

## RETURN TO CRETE a Novella

Cover: The Etz Chaim Synagogue in Chania after restoration.

This is a work of fiction. The places and events are real but the names have been altered to ensure anonymity.

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Joanna and I couldn't sleep. We lay awake talking all night about the trip we were taking the following day. After a five-year gap, we were returning to Chania, the second city in Crete. There was something about the place that was drawing us back. We had wanted to return for a long time but didn't do anything about it. It was the letter that made us decided to return.

Joanna was my second wife, ten years my junior; my first marriage was a disaster. It had lasted only a few years when I found out that what I thought was love was only sex and that soon ceased to be. We parted amicably but my

ego had taken a nasty blow and it wasn't for another ten years before I was able to reconsider marriage

I remember the day clearly. We were having a morning cup of tea in the bedroom from the Teasmade when we both heard the letterbox rattle and then the thump as a letter landed heavily on the hall carpet. Joanna looked at me. I knew what she wanted me to do. Pulling on my dressing gown, I hurried down the stairs and picked it up. It was heavier than it looked and had something stiff inside it. The postmark was Greek.

'What is it?' I heard Joanna call from the bedroom.

'It's a letter from Greece,' I shouted back and rushed up to the bedroom.

'Give it to me,' Joanna demanded reaching out and grabbing it. She furiously tore open the envelope and examined the contents. There was large embossed invitation.

'Look,' she said showing me the card, 'it's an invitation from The Chief Rabbi of Athens.'

'What for?' I asked.

'To attend the inaugural service at the Etz Chaim synagogue in Chania and there is a covering letter from Dr Aftonio Katsaros, the man we met on our first visit to Crete.'

We knew that the synagogue was being refurbished but didn't know when it would be finished. So the invitation came as a pleasant surprise and we knew that we couldn't miss it for anything. It would give us a chance to renew an

old friendship and visit a place with which we had fallen in love. We looked at each other. It was as if fate had decided that since we hadn't done anything about it, it would take control and arrange our lives for us.

Two days later, at six am. on a cold grey morning the cruise ship Star Pride left the historical port of Pireus on the outskirts of Athens bound for the Aegean. She was part of the Windstar fleet a small up-market company specialising in boutique cruise ships. On board were about 150 tourists mainly from the USA and UK most of whom were on their first trip to the Greek archipelago. Joanna my wife, an artist and myself a retired lawyer had boarded her the previous night, having spent a day in Athens and were due to arrive at Chania later that day. I was excited to return to the town to see what had happened in the five years since we were last there.

I woke early that morning, dressed quickly and went onto the deck to watch the skyline of Athens slowly recede into the mist. The whole scene was surreal. How had we got involved in this extraordinary adventure? Was it by chance as was it the case on so many others or was there some mystical reason why we were being drawn back to Crete. Standing on the deck I watched the bow as it split the grey oily surface of the sea sending curling waves spreading further and further away from the side of the boat. I thought of the other ships that had passed that way over the centuries from the

earliest Hellenic fleet to the most recent German navy in the Second World War. So many lives lost forever buried without trace in that deep watery grave.

Joanna must have heard me leave the cabin because I suddenly became aware of her standing by my side. I felt her squeeze my arm. 'I can't wait to get there,' she whispered. 'Me too,' I added. We stood together a long time until the cold and the smell of breakfast pulled us away.

'Let's have a big breakfast?' I suggested as we entered the half empty dining room. We were almost the first there apart from a grey haired man we had met the night before. We had told him about our return visit to Chania.

He had been in the German navy and knew about the battle that had been fought over the island. I was tempted to ask him about it but knew that he would either deny what had happened or blame the Cretans for refusing to surrender. He had waved and mouthed good luck. At the food counter, I decided to omit the continental choice and settle for a traditional English, probably the last opportunity to enjoy a cholesterol-filled meal for many weeks. Joan had more discipline and returned with a healthy choice, hummus, salad, stuffed aubergine and cheese.

Then we had a few hours to burn as we were due to dock at Chania soon after midday. The

time seemed to drag and then coming into view on the horizon, we saw the familiar outline of the range of mountains that dominate the skyline of Crete. Rising to a height of more than 8000ft they run from west to east along the full length of the island. Slowly we approached the port of Chania. It was deserted at that time of day but earlier it would have been a thriving melee of small fishing boats landing their catch, voices rising in the still air and the overwhelming smell of fish would have dominated the scene.

It was only a matter of minutes before the ship inched its way towards the landing, hawsers were thrown and she slowly came to a standstill. Our bags were quickly brought from our cabin and were waiting at the gangway when the ship finally came to a stop. To our surprise we were the only ones disembarking. Bidding the First Officer good bye we left the ship. Supporting ourselves on the rope handrail and treading carefully on the swaying gangway, we slowly made our way down until we stepped onto dry land. Its sudden firmness came as a surprise and for a moment I almost lost my balance but I managed to reach out to Joanna to steady myself.

Turning I looked back at the ship now beginning to move away from the jetty and waved farewell to the few travellers standing at the rails on the deck. Joanna was already collecting our luggage. By now the sun was high in the sky blinding my vision and I struggled to find the taxi

that was supposed to be waiting for us. It wasn't there.

'What do we do now?' asked Joan impatiently.

'We wait,' I said. We haven't any choice. I'm sure it will come the purser arranged it.' We stood in the glaring sun on the broad concrete landing, two loan figures waiting. I began to wonder whether this had been a good idea, when I heard the familiar sound of a car approaching. Around the corner of a shed, an old Hillman minx came puffing, black smoke emerging from its exhaust. It came to a shuddering halt.

*Lypámai pou eímai argá apó fonítikís apóψεος,*  
'(I am sorry I'm late)

*To aftokínitó mou chálase* (my car broke down),' the driver stammered. 'Me Lefteris.' We shook hands.

'I'm not surprised,' I jibbed under my breath.

'We go to Chania yes?' I nodded.

He bundled our luggage into the boot, which was already half stuffed with bulging sacks and motioned to us to get in.

'Samaria Hotel on Kidonias Street.' I said. He grunted as if he knew where it was.

