

Nick Papandreou

Exile: Outside definition

For many years, Canada, the place where I came of age, had been my choice of homeland. When I imagined home, I imagined it there. Yet no one in our family was born in Canada. Escaping the Greek dictatorship in 1968, after a various peregrinations throughout Europe, my father chose as his land of exile a small place north of Toronto called King City. “Population 2000, growing with Canada,” the sign read when you drove over the railroad tracks.

Our home itself was a stone ranch built into the side of a hill. The living room stood at the hill’s edge and from that height you felt you were on a ship, looking down at a sea of green, plus a weeping willow. Our neighbor to our right was a tall imposing man from Quebec with a long dry face and checkered shirts and a scar on his hand from WW II – almost the proverbial Canadian lumberjack. Yet what was most astonishing, coming from Greece, was the absence of fences between our property and our Quebecois neighbor. All it took to delineate properties was a small stick and an imaginary line.

The first day of Canadian school, after five years of grade school in Greece, I was once again astonished by the absence of any fencing around the school. (Even today Greek schools are surrounded by walls.) This indeed was a new world, one without the shadows of the Greek military, a place where history was a European scar on the back of a hand, a place where land was divided by imaginary lines and not walls, fences, and barbed wire.

But so many things impressed me that first year when we moved from Greece to Canada: the bonfire at the Curran’s home, with their Irish family of eleven children, and the generous portions of blueberry pie that followed the fresh, thickly buttered corn on the cob; cutting the lawn, the names of the neighbors – so easy to pronounce, few of them reaching beyond two curt Anglo-Saxon syllables. Was it possible that people had such simple-to-remember surnames? Across from us lived the Alsops, to our left were the Almonds, farther down the Hobsons, the Newtons, the Galbraiths, the Honeys. Further away were the Salmons and the Mansons and the Johnsons, the Saunders. Only outside the Estates did you meet up with the Roncalis, the Natales, the Cruikschanks, and the Kowalskis. No Papapanagiotous or Katsifarases or Alevrases or Mothonioses.

Around King city were Newmarket, Richmond Hill, and my favorite, Aurora, named I suppose after that inimitable sight of nature, the Aurora Borealis, which in those years before urban creep and city lights, was visible from our back porch in the evening, winter’s natural rainbow. Dogs were named Rex, Maximus, Peebles, and the free-roving neighborhood dog who outlasted the whole lot them, Brutus himself, a shaggy, ragamuffin mutt who could eat just about anything in a second. There were also the Indian names: Ontario, Ottawa, Algonquin, and Muskogee. The school I was to attend also had a few eskimoes, or half-eskimoes or a quarter eskimoes; nobody really cared it seemed about backgrounds.

Many homes were being built the summer we arrived, a year after my grandfather’s death, in 1969. With my little brother we’d walk to the development area, stare at the bulldozers and earth-movers, the uprooted maples. The earth was

Home/Lands.

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so black, so rich in natural nutrients I once tasted it. At night, wolves howled and raced around in front of our home – this was simply unheard of in the dry city climate of Athens from where we had come.

The powerful green colors, the taste of back bacon, the great piles of pancakes during cook-outs, the August bonfires where freshly picked corn was boiled, the snowmobiles in the winter and the icicles from our roof, in short the wondrous allure of this new country, pushed the Greece into the distance. But not completely. Dinners with our father were a return to the old country, to the Greece of the mid-sixties that had sent him to jail and nearly to his death by execution. Yet I think that the sight of maple trees and black roads and the aroma of cut grass was softening his attitude to this new country. After all he had lived over twenty years in America before returning to Greece and perhaps he was reconnecting to that part of his life. If this were true, he could never admit it; he was the leader-in-exile, fighting the junta, preparing for his triumphant return.

Since our home was the headquarters for the Panhellenic Liberation Movement, aimed at overthrowing the junta, the old country was never far. We were visited regularly by liberal professors, immigrant Greeks up from Toronto, and a gaggle of students from the States to discuss the different forms of the struggle. I would come home from a game of basketball or finish my homework on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railroad or read one of those I-was-abducted-by-an-Indian novels and suddenly find myself forced to switch attention and focus on other things. Family dinners were like a tightrope of emotions – political analyses, anger, nostalgia, planning, despair. Greece was always there, either because someone had escaped from jail and was proudly showing my father the scars from torture, or someone was crying because of news they'd heard, or because someone had died and there had been no friends at his bedside. The sadness and the range of emotions was exhilarating because these extremes leant such great purpose to everything.

