

The Greeks and I

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (October 2022)



Psaltery and other instruments, post-Byzantine-era mural, Philanthropinon monastery, Loannina, 16th c

Arius, king of the Spartans, sends greetings to Onias, the chief priest. It has been found in a writing concerning the Spartans and Jews, that they are kinsmen, and that they are descended from Abraham. Now since we have learned this, please write us about your welfare. We for our part write you that your cattle and property are ours and ours are yours. So we command them to report to you to this effect.
-12 verse 20-23 of the Book of Maccabees I

Today every Israeli University teaches Greek and Latin.

Israeli archaeologists excavate the ruins of the Hellenistic conquerors and settlers who once lived in the land of Israel. The average Israeli now thinks of Greek popular music as part of the national repertoire, largely because of the musical efforts of Jews from Greece who survived the Holocaust and brought a specific kind of Greek popular music to the shores of the eastern Mediterranean after WWII.

Today documents, either ignored or suppressed, are coming out showing that the small amount of Jewish young men and women who were not sent to the camps from Greece by the Nazis, fought valiantly in the mountains with the Greek resistance.

Greece and Israel now have full diplomatic relations and their economies and security concerns become closer by the day. It wasn't always so and my own encounter with the Greek world is its own story. And so I ask myself, what did I learn about the Greeks and what has it meant to me?



My family has spoken English for only two generations, although it is now my native tongue. Before that they spoke Yiddish, probably for four hundred years. My grandparents also spoke bits of Russian, Ukrainian, Polish when back in the "old country," before the Holocaust, doing business with their host societies.

My maternal grandmother was born and educated in Vienna. By the time she came to Canada and married my paternal grandfather, any trace of her German language and education disappeared, as she took on the role of the Yiddish speaking Polish Jewish wife that my grandfather really wanted her to be, recapitulating in her marriage the movement of medieval German Jewry into Eastern Europe, whose medieval German

eventually become Yiddish.

When the Ashkenazim began leaving the Italian peninsula two thousand years ago, my ancestors must have spoken Latin, as they had been conquered and enslaved by the Romans after their armies conquered Judea and looted the Temple of its golden ritual objects, which they then displayed in a pagan temple in Rome.

Before that my ancestors spoke Greek, in addition to their indigenous Aramaic and Hebrew which were the dominant languages of the Jews from 1200 BC until the conquests of the land of Israel by Alexander's generals. It was they who made their presence felt in the land and who confronted the Jews of Judea with Homer, Plato, Aristotle and the playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, introducing the Gymnasium, the theatre and philosophy into the life of the Jewish people.

Today, the only Jews who still speak Greek are the surviving Romaniotes, the Jews of mainland Greece, and a few surviving Sephardim from Salonika, most of whose grandparents were killed by the Nazis during WWII.

I do not speak Greek, yet. I once did vow to learn Greek and would like to think that I may still pull it off in the years to come. There may still be time. I believe I think like one. Or more precisely, I think and feel like a Hellenistic Jew; not "caught," but poised, between two distinct world views, one that starts with a belief in a moral God who created the universe, once, and one that believes that we do not quite know how the world works, or even how our own psyche works (a Greek word.)

A now deceased Turkish friend who thought of himself as a cosmopolitan displaced Ottoman from Istanbul with Jewish roots (his family was partially descended from the Donme, the converted followers of the 17th century renegade Jewish Messiah, Shabtai Zvi), once reminded me, "Geoffrey, if you

think that the external universe is complex, what is inside of you is equally so.”

In that sense I, and so many other Jews of today, including millions of Israelis are Hellenistic Jews, that is to say we live at one and the same time in the thought world of the Bible and also within the legacy of the creative ventures of the ancient Greeks, whose culture was brought to us by Hellenism, more than two thousand years ago, and which has provided the Jewish people and the rest of humanity, with the secular core of Western and European thought and culture.

Of course, the elephant in the room is Christianity. Has not Christianity over two thousand years influenced Jews, Judaism and Jewish thought? Yes but. First one must put aside supersession, blood libels, pogroms and expulsions which were and still are driven by medieval Christian theology.

