

Books

Of love and war

The vivid frontline diary of a Thessalonikian doctor tells of his profound affection for his wife and the horrors of combat waged in the frigid Albanian mountains

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"MOBILISATION, mobilisation ... we are being mobilised." So begins Dr Theodore Electrís' war diary on 1 November 1940. Over the six months of the military campaign, from his departure from his adopted city of Thessaloniki to his return after it had fallen to the Germans, Electrís recounts his time as an army doctor in Greece's war against the invading forces of Mussolini's Italy.

Entitled *Written on the Knee: A Diary from the Greek-Italian Front of WWII*, the campaign was a personal odyssey for the 32-year-old, a war started by "some crazy tyrants or leaders", the end of which he fervently hopes will be the return to his "nest", the new home he set up with his newlywed wife just three months previously.

Indeed, Electrís' greatest pain is the separation from his oft-invoked "sweet little wife", Chrysoula. Fearing he may never return to her from the front, Electrís' trial dominates this most personal of narratives.

Indeed, it is evident from his daily entries that their love is what keeps him going during the war, fought in a bitterly cold winter campaign in the geographically inhospitable yet stunningly beautiful mountains of southern Albania.

Thus, in so many ways, this is a love story, albeit told in the context of a terrible war. Indeed, as he writes, he lives for her amorous and fragrant letters, many of which have been interspersed throughout



Dr Theodore Electrís (centre) in the Albanian village of Zaberzani with his medics and Albanian hosts

the narrative by the text's editor and translator, Helen Electric Lindsay, the physician's daughter.

His diary entries convey the often petty and monotonous existence of army life. As he wrote on 15 January 1941: "I'm personally sick and tired of this whole expedition. I'm homesick beyond description; I'm nostalgic for my wife, my bed, my home and all."

Eternal concerns

He is, for example, eternally concerned with his food and sleep, bothered by the constant moving and setting up of new bivouacs, securing accommodation and food from Albanians, the cold and the devious, schoolboyish manner of some of his comrades. And the passing of a trusted steed greatly troubles him.

No doubt, his experience as a refugee - a Pontic Greek born in the now Georgian city of Batumi, his family fled the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s - made him determined to chart this latest of upheavals in his life.

Remarking at one stage that "war is

not a picnic", Electrís pulls no stops in describing the horrors of the Albanian front. The sight of any dead soldier - regardless of the colour of his uniform - fills him with sorrow. On coming across the mangled corpses of Italians and Greeks on 29 January 1941, he wrote:

"My thoughts were a poor memorial for those young lives, both Greek and Italian, that had been cut short, wasted, their life dreams and songs petrified within their dead bodies, never to be realised and never to be sung, on these wild impenetrable mountains of Albania."

This most attractive volume, in which the historically significant diary is reproduced, contains numerous photographs taken by the diarist, articles and maps providing historical context from his daughter, and an introduction by Louis de Bernieres, author of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*.

From the pen of a most cultured and humane individual with a great eye for the wonders of nature, *Written on the Knee* deserves a wide readership, which a publication in Greek would greatly facilitate.

Written on the Knee: A Diary from the Greek-Italian Front of WWII



Diary by Dr Theodore Electrís,
edited and translated
by Helen Electric Lindsay

Scarletta Press, 2008
230pp. 14 euros



HELEN ELECTRIC LINDSAY was born in Thessaloniki. She now lives in Wayzata, Minnesota, and is the editor and translator of *Written on the Knee*.

Athens News: What are you reading now?

Helen Electric Lindsay: I alternate between reading

English- and Greek-language books.

In Greek, I've just finished reading *To Novúmpo 31328 (The Number 31328)* by Ilias Venezis. It's Venezis' personal story of his time in a Turkish labour camp of 1922. It's a powerful and timely story of survival 'written in blood'. The psychological sketches of the captors and captives could be from any place

and time. It is a story of human nature as it is changed by war. To me, his best book.

In English, I'm currently reading Jeffrey Eugenides' eclectic and exotic collection of great love stories from Chekhov to Munro, entitled *My Mistress's Sparrow is Dead*.

What is the first book you remember reading?

Aesop's Fables

Your top three books ever could be? And why?

If I could include Homer's *Odyssey*, I would, but it's not prose.

Nikos Kazantzakis' *Christ Recrucified* (also published as *The Greek Passion*) - the most spiritual book I have ever read.

F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* - a truly American story, so tightly written that every word is like a stitch in a beautiful needlepoint.

Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*. I couldn't put it down. It was like reading about people I know. Wolfe has a perfect insight into modern American business, greed and the search of man for his soul.

The worst?

I don't have a worst because I just drop them when I can't get into them. Some titles left in locker rooms and planes include Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

What type of book appeals to you?

History books, novels, travel books with historical content, magic realism, poetry and any kind of short story.

If you were to write (another) one, what would it be about?

It would be about all the lonely people and where do they come from - a bittersweet story about getting old.