

Greece

Natassa Sideri interviewed **Vassilis Vassilikos**

Interview date: September 2019

Sideri: I am here today with Mr Vassilis Vassilikos in his charming office in Palaio Faliro, with the sea almost at our feet.

My name is Natassa Sideri, playwright, short-story writer and translator, and today I will have the honour of interviewing the world-renowned Greek writer Vassilis Vassilikos in the context of a pan-European initiative called the ‘European Archive of Voices’.

Before moving on to describe the initiative and its main objectives, I would like to say a few words about you, Mr Vassilikos, and about the voluminous and versatile body of work you have authored. Vassilis Vassilikos is one of the best-known and most celebrated Greek authors worldwide. He has had more than 100 books published — the first one written at the age of 15 — that have been translated into more than 33 languages. Born in northern Greece, he studied Law at the University of Thessaloniki and later moved to the United States, where he studied at the Yale School of Dramatic Arts and at the TV Studio School of the RCA Institute. He has also lived in France, Italy and Germany. In 1966, he wrote the novel *Z*, which provided an account of the events surrounding the 1963 assassination of a democratic opposition politician Grigoris Lambrakis by right-wing extremists in the Greek city of Thessaloniki. The book was published on the eve of the coup d'état of 21 April 1967 through which the military junta known as the Regime of the Colonels that ruled Greece until 1974 seized power. *Z* quickly evolved into a reference point for those fighting the regime and helped bring international attention to political oppression in Greece. As expected, the regime banned the book and its author lived in self-imposed exile until 1967, knowing that his return to Greece would result in arrest and most likely torture.

I will, unfortunately, not have the time in the context of an interview of this kind to go over every position you have held either in Greece — where, for example, you served as Deputy Director of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation; or abroad, where, again by way of example, you represented Greece as a UNESCO Ambassador for a total of eight years. Neither will I have the time to talk about the numerous distinctions you have earned, so I will just limit myself to mentioning a fact that is highly relevant to the purposes of this interview,

which is that, following your candidacy at the recent elections of July 2019, you were elected a MP with SYRIZA, the left-wing party that headed the outgoing coalition government under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras. I am, most certainly, leaving out a lot but this is the price you have to pay when you are fortunate enough to speak to a man whose work has been as wide-ranging as yours and has 85 years of history behind him.

Now, before we begin, I would like to say a few words about the purpose of our meeting today. The idea of the “European Archive of Voices” was born within the realms of an organisation called “Arbeit an Europa”, a collective of young German writers, journalists and scientists. The purpose of the archive is to collect personal and public memories of intellectuals from all over Europe who were born in the first half of the 20th century, i.e. the people who witnessed or actively helped to build Europe as we know it.

The ambition is for this patchwork of recognisable and experienced voices to help outline a panorama of the European zeitgeist, while the emphasis is deliberately placed on the voice. Indeed, we could have, as is often the case nowadays, conducted this interview via email instead of meeting today in person in your beautiful office. This would have probably rendered our lives easier but at the same time we would have been deprived of the chance to hear you speak. And without making the effort to listen, to try to understand what the other person is trying to convey both through their words and silences, it is impossible to speak about integration, European or of any other form.

A team of 45 international interviewers will conduct interviews just like ours with an older compatriot of theirs. This person may be a writer, artist, political or religious leader, etc. All these interviews will then be translated into English and, together with the original recording, will be placed at the disposal of the public through an interactive website as well as a touring exhibition, and publications.

That's it concerning the preliminaries. Unless you have any questions of your own, I would now like to stop speaking and go straight to the first subject area I would like us to cover.

As it is better to begin at the beginning, I would like to know what the words “home” and “origin” represent for you. You were born in 1934, in a northern Greek city called Kavala. How would you describe your childhood?

Vassilikos: I was, like you said, born in 1934, so in 1940 I was just a 4-year-old boy and therefore not truly in a position to comprehend much about my own condition and surroundings. Later on, in life, other people described those early years to me and that's how I learned that I grew up in a two-storey house built in 1914. We were on the ground floor while my grandfather, grandmother and

my mother's older sister occupied the top floor. From all these people I learned a couple of things that I liked: for example, it appears that I would fall asleep to the sound of my grandmother's jangling bracelets, which were numerous as she came from Istanbul.

My first actual memory was in 1941. I was sitting outside our house and heard a woman called Patra who lived across the street from us come out of her house and say: "Look, it's from there that the Bulgarians will come." That was war, but back then I didn't have any notion of either war or Bulgaria. In any case, come they did and at that point my family was faced with the following problem: Bulgaria had already conquered Kavala in 1913 and the city's intelligentsia had been taken hostage. None of those people ever came back. My father was always involved with the political life of the city and was elected MP in January 1936, though his term was abruptly terminated when the 4th of August Regime suspended the Greek parliament [Fascist-inspired totalitarian Regime that, under the leadership of Ioannis Metaxas, ruled Greece from 1936 to 1941]. For that reason, he feared that the Bulgarians would again take hostages and that he too would never return.