Yes, Christianity in many interesting ways, affected the Jews such as in the decline of polygamy in Western Europe but, not in its essence, for at its best Judaism puts justice and the law first and Christianity puts forgiveness first, even for those perpetrators of Jewish genocide, something that most modern Christian theologians prefer not to discuss.

One could reasonably argue that the American Constitution does not put forgiveness first, but justice, as in Judaism. My explanation is that those Greek and Latin speaking founding fathers read the Bible and particularly the Old Testament, whose language and values dominate the founding documents of that remarkable and now threatened Republic. They knew that.

I cannot and will not forgive the Nazis and their fellow travellers, which puts me firmly in the Jewish camp, although I do spend most of my time trying to understand how the world and human societies work from natural causes, just like Thucydides did in the 4th century BC, when he wrote his history of the war between Athens and Sparta, explaining it as

a rivalry between two cities, with no mention of the intervention of the Gods who we now read about for our amusement and psychological edification, in the surviving manuscripts of the Iliad and the Odyssey. And so, I conclude starting with a minority of one that so many millions of Jews and Israelis like me are still Hellenized, or Hellenistic Jews.

How did this come to be? I can only describe my own journey. Let me begin at the beginning.

I first heard about the Greeks when I was introduced to Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights which commemorates the re dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem and its liberation from the Greeks, really Greek speaking followers of King Seleucus who, I was told, wanted the Jews to sacrifice pigs on the altar of the Temple.

As we were Kosher in the home but not outside of it, I thought those Maccabees must have been really tough to stand up to the Greeks. The idea of sacrificing any animal to me was an anathema and so I sided with the Jews. I did not yet know that Temple sacrifice was part of Judaism until the conquest by Rome.

I did not know that this war commemorated in Hanukkah was more like a civil war between Hellenizing Jews in Judea and those who held to the older Biblical traditions.

In Jewish school, which went on for two hours every day after state school from Monday to Thursday, our teacher went on about how the Greeks worshipped idols and that was the meaning of Hanukkah, a revolt against idolatry. I was ten at the time and had taken an interest in ancient Greek and Roman religion.

I put up my hand and explained that the ancient Greeks did not really worship the statues of the Gods and Goddesses of the ancient Greek pantheon, but that these were sacred statues of the Gods who "lived" in the sky or mountains somewhere. My

teacher had no answer for me. I continued to read about the ancient Gods and Goddesses of the Greco Roman world. In those days, the libraries were filled with books for kids about them.

In Grade 8, I was thirteen. Our teacher was a middle-aged Welsh WWII veteran with a love of English literature. The curriculum for English included a book about ancient Greek myths, yes a whole volume. Our teacher and the introduction to the text explained that we still read the Greek myths because so much English literature is based upon their stories.

Mr. Jones, reminded us that they also explain so much of our unconscious feelings and thoughts and that they are still relevant to us in modern times. I concluded that they indeed explain aspects of the unconscious, a word that I had heard about from my older brother and sister who had read a bit of Freud. This strengthened my as yet undefined Hellenism.

At school we were also taught ancient history. We were taught that our present day Anglo Canadian democracy, which we were told is the best way to live (I agreed and still agree) had its roots among the ancient Greeks, particularly the Athenians of 5th century Greece. We read about how the freedom loving Greeks defeated the despotic Persians, and somehow this reminded me of the allied fight against the despotic Nazis. I could put two and two together.

And then our teachers told us that the Greeks had also invented science and philosophy. These were good things and I knew little about them except that science and technology gave us the gadgets which made life worth living in the fifties and sixties—telephones, electricity, washing machines, TV and most beloved of all spaceships and astronauts. Thank you, ancient Greeks.

Sometime during that time my mother and I sat down to redesign my bedroom as a testament to Hellenism. We did not use those

words but that is what it was. She found, sometime in the early sixties, a full, wall sized wall paper portrait of Alexander the Great on horseback with a Greek temple behind him. We put it on the wall behind my bed.

She then got me a framed black and white photo of the Parthenon which I put on my wall and a letter opener given by a Greek female acquaintance of hers with a Klepht engraved on it, the 19th century Greek freedom fighters/bandits whose outfits can be seen at the changing of the guards at the modern parliament of Athens.

