

Constance Dima

Translation of the Czech article into English

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The Greek community in Brno is one of the most significant minorities of the city. Unfortunately, the story of a daughter of Greek refugees, Constance Dima, does not relate to Brno in a pleasant way.

In 2001, director George Agathonikiadis, who had worked for years in the Czech Television studios in Brno before he eventually returned to Greece, made a memoir film "Podzimní návrat" (in international distribution "Returning in Autumn", TN) in locations of Brno, and with a prominent cast of well-known Czech actors. The director wrote the film script in collaboration with Constance Dima.

"I wrote down George's chaotic and fragmentary memories that he had retained for over twenty years," says the script co-author.

"For me, it meant more than one year of daily grind. I translated the script into French and Greek, too. I was full of expectations and excitement about the project, and was looking forward to seeing the finished film, as it presented a common theme of our fortunes (the director, too, is a descendant of Greek refugees, Ed.) as well as those of hundreds of other children of Greek refugees in former Czechoslovakia."

Although the author can document her significant contribution to the script, she was not even mentioned in the credits, and did not receive any financial compensation. "I do not regret the film being made, nor my not getting any fee. I only feel sorry that I began to fear my friends," says Mrs. Dima with a sigh.

A lost girl

Today a grandmother of two, Mrs. Dima herself did not even have a birth certificate until she turned 43. The reason is that she comes from a family of Greek émigrés; after Second World War, many such came to Czechoslovakia to live and take refuge from the civil war raging in their home country between 1946 and 1949.

"I did not know my mother, and never lived with my father, either. Even today, I do not know if I was born in 1948, or 1949. I do know that I took my first breath under a bush on the Greek-Albanian border in the mountains of Grammos, but in which year, I cannot tell. According to my aunt Alexandra, I was born

shortly before the end of the civil war, on 18th August 1949 (the civil war ended on 29th August 1949), however according to my other aunt, Georgia, it was one year earlier. Then, between the ages of one and fourteen, I went through nine homes for Greek children in then Czechoslovakia."

The little Greek girl was unfortunate to always end up children's homes that would eventually close down. She did not even learn much about how it actually happened that she came to Czechoslovakia.

"I do not know exactly how I got to Czechoslovakia. I can only recall the words of my auntie Georgia who actually brought me into the world when assisting my mother in birth. Because aunt Georgia and I - then aged of 18 months - , are together on one of a few pictures from those times, I thought for a long time that she was my mother. Later on, it was her who gave me more details about my life."

"I found out that I had been sent to Czechoslovakia from Albania as a toddler. I do not know where or how I was separated from my mum, where and when we were together for the last time. She had to stay in Albania because she was seriously ill. During her pregnancy, she endured a three-month march to the Grammos mountains on the Albanian border where her brothers and my father were fighting. As a fact, our native home was burned down because my father and my mothers' brothers were partisans. My mother set out for Albania to save her children," recalls Mrs. Dima.

"In the end I learned that my mum got to Czechoslovakia, too, and died of cancer in Krnov (a small town on the Czech-Polish border, TN) when I was five. I never met her. My father then found me through the Red Cross when I was ten, but did not take me home - unlike my elder sisters. What happened before that, I have never found out. I suppose that father met my mother and sister still in Albania, where they had fled, all came to Czechoslovakia together and settled down in Krnov."

Czechoslovakia was my good luck

Constance Dima considers herself lucky to have get to Czechoslovakia, because it was the only one of the Eastern Bloc countries that had homes for preschool-age children. After completing her mandatory education in Sobotín, she moved to Jeseník where she eventually graduated from grammar school. In 1968, she left for France and embarked on studies of French literature at the Paris-Sorbonne University. However she abandoned her studies after one year "for the dazzling eyes" of her husband-to-be Christos, whom she married in Krnov shortly after. In autumn 1969, she and her husband moved to Haskovo, Bulgaria, and one year later she gave birth to daughter Marianna. The girl was not even two years old

when her mum Constance decided to resume her studies, and signed on for French and Bulgarian philology in Veliko Tarnovo. She graduated in 1974, and gained a post as a teacher of French at Haskovo grammar school. At the same time she successfully defended her Candidate of Sciences (first post-graduate scientific degree, an equivalent of today's PhD, TN).

A journey to homeland

"I moved to Greece in July 1982, single again, with two children and two pieces of luggage. We experienced four years of tough new beginnings in Thessaloniki. I had to learn Greek well; I even had to do A levels again, this time in Greek. In the meantime, I needed to make a living for myself and my kids, so I gave Bulgarian, Russian and French lessons, worked as a travel agency guide, travelled to Bulgaria with Greek groups, acted as an interpreter, taught Bulgarian at a private language school and French at a state grammar school," the lone parent thinks back on the hard times in her lost and found homeland. Since October 2004, she has been living in Brussels; for five years now, she has been teaching French at the local Greek grammar school. When the current school year is up, she will return to Greece for good - this time to the island of Crete, where her older daughter moved when she got married and where her younger daughter lives, too.

Jana Soukupová

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(Ed. - Editor's note, TN - Translator's note)