

Eleni Sarantiti (Autobiographical Note)

I was born in Neapoli, Lakonia, with its beautiful sea and its ancient history. My family was a large and a happy one and my sea-faring father would often take us with him on his journeys in the summertime. That is how, from a young age, I learned to love my country. It was also as a child that I fell in love with books, a love that holds fast even today and continues to grow. It is no exaggeration when I say that I am surrounded by books and that I still yearn to read more and more of them.

In addition to "Kalesmeni ton Christougennon" (Invited for Christmas) I have written a further fifteen books, six of which are for children and teens and the rest are for adults. Of my books, three have been adapted into television serials and another three have been distinguished with literary prizes, including the International Commendation of UNESCO, the Greek National Fiction Award, The Society of Christian Letters Award and the Circle of the Greek Children's Book Award. Pages from these books have been selected and taught in the Ministry of Education and Religion's set anthologies of literary texts for the upper classes of primary school as well as the Ministry's Modern Greek anthology for use in technical and professional education schools. Furthermore, an extract from my teen novel "Kapote o Kinigos" (Once the Hunter), is found in the set anthology of Modern Greek Literature for the first class of middle school.

I often visit schools, municipalities, book stores, and cultural clubs, where I talk to children as well as adults about the benefits gained from a good book. I have been a regular contributor to Eleftherotypia Newspaper for the last twenty-five years. My fifteenth novel, a historical novel, has recently been published. It tells of the private, immensely interesting and unbelievably lustrous yet hardly known, life of Leonidas, the hero of Thermopyles. Writing this novel was one of the happiest times of my life. Another great source of happiness for me is my family.

But there are so many other things that give me joy and pleasure, such as nature, animals, music, the sea, solitary walks, the great religious celebrations and my memories of them, travels to faraway places, regular visits to the place where I was born, and friendship. I believe that life has treated me with generosity but I too have loved, cherished and honoured the beauty of even the smallest and most insignificant things that surround us and call to us every day, like the chirping of a bird, the midday sun over the waves, the rain falling on the windows and the leaves, and the scents and colours of the flowers. These are joys that everyone can experience, as long as one doesn't pass them over with indifference.

EleniSarantiti (CV)

EleniSarantiti was born and raised in Neapoli, Lakonia, in Greece. Today she lives in Athens. From a very young age she loved books and became involved in literature from the age of twenty. This is her fifteenth book.

She writes books for children and teens as well as for adults. Three of her novels have been adapted into television series; of these, "O kipos me ta agalmata" (The Garden with the Statues) was the most famous.

She has been honored with the following distinctions in Greece and abroad: the Commendation of the UNESCO International Children's and Teen Children's Book Competition, the Greek National Children's Literature Award (Ministry of Culture), the Circle of the Greek Children's Book Award, and the Fiction Award of the Greek Society of Christian Letters.

Her novel "O kavos toy AgiouAngellou" (The Cape of Saint Angelo) was nominated for the National Literature Award of the Ministry of Culture. Her books "O kipos me ta agalmata" and "Kapote o kinigos" (Once the Hunter) have been translated into Danish and German respectively.

She taught children's literature to children at the Leontios private school in Nea Smyrni, Athens, and, for a number of years, worked as a reader for an established publishing house in Athens.

Extracts of some of her works have been included in the set anthologies of literary texts for Greek national primary and secondary schools as well as technical schools.

She has collaborated with numerous newspapers providing them with short stories, travel and other miscellaneous articles as well as book reviews, while she has been a regular contributor to Eleftherotypia Newspaper's literary section. She also contributes to diastixo.gr and bookbar.gr on-line literary magazines.

Thermopylae, August 480 BC. A night with a full moon preceded by two days of fatal clashes between the Greeks and Persians. The Persians' losses have been inestimable. Then Ephialtes, a denizen of a neighboring region, comes forth. "And are you not afraid of the gods for what you are about to do to your home?" Xerxes asked him. And the traitor from Malis replied, "Never before have I met the gods on the paths of Mount Kallidromos where I walk." Thus began the precipitous undertaking of encircling the Greeks.

