right after the War (the one who "discovered" my artistic talent), is not among them – she may have been sick or retired. The principal at the center, Mr. Baba-

letsos, was my teacher in fifth and sixth grade and my favorite one (I was his favorite pupil too). We are all dressed in white (our festive uniform) and I remember every single girl (the boys must have separated from us after fourth grade). By that time I was tying my longish hair into two braids (never as thick and strong as Athenaitsa's), and I am still among the skinniest and least mature in class (but this time I smile!).

During my last two years of primary school, while the civil war was raging in Greece, my first cousin Sophia with her husband and two children fled the communist guerrilla attacks in their village and came to stay with us (we had stayed with them during six months at the beginning of the war). Since my father was away (as a political prisoner from 1947 to 1951), Marianne and I moved into my mother's bedroom and the family of four lived in our room for a couple of years, sharing our living/ dining room and kitchen. Sophia's daughter, Koula, was one year older than me and her little brother, Lakis, was five years my junior. We played together a lot, like siblings, and we appear together in several photos of 1948 in our garden, which their father took with his box camera. He also taught us all to bicycle. We had great fun playing every evening in the neighborhood with other kids of our age. Koula and I were like sisters and never quarreled, but Lakis was a little devil and drove everybody nuts, including his mother. Yet I was fond of the little rascal and he looked up to me, in spite of teasing me. (He now has become a distinguished radiologist, with a great variety of interests and hobbies.) There

are several photos of me and Koula over the years, holding each other arm in arm lovingly, mostly on school excursions and one in the summer of 1950 with our best summer dresses, mine a red "silk" with white daisies that I think my aunt Madeleine had sent me from America.

Larissa, the capital of rural Thessaly, where I was born and grew up, was an old city with many of its buildings dating from early in the century. There was only one 4-story modern apartment building, called the Papas condominium, which happened to be in our block. As a result, all the high personages that came through Larissa, from Italians or Germans during the War, to King Paul and Queen Frederica later, were staying in that building. A typical instance of our neighborhood life is a snapshot taken at the corner of the block while people were waiting for Queen Frederica to arrive. Soldier guards are lined up along the sidewalk with standing rifles (to keep possible agitators in check), women and kids are crowding the sidewalk, some sitting on stools in the front row, like my mother. A neighbor's maid, Evdokia, is offering cold water from a pitcher to one of the soldiers and gapes laughingly at the camera, while I and Athenaitsa are peeking behind my mother. I, like many others, was infatuated with Queen Frederica, of course, and waiting for hours to see her passing was a frequent occurrence. We longed for a wave of her hand! But why did anybody dream of immortalizing that particular moment, I wonder? It must have been a hot day. I associate Frederica's visits with the scent of blooming

acacia trees and their white grape-clustered flowers in late spring.

Easter was always a great feast in Greece, partly because it coincided with the nicest time of spring, usually late April. There is a tiny gray snapshot of Easter day celebration in the yard of uncle Christos, my mother's oldest brother, in 1949. Her second brother, uncle Makis, the engineer from Athens, sits in the center with my grandmother (it must have been when he was still a widower, because his second wife, Eleni, is not with him). There is, of course, aunt Aspasia (Christos' wife), my third uncle, Georgos (his wife Nitsa may have been taking the picture), my mother, and a family of neighbors, the shoe merchant Ioannides with his wife and daughter. A man I don't recall and two boys are turning three lambs on the spit in the foreground, and cutting up a kokoretsi. Besides a couple of other hangers on, Marianne, myself, my cousin Danae and a couple of young friends are standing in the background, and everybody is holding or clinking a glass of retsina. A typical Greek Easter family scene in those days, and a grim photo at that, yet every person I recognize brings up separate memories, like my unfortunate cousin Yannakis, Danae's younger brother, who was crippled by paralysis as a result of babyhood fever spasms, and led a tragic life (he is sitting on uncle Christos' knee).

