



Melina Mercouri.... “I was born Greek.”

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by Judy Oringer

TO MANY PEOPLE Melina Mercouri is the essence of Greekness. Until the fascist takeover in April 1971, she was in fact a sort of unofficial ambassadress at large for her country. Since the coup, however, Miss Mercouri—who had achieved an international reputation as an actress following the film *Never on Sunday*—has been working for the Resistance which has sprung up to oppose the Colonels running Greece. She has held press conferences, spoken on radio and television, and formed committees to make people aware of the political situation in Greece. Recently she wrote her autobiography, *I Was Born Greek* (Doubleday & Co.) The book is an intimate revelation of her life: her passionate love for Greece, her career as an actress, her family, the men in her life. It is told in a manner typifying her warmth and passion, her sense of humor and her love for the land from which she is now outlawed.

The following interview was done on the day that Joan Baez was paying tribute to Melina Mercouri and the Resistance by dedicating a San Francisco concert to the Greek *La Pasionaria*. It was also the day that wirephotos showed Spiro Agnew on his good will tour to Greece, underscoring the US commitment to the regime.

As we talked, Jules Dassin, the noted film director and Miss Mercouri's husband, moved in and out of the conversation, occasionally walking over to look through the camera of a documentary film company filming the interview and offering friendly professional advice. Like his wife Jules Dassin knows what it is to live in exile. During the height of the McCarthy frenzy he was forced to leave America in order to continue his work as a film director, uncensored and unsuppressed. Since then the Mercouri-Dassin team has made many artistic and commercial successes—films like *Never on Sunday*, *Phaedra*, *Topkapi*, *He Who Must Die* and *Promise at Dawn*. They now live in exile in Paris, awaiting the day Greece is liberated.

—JUDY ORINGER



What do you hope to get out of your trip to the United States?

Hope is a very fragile thing, but it is something that makes you continue the fight. I can't tell you that I have hope that I will change the policy of the American State Department or the American Government but I always have the hope that I will find people who are sympathetic to a good cause, and sympathetic to all the causes that concern Greece. So I am here to speak out, and it is the only thing that I can do if I am outside my country. The fight must continue, you understand! We haven't any other choice.



We hear about atrocities in Greece all the time—about the suppression of civil liberties, the constant arrests, and torture. Is the situation that bad?

We have been living under martial law for four and a half years. That is the first example in the history of the world that a country has lived under martial law for four and five years. Nobody put themselves in the position to understand what it is to live like this . . . martial law means that you are deprived of every liberty. You have nothing. Even if you express yourself in the most innocent manner you are liable to be caught and imprisoned, to be tortured by the security police, to be humiliated. I want a journalist to explain once what it means to live un-

der martial law. Because if you are not aware of what martial law is, then you can't understand why I'm doing what I'm doing, and I become somebody that is folklore—amusing or silly.

I think people read about certain personalities who have been released from prison like the composer Theodorakis, and they imagine that the situation is getting better.

Theodorakis was in prison without being judged for three and a half years! Nowhere in the world, except in the dictatorships, do you have those rights. Because people ask about Theodorakis and he was very famous, he was released. They let Theodorakis out of Greece because they thought he was doing more harm to them inside the prison after three and a half years than outside Greece. But this is nothing!

What about the anonymous people that they have in the prisons, what about eight million people who are afraid to talk? What about them? What about the children in the schools? What about those children who were forced to go yesterday with the little flags given by the government to greet Mr. Agnew? They force those kids to carry flags to whom? To somebody who oppressed them! Somebody who makes the structure of the schools something unbearable and shameful. What do those children know? What about the children who were ten years old when the Colonels took over, who are now fifteen? What have they heard on the radio, on the television, from the newspapers or their professors? If one professor dares to say something against them or speaks the word "liberty," he is dismissed from the school.

The newspapers say that Agnew was very well-received.

We know very well that the dictators can force people to come. They are afraid not to come (because every district has a Gauleiter (civil guard). They take your names. "Ah, you are Mrs. ———, and you don't go. You must send your child and come with him because otherwise you will be punished in some way. We will find you, we will get you." The people are afraid so they go. But isn't that something shameful for a country?