Yet the life of an exile generates a sickness, I would say. Because you are supposed to be blind to what is right in your face and give credence to the abstract and intangible, to talk about people you are not able to kiss, places you can't smell, and faces you can't see.

As if to rectify the exile's sensual deficit, one of my father's friends, Antonis Tritsis, an urban planner, sent us a recording of a Greek summer afternoon on the sea. For forty-five minutes my father played the tape and required us to either leave the living room or keep our traps shut. What did this recording consist of? The sound of crickets behind which we could hear the clink of glasses, probably from a taverna, and every now and then some laughter or a growl. A motorcycle in the distance, a sound which my father played over a few times. Odd how a hot Greek afternoon distills and carries noises differently than a Canadian one. Antonis completed the tape by playing the guitar and singing a traditional Greek melody. My father kept his back to us. I think it was the only time in my life that I saw him come close to crying.

Years later, when I saw the movie *Il Postino*, about Neruda's exile, I was surprised to watch a moving scene where the humble postman, now schooled in the concept of metaphor by the master himself, goes about the Italian countryside and sea to collect various items from his place of exile to send back to him in Italy, including recordings of sounds. It is said that smell can bring back memories that might knock you out but I now think sound can sometimes do the same.

Although we grew up where snow was the chief element of winter life, in the space of our floating living room we recalled summers on beaches, the dry pine trees, the goats and shepherds, and even the *paliatzis*, the man who would drive through neighborhoods on a horse drawn cart selling old items collected from abandoned homes. This was the Eden to which we would never return. The Greek immigrants in Toronto and Montreal and Vancouver, in Buffalo and New York, would visit and literally cry over their country. Greece, the Greece of exile, grew larger and more important in my mind even as the Canada in which I lived caused the senses to bloom. Its stark simplicity contrasted to the complexities of the near past.

My problem was that I felt guilty that I was enjoying the life of exile so much. After all, high school in North America is one of those defining moments in your life – sexuality, awareness, parties, drugs. And more parties. I was captain of the basketball team. I was chosen for those nerdy shows on television where schools compete against each other with difficult questions. We did walk-a-thons down Yonge Street and went to mega rock concerts at the Maple Leaf Gardens. So in fact Canada for me was no exile at all. Whatever sense of exile I had was merely nostalgia for the friends I'd left behind; if I had any sense of exile it was probably fueled by borrowing, best as I could, my father's emotions. Not to feel as my father did or the emigrants who showed up practically every day was a betrayal to the downtrodden country.

It was possible then to inhabit two countries at once – a first lesson in philosophy, or perhaps *the* lesson of exile. These were two separate entities, forever held apart. Canada seeped in with the force of its size, the sheer in-your-facedness of it all. Greece became the outcast brother, in the process growing more and more distorted, more and more pure, a saintly place. In the world of the imagination, all Greeks were good, like Zorba, alive and passionate. Canadians – well Canadians were all around us, both good and less so.

That small dichotomy, however, is the key to explaining most everything that doesn't allow one to live fully: an inability to inhale the world as it is and an emphasis on the world as you wish it could be. That is the exile's awful lot. The ideal, abstracted location compared to the one in which you live. It seems to be a particularly human trait, to be in one place and yet to imagine another. Love affairs are something like this, when you are away from the object of your desire, the idealization of the other.

On our mailbox we used the name T. S. Knight, a combination of Eliot's first initials and a famous economist's last name. For years I used that name for simple things, clothes at the cleaners, dropping off negatives to be developed, anywhere that didn't require I.D..

During this period of exile, there were at least two serious attempts on my father's life. One response to the various threats was that our home in Canada filled up with weapons, both rifles and guns. In a drawer next to my father's bed, which I once ransacked when my parents were away on a six-week political campaign to rile up the Greeks of Australia, I discovered an old Luger, a semi-automatic Remington with cartridges and a small calibre Beretta. I was certain my father knew as little as I did about these guns.