That year (1948-49) I entered the first grade of Larissa's girls' gymnasium (junior and senior high-school) and also the newly founded Conservatory of Music (for piano and theory lessons). There is naturally a group photo of the new choir,

some 33 girls and six boys, directed by Professor Tsantilas, standing in the middle. Most of the kids were about my age and I knew them from school or from Miss Tsapoulari's earlier private choir. Athenaitsa is, of course, part of it. She was a soprano, like me, with a stronger voice. She was much better in music, somewhat of a star pianist, whereas I was miserable at the piano, partly because we did not own one, so I could only practice a little at a neighbor's, or at aunt Aspasia's, or at the Conservatory, and partly because I never had the guts and memory to be a performer. Both Athenaitsa and I were top students in school, but I was generally a bit better, always coming first.

From that same year, there is also a group photo of all students of Nini, Athenaitsa's sister, who was a piano teacher -- some 35 kids in their early or mid teens, mostly girls. We used to have an end-of-the-school-year party at the coffee-house of Alcazar park, at the edge of town by the river. There I am in a flower-print summer dress, smiling, with my ubiquitous two bows. Again, I remember every face, if not every name, although very few (Poly, Roula, Kiki) were among our friends. Kiki, the daughter of a lawyer, was a year older than me and, like Zita, of a richer or more "aristocratic" set than the rest of us. Kiki went to a private school (where I had gone only during the War years), and was somewhat aloof. I looked a bit like her (often people confused us), and I was sort of proud of it. Zita's father was a rich surgeon, and her Athenian mother was more educated than the rest of our mothers (she played the piano, spoke French and

had an Athenian accent). She was a great snob, but Zita was not, having taken after her good-natured father. She was a sweet girl with very white skin and thin hair, and went to the same public schools as I did but a class ahead. We used to play together as children, because our fathers knew each other and she lived half a block from us, in a house much more modern and grand than ours. However, Zita's mother kept her very protected and never allowed her to play with neighborhood kids in the street, like I did after age eight or ten.

The summer I turned 14, I cut my hair in bangs at the front. There is a snapshot of me with my uncle Aris' and aunt Elli's family up at the village of Rapsani (on Mount Olympus), where they used to go for summer vacations. That summer they invited me for a couple of weeks, because my mother and I could not afford summer resorts. I loved gentle aunt Elli but revolted against my uncle Aris' authoritarian and pretentious manner (he was my mother's youngest living brother, and a lawyer). I got along fine with their son, Alekos, who was six at the time, a very physically timid boy who followed me like a shadow, but their three-year-old daughter, Effi, was a spoiled little prima donna who annoyed me a lot (she is now a dedicated art professor and mother). So, much as I enjoyed nature on the mountain and liked aunt Elli's cooking, I remember longing for my home and independence.

There is also a professional portrait of me during Carnival of that year (1950), wearing for the first time my grandmother's wedding dress -- a national costume -- which up to that time only Danae

had been able to wear for Carnival or national dance festivities. Here my face, seriously looking at the camera, is fully mature, although my body is not. Under the embroidered long skirt my first crepe-sole, "adult", brown shoes stick out incongruously.

Carnival was always a big deal in Greece at the time (like Halloween in the U.S.), and children or teenagers had parties in costumes. Aside from dancing parties in private homes, the Conservatory started a tradition of a *bal masqué*, so this was again a big occasion for group portraits. In 1951, I appear as an Indian maharajah with uncle Georgos' red silk pajamas, a home-made turban, and our red velvet table cloth as a mantle over one shoulder. (Athenaitsa was a gypsy, Poly the queen of night, Tony a musketeer, and so on.) In 1952, I was an elegant medieval prince, with a snazzy felt hat with a feather, the same velvet cape, a custom-sewn striped satin *culotte*, puffy sleeve blouse with white fringe at the collar and wrists, a dashing sword and elegant legs in daring tights. I was proud of my legs, and this time I had appropriate black patent leather pumps to go with the costume. Athenaitsa was Madame Butterfly, Dina another medieval prince or knight, Zita a fisherman, Elli a Chinese mandarin and Tony a decorated ambassador with black tails and top hat (his father was a rich gynecologist, so he could afford fancy dress). My last high-school year I dressed more off-handedly as a pirate, with white shirt, red knee-length pants, a red scarf, large earrings and a knife in my belt. (Athenaitsa seems to have dressed the same but prettier.)

