

# Chapter 1

## Difficult Choices

*“What you leave behind is not what is engraved on stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.”*

—Pericles, Greek Statesman, *Orator and General of Athens during the Golden Age.*

Pericles Rizopoulos should have died a long time ago, along with his brother, Panayiotis, in the rose limestone mountains of Northern Greece overlooking the blue crystal waters of Lake Orestiada. They faced death from the poisonous fangs of an angry horned viper while the brothers hid beneath the graceful branches of a weeping willow tree. When the viper aggressively stretched itself out and gazed intently at the brothers, they had no choice but to remain completely immobile for as long as possible while the twitching snake decided which brother to strike first. Or, if they ran, there were Nazi soldiers on the other side of the willow’s protective branches. The Nazi snakes or the horned viper? A very difficult choice.

But a choice was made because there we sat in his dining room in the Bronx, New York, seventy years after my grandfather’s first brush with death with only a few months remaining before his last. As I looked across the table at Pericles, my grandfather’s eyes were bright, his hands were scarred but his spirit was strong. Before he was my grandfather, he was a father, a husband, a fighter, a survivor, a Greek, and a young boy facing a vicious and powerful chaos that would have paralyzed most grown men.

Hard choices have been the fate of Greeks during the last 500 years. In earlier times, we were the glorious dawn of Western Civilization—the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the science of Euclid and Archimedes, the medicine of Hippocrates, the theater of Euripides & Sophocles, the poetry of

Sappho, Homer’s *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Herodotus’ history and the architecture of the Parthenon. And then, in 330, when the Roman emperor Constantine

moved his capitol to Greek Byzantium from Latin Rome, there were the glories of the Byzantine Empire, of Κωνσταντινούπολις, Constantinople, now Istanbul, the magnificent Greek city on the Bosphorus that controlled the rich trade between Asia and Europe. The Byzantine Empire was the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in Europe, as well as the cultural and religious heart of Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Then, in 1453, Constantinople fell to the Turks, and all that had been Greek was overwhelmed by the Ottoman Empire. Since then, we Greeks have been facing obstacles at times created by Turks, Italians, Germans, French, British and even Americans. We have always fought back. We have always fought for the freedom and democracy that were the founding ideals of ancient Greece.

But we have also, just as we did in the ancient Peloponnesian Wars when Sparta and Athens became bitter rivals, fought with each other. Unfortunately, we are still fighting with each other. Hard choices. These hard choices however, have often made us into very resilient people. Just as in Albert Camus' portrayal of Sisyphus whose face pressed so close to stone became like stone, so too have Greeks gained strength from their difficulties. Pericles Rizopoulos was παππούς μου, my *pappou*, my grandfather and he was one of these strong people.

Looking back, I recall that the most important meeting I had with him was when I was just eleven years old. It was a hot, sticky, New York summer morning when I stopped by to visit with him on my way home from my cousin's house. I had only just walked in the door when my grandfather told me that I should sit at the dining room of the dimly lit first floor of their home in the Bronx, New York. His and Mollie's house. Mollie was η γιαγιά μου, my *yiayia*, my grandmother.

My *pappou* was an old man even then, but on that day he was expectant, vigorous and excited. He sat down next to me and showed me a red covered, bound, unlined book that he handled with such respect, such reverence, that even before he told me what the book was, I intuitively understood that this was a very important document. He sat down and stared at me. "Perrymou," he said, "this book is the key to my life...and to your life. It is a story about φιλότιμο (*philotimo*)."

We sat on the couch where the sun came through the blinds, reflected light onto the book and illuminated *pappou*'s gold crucifix that hung from his neck. The

house was unbearably warm. Using their air conditioning was always viewed as a sign of weakness and a waste of money, so we both sat in our

undershirts and tirelessly went through every page of the book. As he carefully folded back the pages and translated the handwritten Greek, I was totally captivated by his stories of war, adventure and survival, and he was unrelenting in his telling. We spent the whole day together, without a break, just the two of us. He never stopped speaking, and I never stopped listening.

Ten years after our first conversation, in September 2013, when I was 21 years old, I was sitting in a classroom on my first day of graduate school at Columbia University's Teachers College. The class was called "Family as Educator," and my professor, Dr. Hope Jensen Leichter, Director of the Elbenwood Center for the Study of Family as Educator, waited for class to begin and walked up to each and every student, shook each student's hand and asked how we were doing. After these brief conversations, she walked to the front of the room and asked the class to share a story that showed how our grand- parents educated us. I sat in the middle of the room and listened attentively to each student when I suddenly found myself reflecting on that remarkable day I spent with my grandfather. It was my turn to speak and Dr. Leichter looked at me with an expectant smile as I shared the bits of the story that I could remember. I felt the importance of that experience growing with each example I provided.

At that time, pappou could still go outside and work in his yard, cook and walk around freely. Yet, I sensed that he was getting weaker. At family gatherings he was quieter, less responsive.

But the others in my family preferred not to focus on pappou's warning signs. My father refused to say or do anything but encourage pappou while convincing himself that his father was going to make a 180 degree turn and be completely healthy again. Yiayia Mollie, my grandmother, was also becoming somewhat forgetful and absent-minded. Then there was my mother. She noticed, but also did not want to exacerbate the obvious. I did not want to look away from what my pappou was saying and what he was doing. When I told our story to my class, I faced the reality.

That's when it occurred to me that I should go to see pappou and find that notebook. I decided my grandfather and I would read through his brother's journal, and he would tell me their stories while he was still able to do so. We'd

be together...again, like we were on that distant summer morning.