Leonidas, the king of Sparta and general of all the Greek armies, lies awake waiting for the dawn and the final battle that will spell the bloodstained sacrifice of his and the few Greeks who remained by his side, determined to confront Xerxes' armies. Already, as it became known that the Persian armies, under the command of General and Prince Hydarnes, with the traitor Ephialtes as a guide, had trapped them in the night in the Mt. Anopaea path, the commanders and officers of the allied armies have panicked and taken flight. Most of the Greek warriors have withdrawn. Leonidas himself had agreed to the latter as he believed the allies' fears would be a bad counselor... Those who remain include the surviving riders of the initial three hundred and the Thespians, who were not seven hundred as it has always been said for they had incurred heavy losses during the conflicts of the previous two days. There also remain the helots and the soothsayer Megistias.

"Come, my general king, take your gallant men and return to Lacedaemon. Don't you see? There won't remain anything of you in the end. Come!" the commander of the Corinthians urges him. And Leonidas replies: "What do you mean 'nothing'? Sparta's honor will remain? Do you, Corinthian warrior, call that 'nothing'?"

When the allies had abandoned them and the warriors had withdrawn to their tents in wait of the dawn, Leonidas, alone, leaning against a crumbling wall opposite the camp that stays awake and reminisces, lets his thoughts return to Sparta, to the times and events that molded him, to the people he loved, to friendships, to amusements, to battles, to common life, to food messes, to love, to his eight-year-old son, to his beautiful and clever wife, his first and only love. He recalls how at his wedding, as was prescribed by custom, he had kidnapped his beloved who was also his niece, Gorgo, and had then delivered her to an elderly relative, the matchmaker, who then, again guided by their customs, sheared her long golden hair and made her sleep on a straw mattress on the floor whilst Leonidas slept in his barracks. Only on the third night was he permitted to lay with his bride who waited for him with rapture wearing only a short white tunic. That night, the first time they came together, Gorgo danced for him, a splendid, beautiful dance, and then she sang the words of Sappho, who was popular in Sparta, and which were befitting for their night: *Now the wedding you dreamed of has finally happened/ and the virgin you wanted is yours...* And he watched her, he listened to her and murmured: "A goddess. A goddess has come to my quarters". He remembers the course of their love, their young heir who came shortly after and who, very early on, revealed a sixth sense. He recalls Gorgo's father and her half-brother Cleomenes, a formidable Spartan king, whose regents, perhaps due to his power, butchered while propagating that he had gone mad and suicide.

He also turns his thoughts to his father, King Anaxandridas, a "prudent king", who adored his wife, Leonidas' mother. Since Anaxandridas' wife hadn't managed to bear him any children, the king was put under much pressure by the regents and the senate to divorce her and marry another to assure his succession. An honest and very much in love man, he resisted. He didn't abandon her, but married the niece of the sage Chilon thus becoming the first bigamist in the

history of Sparta. Shortly after, however, and after his second wife gave birth to Cleomenes, Anaxandridas' first wife, thought to be barren, bore him three sons. Leonidas was her second son.

With love he also remembers an educated, wise Helot who cultivated their lands and had revealed to him that his mother saw prophetic dreams. She was also a brilliant practical healer and the workers of the fields, the servants and slaves would flock from the surrounding settlements whenever she would visit the estate. She was also a beautiful woman, with a great knowledge of music, just like all Spartan women. She was also knowledgeable, as all young women, in reading and writing. She also knew much of Homer's work, but all in Sparta knew Homer in any case. This was part of their obligations, according to the Lykourgeian legislation.