I also got a mini painted amphora, the kind sold to tourists in the millions in every curio shop that serves foreign tourists in that marvellous land. By then I had read the children's version of the Odyssey and the Iliad in my school library two or three times, and a few books that retold various Greek myths, Prometheus, the stories of the Titans and others.

As a junior high schooler, I vaguely remember reading all of Bulfinch's Mythology and a history of the ancient world for young kids, or various versions of it. At the Royal Museum of Ontario in Toronto I would look at the diorama of the Acropolis and imagine ancient Athens, while marvelling at a bust of Socrates who I knew was a philosopher (I did not know quite what a philosopher did, but I knew they were very smart) as well as busts of Thucydides and Herodotus (They are still there and the bust of Thucydides looks like a Hollywood film star). There was a miniature model of the Parthenon. I imagined what life would be like in those ancient times. Did the ancient Greeks eat breakfast cereal like I did?

I was probably ten when it happened. My family had a cottage on Lake Simcoe and the local cottagers sent their kids to the local day camp. There I fell in love with a blue-eyed girl my age. I was smitten. She threw a party, one of the first for kids my age and I was not invited. I was devastated. I was

beside myself with grief. My mother picked up on my feelings and tried to explain to me that there were many fish in the sea or as I interpreted it, in the lake, where my summer camp was located, where I had learnt how to swim, sail and water ski. The first two skills seem very Greek to me.

She drove me back to Toronto in the middle of the summer. She took me to a movie and trusted me to watch it alone. Those were the early sixties and people were more trusting then. Maybe she even sat beside me during the film. She took me out to dinner. We slept in our home, my father, my mother and I without my brother and sister. The house and street were so quiet. Everyone was gone for the summer.

The film was set in Greece. It was a Walt Disney production called *The Moonspinners*. It was there that I heard my first samples of Greek folk music and saw the exotic fat bellied lute, the lauto and heard Greek clarinet folk music played on a village on the Greek island of Crete. The Mediterranean land, the sun and the light was splendid and I came to understand for the first time that Greece and Greeks were a living, breathing culture. From Wikipedia:

The Moon-Spinners is a 1964 American mystery film starring Hayley Mills, Eli Wallach and Peter McEnery in a story about a jewel thief hiding on the island of Crete. Produced by Walt Disney Productions, the film was based upon a 1962 suspense novel by Mary Stewart and was directed by James Neilson. It featured the legendary silent film actress Pola Negri in her final screen performance. The Moon-Spinners was Hayley Mills' fifth film in the series of six for Disney.

One of the characters in the film is a British musicologist interested in Greek (Cretan) folk music, something that would capture my imagination in a few very short years.

The next day we returned to our family cottage on Lake Simcoe.

I had not forgotten about Carol but I was no longer devastated. Visions of the sea, the island, the people and the music of Greece had shown me something bigger, deeper, more magical than I could imagine and I began to agree with my mother that there are more fish in the sea, especially the Mediterranean. I forgot about Carol.

As I entered high school, the sixties were upon us. Dionysus was in and rock stars were worshipped like ancient Greek deities. Lennon said the Beatles were more important to youth than Jesus, and graffiti scrawled out "Clapton is God." Drugs and ecstatic experience became the order of the day and the non rational aspects of ancient Greek society were widely discussed.

Was God dead? Had the Gods returned? I was fascinated that such a formerly uptight, strict, largely Protestant society around me could so quickly revert to an out rightly professed Paganism. This has not stopped. Sexual restraint was thrown off and for so many the Christianity of their parents was rejected. Clothes were out, nudity was in. Booze was out, drugs were in. Feminism turned to paganism and rejected Christianity. I found it all a bit hard to believe but it was happening all around me. Dionysus was back.

I had little to rebel against; tolerant parents, an ill defined and generally benevolent Conservative Jewish Synagogue (although terribly boring), a nice family, friends and neighbourhood. Having heard that the Beatles used the Indian sitar, and having been trained as a boy soprano at the Royal Conservatory I discovered the Toronto Music Library's 'world music' collection and for the price of a card began my sound travels around the world of music.

These included LPs made in Greece by Greek singers as well as collections of Greek folk music made by roving musicologists from Europe and America. I also heard the first of a growing number of musicians who were bringing back to life the ancient

music of Hellenistic Greece with its asymmetrical rhythms and Japanese sounding scales.