Young men eager to flex their muscles against the Pentagon would gather outside the property and do guard duty if the RCMP thought we were closer to code red. On certain mornings I would use a retractable mirror device to look under the

car for bombs (not that I would have known one if it blew up in my face) before my father drove off. I grew used to looking behind me, used to the RCMP dropping in to report suspicious cars that drove slowly past our home. The trauma of the night of the coup had not yet worn out. Soldiers pointing rifles in our faces, my sister thrown to the floor, the bodyguard beaten and tossed down the marble stairs leaving red stains, my father being pounded by rifle butts, blood spurting from his knee before being shoved into a military truck, my mother chasing him down the street, ignoring the glass in her bare feet. Losing the dreams would take another ten years or so.

To add to this insecurity was the constant moving about. We had gone from one country to another country, from America to Greece when we were young, then from Greece to Canada through stints in France, Sweden, and the States. Such trips required if nothing at least a light load. Light loads are the prerogative of those who move much. You necessarily learn to throw things out, to distinguish the important from the less so – to pose yourself questions like “Do I really really need to bring that book with me?” “I never wore that shirt, what am I still doing with it?” Behind these simple questions lay much deeper ones: what do you really need? What will you miss?

Perhaps to convince myself we were finally settled in, to garner some sense of stability, I began to save everything and to collect still more: pictures, letters, posters, coins, books. I have about two thousand letters today, even ones I’d written (and copied before sending.)

I’d collect books in series: all of Sherlock Holmes, all of Biggles, all of the Hardy Boys, I signed up for Science Fiction Book of the Month Club. I collected moths and butterflies, and as many coins as I could. Only one collection represented part of the larger political life into which we were tossed – the political posters, which grew regularly in number.

Once it became known that I was the keeper of the flag, so to speak, people coming to our home in Canada would often remember to bring me anti-junta posters from around the world. These I posted on a large wood-panel wall in the rec room.

I don’t and can’t remember them all. A few remain lodged in my mind. A poster of a military tank inside the Parthenon, its cannon jutting out from inside the columns, a drawing of a tall lanky fellow with a loose swath of hair looking over barbed wire with a Swedish legend: *Freiheit Åt Grekland* – this was the great composer Mikis Theodorakis whom I had met only a year earlier and in whose apartment I slept while he spoke with the adults about the “resistance.” This was a poster of a man who’d lived a large chunk of his life either in jail or in exile.

Let’s pause briefly with that word, exile. In Greek, the word for exile is *exoria*. Etymologically speaking, the term is made up of two words – *exo* for “outer” and *oria* for “boundaries.” Together its literal meaning is “outside the borders or boundaries.” A more metaphoric meaning could be “outside definition.” As a kid I liked to analyse Greek words in English and discover hidden meanings behind such Greek-origin terms as disaster, catastrophe and utopia.

Under the term “Exile,” the Greek language Wikipedia provides the following example, which turns out to be of personal interest: *During the Metaxa dictatorship (1936-1940) many political opponents, like George Papandrea, were displaced and exiled to distant parts of Greece.* No mention is made of dozens of other famous exiles, such as the poet Ritsos or the composer Theodorakis, the one in the poster I’d collected.

George Papandreu, my grandfather, twice prime minister of Greece, was exiled to the islands of Naxos, Andros, and Kythera, the last during that very Metaxas dictatorship. Echoes of his passage can still be heard – an old-timer on Naxos told me how his father used to bring him food, while an aging priest in a village on Andros told me that discussions with my grandfather back then had converted him once and for to the cause of helping others. As a young boy in the late thirties, my father was allowed to visit him on the island of Kythera, much the way we visited my father in jail in the mid sixties. Family visits to relatives in jail or exiled to distant islands are part of Greece's twentieth century collective unconscious and form the subject of books, movies, and oral histories.

I met my Greek grandfather when I was six, when our family left the States for Greece. At that time he had acquired the stately dignity of a seventy-two year old who'd fought in numerous wars, been jailed five times, and exiled about as many, a man slightly hunched over, who'd earned the term Old Man of Democracy, a man always dressed to a tee with a slow yet agile gait, and eyes, well eyes that were, eyes I sometimes recognize as my own.