This fear led him to the decision to migrate to Thessaloniki together with the rest of us. That is, between the Bulgarians fascists and the German Nazis he decided he preferred to live under the latter. I don't know if this happened immediately after the city was conquered or if it took a few months but I do remember riding on the *gazogene* — a type of bus people were using back then, which would stop in the middle of the street and the driver would add grass and other things to serve as fuel — and we drove all the way north to the Strymonas river. This marked the border with the Bulgarian occupation zone in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, whereas the German zone started west of the river. But there were about 1,000 people queuing to cross to the other side, people who had come on donkeys, wagons and some of them on buses just like ours. Back then there wasn't a bridge like the one they've made today but only a type of platform they were pulling to and from, so it would take three to four days for all these people to cross. My mother spoke very good French. She had been educated at the Ursulines high school in Tinos and was destined to become a nun but she failed to pass the test the young girls were submitted to: they would pass the tip of the safety pin the nun's cowl had to be secured with under the girl's skin and if she screamed, she was deemed unfit to be a nun. My mother screamed, so she didn't pass the test. (Laughs)

Sideri: And so it was that Vassilis Vassilikos was born.

Vassilikos: Yes, she was spared the nun's life and gave birth first to my sister and then to me. In any case, as we were sitting there on the bus, there was a Bulgarian officer outside who was responsible for those 200 metres. He was also well-versed in French culture so my mother and him started discussing

Chopin and music. My mother was a gifted piano player and apparently so was he. So I remember, or rather was told later as I didn't follow the conversation myself, that thanks to that conversation we jumped the enormous queue and managed to get to Thessaloniki.

Before that I had never laid eyes on a tramway, so when I saw the ones in Thessaloniki — they were imported from Charleroi in Belgium, as I would find out later — sliding on the rails, this image made a big impression on me and indeed made me rather dizzy due to the circularity of the movement. This is the first image I retained; the second one was during that horrid winter in 1941 with the famine in Athens and also in Thessaloniki, where I would see dead bodies everywhere. In Kavala there weren't any dead as the Bulgarians simply changed all Greek names adding the ending —ov — Vassilikov, for example, would have been our name — but they were running some kind of feeding programme for the local population so people didn't starve to death. In Thessaloniki this wasn't the case. These were my first traumatic experiences of "war", a word I couldn't grasp the meaning of when I first heard it but later on discovered that what was meant by it is that very bad things happen to innocent people.

Sideri: As you learned through your own experience.

Vassilikos: All this just to give you a rough idea.

Sideri: If my calculations are correct, you were a pupil in primary school during the German occupation. Did you have to break off your schooling?

Vassilikos: No, I didn't. My school was called "Valagianni School" and it was the best one in the city. There I became friendly with a Jewish boy called Ino. A great number of Sephardic Jews had found refuge in Thessaloniki after being expelled from Spain in 1942. The vast majority of them, say 90%, were very poor and often worked on the docks as dock workers; the remaining 10% was an extremely sophisticated bourgeoisie that had no equal in the Greek society of the time.

Ino and I soon became best friends. Opposite the yard of a local church called Agia Theodora lived a German officer who would throw a grenade every morning just to help him wake up! (laughs)

The Red Cross was also active in the city. They were helping mostly children to whom they would distribute something nutritious like Ovomaltine — I can't believe I remembered that word! I would go and queue up with the other children and not far from us, two Gestapo guards would normally be posted, just to make sure there would be no trouble. One day, I don't know how it happened, one of them inadvertently put his finger on the trigger. His weapon

went off and killed a child that was just in front of me. Imagine, if I had been standing only a few inches to the left. That was a huge shock to me.

The second shock came the day when Ino told me: "We are leaving. We are going to Poland, which is a paradise on earth." He didn't say "paradise", but I know he had no fear. At the time, we didn't have any notion of the difference between Greek and Jew. We were, all of us, Greek children. Neither did we know anything about the political significance of what both Ino and I took for nothing short of an excursion. On the day of his departure I see Ino wearing the yellow badge and I ask him: "What is that?"

"Nothing," he replies, "it's to tell apart the people who are going to Poland."

"I'll come to the station too," I told him, and I got on the cart with him.