After I finished high school, as an undergraduate in a newly created ethnomusicology department at York University, my friends and I went to Greek clubs, heard Laika and Rembetico sung and played to the accompaniment of the long necked lute, the Bouzouki.

I read Kazantzakis and Cavafy, Lawrence Durrell and was adopted by a Kalderash Gypsy family in Toronto, one of whom taught me to play the oud. Soon after I joined him, another Jewish friend and a Turkish musician. We formed the Kismet Orchestra and played the night clubs of Mediterranean Toronto. I discovered Greek food, grilled octopus and retsina wine, whose resin-smearred barrels gave me the taste of ancient Greece. I reread the Odyssey and the Iliad, this time in the adult versions.

The war in Viet Nam reminded me of the Iliad, endless slaughter among heroic young soldiers but the Odyssey captured my imagination as it was both an inward and outward journey. I still believe that. And I believe that the Iliad was written when Homer was young and the Odyssey after he had had children. Now that I have grandchildren, I have no love for Achilles. I identify with Priam.

But the Greek world of night club musicians was a different kind of Greece, folk, Byzantine, the Greece of Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greece of Crete and Macedonia, the Greece of a lost Christian civilization still smarting from their conquest by the Turks and remembered in their folk and popular music, lamenting their past but sharing so many of the melodies of their former Turkish oppressors. It was the music of the former hashish den and the music of the imported Greek "Amani" cabaret after the expulsion of the Greeks of Asia Minor from Turkey after WWI. For me it was as good as the blues that was becoming popular among my generation.

I spent much time Toronto among these Kalderash gypsies from Greece for that is what they called themselves. I played the oud and a bit of the Turkish lute, the saz or baglama. We played clubs and festivals. We made pocket money, were wined and dined and inhabited a sub category, an immigrant musical culture far from the classical music I had studied at the Royal Conservatory or the Anglo American folk and pop music that surrounded and delighted me in the sixties and seventies.

The late English writer and fellow guerrilla of the Cretan resistance to the Nazis, Patrick Leigh Fermour, described this kind of Greece as:

... stubborn, unregenerate and irreducible, the pro-Romaic bias lingers. It can be condemned as backward and selfish and dismissed as obsolete; but it thrives as robustly as a field of tares planted by years of wandering and too deep-rooted to uproot. Those distant ranges and archipelagos instilled me with the conviction or the illusion of approach to the truest and most interesting secrets of Greece. Every region has contributed to this: the great temples and ruins and the famous summer islands which are the common experience of all visitors; but also Macedonia, the Pindus, the Rhodope mountains of Thrace, the midwinter cordilleras by the Albanian border, the rocky hamlets of the Zagora, jagged Epirus, the Thessalian foothills, the hinterland of Roumeli, the Peloponnesian watersheds, roadless Tzakonia, the ultimate wilderness of the Mani and a whole solar-system of islands. They are not only the background for dilettante wanderings in summer and spring, but for winter too, when life, tormented by wind and rain or hushed by snow, shrinks from its autumnal expanse to huddled lamplit circles in huts and caves: at moments it is a world of wintry chaos, exhilarated by advances and victories and racked by defeat, occupation and discord.

All of this lives on in traditional and popular Greek music. That is to say when the Greeks invented Byzantium and became

Christian, their music did not. It has remained pagan in so many ways. I revelled in that paganism as a performer in my early twenties. I also listened to archival recordings and discovered wondrous things. But the music which best expresses the Romiosyne world is the relatively modern 20th century genre called Rembetico, which some people have compared to the blues in beauty, passion, sadness and angst.

During my undergraduate years when I took up the Turkish fat bellied lute and the long necked lute, I bought a bouzouki for 150 dollars and learnt to play some Rembetico pieces on it. I still pick it up and play now and then. Rembetico emerged from the sufferings and catastrophes that have afflicted 20th century Greece. Its creators were marginal men and women who have only been recently "rediscovered and celebrated" much like the Blues men of the USA.

So given the blessings of the internet let us stop and actually listen to some Rembetico this repertoire which so fascinated me as a night club performer in my early 20s.