His house was located in the area of Kastri, a suburb north of Athens, a city with a growing population today of 5 million. Not being a rich man, he had built this house at a time when real estate far from Athens was dirt cheap. There were practically no other homes around his back then. Today the neighborhood is considered extremely upscale and builders covet the two acres of pine-filled land that surrounds the only remaining pre-war home, built of stone and mud and remarkably resilient in this earthquake prone region. The large garden is replete with tall pine trees, completely bare until the top, where they crest into a crown of branches. Long green needles and pine cones litter the earth. On extremely hot days the pine cones explode like pop-corn. There are also a few olive trees, brought from his village in the hills north of Patras, wild brush, and a shed.

His office, darkened with German law-books from his studies in Leipzig before the First World War, has two leather chairs with cushions that wheeze, now cracked with age, and a large oak desk upon which still sit both his and my father's memorabilia, pens, notebooks, pictures of my grandfather with Churchill and Venizelos; my father with Tito and Palme. From that office in October 1981 my father made his first televised announcement as Prime Minister of Greece.

My grandfather's history of exile was of the honest-to-god political variety – by that I mean he was sent to distant shores because of his ideological beliefs. Today we have whole new categories of exiles, men and women who have left their countries because they are unable to find jobs (economic refugees), who are fleeing conflict (war refugees) or who are simply unable to continue their traditional forms of life because of our interventions in nature – environmental refugees.

The psychological condition of exile arrives on one's doorstep in many guises. When our family first came to Greece in the early sixties I had my own first taste of exile, mingled with strong nostalgia, insecurity, and a particular kind of loneliness – for the America we up and left, a particular America to which I was never to return – Berkeley of the early sixties. Years later when I found myself in Los Angeles driving along Sunset Boulevard with its fresh black asphalt and its old billboard posters, I was overwhelmed with the sense that I had lived here before – no doubt Hollywood is to blame, but also my early memories and my parent's photo albums of that era. My father had come to Los Angeles in 1951 to propose marriage to my mother, who was working in the downtown area health services. They went and got married in

Reno, getting quick divorces and quick marriages, going to see Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner and later on, Lenny Bruce at the Hungry I in San Francisco. Their tales of romance, reinforced by old 8 mm home movies, their pictures and even their old driving licenses established for me a fairy tale picture of their early romance and of that America.

I think I never lost this nostalgia for their America, the one I briefly tasted in Berkeley, the one I heard about from my parents when they decided to talk about the past, and I carry it with me to this day. As kid in Greece I had first sensed a taste of maladjustment, of being out of water, of wanting to protect, above all, my mother tongue of English. Because of that I plunged myself into books in English. Even today, though I live in Greece and now can write in Greek, I still feel that my reference point is outside of Greece, perhaps to California, but more so to King City where I once decided would be the place of my burial ground for the simple reason that we had actually managed to stay in that place for five consecutive years and I had felt a sense of place, finally.

It was my grandfather, oddly enough, who unwittingly provided me with yet another doorway back to America in those years. Each Saturday, with decent regularity, our family would have lunch at his house in Kastrì. The family seemed fully united, and this particular constellation of family seemed engraved in granite. We were usually served chicken with rice and a bechamel sauce, while he and my father, who had then decided to enter politics as well, discussed the issues of the day. Some time was allotted to us kids but the high point for me was when lunch was over. That's when the old man would give us an allowance of a hundred drachmas, worth three dollars and thirty three cents. With this injection, I would stop on the return trip in nearby Kifissia, at a kiosk that still exists, forty years later to buy American comic books. They went for a dollar each which mean I could and did buy three each Saturday and saved the change for three weeks to buy yet a fourth. I amassed quite a collection those years but was not able to bring it with me the night we fled the country, with my father's life in danger from the military dictatorship that had just released him from jail. We left with only a small suitcase each. Comic book collections were deemed inessential and on the scale of things, they certainly were.

At those lunches, my grandfather never failed to act the perfect gentlemen and would offer my mother and sister a rose. He would say with some pride that he himself had planted the rosebush – crawling up one wall -- when he first moved in and he might walk us into the garden so that he could show us the most recent bloom, then bend and say "Smell. This is life." Here was a man, I later realized, who was in touch with his senses, was always well dressed, always aware of his image, always polishing his voice and his rhetoric, a man who even in exile found ways of loving the places where he found himself.