With a sudden jerk accompanied by a grinding of the gears the car jerked forwards and moved off. It left the relatively smooth surface of the landing platform and plunged across a rough stony path. We rolled and rocked holding onto our seats and searching for handles, there were none in sight. The car mounted a low hill and bounced onto an asphalt road, the main highway to Chania that ran along the southern coastline within sight of the sea. Settling back in our seats we gradually

got used to the swaying and bumping of the old banger. We drove past miles of rocky terrain covered in low bushes light brown in colour, parched dry from the lack of rain. After about an hour without seeing any evidence of any habitation we climbed a small hill and saw on the top a small café.

'We stop,' Lefteris announced suddenly pointing to the building. Later sitting in the shade of a large multicolored umbrella sipping chilled tea, life had suddenly become almost bearable as I rubbed my bruised backside. Madam, our driver's sister had served us, a buxom woman in her early forties. She spoke a smattering of English and told us how she had been a small girl when they came - the Germans, she struggled to mention the word.

She remembered how they had taken over her home and arrested her father.

'I never saw him again,' she said staring intently at the very blue sea.

'I don't even remember what he looked like,' She whispered.

Joan looked at me.

'I'm very sorry, it must be so hard.' Suddenly madam turned and went out to the back of the house.

'I think we must have upset her,' Joan said. After a few minutes madam returned,

'Excuse me, I heard a chicken cluck and I went to get the egg.'

We all laughed.

An hour later we drove into the outskirts of Chania. The houses one and two storeys high, built from local stone, were light brown in colour. We drove on into the new part of the city when it became apparent that our driver did not know where our hotel was. We were lost in a city where few spoke English and all the signs were in Greek. It reminded me of my short stay in Kyoto where I felt the same sense of confusion. Then I had by chance stopped someone who spoke a smattering of English; perhaps the same will happen here I hoped.

I got out and stood by the roadside waiting for someone to approach. Several people passed but they didn't look like they would have known where the hotel was. Eventually I spied a tall well-dressed man and stopped him. 'Excuse me,' I began. He interrupted, 'You are English?' He asked in a perfect Oxford accent. 'How may I help?' 'We are looking for the Samaria hotel.' 'Ah yes. It's not far. Let me explain it to your driver.'

The hotel was situated in the centre of the town. It had a modern exterior with 6 floors each with balconies overlooking the busy street. It was not what I expected to see. I had imagined it would be one of the older hotels, more like a renovated residential house. As it was late afternoon the street was now relatively quiet. I unloaded our luggage, paid the driver and followed Joanna into the poorly lit foyer. Blinking to accustomise my eyes, I saw the reception ahead.

On mentioning my name, I was handed an envelope and we were directed to a room on the third floor. The porter let us in and opened the shutters onto a balcony allowing the light to stream in. The room was of average size with a king sized bed, a wardrobe and a dresser; a door led off to a rather compact bathroom and toilet. We looked at each other pleased to have arrived safely and to have some time to rest.

'It's fine,' I said. 'We will be very comfortable here.' I don't think Joanna was listening as I next heard water splashing and realised she was already in the shower. I walked onto the balcony and looked out. The day was beginning to cool and there was a light breeze coming off the sea that I could just see in the distance between the high buildings.

Chania is the second city of Crete and the capital of the Chania Principality. Heraklion at the East end of the island is the capital. It was where Sir Arthur Evans carried out the Knossos excavation in 1900 revealing for the first time evidence of the Minoan civilization. The city comprises an old town and a modern city. The former overlooks the old harbour and is characterized by three to four storey traditional Venetian buildings. It is where the main square of the Old Town, Eleftherios Venizelos, the centre of the tourist region is situated.

The Jewish quarter (Evrakil or Ovraikl) is located at the northwest corner of the old town within the

borders of Topanas, which used to be the Christian district. The area embraces narrow picturesque alleys with café, restaurants and hotels. It is here where the Romaniote synagogue was built over 200 years ago. We stopped and ate lunch at a small fish restaurant on the front overlooking the harbour. There were only a few boats about most were out fishing many miles off shore. The scene was idyllic with the sun sparkling on the calm Mediterranean Sea. The owner a bearded local greeted us and asked us where we from. When we told him that we were here to inaugurate the new synagogue, he sat down at our table and told us the full story. He said his name was Christos.

'Many people don't know,' he began, 'that there were Jews here in Crete a very long time ago in fact before the Christian era. When the Romans came in 67 CE the Jews were treated as Roman citizens but later were persecuted and expelled by the new Christians.

His story was interrupted by the arrival of our lunch, a whole fish on the bone served with potatoes and vegetables. Our host waited for us to finish before he continued.

'Crete was conquered by a many invaders over the next five centuries. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the archives had recorded four Jewish congregations. One of the synagogues was named Elijah the Prophet. Between 1380 and 1485 under the Venetian Rule, it was estimated that there were 1,160 Jews in a population of 200,000.' We listened intently amazed at his knowledge. We could see that he wanted to tell

us more but had to get on with serving other customers. My wife turned to me and whispered, 'Why don't we invite him and his family to the hotel and he can tell us more.' Seeing a break in his routine I invited him. He told us to wait until the serving quietened down when he would have a break.

'My wife and I would like to invite you for a meal at our hotel,' I said. I told him where we were staying he made a face.

'What's the problem?'

'Umm the food there is not very good I'm afraid, why not eat here and my family will join you?' We arranged to come the following lunchtime.

After lunch we sat in the shade and drank Greek coffee. While we were enjoying the dessert, a baklava, he continued the story.

'It all changed in 1941 when the Germans invaded. It was April. I remember the olives were just ripening on the trees and the island was at its best. We had been warned that an attack was imminent but it caught us all by surprise.

Suddenly we heard the sound of airplanes, they blackened the sky, and then hundreds of parachutes began to fall out of them swaying in the breeze as they slowly descended. The sight was mesmerizing and most people just watched, at first oblivious of their significance. Then the alarm sounded and chaos followed, people running here and there gathering up children and trying to take shelter.'