You have just heard the song Atatki, which means naughty in Greek. It is really talking about pre-WWII rebellious female sexuality, no, not in decadent Weimar Germany where free sex and drugs had become the urban order of the day. No, this is a song about pre-WWII Athens, Greece. The song is about a female sexual rebel. It is one of the classic Rembetico songs from the Greece of the 1930s, performed by that past master of the genre; composer, singer and bouzouki master George Vamvakaris. You can still hear Atatki played in Greek taverns and nightclubs today.

Vamvakaris was an outsider, a poor boy from the island of

Syros, a Catholic in a predominantly Greek Orthodox country, and an immigrant to Athens during the height of the depression during the 1930s, when more than a million Greeks left what is now Turkey in the early 1920s after yet another failed Balkan war when Greece had hoped to keep Asia Minor and Constantinople. (They lost).

There he rose to fame, both before and after the trauma of WWII which for the Greeks had an added tragic dimension, a brutal post war civil war which turned brother against brother and sister against sister across the country, as the West and Communist Russia fought their first proxy war on the soil of Greece.

Atatki means naughty, loose, as in lawless, without conventional morality. In a society that was bound by the honour and shame values of the Mediterranean, the song describes the loose sexual morals of what we would now call a free or liberated women. But that is not how the Greeks saw it then. Here is some of what Vamvakaris is saying. He is exasperated that a woman may have the same sexual and romantic prerogatives as a man.

*O What haven't I done for you
to "fix" you,
but you are so naughty
oh...go away to save myself.*

*I don't want you, I don't want you,
I don't love you anymore.
I don't want you, and go away
and move along.*

Here is a line about a fortune teller that could have been drawn from an old blues lament:

Witches have told me,

*and all the psychics,
a girl from Egypt has told me
oh...she had wide braids.*

You have just heard the Greek national anthem. It is a far cry from Rembetico as if it was composed in a different world. It is as we now say, "inauthentic."

When the Greek nation regained its independence from the Turks in the mid 19th century, they were saddled with a German king and an emerging middle class who tried to imitate the culture of the French, Italians, Germans and English, who had helped them gain their independence from the Ottoman Turks.

The music of the village was to be left behind, the existence of the music of the street was ignored, and shunned, eventually paving the way for a reaction which created the kind of music and class of person called Rembetico

The Greek national anthem is written in a style of that modernizing western European ideal that the movers and shakers of the new kingdom of Greece aspired to. It could have been lifted from a 19th century German conservatory, or, it could have provided the basis for a beautiful 19th century Italian operetta. It is replete with 19th century romantic musical nationalism. The anthem was written by Greek composer Nicholas Mantzaros in 1865.

Here are some of the lyrics:

*I know it's you from the edge of the sword, the terrible one,
I recognize you from the look which with hardness surveys the land,
drawn from the bones of the Greeks, the*

sacred ones and, valiant as first, hail, o hail, Liberty!

Not surprisingly, the composer Mantzaros came from the island of Corfu which was under the political and cultural influence of Italy at the time. But this kind of music was not what most of the people of Greece were listening to in the mid to late 19th century.

From 1865 and until the 1920s most Greeks were living traditional, agriculturally based village lives. Each region and each village had their own songs which expressed the annual round and the stages of the life cycle. Here is a village folk song which has that wonderful mixture of eastern and western musical styles with a vocal expression that is both melismatic in the eastern sense, but open enough to appeal to those used to northern European and Anglo-American styles of singing.

It is a beautiful song about a shawl and the love between a yet, unbetrothed village girl and a boy who see each other at a village dance. It is simple and romantic and strictly bound by the values of honour and shame, including invocations to the Virgin Mary. There is mention of love, but no mention of sex which became the staple fare of urban Rembetico. It is the opposite in sound, mood and values than that of a typical urban Rembetico lament with its references to prostitutes, loose women, crime and hashish dens.

Here are some of the [lyrics](#):

*Take the shawl out of your hair, out of your hair
And come and dance around, dance around*

It's not a dream, it's real

*You love me, I love you
Mother of God, how I long for you and care about you
We're so suitable for each other*

*Dance a little tonight so I can see you, a little so I can
see you
So, I can admire you dancing in the front of the circle*

Rembetico is the music of the dispossessed, of suffering, catastrophe and loss. It is urban music. It is a blend of many styles of music and it went through three or four historic stylistic stages which are now being exhaustively studied by ethnomusicologists.