I wasn't allowed inside the station, so I didn't get to experience first-hand the awful scenes we all learned about later. I stayed outside and said goodbye to Ino. Neither of us was afraid. Ino thought, as this is what they had told them, that they would change their drachmas to Polish zloty and live more comfortably than they did in Greece. That's all we knew, us children, nothing more. Then, in 1944-45, the war ended and I went to Ino's house at Panagia Chalkeon, a Jewish neighbourhood in Thessaloniki. I saw the houses and they were all boarded up. It is then that I heard for the first time that all these people were not coming back. "Why not?" I asked. I didn't know anything about the Holocaust, and neither did anyone I asked.

After the end of the war we moved back to Kavala. My father was a key figure of the "Eastern Macedonia and Thrace" refugee population, as they called us, so he had to return in order to lead by example. Two years later we went back to Thessaloniki so my sister and I could go to school. My father was born in Thassos [an island in the northern Aegean Sea] and owned a piece of land there. During the summer of 1946-47 we were there on holiday. Obviously, half our property was destroyed because of the military drills and other types of exercises the Bulgarians did there. One day, as we were sitting outside, a man came by. An acquaintance of my father I believe he was, and he told us that my sister and I would be given scholarships to attend Anatolia College in Thessaloniki. My family didn't have much money at the time. In the meantime, the Civil War [the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) was fought between the Greek government army and the Communist-led Democratic Army of Greece (EDES)] had started and my father, who was a lawyer and a devoted democrat, would go and defend people at courts martial. He saved many lives, back then.

Sideri: You mean in his capacity as a lawyer?

Vassilikos: Yes. He was a truly gifted speaker. And this is how we found our way back to Thessaloniki as permanent residents, this time, not as refugees.

Sideri: I see.

Vassilikos: We never went back to live in Kavala. We started a new life in Thessaloniki. I was boarding at the school.

Sideri: Was it a boarding school?

Vassilikos: Yes. I lived there for the first two years, until the end of primary school. Then I moved back to our family home. Anatolia College had moved to Thessaloniki from Turkey at the time of the Armenian genocide [the Armenian genocide: The systematic mass extermination and expulsion of Armenian populations living within the Ottoman Empire in the period 1914-1923]. It was a very progressive school. There were a couple of foreign teachers — American and English — among the staff but the majority of subjects were taught by Greeks the public school system would not hire due to their political convictions. So the teachers were really the crème de la crème and nobody could touch them, as Anatolia College was funded by US donations and did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Greek state. This is where I did my six years of high school and I can say I learned a lot at that school. We had, for example, an American painter who was our English teacher but would also talk to us about many other topics. I remember, one day, he asked us: “Why do you think that the mother of Jesus, as depicted in Michelangelo’s fresco in the Vatican, is only three years older than Jesus himself?” (laughs)

There, also, I was introduced to Macbeth, which I read directly in English. From my Greek teachers, I remember mostly a mathematician who was a true genius, even though I was never good at mathematics. I remember also my history and Greek teacher, thanks to whom I actually became a writer. Why is that? Because in his classes he encouraged us to look at specific details and would not dwell much on generalities.

The subject I did the best at was composition, though my Armenian friend Karabet Kalfayan [1933-2013, Thessaloniki art collector and merchant] was even better. From this teacher’s lessons there are a couple of things I remember even to this day. The first one was reading a phrase that appears in the short story ‘The American’ by Alexandros Papadiamantis [1851-1911, Greek novelist, short-story writer and poet from the island of Skiathos]. It is about a man who returns to the island of Skiathos — Papadiamantis doesn’t mention the name of the island but we can assume this is the setting — after living in the US for 20 years. In this short story, Papadiamantis uses the phrase “by some kind of superstitious fear”. What was that exactly? This man was afraid to ask if the girl he was engaged to before migrating to the US had

married someone else during his absence or if she was still waiting for him to come back. Towards the end of the story, it is Christmas and the children go to his ex-fiancé's house to sing the kalanta [Greek Christmas custom where, on the mornings of December 24 and 31, groups of children go door-to-door and sing carols while playing music with metal triangles]. This is when the man sees that both the woman he loved and her mother were dressed in black and he realises that she hasn't married anyone else. That phrase, "by some kind of superstitious fear", which I read in that teacher's class for the first time, stuck with me.

And so did a description by Karkavitsas [1866-1922, Greek novelist and short-story writer] who, in one of his short stories, instead of writing that a character's father is dead he writes: "my father," dash, "may the wave that swallowed him be holy," dash again and then he continues. If I became a writer it is basically thanks to these two phrases. (laughs)

I am giving you a lot of information in a condensed form but the main thing I want you to hold onto is that school is the foundation of everything and I was fortunate enough to attend this wonderful school. There, also, I had access to the work of Ritsos [1909 -1990, Greek poet and left-wing activist], whom the Regime had already sent to a prison camp by then. There was also a wonderful library and the American painter was teaching us Kafka. I was only 16 years old when I first read Kafka.