I sat trying to imagine their feelings of sheer terror and confusion. We took our leave,

thanking him for his hospitality and inviting him and his family to join us at the synagogue the following day. We would love that he said we have great admiration for the Jews who have suffered so much here in Crete

The inaugural day arrived. Joanna and I couldn't contain ourselves. We gobbled down our breakfast and made our way to Parodos Kondylakia the narrow street near the Archeological Museum where the synagogue was. It hadn't changed, still the same shops with shades overlapping the street and the restaurant where we had eaten so many years ago. Crowds of people had already assembled and we heard many different languages spoken. Easing our way towards the now open gate I showed my invitation.

We walked across the small courtyard, passed the now restored small cemetery and entered the synagogue. We were welcomed and I was handed a kippah. The building had been completely restored with brightly painted white walls, a Bima at one end (In the Greek style) and the ark in dark brown wood at the other. There were seats at the sides and the rear facing inwards. I was ushered to one of the side seats while Joanna joined the women in the rear seats, as there was no lady's balcony.

I sat looking around and my mind went back to that first visit over five years earlier. Then the building was derelict, the headstones of the tombs in the small cemetery were broken and lay in pieces. Rubbish was everywhere, having

been thrown over the walls by passers by over the years. I remember Dr Afonio Katsaros telling us that the tombs were the resting place of some of the earliest Jewish rabbis. I looked around for him. He had aged, as had we all, dressed in a long white gown he was wearing a high gold lined hat the symbol of a rabbi. I caught his eye and he beckoned me over and we hugged.

'Welcome I hope your dear wife has come with you?'

'Yes she's over there,' and I pointed to the women's seats. 'We wouldn't have missed this for anything, what a change. You have done miracles.'

'Yes thank God and the World Monument Fund, together they did it.' He smiled.

'What about you?' I said.

'Me, I was just the instrument. Now I must get ready the service is about to begin. Before I forget you have been given the mitzvah *p'tkhah* to open the ark.' And he was gone.

I remember sitting as if in a dream, it was all so unreal yet I knew that it wasn't. A chance journey a chance meeting and my life was altered. Was that what life was for to see beyond the mundane to a better place? By now the small synagogue was almost full, many present were tourists passing by and attracted to the excitement. I learned later that few were Cretans Jews; their numbers were still minimal although some non-Jews were attending the classes to learn more about one of the oldest religions.

At that moment a tall magisterial figure clothed in white walked up to the bima. He was the chief Rabbi of Athens and was accompanied by Aftonio. He began to say a few words welcoming us in Greek, which were translated by Aftonio.

'My dear friends, it is with the greatest pleasure that I welcome you to the inaugural service of the Etz Chaim Synagogue here in Chania the second city of Crete. We are today celebrating the rebirth of this sacred place, which for too long has been unused. It had served the Jewish community of Crete for over two centuries until that fateful time in 1941 since when it fell into disuse. It remained derelict until one man with the help of many others brought it back to the splendour it is today.

I am honoured to be here with Rabbi Aftonio and acknowledge his tireless efforts.' Clapping broke out but the Rabbi calmed them and continued. He above all others has been the driving force, the inspiration that encouraged others. He persuaded the World Monument Fund to join this noble cause and the rest is history.

I sat listening aware that I was witnessing a unique and unforgettable event. Then Rabbi Aftonio stood and addressed us.

'This is an auspicious moment for me. It is the culmination of a dream, which began over five years ago. Being born here in Chania and knowing the synagogue all my life it was a terrible shock when due to over whelming circumstances it fell into disuse and remained so

for many years. There are too many names for me to mention, the hundreds of people who made this rebirth possible. Some are here today and to them all I give a heart felt vote of thanks. It shows that where good people act together miracles happen.'

He stepped back, the cantor came forwards and the hall was once again filled with the sound of Hebrew. As I listened to the cantor's melodious voice rising to the ceiling, I relived that first unforgettable visit to Crete five years earlier, a memory that has stayed with me ever since.

I was due some leave having worked extra overtime. An advert for a two-week's holiday in Crete staying in a small hotel overlooking the city of Chania on the west side of the island caught my wife Joanna's eye. It looked the ideal place for a restful break. At the last moment I remember looking at the map trying to imagine what that small oval island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea would be like.

But it was not until late summer that we flew charter from Gatwick to the international airport at Chania and took a taxi to the hotel. The driver was very chatty and gave us a potted history of the island since its occupation by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. In the course of his story, he said he knew the hotel well and explained that his sister worked as a housemaid there. After a circuitous journey from the airport, we arrived at our hotel, which was situated high on a hill overlooking the town. It was a modern

building gleaming white in the bright sunshine with a small tropical garden in front.

Amalio, the owner and maître d'hotel, a stocky well-tanned man about 5 ft. tall with a broad smile greeted us in Greek, *'Kalos ilthate* (Welcome)

He had a broad grin which showed his stained teeth some of which were missing. At that time we seemed to be the only guests but as the week progressed the hotel began to fill up. A porter took our luggage and we followed him to our room on the first floor. He unlocked the heavy mahogany door with an enormous brass key. The room was in darkness but he went ahead, drew the heavy curtains and let the light flood in. A large double bed filled the centre of the room with a small wardrobe to the right and a door leading to the bathroom on the left. He deposited our luggage and departed.

As soon as he had gone we rushed to the window, pulled down the windowpane, breathed the scented air and gazed at the unbroken view of the town stretching out before us. In the distance we could see the old harbour and beyond the sparkling blue sea. It was an idyllic view that could have graced any holiday postcard.

Eager to explore the town, we unpacked, tidied up and rushed out. The heat of the day had subsided and there was a cool breeze as we walked cautiously down a small uneven path in front of the hotel and followed a narrow winding

road. On an old tilted lamppost we saw a sign to the old town. We were both excited at the prospect of exploring a new place, not knowing what we would find. Although we had a travel guidebook and had read about the town, it was still by chance that we found ourselves in the area called Ovriaki (Evraiki) the neighbourhood originally settled by the Jews. We only realised where we were when we came upon a large wooden door set into a stonewall. It was unpainted, rotting and clearly derelict. The hinges or what was left of them were rusted with parts missing. It looked so out of place in that otherwise well kept street.

