

# GOETHE MEDAL 2013

## LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR PETROS MARKARIS

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A good ten years ago, a Greek friend of mine placed the first detective novel by Petros Markaris in my hands: *Hellas Channel*. "Read this!" he said. "Then you'll understand our country better." That is how I got to know Inspector Costas Haritos, the cantankerous murder investigator with a gentle soul who crumbles in the face of his superiors, then deftly ignores their orders. I surmised that this anti-hero with a love of simple Mediterranean fare must be the author's alter ego.

Far from it! Petros Markaris doesn't chug through the Athens traffic jams in a rickety Fiat Mirafiori, now mere legend since the crisis. Markaris doesn't drive at all. He conquers Athens' asphalt jungle on foot. Yes, per pedes, me ta podia! The author is a big city flâneur, who, like Karl Kraus, is a professional pedestrian. How un-Greek! But Markaris is also not some bourgeois Greek like his inspector, indeed he is not even Greek, at least not in the usual sense of the word.

The best way to track down this man – who always seems to be in motion – is to follow in his footsteps, for example by reading his city guidebook *Quer durch Athen*. I doubt that any writer has recently given any European capital a more loving and informative portrait. Markaris explores the centre and suburbs of Athens along the *Ilektrikos*, the over-100-year-old city railway. He only gets excited about those districts where opposites are more than obvious, where "faux leather jackets and fur coats" stroll side-by-side, where cheap amusement shanties and squat houses of refugees from Asia Minor have survived between bourgeois villas.

Markaris is bored when everything is sleek, but he feels at home in the world of contradictions. In Athens his soul is searching for his hometown: Istanbul. He calls it the air of home, what he sniffs out between Sofokleous and Evripidou streets in the still oriental heart of Athens, where spices and pickled *toursi* are sold off open shelves without any protective plastic skins. City wanderer Markaris may be walking about Athens, where he has lived since the mid-1960s, but he always has another indelible map in his head: that of Istanbul.

That is where Petros Markaris, for whom Armenian was the father tongue and Greek the mother tongue, learned his southern-sounding German at the Austrian Sankt-Georgs-Kolleg. The route to this school led him through the Kuledibi neighbourhood, where one heard almost only Ladino, the language of the Sephardi Jews of Spain. Turkish and Greek as well as some Armenian were spoken in Kurtulus, where the family lived. There, Petros Markaris was still called Petros Makarjan, the Armenian form of his name.

Istanbul was, as the author writes, "a special case of multi-nationality." The term "Istanbullu" for Istanbulite has nothing to do with origin nor is it a precise place name, but a term for life

in diversity. People who describe their place of birth this way can only be citizens of the world. For them, the world may have an imaginary centre somewhere on the Golden Horn, but knowing this they can strike roots elsewhere. Yet they keep a certain distance to their chosen home.

It is possibly this inner distance that lends Petros Markaris's books their ironic, sarcastic tone and made the author such a clear-sighted commentator of the crisis years in Greece. The simple patriotic reflex does not work for him. "I stand by Brecht," he says, "rather than loving my home, I describe its character." This has made Markaris a mediator between the fronts, an ambassador without portfolio, in times rife with misunderstandings and moroseness. Germans and Greeks have not railed against one another, mutually misunderstood one another like this for more than half a century. Markaris asks himself why for many Greeks Germans have suddenly become Nazis again when they were only recently received with open arms, and why conversely German tabloids so bluntly agitate against the "slackers" in the south.

Anyone who speaks with him knows how painful this is to him and how he is seeking explanations. In private many Greeks discuss what is going wrong in their country; they grumble about politicians' failings and shameless profiteers. Among strangers, however, the stance of self-defence prevails. Markaris calls the search for scapegoats a Balkan phenomenon, and calls nationalism a regional ailment.

It is an ill that the 76-year-old author knows all too well from his youth on the Bosphorus. His multi-national Istanbul was destroyed by churning nationalism, which is why he is very concerned about the breath-taking rise of a right-wing extremist, neo-Nazi party in Greece agitating against all that is foreign. He repeatedly reminds the people of Greece that millions of their fellow citizens were themselves refugees from Asia Minor. And he asks the Germans not to add fuel to the flames. "Both sides would benefit very much," wrote Markaris, "if the Greeks would add a tad more reason to their passion and Germans a tad more compassion to their reason."

The history of Greeks and Germans is a history of forgetting. Many Germans have forgotten what was done in their name to the country that they sought "with their souls" throughout the ages and where they, their Goethe in their knapsacks, left behind the greatest devastation. The German occupation in Hellas and places like Kalavryta, Kommeno and Distomo were, it seems to me, catapulted back into memory by the crisis. The fact that Greeks were among the first guest workers in Germany who helped create the German economic miracle in the 1960s seems miraculous against this historic background. Many Greeks, too, wanted to forget; and they had hardly any choice. As many times in history, poverty, persecution policies or dictatorship forced them to emigrate. Greece only really began to flourish after its accession to the EU in 1981. Years of stability and recovery followed; a hungry phase of making good in a delayed democracy. Petros Markaris says the Greeks mastered the "culture of poverty" very well. What they lacked "was the culture of wealth."

In the Istanbul of 1948 (!), Petros Markaris's father, a merchant, saw German as the language of the future. His father was "sorely mistaken" says Markaris. But the choice of a school and a language later took him to Vienna where he chose to study Greek literature on the grounds that he could never imitate elegant Viennese German. In Greece many did not discover Markaris until his novels became bestsellers in German translation. It was less well known that he previously wrote very successful plays and TV screenplays and was a congenial co-

author with his friend, film director Theo Angelopoulos. Not to mention the translation of Goethe's Faust I and II, for which Markaris, as he says, "sacrificed five years of his life."

Petros Markaris moves between professions just as surefootedly as he does through the streets of Athens; from economist to superb translator who had already translated Gottfried Keller and Theodor Storm in his school days. As a crime thriller writer he cites Georges Simenon and Ed McBain as his role models. They too recognized the genre's usefulness for social criticism. Even his pre-crisis novels were highly topical and explored recent history from the civil war to the military junta. Reading them will teach one a great deal about Greece.

Markaris had to reach back into his memory before writing about Istanbul. On today's Istanbul he says, "Sadly in countries like Turkey and Greece modernization is always accompanied by the destruction of the ancient, beautiful and historic." Following the protests against the destruction of tiny Gezi Park in Istanbul, he now has "the silent hope that this experience will reinforce reason." Petros Markaris never seems to lose hope. He says, "When I look back at my life, I see that I lived in countries that repeatedly stood at a crossroads, meaning that they repeatedly started over again."

Like Markaris himself. Dear Petros, congratulations on the Goethe Medal.