As Leonidas bears his soul, at times he addresses the full moon known as the Star of War by the Spartans, as it was by its different phases that their campaigns were planned, while at others he talks to Apollo, a god particularly adored in Sparta, to Artemis or the Dioscuri. He thus enters into a dialogue with holy figures knowing that they are present, even if only as spectators, this critical night. At other times he addresses his "misguided and complaining" heart, as he calls it. He talks, incessantly. He appraises his life and, as everything is laid bare with honesty, we follow and get to know the humane, and incredibly sensitive and sincere side of this great man and, as we will come to realize further on, this ingenious general. He also shines light on beautiful ancient myths of the Spartans, describes Helen of Troy's athletic performance, her deification in ancient times, her therapeutic abilities as well as her reputation as protector of young children. For his, varying reasons, Leonidas refers to the Messinian wars, to their Tegeate allies, the women's places of worship during religious celebrations, the women's wrestling games, the poets who wrote and composed the odes, the chorus chants, the makers of musical organs, foreign entertainers, buglers, traders and balancers who arrived from other cities when Sparta celebrated. Then entry was allowed to every foreigner/stranger. He also tells of a difficult time for the city when, at a blacksmith's in Arcadia, and following an oracle's direction, Orestes remains were found and returned to Lacedaemon with respects. Following that, it is said, the city recovered. As myth has it, Leonidas continues, on his return from Tauris, Orestes brought back with him the statue of Artemis from Orthia. It was the only statue depicting the goddess as standing and not sitting in a throne. The statue was all but forgotten for years and when two royal siblings discovered it among the osiers on the banks of the Eurotas river, they couldn't believe their eyes. So commanding was the goddess's deportment. She was also named Ligodesma for the branches of a willow tree had woven themselves around her like bonds. Leonidas continues to look back at the past. He remembers how, before the campaign, in which not all the forces of Sparta had taken part since they had been celebrating Apollo Karneio, and thus from then on a truce was crucial, women, children, elderly parents, brothers and many of the relatives of the riders and soldiers who were to accompany Leonidas, mourned. They locked doors and windows and cried in silence. Even the dogs howled. And, on the morning of their departure, no birds flew in the sky. So leaden was the atmosphere. Until the dawn Leonidas reminisces and, through his memories, as well as his conclusions, we become familiar with unknown pages of Sparta's history, as well as events taken from so-called "Heroic" times, and we understand why Lykourgos was so great and Chilon so respected.

However, at the same time, on the other side, in the enemy's camp, another Greek lies awake, his thoughts, too, in the past. It is Dimaratos, the fallen king of Sparta and now advisor to the Persian monarch. Once the fugitive king and Leonidas nurtured a warm friendship. Yet, from

what we can surmise from Leonidas narrations, mutual respect continues to exist between both men and, whenever it becomes necessary, Leonidas stands by him. Besides, it was Dimaratos who warned the Greeks that Xerxes was preparing a campaign against them.

Through the monologue or dialogue of the hero of Thermopyles, we get to know ideas, deeds, and events that we could never have imagined. As well as figures of great radiance! Of a not only warfaring Sparta, but one that is also a protector of the arts, with beautiful, educated and lovable women, "Spartekalligynaika" (Od. 13.412) as called by Homer but also many other foreigners. Legend says, continues Leonidas, that when the denizens of Aegio won the Aetolians in battle, drunk from their victory, they sent men to the Oracle at Delphi in order to ask the God Apollo "Which of all the Greeks is superior to them", and Apollo replied "Of all the earth, Pelasgic Argos is best, as are Thessalian horses, and the women of Sparta".

We hear of heroes and unknown gods and stand respectful before a king who is humble and filled with compassion for his warriors who are condemned to die: "Oh I, I who have led them to the slaughter. I, who am victim and perpetrator together..." he sighs.

"Oh King! It is a Greek who will defeat us. The ancient letter of his name corresponds to the fifth letter of the Laconic alphabet. His compatriots have already defected to join rival factions. Now, my lord, comes betrayal! Without it, the barbarian armies would be defeated. They would have been finished by the foul – from heat and immobility – food and from contagious diseases. Yet we persisted, oh King and General!" informed him the Soothsayer Megistias with eyes that glared like a wild night.