Which is why the night of his arrest in the coup of 1967 the soldiers had been so nervous he had to speak to them in his older man's voice, make sure they didn't mistakenly squeeze a trigger. Whereas most of the politicians were dragged to prison in their underwear, my father included, my grandfather asked the soldiers to do him the favor and give him a moment. If he was going to be arrested, it was going to be in style. When he arrived at the political holding ground, a way station for the prisons, my father, also dragged there, told us later that the old man wore his three-piece suit. Not only that: in full display was the piece de resistance: a rose from his very own rosebush pinned to his lapel.

When the Colonels fell in 1974 and we abandoned Canada, we returned to this home in Kastri. Over the years it was this home that began to supplant the one in Canada, as this home became the place for important events in my own life.

Soon after our return from Canada, on “orders” from my mother, I searched out my father and found him sitting in my grandfather’s dark, book-laden office. Here I challenged him about his extra-marital activities, the good son ever on his mother’s side. I was seventeen. It turned out not to be the first time I would play this role. His response was not to tell me to stay out of it but that he was doing his best to sever the relationship. So hard did he try, so the story goes, so great his indecision, that he fell into a deep depression. For two years. Of the William Styron *Darkness is Visible* variety. His handwriting shrunk. He said little. He was barely interested in the outside world. He gave speeches in a dull monotone. On the eve of a most important speech he started to stutter, the first time ever in his life. After keeping the whole thing under wraps, except for advice from an American psychologist in Los Angeles, my mother finally turned to a Greek expert who examined him in person. That very first meeting the psychiatrist said he would propose a radical procedure, with no guarantees. He gave some sort of concoction of pills and told my mother that he had to take them each night. If the procedure worked, the first signs of recovery would come in exactly six days. Each night my mother would go to sleep with him, in the same room where my grandfather had lain and each morning she would stare at my father, not believing that there was any magic about to happen. He noticed nothing, he could barely get dressed.

On the sixth morning my mother woke up convinced that his condition was permanent. She looked at him in bed – no change. He got up slowly, as he had for the last two years. But this time, instead of wondering where his shoes were, he went to the window, opened the shutters and looked down into the garden. “Margaret,” he said, “have you seen how beautiful is father’s rose bush?” This was indeed the beginning of the road out of darkness and in his case, the road to power.

My grandfather had spent his last days in this home, under house arrest, before his final demise in 1968, at the age of eighty. These final months of his life are now part of the country’s modern history. Despite his age, he did not want to fade away. It would be easy to fall to sleep, to tell himself that five arrests, fifty years of working for the cause of democracy, primeministerships, children, two wives, grandchildren, that all this was enough. He could barely bend down to shine his shoes but he wanted to look completely unruffled each morning, as if being under house arrest was a temporary condition. He wore his suit and tie without fail.

In the spring of 1968, the last spring he would ever enjoy, Kastri dripped with life, the rosebush, the pine trees, the small olive grove. He wanted to smuggle out a speech to the BBC, which was broadcasting into the country, but he was being watched. He had a recording machine, which they had failed to notice, but how was he to use it without being discovered? He decided to play the palaverous cranky old man recalling his past. In front of the soldiers, out in the garden, he would take his walk but now he would talk to himself, sometimes quoting himself from his old speeches, other times coming up with completely new ones. At first they listened in, after all he was considered a danger. To impress upon them his imbalance, he purposely exaggerated the old flourishes, the intonations, the pauses. Here, in the garden, surrounded by scurrilous but also some respectful soldiers and sergeants

sitting beneath the tall pine trees, it didn't take much to act as if senility had finally come to collect one more soul.

He read the actual speech into a carefully placed microphone in his living room. By then, the soldiers had given up listening in. The Easter of 1968 coincided with the first anniversary of the coup. Perhaps because he was the son of a village priest, his speeches had a certain biblical style to them. Rarely absent in his own speech was the Bible's pithiness and tendency to aphorism and with these linguistic weapons he forge his own unique voice. *Greece of Christian Greeks*, this speech began, mocking the dictator's penchant for beginning his own speeches with those very same words. *Today, the Greece of Christian Greeks are catholically protestant. Today, though we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, we mourn for the crucifixion of the people.*

I recently had occasion to listen to the unedited recording – apparently the BBC filtered out background sounds when it finally aired the speech. I swear I can hear my own childhood: the sounds of the street, a car in the distance, a lone motorcycle racing up the hills of Kastri, its single lung sputtering with intent. Perhaps it's only my imagination, but I think I can also distinguish the hoarse cry of the *paliatzis*, selling his wares from the back of horse-drawn cart. I remember thinking of the time my father had so reverently listened to the tape from Greece during his exile. At the time it had seemed sort of dumb to get all teary-eyed from the sound of crickets on a Greek beach. After all, why listen to that? But I was only fourteen then. I recalled my father trying to hide from us his sadness. I was only lucky that my own little son, Andronicus, aged 5, did not walk into the living room while I was listening to the BBC speech.