I've heard that newsmen have admitted to you that they didn't know about the CIA involvement in Greece. Have you found that Americans refuse to believe that the CIA engineered the coup?

I don't believe that Americans refuse to admit to themselves that they are the oppressors. Mr. Agnew went to Greece and congratulated Mr. Papadopoulos. I believe that now they have shown in a very cynical way that they want the Junta, that they support them, and with great glamor. I don't believe that you have the right anymore to say that you don't support the Junta. You are supporting the Junta, your government is supporting the Junta. Since I know that Mr. Nixon had free elections, everybody who voted for Mr. Nixon is very responsible for what happens to my country. It's the truth. They are saying what all the Germans said, "We didn't know that the Jewish people were being burned in concentration camps". Who is kidding whom? You *are* responsible for what happens to my country. Things are very clear, and I prefer that because now I can scream more without having even the slightest doubt.

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It seems that there are very strong economic and political connections between the Greeks and wealthy Greek-Americans. Apparently some of the Greek-American shipowners like Thomas Pappas, and Spyros Skouras' people are very close to Agnew. . . . But Thomas Pappas is the boy of Agnew, you know that very well. . . . [Jules Dassin: "Or Agnew is Pappas' boy."] Who is the boy of whom, you know? It's like the pederast: who fucks who? Excuse me.

People like Niarchos and Onassis. Do you think they've become more powerful since the coup? What is their strength?

The man is the strength. And their cynical attitude toward life. I'm not surprised about Onassis. Onassis makes himself very clear. He's a man who wants power and money, a man who represents power and money. It is

very obvious that he would like the Junta because people cannot make strikes, you can't protect your civil rights. The Junta suits him very well, Mr. Onassis. So do all the juntas of the world. He always has work in South America. Now he's coming to Greece. He will go everywhere that juntas exist. This is capitalism, is it not?

What about the backing of King Constantine? Does he have a following?

I believe that there are a few officers who will remain faithful to King Constantine, and I believe he has a certain strength in the Army. That's why I believe that he's very much responsible for what happens to Greece. Because, when the Junta came, if he was not so blah-blah-blah-blah, then perhaps the Army would have been with him and not with the Junta. But he was cowardly. He was not a responsible king. He was very young and he signed a thing that was shameful. The people didn't know if the King was with them or not. The Army didn't know for a while if it was a coup led by the King or not. And that was a terrible thing that happened to Greece. . . . [Jules Dassin: "Because all the first orders and all the edicts bore the King's signature, forged, literally forged."]

And after that he made a coup, he made a fuss. Everybody knew it. Even before he even thought of doing it. Everybody around him knew about it. Papadopoulos knew it beforehand. The King asked the Greek people to give their blood and after seven hours he left with his suitcases, with his little dogs and with his great mother. Was he responsible? When you ask Greek people to go to die for you, you should stay. It was impossible to touch him—he would not have lost his life. If he had been in prison for one hour, it would have been something amazing. But he still left. Now perhaps he will grow up in exile. I hope he will. Because everybody grows up in exile.

Why do you think the US is so interested in Greece? Why is it pouring so much money into Greece? Why Greece?

Because you love us so much that you want to kill us. It is the Mediterranean and the geographical location of Greece.

You've been living in exile for several years in Paris and the United States. How does it affect you?

To live in exile is something that is very, very strange. You become somebody else. Because at the same time you become somebody more international. All the things that happen to other countries that are in the same situation as yours become more dear to you, become more close to you, become *your* problem. I became less nationalistic, and at the same time I cry more for Greece. I can't explain. I wanted to be a writer to explain what it means to be in exile. You have a thirst for your language. . . .