I must not pass by another group shot in costumes, lest it gets mistaken for a carnival picture. In 1952 Zita and I were the main actresses in a play put on by the Alliance Française, "The Sleeping Beauty": surrounded by courtiers, Zita smiles brilliantly as the princess holding the hand of a bright young man dressed as the prince, and I stand next to them as the good fairy, in a white long tunic/nightgown, a gold star crowning my hair, and a magic wand in my right hand. It is actually a sweet, if pathetic scene.

There are numerous snapshots of me in small groups during high school or Conservatory excursions. Each was an event to remember, even though most of them were at the same places. Rocky creeks or fountains were favorite spots for photos: Koula and me sitting on a boat by the sea at a village of Mount Pelion; Athenáitsa and me with a couple of other classmates wading in the sea, hats on; Athenáitsa and me on the crook of a plane tree at the Valley of Tempi; Athenáitsa, Aigli, Elli and me at Platanidia; Athenáitsa and me with Poly, Elli, Zita, Niki and a couple of other classmates at Alcazar, where every now and then the whole school walked in line for an afternoon free of classes when the weather was lovely. Whoever took this photograph was so amateurish that the group fills less than the left half of the frame, with Poly's face partly cut off! There is a later photo of me, too, during a day's excursion to Alcazar, riding away with my classmate Hiro on rented bicycles. I can't recall who commemorated all these occasions (none of my friends owned a camera), but a few are quite handsome, probably by itinerant professionals. There is also a nice shot of me playing

the accordion during an excursion to Kala Nera in May 1953 (my father bought me the instrument when I was sixteen and I played it a lot at family or school festive gatherings).

Three sets of studio portraits punctuate my adolescence in Larissa. One at age fifteen (summer of 1951) marks the end of my childish looks: I still have straight hair (no bangs), but a side part and only one little bow. Wearing another dress that aunt Madeleine had sent me from America (light blue with white embroidery on the pockets), I look at the camera with a sickeningly sweet smile. Another of these photos, with my arms crossed over the back of a chair, must have served as a prototype for a life-size self portrait that I painted that summer, making my hair fall into fanciful casual waves. (This was my most accomplished painting with the oils that aunt Madeleine had sent me a year or two earlier.)

I actually let my hair lengthen after that summer, mostly without braiding it. It is shoulder-length in the first photo I have with my father after he came back from prison, in March 1952. We had gone to Karditsa, a nearby town, to visit a doctor cousin of his, and all three of us are walking in the sunlit street. It must have been still cold though, because we all are wearing heavy winter coats. Mine was a belted brown one that I had sewn that winter, with a little hat to match. I am holding the hat in leather-gloved hands, and I step pigeon-toed in a pair of brown shoes that I will always remember: even though they were custom-made and measured to fit, they pinched me so badly that I since developed corns on both of my little toes.

I often curled my hair after that age. I don't remember if I had a permanent (I think not), but I used curlers at night and my mother used to wave it with a hot iron curler. There is a snapshot of me taken in the summer of 1952, with puffy, shoulder-long curls and my new, sky-blue taffeta dress, posing with a big smile against a light pole at the central square. The next studio portrait from my adolescence, three-quarter smiling, must date from about the same time, although my curls are more subdued (I never had enough hair or patience to sustain voluminous hairdos). The final studio portrait must date from the following year or two, and this time I look more mature, with my curled hair held back at my nape and a Gioconda-like oval face and smile.