A few days later, when I was in the Bronx, I stopped by my pappou's house unannounced, which was typical for me. I found a parking spot only half a block away from his house, a miracle in itself because finding parking in the Bronx can be a very difficult task. I threw my bag over my shoulder and walked toward his side door, through the small white gate that stands at the height of my hip. I walked over to the side window of the first floor. I knocked and the white shade shook from the vibrations of my knocking. I yelled, "It's me."

My yiayia, as she always did, greeted me warmly. She yelled to pappou, "Perry, your grandson is here." Then back to me, "He'll be right there, honey." I walked back through the gate to the front of the house. I waited a moment and the garage door slowly began to rise. I quickly ducked my head under the door, mostly because I am perpetually impatient, and there he was.

Pappou was wearing a white v-neck undershirt tucked into khakis, and *pandofles*, or sandals, and black socks. His hair was brushed back and his eyes were bright and alert. He hugged me and put one hand in the space where my jaw meets my neck and gave me a slight smack as a gesture of endearment.

I immediately prepared for the first of the three questions he always asked. "How are you, Perrymou?" With his hand still on my jaw, I said "I'm good, how's it going?" He smiled and said "Good, come see yiayia."

As I walked in, I was confronted with the second question, "How goes the school?" I turned back for a moment, "It's good...I have to ask you something." He responded "Ok, Perrymou."

I saw yiayia and she raised her arms into the air, *zeibekiko*, Greek dancing style, to express that she was happy to see me. We embraced. Then as we broke our hug, pappou asked the third and final question as I was sitting down at the dining room table. "How goes the girl?" he asked with a smile.

"Still looking," I replied. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "*Endaxi*," or "ok."

After yiayia asked if I was hungry, and then looked annoyed but still hospitable when I said no, I asked about the book. Pappou immediately understood what I was referring to although we hadn't spoken about it in a decade. It took

him 15 minutes of rummaging through the closet next to his desk before he found it.

“Perry,” he asked me, “why do you want me to find this book?” I told him I was going to use it for my graduate school thesis. “Graduate school thesis!” he appeared somewhat nervous. “You will make sure it’s safe?” “Of course, pappou.” Then he gave me a sly smile. “But Perry, you don’t read Greek.” “I guess I’ll find someone to translate it,” I said. “Ah, Ναι, yes, you will need someone to translate my brother’s words.” “Exactly, pappou.”

“And where will you find someone, Perry?” Again he gave me a wry smile, as he looked me in the eye. “How will someone know what my brother and I were thinking?”

I smiled and nodded in agreement with his argument. “Well” he said as if the idea had just occurred to him, “I could translate.” I smiled back at him and only took a few seconds to realize that this would

be our project, together. He put his hand on my shoulder and then stuck it out towards me. We shook hands.

With a grin, I said “Ok, let’s go.”

And so we agreed I would meet with him every week, and he would tell me all over again, the stories of the killing, of the blood, of the planting, of the children, of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, of brothers killing brothers, of the harvest, of treachery, of bravery and salvation. I walked to my car after this first conversation fully aware that I made him a promise that was not to be broken.

When I returned a week later, we started with the ritual that would, more or less, begin each story. My pappou would sit in his chair in the living room, waiting. When I entered the room, he always stood up and walked towards me with open arms. He invariably said, “Ah, it’s the writer.” We would hug and kiss. He always asked me the same three questions and I would greet my yiayia as she was sitting on the couch. When we hugged and kissed, she would smile and ask me, as always, if I wanted to eat something. I usually said no. She would, as usual, be slightly annoyed, and I, of course, always told her that I had already eaten. She would put some kind of food on the table anyway which I would

inevitably eat.

Then we three walked into the dining room and sat down at the dining room table that became our work desk. Pappou sat across from me. On our first day speaking about his story, he began by looking at me directly in a very formal way. He sat straight. His blue eyes were shinning. His gaze was clear and sharp. His full head of gray hair was flecked with some strands of white and was meticulously brushed back from his face. He dressed that day as he did for all of our meetings, in a variation of the same clothes—a button-down flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up, his shirttails tucked into a pair of crisp, pressed khakis.

This was how he dressed years earlier when he was working full time with my father in the laundromats. Now, our project was to be his new work, and as such, he dressed for the part. My grandfather had one set of clothes for relaxing in the house, one set for work, another for going out to eat or to go shopping, and then there was his most important look, his church clothes. The only carry

over in attire were his church socks, which he often wore while sitting around the house, relaxing.

Yiayia enjoyed sitting with us. She would smile and nod and follow the conversation. She was also very helpful when my pappou had trouble translating certain Greek words, phrases, or expressions. She was born in America and her English vocabulary was much larger than my grandfather's. She would gently tap pappou on the arm when he was searching for a word, he would look at her, she would smile and nod toward me, perhaps supply a word or two. Then pappou would calm down and resume telling the story in English.

She also had a habitual way of dressing in a long black skirt worn by traditional older Greek women and a long-sleeved blouse, usually blue or white. Her hair was always nicely combed. They were the perfect portrait of an elderly Greek-American couple—attractive, proud and comfortable about who they were and what they had accomplished.

When we were settled in, my grandfather reached for his brother's note-book. He never opened it right away. Instead he placed one hand flat on the cover, the other on the table. Then he would lean forward and place both his elbows on the table and ask, "What do you want to know, Perrymou?"

I would answer: "What do you want to tell me?"

He always started by reading briefly, silently, to himself, from the old notebook to revive his memories, and then the story would begin.