So much part of this country's unwritten history flowed from his home. Its green gate and first floor veranda are now part of the iconology of modern Greece. We only replaced the gate this year and were obliged to paint it green and make the exact same copy of the original. Of course it was in the home in Canada where I first saw my father dance Greek dances, surrounded by his supporters, smoking, clapping and drinking and those images are not easily diminished. In 1974 this was the home where the new socialist party was launched, with people writing things using the floor for a desk, crowding around the balcony or arguing in the living room, squeezing into the old office, flowing into the basement. Even from the bathrooms you could hear people talking. They finally came up with what is now called the Third of September Manifesto. From this home did images circle the country when my father won his first national elections. Thousands of people have gathered outside and inside the home to launch campaigns, to wait for election results, to listen to speeches of victory or electoral defeat, either during my grandfather's lengthy political career, my father's fiery career or now, in 2008, my older brother George's quieter political, more Swedish or perhaps more Canadian-style trajectory. My brother's many years abroad are held against him, they say he has the "trademark name" but that's not enough, or they call him by his diminutive – Yorgaki – or they say he is a Greek politician whose other language happens to be Greek.

Nonetheless, he bears the burden of the political legacy and as I write, is the leader of my father's socialist party, the one created in Kastri back in 1974. He is aware of the symbology of this home as well as the importance of a steady signal. On special occasions he calls the press there or will make an announcement from that very same office, the one laden down with German law books from the previous century, a Nietzsche sassily displaying its spine.

This spring, for the first time in my own life, I had the house to myself. Beneath the remaining pine trees I played Frisbee with my younger son. We discovered that like me, he is also allergic to the caterpillars that thrive inside these awful gray pouches and hang from the pines. It was very odd to sleep with my wife in the same bed where my parents had slept – I told my wife that these fading shutters were the same ones my father had swung open when he'd finally thrown off the curse of depression. This was where my grandfather had also slept. By a quirk of chance, my wife had known my grandmother when she was a little girl and recalled her well. My grandmother, the first wife of George Papandreu, lived with us for many decades. She once told us that she respected this bed and made sure she never slept on «his side.» In her final years she was happy to be in Kastri and started to sing in German. Are you okay, I asked her? She was 94 at the time. «Of course. These are the love songs we heard with your grandfather when he was in Leipzig. I am trying to remember them all before I see him again.»

For that month I was head of the Kastri house. Dumb as it sounds, I felt like I had finally made a connection with my past. I would sometimes sneak into the old office and for the first time, I actually sat down in it. Here, over thirty years ago, I had challenged my father's womanizing. Here he had given me a beautiful watch as a present, which had been a present to him, and which years later, I then gave to someone else. Yet for all this I can't say I am closer to deciding where, in fact, I should be buried, macabre as that may sound. I think my mother's choice, to be burned and scattered over the Aegean, is quite romantic but I want to leave some sign that I passed through King City – a place to which I have still not returned, though nearly forty years have passed.

Each morning in Kastri the aging gardener would cut a rose and put it on the breakfast table for us. I told Andronicus that his great grandfather had planted the rosebush here many years ago. He decided to use a word whose meaning still escaped him, though not completely.

«Infinite years ago?»

I nodded my head. «Infinite indeed.»

For him, I hope exile will be something he'll read about in history books, a word whose literal meaning he'll understand but whose emblematic one might escape him. Though not completely. He'll still have those recordings of sounds, my two thousand letters, the old coin collection, the blooming rose bushes. The rare posters I lost long ago, stolen from me during my college years. And because people will ask him about his grandfather and great grandfather, I have a hunch he will have to learn quite a bit about them, as I have.