Rembetico is the music of trauma, of the migrant from the village to the city, of the temporary worker in the slums of Athens in the 1930s, and of the downwardly mobile refugees, more than a million formerly well-off Greek speaking farmers and shopkeepers from in and around Smyrna in Ottoman Asia Minor, who were forced out of their homes by war during one of the greatest population exchanges of the early 20th century.

The Greeks from Smyrna, brought their Turkish sounding urban music, music from taverns, brothels and hashish dens, to the west. They brought it to the clubs, brothels and hashish dens of Athens, and particularly the port area called the Piraeus, like most port cities, the roughest side of town.

They brought it to Thessaloniki in Thrace and slowly, over time, the repertoire moved from sung Turkish and Greek to predominantly Greek. In the beginning it was played on what we now think of as Ottoman musical instruments; the fat bellied oud, the European violin played with quarter tones, the goblet drum or durbaki and the zither, or kanoon. But as the style crystallized into something new and uniquely Greek, it was the bouzouki which later dominated the style. And after WWII the revived style went electric, just like the blues.

Here is a beautiful, oriental style, free rhythmic improvisation called Taksim, in the Turkish musical mode called Kurdi and that often precedes a typical piece of Rembetico.

Rembetico lyrics are not just about loose or free women. There was also much freedom among the Rembetico musicians themselves, male and female, and especially for women who broke away from their families. One of the most famous was Roza Eshkenazy a Salonika born Sephardic Jewish woman, with a voice that dripped sensuality and displayed a love of night life.

Here we hear her singing a Turkish gypsy song in that melismatic, soulful style that early Rembetico brought from Turkey to Greece. Notice that the rhythm is an asymmetrical nine, 12 12 12 123 typical of Turkish and much Balkan music and a characteristic that Rembetico has kept up.

And here is an example of the dream like surreal lyrics of this song\;

*It rained on my tent
|It rained on my tent
God did not take my life yet
God did not take my life yet
Selling on credit nothings is left
Selling on credit nothing is left*

Perhaps the most stereotypical exaggeration of a Rembetico can be found in the work of the musician Anestis Delias, a king of sex, drugs and Rembetico in the Athens of the 1930s.

After WWI Greece received its millions of involuntary immigrants from Asia minor. Then the economy entered the Depression and by 1936 Greece had become an authoritarian

dictatorship much like that of Mussolini's Italy before its alliance with Hitler.

The middle class did not know what to do, the intelligentsia were censored and so was the popular music called Rembetico. From its underground criminal and working-class origins, it returned to its obsession with darkness and suffering. After 1936 the government forbid its broadcasting and recording. Musically the long-necked lute, the bouzouki, dominated this repertoire, and slowly the guitar was added, as well as European harmonies which were used in song arrangements. Rembetico was moving westward, musically speaking.

Here it is at its last historic pre-WWII gasp before we hear an example of this westernized style. Let us listen to a song by Anestis Delias, bouzouki player, singer, and heroine addict with a partner who was a prostitute.

Four years after the establishment of the dictatorship of Metaxas, the Italians invaded and then the Germans occupied Greece for most of WWII. Not surprisingly, when Greece was brutally occupied by the Nazis, the Greek people did not turn to the conservatory inspired German like music of the Greek elite of Athens. They turned to Rembetico for solace.

No longer was it the music of the oppressed of Greek society. As all Greeks now felt oppressed it became everyone's music. The coded anthem to their own freedom was composed and performed by one of the great Rembetico's of the 1930s, Tsanis, who came from a middle-class family. After the war he added a fourth string to the bouzouki allowing it to play harmonic chords and which gives us the modern version of the instrument that you can hear on the soundtrack of the film *Zorba the Greek* done in 1962. Here is this coded melancholic,

gloomy song which is really about the German occupation |

Here are some of the lyrics:

*Cloudy Sunday, you're like my heart that's always cloudy.
Christ and Holy Virgin!
You are a day like that day in which I lost my joy. Cloudy
Sunday, you make my heart bleed.
When I see you that rainy, I can't rest even for a moment.
You make my life black and I deeply sigh.*

