

On the regaining of the mother tongue...

During a discussion after the fabulous event on the Vlach version of *The Little Prince*, the actor Constantine Themelis confided us something, that led me, once again, to the considerations that have, for years, been plaguing and inspiring me: He talked to us about the sudden "awakening" of the Vlach language during a promenade in Spain, about the unexpected strong desire to recollect and speak again the language of his childhood years. A simple, brief, daily dialogue in Spanish between two girlfriends of his was enough to awake that sweet ache of nostalgia, which usually marks the beginning of the artistic creation and led him to a targeted regaining of his mother's language, of the lullabies, of everyday discussions in the privacy and warmth of the first family. Of a language that was not allowed to be spoken "in the outside". The way those times demanded (and if it depended on the outdated perceptions of certain persons, it would still be so nowadays), those dangerous and restrictive for any kind of "diversity" times. The awakening of a language, its regaining, is a fascinating story that has always to do with the subconscious, this part of ourselves that doesn't easily accept prohibitions, restrictions, silences. So, suddenly, a friend's grandmother from Thessaloniki, who was hiding for decades the "sinful secret" of her childhood's beloved language, awakening from the coma into which she was shed by an unexpected stroke, started talking and understanding only the Slavic dialect of her west Macedonian village. Her subconscious, the pain of years of oppression had, because of the stroke, erased in her inside world the Greek language. So, since in her old years she had abolished the need for "social climbing", since she did no more felt the shame caused by the contempt of her foolish fellow citizens, who used to see in her a "Slav villager", her subconscious rebelled and imposed itself on the language. Her language was the "dopika", or the "Macedonian", for some the "Bulgarian", and whoever did not understand her, should solve the problem by himself. Something similar happened to my own grandmother from Euboea, who we never had heard to speak in her own language of her childhood years. And yet, one day, alone with her small great-granddaughter, sitting next to the kitchen's table, sure that none was nearby to listen (I was standing, positively shocked, at the door and did not dare to tell her that I was there) she began to sing, rhythmically beating her palms, an arvanite children's song, escorting the three years old little girl in a first, tentative arvanite dance. My grandmother, Alexandra, spontaneously, the moment of the great emotion and excitement, had revoked the faded words, the tongue that would never be accepted in

Athens of the commercial circles, where she hung out with my Peloponnesian grandfather. So it was and so it is: The language which stigmatized the speaker as a "poor devil", "a villager", "a stranger", locked firmly at the back part of the heart, hidden in chests, chests for treasures hidden and sometimes forgotten. And it was enough a small earthquake, a sudden turn of life, an emotional outburst to open the treasure's chest and gush from inside all the beauty and the tenderness of childhood. I don't know if, from the place she is now, she gets angry with me or if, in the between, will be free to spin whenever she wants in the beautiful hamlet over the wild waters of Cavo d' Oro and to sing, lighter than even, lighter even than the wild winds of her unclimbed mountains, in the language that she first-spoke. Proud. And free. At Last. At-last.

*The same way* I understood also Constantine Themelis during the moment he was reciting the first chapter of *The Little Prince* in Vlach, and fascinating us with the wonderful melody of this unique language: Free, but, and before all, proud. Enthusiastic. And rightly so – the Vlach, a melodic Latin language, that is spoken and will be spoken, that is sung and will be sung by a lot of people in Greece, sounds very beautiful. Really beautiful. And it is a great offer by people like Constantine, but, also, like Thodoris the Kahl and "the Maraki" ("the little Maria"), his beloved Vlach wife, who decided and led us in this experience.

After years of dealing with similar issues, after a bitter researching and academic experience in the strange country called Greece, which increasingly, now with the crisis, wraps with autistic way in its boring lie of "one nation, one language, one civilization", I can reply to those who warn that behind initiatives such as this are hidden "anti-national conspiracies" (something that done already AND for the event which we speak), with the fox's words in *The Little Prince*: "It's quite simple: One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes."

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Translated from Greek in English by Constantine Themelis