The summer of 1953, at age 17, I felt my body filling in and maturing suddenly, especially my breasts and hips (I think I started wearing a bra for the first time). It was the summer I went with my mother to the spa of Kylini, south of Patras, the farthest away trip of my life. Until then, I had only gone twice outside Thessaly: to Athens, at age fourteen (?), to see my father who was then serving as a doctor at the prison psychiatric hospital of Dromokaíteion (my mother and I stayed with uncle Makis, but there are no mementos of that trip); and to Thessaloniki, with my mother, Sophia and Koula to see the Expo, when I was sixteen. We stayed with my father's cousin Maria and her adopted daughter Toula, a little older than me – and there is a photo of all of us walking arm in arm at the Expo, me wearing the red silk dress with the white daisies now

converted into a skirt. (Everybody in that photo except Koula and me is dead now, Toula by suicide.) As a contrast, there are nine photos commemorating our stay in Kylini, which may have been as long as a month, because my mother went to inhale and drink the waters as a therapy for her asthma (it had started after my father came back from prison). Kylini was no luxury spa, just for middle class people, but located on the beach, and many of the older ladies were accompanied by their daughters, so I had companions of my age. It was quite a nice spot with lots of trees (eukalypti and cypresses), but very sandy and humid. Walking at night we had to watch out for the scorpions in the sand, so we all had flashlights and sticks, to see and kill them if they ran too close to our feet.

There is a photo of me in a red satin bathing suit, my thighs quite plump, with a girl a bit younger than me who often was my swimming and rock-climbing companion; and another of eight of us youngsters standing on the rocks in bathing suits. Among the people who befriended us was the local handsome young pharmacist whom my mother liked very much and cultivated as a possible future husband for me. Another acquaintance was a lady from Athens, Mrs. Typaldou, with whom our friendship continued for years after, because *she* thought I would be an ideal wife for her son! I may have been more attractive than the other girls there because the pharmacist is posing next to me in the bathing group picture. In almost all pictures I am wearing a light striped T-shirt and a longish, flaring, gray "canvas" skirt, decorated with alternating red

and yellow straw flowers, which I had sewn myself. My shoulders are sloping, as always, and my waist incredibly squeezed by a wide black elastic belt. Both the belt and the skirt were fashionable at the time, I think, but I did not own much of a wardrobe anyway. (I still was not wearing high heels, and of course no cosmetics.)

Greece celebrates with great pride two national holidays: the 25th of March, the date when the Greek revolution against Turkish bondage was declared, and the 28th of October, the day the Greek government refused to surrender to Nazi military threats and entered World War II. On both holidays there is a grand parade of school children, military forces and bands in the morning, and in the afternoon there were often national dance shows by high-school girls at the town's central square. Although our daily school uniform was black, on those occasions we dressed in festive all-white (or later white blouse and blue skirt). We were proud to parade, each class in its formation, in rows of three or sometimes six or eight, with the tallest girls at the front. But the greatest honor was to parade with the six students who walked with the flag ahead of the entire school, and they were chosen not because of their figure but for having the best grades in each class. So even though I wasn't very good in physics (being shy and a weakling), I walked with the flag every year at the National Day parades. There is a photo of me at age fifteen in the second row, one at age seventeen in the first row, and several of me carrying the flag in my final high school year. That year a photo shows that I also led the circle in one

of the folk dances, which was an honor, too; and three more shots show me, flanked by the first-in-class of the two boys' high-schools, carrying a beribboned wreath and depositing it on the tomb of the unknown soldier. By that time my figure had filled and I had my hair longish in waves and curls, so I was a presentable young person.

The last year of my life in Larissa also culminates with my graduation from the Conservatory of Music (in theory and harmony) and from the French school – both events celebrated with several photos. While graduating from the French academy of Larissa, I participated in an international competition of French writing for high-school-age students, organized by the Alliance, and I won one of the ten or so positions in all of Greece (only a couple from the provinces). The prize was a two-week trip to Paris by boat, with stops in Genoa and Marseilles! That was the trip of my dreams, since my father (who had specialized as a neurologist-psychiatrist at the Salpêtrière) had told us so many stories about Paris and its museums and wonders throughout my childhood. A naive provincial girl at age eighteen, I was privileged to see for the first time European modern art, including Rodin, before leaving Larissa to study sculpture at the National School of Fine Arts in Athens. There are thirteen photos from that trip...

© Athena Tacha 1998

* The colors are from memory (or hearsay), since all my photos are black and white.