Sideri: That's fantastic.

Vassilikos: "No,' said K." All these experiences were extremely formative, as I realised later. You may have a certain amount of talent but the keys to writing are not something that can be taught, so what I had the chance to learn at school helped me a lot in this respect.

Sideri: It certainly sounds like it. Just to clarify, the lessons were taught both in Greek and in English?

Vassilikos: The school followed the high-school curriculum set by the Greek government to give us the option to continue our studies in Greek universities should we wish to, even though most of my fellow students went to study in the US. We were taught mainly in Greek but there were a couple of subjects in English, since all of us were interested in learning the language. But I also spoke French because of my mother.

Sideri: So you had an advantage from the outset, a certain ease with languages. Before you even went abroad you had very good English and French skills.

Vassilikos: Yes, I was bilingual. I remember my father, who, like my mother, was also fluent in French but couldn't speak English, say to my sister and I: "Toujours en français".

Sideri: What are the most important things you felt you learned at school?

Vassilikos: Since Anatolia College's high school had to follow the state curriculum, I remember one year we had to study *Antigone* by Sophocles in Ancient Greek. In an entire school year, we did only three pages. Later on I took French classes at De La Salle, the French College of Thessaloniki. There, at the end of the year the graduating class had to present a play at the Thessaloniki Royal Theatre. My class did *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh and we performed it in French. I was playing Creon. It was the first time I understood what *Antigone* was about. Do you understand the problem? Ancient Greek was a foreign language to us, it was impossible to get past the first three pages.

Sideri: I am 38 years old and my experience with Ancient Greek was exactly the same.

Vassilikos: I guess that when you went to school things were rather different.

Sideri: I was actually something of a guinea pig. In my year, they tried to reintroduce Ancient Greek for all high school children but the result was the same. It would have been better if we had read the texts in French. (laughs)

Vassilikos: So this was my first contact with Europe.

Sideri: When was the first time you travelled in Europe, then?

Vassilikos: I first went to France in 1955. By then I had already published my first book, *Jason*, and I went to France to meet Marcel Jouhandeau, the author whose words served as epigraph to that book. But the writer who inspired me more than anyone else was André Gide. Among the Jewish families of Thessaloniki that escaped were the Molchos, who owned the city's international bookshop.

In 1951, on the day of Gide's death, I happened to go to the bookshop and Mr Molcho told me: "You should read this book by André Gide who got the Nobel in 1946". The book was *Theseus*, an extraordinary short story that I indeed read and translated — rather badly — into Greek before going on to write my *Jason*. Gide was an important reference point for that book, as were of course other writers I was reading during that period. I still have some of those books here, in my library, in the old editions I used back then. But Gide, especially, was my god, at least until the day when Albert Camus came to give a lecture at the French School in Athens in 1955, which obviously I attended. There, in the dark amphitheatre, I could see his Algerian eyes looking around the room and I was

convinced he was speaking only to me. The room was crammed full of people but I didn't care. The words of Camus completely changed my point of view. He said that, nowadays, the artist should not be the one stargazing at the prow but the one that paddles. The writer as an engaged subject, that's what his lecture was about. I tried to meet him during my first visit to France in 1955. I went to his office but he wasn't there. So French culture served as my introduction and my first bridge to the rest of Europe. And it still does, to a certain extent.

Sideri: In 1955 you were 20 years old. Is it true what I've read that you wrote your first book when you were 15?

Vassilikos: The first book I published was the novella I told you about, *Jason*. My father read it and made only one comment about the fact that I mentioned cutlery, when obviously they could not have been using cutlery during Jason's time. (laughs)

He gave me the money and I printed 500 copies. The book you are referring to, which I indeed wrote in Thassos when I was 14 or 15, was called *The Silos*. Even though I don't have any memories of the Bulgarian occupation myself, the stories my grandfather would tell had made a huge impression on me. Among them was the one I write about in this book. The Bulgarians were planning to blow up the silos before leaving Kavala but a local resistance group my grandfather had joined managed to get there first and they cut the wires. The Bulgarians were very keen to go ahead with their plan but they didn't have time to replace the wires so the silos were saved and the people didn't go hungry. They had also requisitioned our house when we left for Thessaloniki in 1944 and took my mother's piano with them when they left. Years later, in 1976, the Association of Bulgarian Writers invited me to go and give a series of lectures in Sofia and Plovdiv. I accepted their invitation and when I arrived in Plovdiv somebody asked me. "What made you want to come to Plovdiv and speak about your work?"

"I have come to find my mother's piano," I replied.