As I approached it, I was able to read some of the graffiti that disfigured part of it. There were some poorly drawn swastikas with crossed out Magen David Jewish stars. There was also some Greek writing, which we couldn't decipher but it was clear what we were seeing. We knew a little about the fate of the Jewish Community during the WW2 but this stopped us in our tracks. We looked at each other in horror. Then Joanna saw it, a piece of frayed paper pinned to the wood. The rain had faded the writing but there was enough detail for her to read. It was in the form of a letter to a passer-by. *This place was the site of the Etz Hayyim Synagogue, which was destroyed in 1941.* It was signed and there was a telephone number.

Some hours later over dinner in the small dining room, Joanna mentioned the letter on the wooden door.

'I've been thinking about that letter,' she began.

'It has troubled me.'

'How? In what way?' I asked.

'It seems like a sign. We have come all this way on holiday and we find a letter about a disused synagogue. Is it fate? Are our forefathers saying something to us?'

I was speechless; I had never heard her talk like this before.

'Don't be ridiculous, you don't believe in all that stuff do you?' I said. She went quiet as if thinking and then she said something that surprised me.

'I think I do. I know you'll think I'm crazy but I think we should phone him.'

'How do you know if he's still around? That letter could have been written a long time ago,' I said.

'I know but I think we should try.'

Later that evening we went into the hotel office and they kindly phoned the number. A male

voice answered in Greek and then in English.

'Hello who is that?' He asked. I then explained that we were on holiday and that we had been to the derelict synagogue, read his note and would like to meet him. To our surprise he was happy to do so and we arranged to be at a small café on the front the following morning at about 11 am.

Sitting out on the patio after dinner overlooking the pool as the sun was beginning to set Joanna began to read about the old synagogue in preparation for our meeting the following day.

'It says here that there has been a Jewish presence on the Island since the first century and that the Etz Hayyim synagogue served the population of several thousand. Over the years the numbers have dwindled.

'Why was that?' I interrupted.

'It doesn't say but by the 1940s there were only about 400 Jewish souls. That is until WW2.'

'What happened then?'

'The Germans invaded and took over the Island.'

I tried to imagine the scene in 1941 fifty years earlier. when the Battle of Crete was being waged during WW2. The war in Europe had been progressing badly for the Allies. Greece had fallen and the battle for North Africa was in progress. Crete, occupied by the British was in a strategic position. It was still a third world country with poor rocky roads, an economy based on small hold farming with a homogeneous people mainly Greek Orthodox living on the land. The main cities of Heraklion and Chania were still relatively simple collections of one and two storey buildings. Over a four-week period this quiet peaceful backwater under the jurisdiction of Greece would have been transformed into a battlefield. I sat staring out to sea. It didn't seem possible.

'Are you all right?' Joanna asked. 'Shall I go on? It gets very upsetting, 'Yes go on,' I said.

'On the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 1944, the whole Jewish community of over 350, including over a hundred children and some freedom fighters, were rounded up and herded onto the merchant

steamer Tanais. They were made to leave their homes without notice and without any belongings. The locals stood by helplessly as their neighbours were taken away. It was thought that they were being taken to concentration camps on the mainland.'

'The story gets worse I'm afraid. The ship was torpedoed in the Mediterranean and all were lost.'

'Oh dear that's terrible. Was that the German plan?'

'No it was an awful mistake. Apparently a British submarine HMS Vivid captained by Lt J C Varley spotted her near Santorini, an island 200 Kms southeast of the Greek mainland and assumed she was a fighting ship. He torpedoed her with all hands lost. He didn't know that she was loaded with innocent civilians.'

We both sat in silence as the sky darkened and the stars began to appear, it was a perfect evening but neither of us was in the mood to enjoy it.

That night I awoke, as I'm not a good sleeper. The room was in pitch black and for a moment I imagined I was on that stricken steamer as she began to sink. I felt the hysteria, the screaming, then the water closing in on me and I was struggling to breathe and then silence. My thrashing about must have disturbed Joanna because the light, which she had switched on, suddenly awakened me. She was holding me. 'It's OK, you're OK,' I heard her say as she stroked my brow. I slowly came to and realised it

was only a dream. Neither of us was able to sleep after that and we passed the rest of the night holding each other until the early sun lit up the room.

By the morning everything seemed back to normal. The night was forgotten and we prepared for the meeting with Aftonio Katsaros, the signatory of the posted letter. After breakfast on the verandah, we made our way to the old Port and to the Café Greco on the corner. As we arrived I could see a man sitting at a table in the open. He waved and we joined him.

‘Good morning Mr Katsaros this is my wife Joanna, my name is Michael.’

‘Please call me Aftonio, Come and sit down.’

‘What would you like?’ he said turning to Joanna.

‘Some water, cold please, and you Michael?’

‘An espresso please.’

He beckoned to the waiter. Aftonio was a tall man with a scrawny build. He had deep blue eyes above deeply creased cheeks and wore a well-trimmed beard; he spoke excellent English with a hint of an accent. After our drinks arrived, he said smiling,

‘Welcome to Chania, how can I help you? What would you like to know?’

Shaking his hand, Joanna said,

‘Thank you for agreeing to meet us. We are honoured to be here. My name is Joanna and this is my husband Michael. We are from England on holiday. It’s about the disused derelict Synagogue we came upon by chance. We are intrigued about its history. We would like

to know more about it and if you don't mind, how you are connected with it?'

'OK, let me start at the beginning, it's a long story. I was born in Athens but lived most of my early life here in Chania that is until the War in 1941. I was nine at the time. I am an only son. My parents managed to send me to the mainland to my grandparents in Athens; my parents were in the Tanais and were lost.'

'I'm sorry, we read about it, what a tragedy.'

'Tragedy? Maybe yes? Maybe no? They were all destined for a concentration camp. Maybe fate did them a favour?' He said looking down at the pavement.

Then in a quiet sad voice he continued.

'I remember the invasion as if yesterday. The sky was suddenly filled with greyish white parachutes blocking out the sun, I watched mesmerized as they floated soundlessly down, not knowing what they were. I called out to my mother.

Come look, there are umbrellas floating towards us. My mother's name was Rebecca. I saw her look up and realised that she had instinctively recognised what they were. I saw her clutch her throat as if a spasm of fear had gripped her.