Rembetico had become the music of the resistance to the Nazis. Eventually I began to read about this resistance, men and women who went to the mountains to fight the Nazis in daring raids. And then I discovered that young Jewish men and women, survivors of the near total expulsion and murder of 90% of Greek Jewry also joined the freedom fighters, the Andartes and they earned a reputation for bravery, daring and intelligence among their non-Jewish Greek comrades. After WWII many of them went to Israel where they were asked to keep their stories to themselves as Israel had to deal with a Royalist Greece who saw these former heroes as leftist enemies of the state. Over the years their stories have been translated from Greek and Hebrew and it is a series of tales that needs a wider audience. For me it was just one more dimension of my curious interest in all things Greek.

After WWII many Rembeticos died, retired or immigrated. One would think that the music would pass from the public mind but that was not to be.

After the British and American backed Royalist (most of whom collaborated with the Nazis) forces won the Greek civil war, from about 1950-1967 Greece was still at the margins of European society. Its economy had not developed, thousands of political prisoners, former freedom fighters, languished in

detention camps and hundreds of thousands of Greeks moves to western Europe, Australia, America and Canada.

Many of the great Rembetico performers of the pre-WWII period, had put down their bouzoukis. Like the bluesmen of the United States they had exhausted their shelf life and fame and fortune seemed to have deserted them.

While Rembetico looked like a dying lifestyle and repertoire of song, the sons of the middle class began to rediscover the style. In 1959 Europe looking, classically trained, Athenian middle-class composer Mannis Hajidakis shocked the establishment by arguing that Rembetico was the real music of the Greek nation. He explained that this music of the people, of the underclass, the poor, the criminalized was in indeed the national music of the Greek people.

Soon after, Greece was again under the thumb of a right-wing military dictatorship and the Rembetico styled music embodied the music of protest. Even classically trained composers like Theodorakis adopted it, as he and others protested this ludicrous dictatorship established in an otherwise post war, democratic Europe. |And so, when the colonels fell there was a concatenation of forces which elevated Rembetico in the eyes of all freedom loving Greeks.

Greek and foreign scholars began to study its oral history. Record companies began to reissue old masters, first on vinyl then on CDs. People started writing PhD s on Rembetico and otherwise mainstream popular singers began to sing from its classic repertoire somewhat like Eric Clapton taking the once denigrated songs of an old blues man Robert Johnson, and selling millions of copies to newer, younger audiences looking for something real.

This ushered in the Rembetico revival which has highlighted this mish mash of styles that went through four or five phases from the time of the expulsion of the Greeks from Asia minor

in the 1920s, until its last Post WWII gasp.

Here is world famous Greek pop music singer Stelios Kazantzidis singing one of the old Rembetico classics with all the blessings of a modern recording studio. There is just one thing missing in many of the pieces that he revived. The old Rembetico [lyrics](#) were replete with references to sex, drugs and violence. Modern Rembetico revivalists are therefore now singing these lyrics which were watered down by decades of censorship. In this song it is the poor fisherman who longs for a girl whose social status is higher than his.

*My lady, why don't you want me
because I'm a fisherman
and I'm always at the streets
as a fisherman and boatman*

*And you think that with me
you won't have a good time*

*I have a small boat
with oars and sail
and I fish every night
alone with the fishing net*

*The fish I'll get
I sell them in market*

*And if I'm wandering barefoot
don't look at me laughing
I know how to take care of
the woman I'll get*

*I'll do her favours
Don't mind that I'm a fisherman*

During the last twenty years there has been a Rembetico revival among young Greeks, like the folk and blues revival in the US during the 1960s, where the white middle-class college

educated baby boomers began to play the music of the Mississippi Delta and of the poor whites in the mountains of Appalachia stimulated by the field recordings of people like Alan Lomax.

Clearly, Greek composer Hajidakis was right. Rembetico is and was music that rose up from the bottom of society, permeating upwards and in doing so, expressed the raw poetry and musical power of what Greece and Greeks have experienced suffered and died for, during the last hundred years. In my opinion it is better than anything that has emerged from the classical conservatories of Greece, who have been under the spell of Western Europe for more than a century and a half.