When I wrote that book, I had no idea it was the first one on the subject of the Bulgarian occupation, even though tons had been written about the Germans and the Italians. There was, however, one image from the Bulgarian invasion of Thassos that remained engraved in my young boy's mind. The Bulgarians didn't hurt anyone, didn't touch a thing. They went straight for the beach, kneeled in front of the sea and started saying prayers. The sea! Sofia is 50km away from Kavala and the Bulgarians have long dreamt of having access to the sea. It then became clear to me that this corridor was what these people, who had already conquered Kavala in 1913, were after. Anyway, this book, I wrote it and put it aside. I forgot about it.

Sideri: I know that a new edition of it appeared recently. But when was it first published, then?

Vassilikos: It was when I came back to Greece following the fall of the Junta and stayed only a month. During the 7-8 years I spent in exile I had painted an idealised portrait of Greece in my head, which didn't correspond at all to the reality I found upon my return to the country. This was too much for me to bear so I went back to Rome. That, however, was a period when publishers were all over me to give them books. I started rummaging through my old papers and that's when I chanced upon this manuscript. "What's this?" I said, then read it and gave it to a publisher that was completely inept. That was in 1976. The version it appeared in recently is the definitive one.

Sideri: I read you say in an interview that this is your favourite among all your books.

Vassilikos: In this version, it is. You know, typography is very important. In its first form the book was repulsive. I didn't like it. This time, Thanassis Agathos, who is Assistant Professor of Modern Greek at the University of Athens and has studied my work thoroughly, was in charge of the publication and the final result was a wonderful edition I fell in love with immediately. I remember asking him:

"Thanassis, nobody understands the language I use in the book anymore. Not even you and I. Shall we add some footnotes?"

"No," Thanassis would say.

"Shall we explain what this word means?"

"No," he insisted.

In the end, he only agreed to two footnotes. And that's how I ended up really liking this book that I didn't care much about until then.

Sideri: The value of the book as object, right?

Vassilikos: Exactly. Gutenberg, the publishing house that was behind this edition, have Yiannis Mamais, an excellent typographer who is almost the last of that generation. In that sense I was really lucky.

Sideri: So, to recapitulate: you are 19 years old in 1955. You have already written two books, have taken abundant stimulus from your school environment and you are already determined to pursue a writing career. And yet, unlike your fellow-students, you don't go to the US or France to continue your studies but instead stay in Greece to study law. What happened there?

Vassilikos: Yes, that was the problem. As every parent wants their child to have a bright future.

Sideri: And every Greek parent even more so.

Vassilikos: And every Greek parent even more so. (laughs)

Vassilikos: My father told me: “What are you going to do now that you’ve finished high school?” In general, I was a very bright student but in the last two years my grades dropped dramatically. I almost didn’t graduate. Do you know why? Because I was reading Nietzsche’s Zarathustra! (laughs)

So when my father asked me that I told him: “I’m going to be a writer.”

“A writer, huh?” he said. “Good, then show me 2 or 3 Greek writers — of our times, not in Ancient Greece — who managed to live off their craft.”

So I take down the Encyclopedia and I find two: Nikos Kazantzakis [1883-1957, Greek writer and playwright most famous for the novels *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Zorba The Greek*] and Dimosthenis Voutiras [1872-1958, Greek short-story writer and novelist], a very good writer from Piraeus who wanted to be an opera singer but didn’t make it. So my father, who was a very clever man, replied: “Kazantzakis studied law and Voutiras died penniless. Which do you prefer?” (laughs)

As I really loved my father, I decided to go to Law School. I attended the classes, passed all the exams and when I got my degree, I gave it to my father and said: “Dad, I did what you wanted but I’m not coming to your practice. This degree is a gift to you and now I will go and study what I am really interested in.”

And that was cinema. My generation of writers, you see, was the first one in the history of the written word to have a second means of expression at its disposal. If you think about it, Susan Sontag, Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, they all did films as well. There wasn’t a film school in Thessaloniki at the time and in any case neither the state nor any other bodies would fund cinema studies, so I thought I will do television instead. At the time, “TV director” didn’t exist in Greece as a profession but we knew that one day it would come. So the Rotary Club of Thessaloniki gave me a scholarship — the president was an acquaintance of my father’s — to go to Yale and attend classes in TV directing.

I arrived in Yale and for the third lesson, we had a lecture on scriptwriting, there was this lecturer telling us how in a script the viewer has to identify with the actor, that on a corner street if the killer is waiting on one side and the unsuspecting victim is walking down the other side the viewer needs to want to shout: “Don’t! He will kill you!” And that was all fine, I understood everything but

then a German theorist came out that had the same voice — exactly the same! — as the German officer that gave the order for all my father's books to be burned. Except for "the classics", that was the only word we understood. These they did not touch but all the other books they piled up in the middle of the yard, soaked them with petrol and reduced them to ashes. The Nazis didn't stay in Kavala but they had to pass through and they definitely made their presence felt before handing over the city to the Bulgarians. And that same voice, there, in Yale. At the end of the lecture, all upset and trembling, I went closer to see him. I can tell you now, taking some author's licence, that it was the same man. In reality I have no idea.