'Quick come inside and shut the door, close the windows and keep quiet,' she whispered. I caught her fear and rushed ahead of her. She had heard the news on the radio that Greece had fallen to the German and knew that an

invasion of Crete couldn't be far behind, but she hadn't expected it so soon.

'They won't win,' she kept saying to herself as she led me into the kitchen. 'The Greek and British army will defeat them,' she prayed.

'Where was Christos her husband?' She said and then she remembered that he was in the olive grove tending the trees. '

'He must have seen the Germans coming down in their thousands,' she whispered, 'he'll be safe.'

My mother had lived all her life on the island. Our family was Greek Romaniote. My forefathers had escaped across the sea three generations earlier to avoid persecution. She had met my father Christos at college in Athens where she had gone to study. After their marriage they had spent a few years there but she was homesick for the unspilt sun blessed countryside of Crete and returned there where I was born. We have lived peacefully with the locals who were mainly Greek orthodox, and have attended the small synagogue in the old city. But then things changed. There were reports of attacks on Jewish families and then, we heard that a man had been killed accused of stealing. He was well known in the community and everyone believed it was a frame-up.

Apparently my father Christos was hard at work pruning the olive trees and didn't see the German parachutists until he heard the rustle of leaves and their guttural commands as they

dropped into the grove beside him. He had tried to run but was soon surrounded.

'Hände hoch (Put your hands up)' One had shouted.

'My family, I must go to my family,' he had replied but they took no notice and marched him off in the direction of the town.

'My mother and I had remained crouching in the kitchen listening to every sound. At last the noise of footsteps began to disappear into the distance and then there was quiet.'

'Stay here,' she had commanded me, 'don't make a noise, I will go and see what is happening.' I saw her slowly open the front door and look out.

There was no one there, the front garden was as she had left it, the road beyond was empty but we could hear muffled gunshots in the distance. She said that she could see the vineyard and was usually able to see Christos moving about but despite straining her eyes there was no movement. She wanted to call out but the sound stuck in her throat, No, I mustn't they might hear she realised, she was now unsure what to do, to try and find my father or go back to me. The rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire decided for her.

I learned later that my father was rounded up with a number of other men. When I finally saw him again he told me what had happened. He said that they were lined up in a column and marched to the nearby village of Kondomari just

outside the city of Chania. It was all happening so quickly. He said he was confused and wondered what was going on. By the time they had arrived at the town square there were many other men and some women already there crowded together. Then my father saw three trucks arrive. He said they stopped and German soldiers lept out carrying rifles. They lined up in front of the crowd. Suddenly, we all realised what was happening and began to surge forwards.

He told me that he had heard a strident command and then the soldiers began firing wildly into the crowd. He heard women screaming and men shouting. All around him people were falling, blood spurting from their chests and heads. He knew he had to act fast and before the spraying bullets reached him he fell to the ground feigning death. Bodies fell heavily onto him, their blood dripping onto his face and into his eyes. Then the shooting ceased. Those still alive lay groaning in pain. Then he heard sporadic shots as each was silenced.

In a dull almost incoherent voice, my father then said that several hours had passed before he felt safe enough to move. He sat up gently easing the dead bodies off him. Looking around, the square was empty apart from the massacred bodies piled high in the middle. Gradually one or two people who had been able to escape came out from the surrounding houses and slowly walked towards the heap of bodies, women

sobbing, men staring in disbelief. He was helped to his feet and taken into a house. No one spoke. A woman handed him a bucket of water and some clean clothes. He stripped and washed off the blood, which had already caked on his skin. Feeling clean at last he had thanked the woman and made to leave the house.

'Be careful they are everywhere and won't spare you.' She said.

'I must get home, I left my wife and son there.'

Thanking her he had waited until dark and slipped out of the square. He said the moon was full that night and he could see the sky lit up with flashes of light and heard the sound of heavy artillery. His heart was thumping in his chest as he crossed a field near his home. He tried to crouch as he ran but knew that if any Germans were watching, they would easily see him and he would have no chance. Luckily no one saw him. It was a short journey to his house, which was in darkness.

He said that the front door was open and as he entered, he called out softly,

'Rebecca it's me, Christos.' He heard a movement and then a familiar voice whispered, 'We are in the kitchen.' Then he was holding her feeling her body trembling. It's all right we are safe. Let's wait until it's light and see what the situation is.' Throughout the night the house was shaken by loud explosions, which lit up the night sky. They woke to an overcast sky with a light drizzle. Rebecca tried to brighten them up by producing a cooked breakfast but found the electricity had been cut off as well as the telephone.

'What are we going to do? How are we going to live?' she cried, 'I'm so frightened and what about Aftonio? He needs to go to school?' my father tried to calm her.

'We'll manage somehow, he assured her although he didn't know how and was feeling that all was hopeless. The Germans were everywhere and the allies were no match for them.

My father told my mother that they must send me away somewhere safe; it was too dangerous here for me. Then they turned to me and said, 'We don't know what will happen and we are so frightened for you. We must get you to Athens where Grandma will look after you and you can go to school, it's too dangerous here.'

Aftonio paused,

'I'm afraid as you see; it's a long story. If you are still interested, I will continue it tomorrow. Come here around lunchtime and I will take you to my house and tell you the rest over lunch.'

We said goodbye and returned to the hotel, both feeling that something miraculous had happened. Chance had brought us in contact with an amazing man and we couldn't wait to hear more of his story.

We were met by Amalio the owner who asked us about our day. We told him about the letter on the wooden door in the Jewish quarter and the man we met.

'Yes,' he said, 'it was a terrible time but now things are better, The Jews are coming back although some people still don't want them to.'

Aftonio was at the café when we arrived the following day.

'Hello I hope you had a good night.' he said. 'I live very close, follow me,' and he set off at a brisk pace towards the row of narrow Venetian houses that overlooked the harbour. We stopped at the end one and he produced a key. We entered a narrow hall with a staircase leading to the next floor. The house was on three floors, lit by narrow windows with a view of the harbour. Everywhere there were artifacts; on small tables and on the walls. Many of them were paintings and etchings, which we later learned were done by Aftonio. He modestly told us that he had an agent in Athens who handled his artwork.

