

## College Year in Athens: **Beginning Modern Greek** in Paros

Alexandra Galin and I applied for the Stavros S. Niarchos Research Grant in March because we wanted to research the German influence on Modern Greek culture since its independence in 1827. Our approach to this broad topic was concentrated in three periods: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discoveries of Schliemann and other German archaeologists and the presence of Prinz Otto von Bayern; the gruesome Nazi occupation in WWII; and the current exchange of the two cultures in the numerous German tourists that travel to Greece each year and the many Greeks that go to Germany to work. Without any prior knowledge of Modern Greek, this was unfeasible, the committee that reviewed our application told us. Instead, we enrolled in CYA's summer program on Paros to start learning Greek and to gain a feel of the culture and the country, to then be able to reassess and restructure our project.

The program started June 9<sup>th</sup> in Athens at the DIKEMES Center next to the stadium with an orientation and our first lessons. After taking the ferry and bus to Logaras, we arrived at our small hotel—a bed and breakfast managed by a Greek man, his mother, and his American wife—late at night. Even before our first breakfast, we had the impression of painstakingly white houses with blue doors and windows, painted cracks on the ground, bright sun and wind, intensely clear blue water, and a surprisingly small number of people.

Monday through Friday we had lessons from 9 to 12 in the morning and from 5:30 to 7 in the afternoon. The beginning and intermediate classes met in two rooms in the lower level of the hotel. Μαριονέττα taught primarily the intermediate class, and Ελένη primarily taught the beginning class: for a few sessions, they exchanged classes, however. The lesson would normally start with a reading which Ελένη would read out loud with us only listening, then again with us reading the text as she read out loud, and then the students would join her in reading it out loud. New vocabulary would be discussed where Ελένη would incorporate many stories or explanations about roots from the ancient Greek and manifestations of the Greek in other languages, mostly in French, English, and German. Besides the linguistic aspects, Ελένη gave us many fascinating cultural tidbits about food, the myth of the evil eye—blue because of the rarity of blue-eyed Greeks in antiquity—and the church's support of this superstition (the priest being summoned to spray holy water when someone fears the evil eye), the Olympic Games in history and next year in Athens, the history of the Greek language through the time of the Ottoman Empire, and a little about the struggle for independence. One interesting story was the Greek version of how Constantinople became Istanbul: in ancient Greek, “εἶστε την πόλη” means “to the city,” and Constantinople was *the* city. After the vocabulary, Ελένη would ask each student questions on reading comprehension. There were only seven students in the beginning class, so we had many opportunities to practice speaking. New grammar introduced in the reading would be explained and then be practiced in oral exercises. Between classes, in the afternoon and at night, the homework—written exercises and listening to a CD that corresponded to the book—reinforced the learnt material. Ελένη always tied the lessons together by reviewing previous readings and correcting the homework orally in class.

The first hurdle to overcome was the alphabet. With much systematic reading practice in class and the continual occasion of interpreting street signs and restaurant

menus, it only took a few days until we were completely comfortable writing and reading most of the beginning texts. After that, the progress was fast.

Between classes, we either stayed in Λογαρά on the beach or took the bus to Παροίκια, the main port. The bus ride was at least 45 minutes long, a tour through all of the villages on the way to Παροίκια. There in town we would read our emails and look around the little tourist shops.

There were several outings that the program had planned. The first was a communal dinner to introduce everyone to typical Greek food—τζατζίκι, μουσσάκας, φέτα, fried feta, big light green beans, fried spinach balls, meat balls, the classic salad with tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions, and olives. Another day in the first week we walked down the ancient Byzantine road from Λέφκες to a village where we ate octopus (prepared in vinegar and olive oil) in a small restaurant that grows all its food. The walk through the hills towards the ocean was beautiful. The old stones that had been walked on for thousands of years, with the pure evening air, the view of the pale ocean behind the hills and a few distant white houses, the smell of fresh herbs, accompanied by the rise of the moon, made the walk very special. The second week the group went to see a charming basilika in Παροίκια built under Justinian by the student of the architect of the Hagia Sofia. The last week we went to a neighboring village where they had a traditional celebration for St. John the Baptist's birthday.

The three weeks in Πάρος encompassed two full weekends. The first Sunday, our group did a day trip to Ίλος. The ruins on the uninhabited island surprised me with their conserved state. Despite being totally exposed to wind and water for thousands of years, painted plaster, mosaics, stairs, windows, walls were still present. Originally a French excavation site, the identification tablets were all in French. What most impressed me was the silent majesty of the lions standing in a row, though the blatant, prominent phallic symbols in big sculptures on the road and on relief sculpture in the museum were also striking. On the way back from Ίλος, we stopped in Μήκονος a few hours to eat and stroke the pelican's beak. The second weekend, I went to Σαντορίνι with several students from our group. The island was amazing! The rugged red cliffs with the little white houses gripping on to the edge and spilling over the top a little, the volcano lying in the embrace of the island, and the sunset that is so easy to watch from the cliffs at open sea made it the most beautiful. That Saturday we went to the ancient city of Akroteri which was preserved by the ash after a volcano eruption; archaeologists are still working on making the site more accessible to visitors. An archaeologist took us off the visiting grounds to show us the projected plan of the site. Sunday we visited the volcano and swam in the hot springs.

The last day we had our final exam in the morning. In the late afternoon, they were returned with the grades, and the teachers distributed the diplomas. Alexandra and I took the midnight ferry back to Athens.

Starting to learn Modern Greek and living in Πάρος for three weeks made me realize how unrealistic our initial project was. After those three weeks, we could at least read the signs and ask for directions. Our independent travel plans would have been nearly impossible without that basic knowledge. Observing the ambivalent attitude of Greeks toward the many tourists and talking to our teachers again made the necessity of a more focused proposal clear. Even tackling only one of the prongs in the original three-pronged approach to the broad subject of German historical influence in modern Greece

may be too unwieldy a subject. In terms of providing us with a strong basis, a forceful launch in studying the Greek language, the teachers and the location made the program very successful. The general unfeasibility of our original project was clear after the first day; now, if we can, we will know how to modify it next semester.

Unfortunately, I cannot take Greek this term because of prerequisites for my prospective major that have to be completed. I want to continue it, though, as soon as possible, regardless of what happens to the original project. I really liked learning the language because I simultaneously learned a lot about the western languages for which Greek is the basis.