But it gave me the excuse I was looking for. Yale, you see, had no equipment. All the courses we were taught were theoretical. When I arrived in New York, I went to find my American teacher from Anatolia College. He was the one who told me about the next school I would attend, the School of Radio and Television, on 45th Street and 5th Avenue. It was exactly what I wanted. Luckily, the scholarship I had covered the expenses. There, during the first week, they taught us how to sweep the floor of the studio. (laughs)

Then they showed us how to use a camera and make sure the one placed opposite wouldn't be in the frame. The studies had a practical orientation and lasted for a year and a half, after which we had to pass a final exam and choose a specialisation. I chose directing.

Until that time, TV was either live or recorded on film. Video was invented in 1959. When I was in the States, a big scandal broke out because it transpired that a popular game show wasn't broadcast live, as people thought, but recorded on video. So everybody, including my teachers, started writing articles about how that was the end of live TV as we knew it. Nowadays, with the exception of documentaries and TV films, video is the absolute king on TV.

At the end of the year, I had to pass an exam for this class in front of a committee composed of very important people who were there to scout for international talent, as my fellow students came from all over the world. The test was that we had to edit a film on the spot. Each one of us was given a subject and we had 2 hours and 50 minutes to complete the editing and transfer the film to video. Do you know what I was given? The invasion of Normandy. Everything was going very well, I finished editing within two and half hours, chose and transferred my 8-minute long material. Then it was my turn to show my work to the committee.

Have you heard this story?

Sideri: Yes, but I'm sure others haven't and it's a good story. (laughs)

Vassilikos: It was one of the worst moments of my life. There I am, watching planes reversing instead of taking off and marines sliding backwards! At the end of the eight minutes I hear people applauding. I look around at a loss, "why are they applauding?" I was awarded the first prize among European students. They thought it was a surrealist, Dadaistic approach or something like that and the three major TV networks came to me with blank contracts to sign to take me on as TV director. At that moment, I faced one of the biggest dilemmas of my life. I knew that if I accepted, I would never come back so I started asking myself: "Who am I? What do I want to be? A writer in a country where writers cannot make a living or a TV director in the States?" I was about to sign the contract but then something happened and changed my plans. So I came back to Greece, where television hadn't even arrived yet.

Sideri: What year was that?

Vassilikos: 1959-60.

Sideri: So you returned to Greece in 1960.

Vassilikos: Before, though, I had to pass another exam. In 1959, Americans were voting for their President and the first series of debates was broadcast on TV. The candidates were Vice President Nixon and a largely unknown, even to Americans, senator or something who was the leader of the Democratic party. His name was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. As part of our evaluation, we had to watch the four debates and write reports. With each debate, Kennedy's poll numbers were rising. During the last debate, which marked the end of Nixon's presidential hopes, he was asked the question: "What are you going to do about Taiwan?" Nixon was caught completely off guard. As it was a very sensitive subject, with the alternatives being either to say something against Mao or declare that Taiwan would remain with the United States, Nixon couldn't find an answer. Kennedy then seized the opportunity and said that if I were elected President I would do this and that. That was it, Nixon was done. The fact that the make-up artist had given Kennedy a few wrinkles to make him look older helped as well. Afterwards he was taken to court for that but by then Kennedy was already President. That's when I understood that politics as we knew it, with the balcony, the touring, etc, was finished. It was all about television now. And it turned out that this was the case.

I finished my studies and came back to Greece, where I made a living working as a guide for foreign productions that came here to film.

Sideri: You've lived abroad for long periods of time. We've already mentioned the time you spent in self-exile during the Regime of the Colonels but there were many others. Other than your English and your French, were there other

languages you picked up along the way? Did you, for example, learn Italian while in Rome?

Vassilikos: Just enough to get by on the street.

Sideri: Just like your character Glafkos Thrassakis, then? (laughs)

Vassilikos: Yes, exactly! But the place where I wrote the most books was West Berlin. I wrote 14 books in 12 months! I was there on a DAAD scholarship [German Academic Exchange Service]. Back then, Berlin was a zombie city and they wanted to have some foreigners around. That was in 1969-70. By then Z had come out so they gave me and many other people scholarships to go and live in Berlin with the sole obligation to walk up and down Kurfurstendamm for two hours a day. The reason, you understand, was for everyone to see that there were people from other countries present in the city.