I will also hold on to all those reissues of the old masters, Vamvakaris, Eshkenazy and so many many others who now speak to us , on vinyl, CD and on Youtube from that dark time before WWII. And yet, it was a time of enormous creativity-fancy that. Perhaps I like it because it reminds me of my days as a young man on the east side of Toronto playing similar tunes for Greek refugees and immigrants running away from the Junta.

Rembetico was also the music that the Partisans listened to in the Greek mountains while they fought Greek collaborators, Italian, German (Nazi) and Bulgarian occupiers during WWII. Jewish veteran, and historian Michael Matsas writes about this:

Being a partisan did not mean fighting all the time. Samuel liked to play the bouzouki and when he went to the mountains he took with him his favourite instrument. On many occasions he played it and sang, entertaining his companions around the campfire.

I could stop there and say enough but the Gift of the Greeks keeps on giving. The fall of the Berlin wall triggered a reevaluation of the ancient Greeks. Some people argued that the West, that is to say the spiritual descendants of Athens had defeated the Russians, the spiritual descendants of the tyrannical Persians.

But before I do so I must mention one other life changing event. When I was a young undergraduate, I had a hunger for the fine arts and spent four years as a music student. While studying music history and ethnomusicology I would wander my university library and ask myself, "Amidst the millions of books outside of my specialty, what should a person read?" None of my professors had the answer.

And then by chance I discovered Mortimer Adler and the Great Books movement. I read his book, "How to Read a Book" and was converted. Adler and his colleagues argue that Western civilization was a voluntary conversation that began with the Bible, the ancient Greeks, the Romans, Byzantines, Medieval, Modern, 19th century and twentieth century philosophers, theologians, historians, creative writers, essayists and scientists and that each successful generation of thinkers read and made reference to the great works that came before them. Adler and his colleagues argued that North American and Western civilization would only survive if young male and female undergraduates studies these works over four years and only afterwards specialized in a profession.

I was converted and began to read these Greats which of course included Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Roman writers, medieval writers and moderns such as Locke, Hobbes, the founding fathers of the US Constitutions and Freud. I have not read all of them but most of them. The arguments that these men made inform the way I now live and think about the world.

Adler and his colleagues failed. There are only a few Great

Books programs in the ocean of colleges and universities that are today preaching wokeism and Critical Race Theory. So today few undergraduates have the opportunity to read the ancient Greeks without prejudice, as if they do (and most do not) they do so through the lens of post modernism or critical race theory.

In Israel it was refugee German Jews who brought this secular heritage to the new universities of the Israeli state and where they still survive. I sometimes fear that if the West enters a new intellectual dark age the classics may only survive academically at the universities of the Jewish state.

And so since 1945 the West and European higher learning has more and more dismissed the heritage of Greece, calling them "dead white males" until our children are no longer taught these books and their authors are no longer honoured in our schools. This is the essence of today's wokeness for Athens is no longer the school of Hellas.

If Pericles were alive today he would remind us:

I say that Athens is the school of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace. This is no passing and idle word, but truth and fact; and the assertion is verified by the position to which these qualities have raised the state. For in the hour of trial Athens alone among her contemporaries is superior to the report of her. No enemy who comes against her is indignant at the reverses which he sustains at the hands of such a city; no subject complains that his masters are unworthy of him. And we shall assuredly not be without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages; we shall not need the praises of Homer or of any other panegyrist whose poetry may please for

the moment, although his representation of the facts will not bear the light of day.

And so I remain a Hellenist at heart, hearing the music of the recent past and remembering the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, a heritage that makes all of us moderns, Jews and Israelis, Europeans, North Americans and even educated Indians and South Americans, inheritors of a tradition which we must keep alive in word and song.

During the last thirty years Greek music has become very much part of Israeli national culture and Rembetico holds a special place in the hearts of Israelis, as it is played and heard in the clubs of Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem. It was brought to Israel by Greek Jewish freedom fighters like Matsas and kept alive by their children some like Yehudah Poliker who are national pop stars.

I now know that Jewish Greeks sang these songs in the mountains as they planned their next raid on the Nazis, and later when they brought them to the new Jewish state in 1948. As a Jew these songs are no longer foreign to me.

Maybe those ancient Spartans were right after all.

Table of Contents

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)