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09/16/05

Stavros S. Niarchos Language Study Fellowship Report

Project summary: In the summer of 2005, I attended language courses on the island of Ikaria for six weeks. The courses greatly increased my Greek speaking and comprehension skills, and confirmed my interests in modern Greek and Hellenic studies.

This summer, with the generous assistance of the Stavros S. Niarchos Foundation, I was able to confirm my strong interest in Hellenic Studies while progressing in my Greek language skills. For six weeks, I attended intensive language courses at the Ikarian Centre in the mountain village of Arethousa. The island, the school, and my own personal development – both linguistic and intellectual – greatly surpassed my expectations, and I look forward to continuing my studies of Modern Greek language and culture at Yale and beyond. My original goal was merely to reinforce and cement the Greek I had learned in my one year of formal study at Yale, under the impression that I would not be able to proceed to the next course. But after a summer in Greece, I realized the true depth of my desire to learn the language, and the first course on my schedule, on returning to Yale, was Intermediate Modern Greek.

The teachers at the Ikarian Centre, the small hostel and school located a short walk outside of Arethousa, were welcoming and accommodating, and from the start I was impressed with their level of dedication. Each weekday for six weeks, I spent four hours in class: two hours with one teacher, followed by a short break and another two hours with a second teacher. Class consisted of a mixture of verb drills, word games, work in the textbook, and conversation. The class sizes were consistently small for the duration of my stay, ranging from four to six. This allowed for a great deal of individual attention, which offset the fact that, with such small enrollment, the range of class levels offered could not provide a specific match for students in

terms of their individual language ability. As I soon discovered, though, interacting with the teachers, Ikarians, and other students of varying Greek language levels – from complete beginners to professional interpreters – was one of the most rewarding aspects of the program. As we endeavored to communicate and converse in Greek, our new lingua franca, we learned from each other continuously. While it was not a total immersion experience, learning Greek did become a twenty-four hour process.

Another highlight of taking courses at Ikarian Centre was the attention given to Greek culture. For example, in the first two-week course, dance lessons were offered in the evenings; we were then able to use our new skills at the lively village festivals, the *panegyria*. Daily trips were made to beaches and tavernas, as well as weekly excursions to archaeological or historical sites and several hiking adventures, which made up for the difficulty of getting around on Ikaria and the isolated location of the school. In addition, most evenings were reserved for film screenings, slide shows, open discussions, and a good deal of singing, both in a classroom setting and spontaneously.

I knew little about Ikaria prior to my arrival, other than its reputation for resisting the tourist overdevelopment rampant on other Greek islands, and when I witnessed its empty, green expanses on my first roller-coaster taxi ride across Ikaria, I knew the guidebooks weren't lying. However, the island's isolation turned out to be to our advantage. Residents of Ikaria are uniquely friendly, and are generally amused, rather than annoyed or impatient, with the efforts of Greek language students from Arethousa. With their hospitality, as well as the dedication of the staff of Ikarian Centre, and of course, the grant from the Niarchos Foundation which made this summer possible, my six weeks on Ikaria were truly unforgettable, and I am eager to continue my studies of Greek language and culture.