Anyway, something happened to me while I was in Berlin. At the time I would only travel by train. A plane I had been on a few years before had split in half during landing and even though there were no casualties I didn't want to fly anymore. So I would take the train into the West Berlin station and the moment I arrived there, I don't know if it was the climate or the fact that I didn't speak a word of German, something would happen to my brain. I had this tremendous desire to write, which translated into an important production of books. Unlike France, where I never wrote anything, my nonexistent German prevented me from participating in any other form of social life.

Sideri: Really, you never wrote anything in France!

Vassilikos: Once you understand the language the game is lost! In Italy too I was very productive until my Italian was good enough to understand what was happening but it was only in Germany that this miracle happened. But I also got to know the city through the writers of *Gruppe 47* [Informal association of German-speaking writers that was founded in 1947 and headed by Hans Werner Richter] who invited us — the Greeks who had fled to Paris — to Berlin. I met Günter Grass, who later became a close friend, and also Uwe Johnson, who for me is the most talented writer of that generation. Berlin was like a Pool of Siloam for me. There were, of course, other Greeks and we would go and protest together with the Turks in front of the Turkish Consulate. The Turks would come to our protests too, also because they knew there would be no photographers there to take pictures that would result in the fascist Turkish government going after their families in Turkey. During that period, we had very close ties with the Berlin-based Turks who resisted, or rather opposed, the regime in Turkey, as in reality neither us nor they actually did anything to change things in our respective countries.

Sideri: You were writing. You raised awareness.

Vassilikos: All we did was talk and argue.

Sideri: Isn't that also important?

Vassilikos: There, however, I sensed for the first time what you mentioned in the questions you sent me. I first became aware of what Europe was when I left Greece to flee from the Colonels.

Sideri: Is that when you first grasped the idea of Europe?

Vassilikos: Then, for the first time, I understood the differences between Italy, France, Germany, etc. And when they invited me to the premiere of Z in New York, I refused to go.

Sideri: Why?

Vassilikos: Because I believed that the Americans were mainly to blame for the situation in my country. [During a 1999 visit to Athens, the former US President Bill Clinton made the following statement: "When the Junta took over in 1967 here, the United States allowed its interests in prosecuting the Cold War to prevail over its interests — I should say its obligation — to support democracy, which was, after all, the cause for which we fought the Cold War. It is important that we acknowledge that."] When I shared my intentions with Simone Signoret, she asked me: "Why, Vassilis, are you not going?"

I told her that Sartre didn't go either because of the war in Vietnam, and she replied: "You are not Sartre, Vassilis. You are not French, you are a young man from Greece who wrote a good book that was made into a good film. You need to go to the States if you want your career to move forward."

But I didn't go. And I never regretted it.

To go back to Europe and the difference between countries and their politics though, in 1992, I had already formed a notion of France and, through it, also of the European Union. And then the Maastricht Treaty came along, which for me was a great shock. For the first time ever, I joined a party, that of Chevènement [born 1939, French left-wing politician, founder of Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC) and later of Pôle Républicain and presidential candidate for the 2002 elections], which opposed the treaty. A lot of my intellectual friends were also members of Chevènement's party — Michel Debré [1912-1996, French politician who served as Prime Minister of France under Charles de Gaulle], Max Gallo [1932-2017, French writer, historian and politician] — and we all thought that if France were to ratify the Treaty, that would be the end of Europe. Do you know that in the I don't know how many pages of that text there

isn't a single mention of the word "culture"? And then you think, it's not possible, Mitterrand is not going to let this pass, yet the results of the referendum come in and its 50.7% in favour, 49.3% against. That was in 1992. At that point, I was really shaken.

In Greece there wasn't even a discussion, all parties voted yes, end of story. I was already living abroad by then, as I couldn't take the situation in Greece, with all the former members of the resistance trying to cash in on their reputation. I mean, is it possible not to vote Alekos Panagoulis [1939-1976, Greek poet, politician and a major figure of the Greek resistance against the Regime of the Colonels, as he tried to assassinate the dictator Giorgos Papadopoulos on 13 August 1968] into parliament at the first free election? And yet he almost didn't make it. I think they added a few votes to avoid becoming the laughing stock of all Europe, where Panagoulis was already a known figure thanks to the book Oriana Fallaci [*A Man*. 1980] had written about him.

Sideri: You are giving me an excellent opportunity to move on to the next question I would like to ask you, which is to do with the formation of your own political identity. Could you tell us a little bit about how this was forged? You already mentioned, for example, Alekos Panagoulis. Which other politician have you admired in the course of your life?

Vassilikos: I was, let us put it like this, an angry young man.

Sideri: People have often described you this way.