After a simple lunch of Spanakopita with a number of salads with olives, pepper and tomatoes accompanied by Retsina a sweetish white wine, he showed us around the house. We ended up at the open patio on the roof with a panoramic view of the harbour. There he served us Greek coffee in the traditional small copper cups. Then settling us down he asked, 'Shall I continue?' We both nodded.

'Now where was I? Oh yes I was about to be sent away from Crete to Athens. It was some days later that my father remembered Nikos a fisherman who fished in the deep water of the Mediterranean. He had a small boat with an outboard motor and was always looking for jobs to make money. After a few days he made

contact with him and asked him to take me to the mainland.

'Impossible it's too dangerous I have a wife and children I can't do it. It's not possible with the Germans everywhere, it would be suicide.' Said Nikos walking away. My father knew the rules of the game.

'Stop! OK how much do you want, he asked?' It was now a question of money. After more wrangling they settled on a figure and a date was arranged. The boat was kept at Maleme, a long beach to the west of Chania. It gave open access to the north and to the Peloponnese Peninsula, the southernmost tip of Greece a distance of about 100 kms. It could be a dangerous trip in heavy weather but the forecast was good and Nikos needed the money.

The plan was for me to be on the beach before dawn the following day.

I have never forgotten that trip. It was like the movies a dare devil escape from the evil dictator. I remembered arriving in the dark travelling on the back of my dad's bike. A torchlight showed us where Nikos' boat was. My Dad held me in a tight hug and said,

'Be careful; let us know when you get to Grandma's. We love you. Now go.' I saw my father fighting back tears knowing that we might never see each other again. He thrust a bag of food in my hand and cycled away before his tears could be seen. It was the last time I saw him. Nikos grabbed my hand

'Come we must leave now,' he barked. Once I was in the boat, he launched it through the low waves and began rowing.

'I won't use the motor until we are well out of sight and sound of the shore.' I heard him say. I sat watching the water as it lapped against the side of the boat. I touched it and put it to my lips. It was very cold and salty. Once out of sight of the land and surrounded by water on all sides, I was amazed how big the ocean was.

'This must be the biggest ocean in the world?' I had whispered to Nikos.

'No, it's not even an ocean it's a sea, the Mediterranean.'

Then he said,

'Aftonio we must be very careful, the Germans are patrolling this water and may see us. I want you to cover yourself with this blanket and try and sleep.'

I was very tired and was soon asleep. I think I must have been dreaming when a sound disturbed me.

'Was machst du hier? (*What are you doing here?*) Barked a German voice

'I am a fisherman and am fishing, replied Nikos.

'Sie keine Fische gefangen haben.' (*You don't seem to have caught anything.*) Said the Officer, and then he saw the bundle on the floor.

'Was ist das?' (*What is that?*)

'It's only a blanket to keep me warm.' There was a moment when the Officer was about to look under it but changed his mind.

'OK gut Angeln.' (*OK good fishing.*)

Neither Nikos nor I said anything until we were well out of earshot. We had both realised just how close we were to being found out. The following morning just as day was breaking we saw the coast of the Peninsula. Nikos was familiar with the many bays and outcrops and soon we were heading for a small beach. It was deserted apart from some children playing at the waters edge.

'Poú zéfte? (Where do you live?)' Nikos had asked one of them

'We come from a small village about ten minutes from here.' The eldest girl, a slim dark haired child about ten years old said,

'I have a favour to ask your mother, can you take us to her?

'What is it?'

'I want her to help this boy to get to Athens.'

After the short walk we came to a small village with about ten small houses.

'That's my house,' said the girl pointing to a yellow painted building. A buxom woman was standing out side,

'What is it? Has something happened?' she asked the girl.

'No, it OK Mum these people want to meet you. They have come from the Island. They have a boy who needs to get to Athens to join his grandparents. Can we help him?' Nikos who was listening to the conversation then spoke up.

'I am a fisherman from Crete, we are under German rule, life is very difficult.'

'Yes we are the same,' said the woman

'I have brought a boy with me who needs to join his Grandparents in Athens, how can he get there?'

'Come inside we can't talk, here it's too dangerous.' Aftonio's voice seemed to change, as he continued.

'I sometimes recall that trip even now so many years later: when I am on my own, waking in the morning, about to go to bed at night, sitting in my room. A feeling of absolute fear, uncontrollable shaking, my voice trembling, utterly alone, dreading the unknown, would come over me and for a time I would be back in that time. I would remember flashes of the journey itself, the bus lurching in the dark along unknown roads, flashing lights, rasping German orders. Standing in the open, the rain drizzling on my bare head, being checked before continuing the journey. Thirst, my lips cracked and stiff, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. But there was a good side to that journey. I will never forget my fellow passengers, their gentle words, their warm smiles sheltering me, adopting me as their own when the question of why I was travelling alone was raised, even sharing their meager meals with me.

At that time when my awareness of the world was limited, I could not have known that, that feeling of camaraderie, that spontaneous reaching out to another human being that I had experienced on that journey would be the guiding light for the rest of my life. Only years later would I understand the forces that had

shaped my commitment to dedicate myself to the needs of others, both spiritually and physically.'

Joanna and I sat transfixed by his story. We could not imagine what it would have been like, to have gone through what Aftonio had described. He saw the look on our faces.

'Yes it is an unbelievable story and even as I recall it, it is as if it had happened to someone else and that I am describing someone else's life.'

'Did you get to Athens?' I asked. He didn't answer. The evening was drawing in and we could see that he was tiring.

'We would love to hear more but you must be tired.' I said.

'Let's meet tomorrow if you are willing?'

Aftonio was sitting at the café as we arrived the next day. He greeted us and then said,

'Are you sure you want to hear more. Don't you want to explore the Island?'

'Yes but we have two weeks and your story has really hooked us. We can't wait to hear more'.

'Where was I? Oh yes I had arrived at my Grandparents house in Athens. I remember unfamiliar arms reaching out to me when I knocked on the door of my grandparent's home in Athens. I was gathered up and smothered with hugs. Half asleep I tried to answer the barrage of questions. How did you get here? What did you eat? How do you feel? Are you hungry? Thirsty?'

'Leave him alone Mama, he's tired let him sleep,' said my grandfather. My last memory of that long day was the soft bed into which I sank and sleep overcoming me.