I will tell you a story about what happened to me in Paris. I was in a taxi and the chauffeur said to me, "Madame, why did you make me cry?" I was very astonished when he said that to me. "Why did you speak out?" Then he said to me, "I am a compatriot, a Spanish compatriot I've been here for thirty years. I left Spain during the Civil War. If I hadn't left my village, in five minutes they would have executed me. Ach, thirty years! And I wanted to go back. I wanted to see this country again and I went back two years ago, after 28 years." "And you know what," he said, "everybody has forgotten my face, my ideas, everything. And the most terrible thing I can say is that they were happy . . . happy in a way that I hate." So, this is what it is to be in exile. How many people now go to holidays in Spain? Even the Communist Party in Spain has given the order: "Go to Spain." We had a great dilemma, Dassin and me, about making a film in Spain. Very progressive friends said go. But what does that mean? It is the biggest defeat. It is because they know that it is *finished*, that they must start from the beginning, and people like us, progressives, we must go and speak to the people. So when I said the first year: "Don't go to Greece, isolate Greece. Don't give support to Greece. Don't go, tourists", it was a good political action. And now after four

and a half years I can't say the same thing. But it is a defeat. They have won. And that is the biggest defeat for the world if they have won.

Some people here—especially young people—want to help but don't know what they can do.

But it is not the problem of the young people to go and fight for us in Greece. That makes me angry. They have so many things to do here in America—your country is going to hell! You must work out your own problems first. Then I can ask you to go and fight with me in Greece. But I do have the right to ask you to fight here. Because that helps Greece. I feel that young people are much less active than they were in 1968. In 1968 I had great hope for the youth of America. I don't know if they take drugs . . . or if they take Nixon. It is the same thing. To forget Nixon, you must take everything. Either you must kill him or you must take everything to forget him because otherwise you have nightmares . . . I am a little disappointed in the American youth. And I will tell them that. Because they must be organized. They were organized in 1968, and during the Revolution in France. That was one of the most beautiful things in the world. The French, they did it. And nothing will be the same in France, even with a conservative government like Pompidou's. They are lazy, after all. With the first difficulty that they have, they all go to drugs to forget their humiliation and their defeat and they don't organize. They are talking, talking, talking, and they learn, they learn, they learn. No! It is to organize a revolution in a practical way. To organize something very profoundly and very deeply and not only to make demonstrations or marches. Marches don't mean anything any more. To protest. You must organize the people and make them militant!

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I wonder if we could talk about Promise at Dawn for a moment? I like the film very much, and the part that I played. But if I can do a film that has more political meaning, this is

my project, my most beloved project. I will do it now perhaps. We couldn't find the money to do it before. But we will do it, Dassin and me. We must do it: we are people in exile. The story is about people who went to the Council of Europe, who were inside Greece, and escaped. They testified in the Council of Europe when Greece was thrown out. It will be the story of four or five people. It will be a story about a worker—because in Greece we have a terrible problem with all the youth because they can't find work in Greece and are forced to go outside Greece to Australia, to Germany, America and Canada. So it will be the story of one worker. It will be four or five stories. It will be the story of a woman who was not politicized. She became a good citizen in Greece after the coup. It will be about an actress who was tortured by the security police. And it will be a story about a man who was living in exile for thirty years in the socialist countries—in Russia, Tashkent, and now in Paris. He's a writer. All that will have a connecting theme. There will be many songs in the film because there is a great tradition of songs in the Resistance in Greece. The Greeks, when they suffer, when they love, they express everything with songs. And I hope that it will be something that will document not only the lives of these people, but the atmosphere in Greece all together.

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I had wanted to ask you about being a woman in Greece, a woman with ambition.

You understand that the difficulty in Greece is to be a man, a woman, a child, a cat, a dog. Understand this, too: I am for the liberation of woman. I am for everything that is progressive. But in Greece where we have nothing it's not important to protect only a woman's rights, but to protect a man's rights, too. I must be for the human beings in my country. And for the children most of all. Because we can make our lives. But what will the children become in Greece? They will transform all the Greek children into little fascists. With distorted ideas. And this is the crime of a dictatorship

—the greatest crime. Textbooks are rewritten. The history of Greece is told with lies. Everything is distorted. If a professor says the word "liberty" or even speaks about Greek tragedy—they cut words from the Greek tragedies—then he is fired. You must read about what the Resistance means. Because it is more profound for you not to be political, but to be *resistant*. You must fight as the militants and the resisters fight, not as the politicians. With all the movements that you are making now, you speak like another establishment. The youth have become another establishment. You must have moods, tactics, you must be resistant! You must be an army.