But Leonidas knew of this already. He had been told of this sacrifice years before. A woman from Messinia who came from a line of enslaved princes, and who had been his mistress for a long period, had foretold this. "Oh what a good ending your homeland has in store for you! To the sacrificial altar there beyond, by the Gates that stand by the holy thermal springs, that is where they will send you. Like a lamb to the slaughter you shall be sent because of the love that you hold for it." Apollo too, through the Oracle at Delphi, had also given his word. "Either Sparta shall be destroyed, or, if it shall be saved, then the entire city shall mourn a king born of Hercules". Leonidas was a descendant of Hercules and a prince of the Herculeans. Truth be told, he didn't campaign with a soul rich with courage from the start, on the contrary, there had been moments when he had faltered, cowered, and even been afraid. He knew of this and, as Demaratus had so pointedly highlighted to Xerxes: "That which the Spartans are making Leonidas do, is nothing less than a suicide mission."

The peoples that the Persian king had recruited were so many that the rivers his armies crossed dried out in their passing. So great was the number of the Persian fleet that there existed no harbor that could protect them, and so, with the first great storm, huge losses were incurred. Through the information that Leonidas' or his spies accumulated about the Persian army, we obtain a through account of the Persians, their customs, their religion, and their vassals, as well as their time and their society. This is also true about the Phoenicians, the great and ferocious seafarers about which we know so much, in addition to the fleet of the allies under the command of the Spartan Eurybiades, that laid anchor at Artemisium and the surrounding area. There, too, was the Athenian general Themistocles.

We also read and follow, in detail, the preparations for the battle, including the hymns, the sacrifices, the crowing of the soldiers, the clearing of the ground, the caring of the arms and, as far as the Spartans are concerned, the preparation of their bodies and their impressive hair. We are also present during the three-day skirmishes, and there, the Greeks' valence is unprecedented. Just as Xerxes' soldiers' lack of discipline and experience is also apparent. Here it is proven that while the "King of Kings" – as he called himself – could supply an unheard of number of men to do his bidding, he couldn't supply warriors. We also observe how the Allies honoured their dead following each battle and with what care and diligence they tended to their wounded. Finally, we read of the spectacular and unique Spartan tactic of "falsewithdrawals".

"The Greeks! The Greeks are fighting! The Greeks are fighting *us*!" screeched Xerxes to his officers. He never expected resistance. Now the battlefield is filled with his dead. They had left them there. They could not carry away so many men. Their blood was stagnating where it had spilled. The vultures encircled them.

"You expect to defeat Xerxes' armies with this small handful of men?" Leotychides, co-king of Sparta, had chided upon Leonidas' departure from Sparta. And Leonidas had replied "But for men condemned to death, they are rather a lot, aren't they?"

And a former slave from Ethiopia, who was now a Corinthian Lady, sent him a charm with the eyes of the Goddess Demeter engraved upon it, and wrote to him: "Now that you are on your way to defend not only Greece but also the ideals of every man, I have decided to dedicate to you, a little like a blessing, my charm. May it protect you and be in your favour, and may it stand by you like a spirit that is pure, whatever the outcome may be". This charm resonated a strange warmth. Leonidas wore it around his neck until his dying breath. The young girl from Ethiopia was called Aba, or Margarita, and had been sold at the port of Corinth. She had been bought by the well-known tragic poet Pratinas. When Leonidas had first laid his eyes upon her, she looked to him like a beautiful yet frightened gazelle. Later, when she became a Lady, as the wife of the great and wealthy sculptor Xenokleides, her name was changed to Isthmias. She closed her letter calling Leonidas "Son of Leon, may your path be joyful". Demaratus, too, in the letter he sent in secret from the Persian camp, the night of the wake, called him "Son of Leon" too, and closed by saying "I hope that Zeus the Almighty may guide you to the borders of honour and the limits of immortality". Along with the letter, he sent Leonidas the ring of his father, King Aristonas.

He was called son of Leon because that is exactly what his name meant. Many historians refer to him as having fought like a lion to the end. Perhaps that is because he knew of the holy purposs of this war.

"Oh King, you find yourself against the greatest kingdom of Greece, that which has the bravest men. There is no other nation in all the world that will resist you!" Demaratus had warned Xerxes.