Their house was like a museum, room after room to explore, the library with books reaching almost to the sky, the Orangerie facing East to receive the morning sun built by my grandfather to house the hundreds of plants which he had collected, each carrying a small name tag. The kitchen a huge room with a high ceiling and large table tops on which the meal of the day was assembled. I loved to watch my Grandma's agile fingers molding and shaping wedges of dough before being transformed by the open oven into feats of flavour, crisp miracles of taste. I often tried to reach for a small morsel from the oven, but Grandma would see me out of the corner of her eye and smile as I tried to eat the hot bun tentively not allowing it to cool.'

'It was too dangerous for me to go to school so my days were planned as if at school. Grandpa, with his white beard, warm smiling eyes and soft hands had been a teacher in his earlier years and knew what was required. A timetable of lessons was agreed leaving time for exploration. Kind but firm, grandpa allowed no slacking, the lessons started on time, homework was a must but I loved it. I responded to the discipline, the knowing of what was to come. I think that early regimentation of my life formed the foundation of my academic world to come. I learned about the extraordinary culture, which I had inherited, the

great Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Aristotle, Plato and many others.'

'How do they know so much Grandpa?' I would ask. He would stroke his beard before replying. 'In those days life was simpler; there were fewer diversions to interfere with studying. I often marvel at the wisdom of these men who had lived so many years ago.'

Without pausing Aftonio asked, 'Would you like some more wine?' and not waiting for an answer began filling my empty glass. 'How did you get involved with the synagogue?' Joanna asked. He sat back in his chair and looked up to the ceiling. 'That is another long story. Why don't we keep that for tomorrow?'

The following day I could feel that Aftonio was more at ease with us and he began to talk more about himself.

'I have had a very unusual upbringing, my father was Greek Orthodox and my mother Jewish from Istanbul. I was educated in England, and the USA. From a very young age I was interested in the past. What life was like long before I was born? How did we reach this point in civilization? So I studied Archeology and History with a bit of cooking and Art thrown in. I also studied Philosophy at the Kapodistrian University of Athens.

Most recently I have been working in Athens. There was a large collection of artifacts, which had never been classified or put on show so with others I helped to set up the Athens Archeological Museum. I have an unquestionable hunger for knowledge, I love to play musical instruments and when I can, I draw, paint and etch. My family moved to Crete from Athens prior to the onset of the Second World War hoping they would be safer there.'

'Sadly my parents died and I was at a loose end. My parent's house was a traditional Venetian town house here in the old city overlooking the harbour. Having no brothers or sisters, I inherited it and decided to return here and continue my writing and art. However I found it in a terrible state. Most of the furniture had gone, the fabric of the house had decayed but it was a solid building and the main structure was intact. I set too and restored it to the state you see it today. I have lived here ever since.'

I watched him as he spoke his bright blue eyes darting from my face to Joanna's, his voice animated with the memory.

Back at the hotel Joanna was busy planning the rest of our holiday.

'There are some places we must see,' she said reading from her favorite travel guidebook. 'The obvious one is Heraklion with the Knossos site and then the Museum and the cemetery where John Pendlebury is buried. That's another amazing story, I think the best way to go would

be to hire a car something small simple and reliable a small Fiat if available.'

I promptly got onto the manager and within ten minutes he had booked us a car that would be delivered to the hotel the following morning. Being an island in the Mediterranean Crete enjoyed amazing weather. The breeze from the sea ensured cool nights and fresh warm days and it was on such a day that we set off for the west end of the island retracing our steps along the same road we had taken a week or so before. Joanna estimated it would take about 2 hours driving to do the 140 kms to Heraklion.

We took turns to drive; it had gears and a very noisy rather smoky diesel engine. It was while I was at the wheel that we saw Madam's café in the distance.

'We must stop,' shouted Joanna over the din of the engine, 'and see if any more hens have laid.' Madam remembered us and greeted us with a hug and a kiss. Once again we sat staring out across the Mediterranean, not wanting to move. 'Where are you going?' asked Madam carrying a tray with ice-cold tea. Joanna looked at me. 'Umm, we're going to Heraklion to see the excavations and the museum.' 'Don't miss the Cemetery,' she said, 'it's something you won't forget.'

We continued with her words ringing in our ears, 'you won't forget.'

We had booked into the Lato boutique hotel on the outskirts of the city within a short distance

from the excavations at Knossos. We had given ourselves two days, as we were due back in Chania for the inaugural Service at the Synagogue.

As I drove, Joanna began to read about Knossos.

'It says here that it is the capital of Minoan Crete dating to the Neolithic period, about seven thousand years BC. Minos Kalokairinos originally discovered the site in 1878. But it was the English Archeologist Sir Arthur Evans (1851-1941) who excavated and partially restored it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of his colleagues was Arthur Pendlebury but more of him later. 'Lets wait until we get to the excavation and you can tell me more,' I suggested beginning to find the reading rather dry.

The hotel was functional and we were soon unpacked, changed and were ready to explore the excavations. Although there were some directions to Knossos in our guidebook we decided to ask at the desk for instructions. I very helpful young woman at the reception listened patiently and then provided us with a simple hand drawn map, clearly we were not the first. After a twenty minutes drive over a rugged asphalt road we came to the site, which occupied about 5 acres. It was unlike many archeological sites we had visited which mainly consisted of outlines of walls and paths.

In 1900 its excavator, Sir Arthur Evans, a British Archeologist, reconstructed parts of the site. As

a result there were a number of incompletely restored buildings with walkways and rooms. How well these rebuilt areas were a true copy of the original is open to debate and has been criticized. From the visitor's point of view however it made the visit more rewarding. We walked through rooms open to the sky and along raised walkways which helped us to visualise what the palace and its surroundings would have been like before the earthquake in 1500-1400 BC almost destroyed it. According to Greek Mythology the famous Architect Daedalus designed it in such a way that no one could find their way out, hence the story of Theseus and the Minotaur.

During the course of her reading, Joanna came upon the name John Pendlebury. We were walking along a broad reconstructed road when she suddenly stopped me and said. 'Listen to this,' and she began to read about him but I stopped her. 'Let's do it later,' I suggested. I knew a lot about him. He was a schoolboy hero of mine.