[Jules Dassin: "Yes, but at the same time, you say use the vote. Yet you say you must be more resistant than the politicians. I disagree with that. I think you have to think *politically* and work *politically* and organize *politically* in order to be resistant. Let's say you support a guy like McGovern and you get him to write into the plank of the Democratic Convention a very clear attitude with absolute condemnation outright, no futz around with this kind of government. Then, that'll help Greece. Get that plank into the Convention."]

What I think is the most shameful thing of all about youth in the world is that they talk about internationalism, they talk about Trotskyism, Leninism, Maoism and all that. If they speak about internationalism, why don't they do acts in Greece, or in South America, or in Pakistan? Nowhere. If they say they can do nothing here because of the political structure of the Pentagon, fight them in other countries then. Let's go! I want one student to come. . . . I'm not contradicting myself either. They abstain from voting, they accept the fact that they can't do anything here in America. From outside, then. They must invent the revolution. Not to talk only in a room.

But I must say that I don't like all my criticism of the youth. When I criticize like that, it is because I belong to the youth and I feel that they belong to me, and they are the only hope. The only hope. That's why I'm talking. Because they are the people I want to reach. Otherwise, we are dead: all together, let's dance and die. ■



Mascots of War

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD LE VAN CAU had been studying English, so, when the village chief came and asked him to work whenever necessary as an interpreter between the villagers and the Americans, it seemed like a good way for him to practice his English. At first all he did was relay to the Americans the needs of his village for medicine and food stuffs. But after a year of this he and the Americans had developed a genuinely warm rapport. They had even given him an American name, "Bobby," and so in his eyes they were rich, powerful, the good guys. And from their point of view, Bobby was bright, helpful, a very winning kid, incredibly eager to please. So the Captain of Company D asked Bobby if he wanted to work with the Americans as an interpreter. Elated, Bobby accepted—and so, at age 14, became, in his own words, "same, same as Americans. I do everything they do. I eat with them. Sleep with them. Wear soldier clothes. Anything they want, I do. They say kill V.C., I kill V.C."

Company D was divided into groups, each with its own civilian "interpreter" like Bobby, and each was assigned a different area. His platoon, the First, was assigned to Phu Thanh village, about 20 kilometers from his home, and so Bobby left school and joined them. There, during the day, he would work with Company D and the people of Phu Thanh to "keep the communists out." This meant building hamlet fences, putting up barbed wire and sandbags; in general, making the village secure militarily. At night they would move out and set up ambushes or raids and here too Bobby went along as a full participant.

After six months or so, they began moving into insecure areas. There Bobby would help with the security check. He would go into houses of suspected Viet Cong, ask to see their papers, making sure their credentials were in order and, if not, taking them back to the interrogation center.

Here he did indeed function as an interpreter, but at all other times Bobby will be the first to eagerly reassure you that he functioned just like any other US soldier. "I set mines. My American buddies check to see O.K., then we fix, go off. When we find communists, I shoot. Americans give me M-16, bullets, everything. I look just like American soldier. They show me how to use gun. I shoot communists, just like my buddies."

How many V.C. did you kill, Bobby? "Wow! I forgets, but *beaucoup, beaucoup*."

As one of the guys from Company D said, "Sure, now that I look back on it, it just was wrong to take a 14-year-old kid and indulge him in a soldier fantasy thing—'cuz out there it's for real. I know that back in the States I never would have let such a thing happen much less pay for part of the kid's salary out of my own pocket. But over here, in order to survive, you gotta forget there's a right and a wrong. It's a common practice to use kids like Bobby and so we just did it."

Bobby wasn't on any army payroll, since officially you must be 18, but he was paid by the soldiers in his platoon, each of whom took a little from his pay each month and gave it to the Lieutenant who in turn would take the military money to Chou Lai and there, on the black market, convert it, at almost twice the legal rate, to Vietnamese money. Bobby's salary depended upon how much each man liked him and felt like giving, so while he usually received \$50 per month, it varied from \$35 to \$100, which meant the average contribution was \$1 to \$2 per man. He was well-fed, housed, clothed, and at age 14, received a salary higher than a soldier in the regular South Vietnam (ARVN) forces.

The only drawback was that Bobby and others like him were usually sent out first.

by Jill Marti