'We must go and visit the cemetery at Souda Bay near Chania, it's maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. He's buried there. I'll tell you more about him when we get there. But before we leave here we must visit the Archeological museum where many of the artifacts from Knossos are kept.'

We had no difficulty in finding the museum everyone knew where it was in the centre of the

town. It was built between 1937 – 40 by the architect Patroklos Karantinos on a site previously occupied by a Roman Catholic monastery, which was destroyed by an earthquake in 1856. It was erected on two floors with a large entrance opening onto 13 rooms on the ground floor and seven on the first floor. Joanna picked up a guidebook and began reading to me again.

'It says here that the museum is the largest in Greece and covers a time span of over 5,500 years from Neolithic to Roman.' We purchased a catalogue, which showed that the objects were grouped according to when and where they were found.

Moving from room to room, we marvelled at the objects from Pre-historic times such as pottery, carved stone objects, seals and small sculptures which had been found in excavations of palaces, mansions, caves and burial grounds. Then we entered special rooms, which were dedicated to Minoan wall paintings, sarcophagi and Special collections.

Finally exhausted by our visit we found the small restaurant where we rested and had a light lunch. Joanna was full of excitement at what we had seen. She was brimming over, her eyes were shining and she couldn't stop talking about what we had seen. It's unbelievable that objects of such beauty and craftsmanship were made so many years ago.

The journey back to Chania could have been a bit of an anti-climax after what we had seen but we were both excited by the visit to the cemetery.

'There is something very moving about visiting war graves. They exude a feeling of calm and peacefulness yet they are a reminder of the futility of war,' said Joanna as we stood viewing the rows of headstones running in long lines.

'This one here at Souda bay is no exception.' I said admiring the way it had been sited on a piece of land overlooking the sea where the breeze from the sea cooled the visitor. Standing on the beautifully mown lawn separating the serried rows of gravestones. I felt that it was a far remove from the war that has killed its occupants,'

We walked along the solemn rows of tombstones reading the names, date of birth and regiment, 8<sup>th</sup> Greek Regiment. There were 1500 commonwealth servicemen buried here of whom over half are unidentified New Zealanders from the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF) including one Maori along with British and other Commonwealth troops, and Greek defenders. I was overcome with grief as I thought of these young lives wasted. Joanna saw my struggle with my emotions and held my hand. There were no words to describe the sadness of it all.

Then we came to one gravestone that made me freeze, it was the tomb of John Pendlebury. His

story for me epitomized so many of the lives of those lying there. He was schoolboy hero of mine but I had forgotten him until Joanna had mentioned him.

Joanna and I were very tired and decided to have an early night. I settled down to sleep but Joanna put on the sidelight and began to read aloud about John Pendlebury. I heard her voice droning on.

'John Pendlebury was born in 1904 and at the age of 2 lost an eye. He had worn a false one since.' I think I was asleep when I seemed to awake and John was standing near me. He appeared to me wearing army gear. I didn't recognise him at first he looked so much older. We shook hands.

'What are you doing in Crete?' I asked him. He smiled that familiar languid look that I knew so well, his false eye not moving as well as the other.

'You'll remember I won a scholarship to Pembroke college, Cambridge where I was awarded a 2<sup>nd</sup> in Part 1 and a first in Part 2 with distinction in Archeology.'

'Yes I knew that Archeology was your first love.'

'Well, after my first visit to Crete I couldn't wait to get back. I had heard that Arthur Evans later Sir Arthur Evans was excavating a site outside Heraklion, which he thought was the mythical city of Knossos. I immediately applied to the British school of Archeology and went out to see him at Villa Ariadne. He was keen for me to join

him and together we exposed a large part of the palace and grounds.

'Was that the time when there was that controversy about reconstructing some of it?'  
'Yes we realised that if left it really as a pile of stones it would not 'Come a live; in the eyes of the world so based upon some early plans we took it upon ourselves to rebuild some of the buildings to give the visitor an idea of the splendour that it had been. Soon after we had started there was a backlash of criticism but I am sure that in the future it will all be forgotten. In the autumn of 1929 Arthur Evans appointed me curator of the archaeological site at [Knossos](#) in central Crete to replace Duncan Mackenzie. My title was to be Knossos Curator.'

As I listened I tried to imagine the controversy surrounding that decision. There has always been a group of archeologists who believed that excavation should not disturb or reconstruct particularly because there is often a lack of detailed information so that the reconstruction may be seriously misleading. The others say what's the use of just leaving a pile of stones especially if there is some information which can be gleaned to reconstruct.

But I wanted to learn more; I was intrigued as to why John was wearing army uniform. Always an adventurer, he said that as soon as the war in Europe began he knew that the Germans would try to expand into Africa and the obvious footstep would be Crete.

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'What did you decide to do? I asked always amazed at this man's courage.

'I applied to the British Home Office and returned to the UK where I was enrolled in the British army. I had offered to mobilize the Cretan resistance to be prepared in the event of an invasion.'

'What was their response?'

'At first they thought I was mad after all they had hoped that the war wouldn't come, that Chamberlain would be successful in an appeasement. Well as you know Hitler was having none of that. So after a year of intensive training, I returned. What did you find?'

'There was a well-organized Cretan resistance which when the Germans came fought valiantly against them.'

At that moment everything became blurred and I heard the sound of gunshots. Then to my horror I saw John lying on the ground blood coming from his chest. I tried to shout but the words stuck in my throat. Then a number of German soldiers propped him against a tree and shot him. I saw him fall to the ground, lifeless. I screamed out and then I heard Joanna's voice, 'Michael wake up. Are you all right? I think you have been dreaming.'

I sat up and looked around the room. At first I didn't know where I was but then I saw familiar things and Joanna's face leaning over me.

'It was so real. I spoke to him. I saw him shot.'

'Who? Who?'

'John!'

'John who?'

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‘John Pendlebury.’

As her voice faded I seemed to return to the present. The sky above was blue, a cool sea breeze was blowing from nearby and apart from the graves, it could be mistaken for a pleasant summer afternoon. We said our farewells and headed towards Chania. Tomorrow was a big day.

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