Vassilikos: When my book *The Leaf* came out in 1961, there was a magazine in Thessaloniki called *Epitheorisi Technis* [Art Review]. It was the only one. I went there and gave a copy to Dimitris Despotidis, who was the person that was going to introduce me to left-wing politics. He read it and a couple of days later he invited me to his office. I knew some things about the Left but this person, he became my mentor. And when you have a mentor whatever he tells you, you follow it blindly. So at that time I started writing for the [left-wing] magazine *Tachydromos*, also ran by Despotidis. He would assign the topics — for example, "rubbish tip scavengers"; or "mothers of political prisoners"; or "the bullet-ridden buildings of Athens" that were left behind following the Civil War — and I would go out and write something.

When Lambrakis was assassinated, he called me and said: "I want you to write a book about this".

Sideri: Is this when you started writing *Z*?

Vassilikos: This is when I made the promise that I would write it. As the assassination took place 200 metres from my family's house in Thessaloniki, I went back and started doing research. But what could I write? I would read in

the daily newspapers the articles written by the 3 journalists reporting on the case. Then, one day, Dimitris arrives with 40 boxes full of papers. They were copies of the prosecutor's material. Immediately I started reading. I go through the whole thing and am completely blocked. I cannot write a single word. Every once in a while Dimitris asks: "How are we doing?" As I was relying on him for many things, I couldn't bring myself to lie to him. So I wrote a book then — thank goodness it was never published — entitled *Z's Diaries*, which was a kind of apology to my friend for being unable to write the book I was supposed to. Then, in 1966, a friend of mine returns from Siberia and hands me a copy of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. I started reading and as I was nearing the end the first lines of *Z* came to me: "The General glimpsed at his watch just as the keynote speaker, the Minister of Agriculture, was giving a speech about the potato blight". Two months later, the book had practically written itself. It was completely effortless.

Sideri: That magical moment.

Vassilikos: For me, it was a really happy moment. In the meantime, together with Theodoris Manikiotis, Dimitris had started a new publishing house called Themelio. As before, I had taken him my writing and he had already published *Outside the Walls*. When *Z* was finished I took it to him and read him the first part. It came out in November 1966. The first half was published in *Tachydromos* magazine, where it was also announced that the book would soon be available at bookshops. During that time, I experienced one of the happiest moments of my life when, while watching a football game in a courtyard swarming with people, I see a guy in front of me reading. Our team scores and he continues reading so his friend taps him on the shoulder.

"What do you want?" he says.

"We scored!" the other one replies.

"Leave me alone," the first guy says and goes back to his book.

I manage to get closer and make out what he's reading. It was *Z*, the fifth installment published in *Tachydromos*. Now, normally, for every page-long piece I wrote for the magazine I was paid 500 drachmas. So I sit down and calculate, 40 pages times 500 drachmas, I'm going to have a good Christmas! Do you know how much they paid me? 1,000 drachmas. (laughs)

"What happened?" I said. "The rest of it is our commission for the publicity we brought to your book."

At that moment I thought, "that's it, I'm leaving Greece for good". I was invited to the United States for a poetry conference. I bought the ticket but changed

my mind along the way, notified the person who had invited me and went to Paris instead. That is where the coup of 1967 found me.

Sideri: Through this process you became a “political writer”, as they often refer to you, even though, as you often reply, this means nothing in literary terms. Would you say, however, that the publication of Z functioned as a trigger for you to become more systematically involved with politics?

Vassilikos: Yes, absolutely, although my involvement had already started with the articles I was writing for *Tachydromos*. The piece I did for the prisoners’ mothers, for instance, resulted in the release of hundreds of people as [the former Prime Minister] George Papandreou read it and was deeply touched. So, you see, I was already politically involved, and quite significantly.

Sideri: I do see. And then you continue on a political course that, a few years ago, resulted in a candidacy on the side of Fotis Kouvelis [Greek left-wing politician]¹ and culminated in your being elected MP, this time with SYRIZA, in the 2019 elections.

Vassilikos: Let me tell you how this happened. A few months ago, Tsipras sent somebody to talk to me about the prospect of running with SYRIZA and, without discussing anything, I immediately said yes. Do you know why? Because I took it as an acknowledgment of the work I have done as a writer, which, like we said, is deeply political in nature. The term “political writer” may mean nothing but all my books are inspired by politics and civil society. I have always said that, through my work, I want to paint a mural of Greece in the second half of the 20th century. Ever since 1962, that has been my main pursuit. I didn’t care if the book was good or bad, if people would accuse me of being “journalistic” or other nonsense of that kind. The journalists would not let me join their Union because I was a writer and the writers would criticise me for writing like a journalist. Just imagine.

Sideri: Nonetheless, you decided to take the risk and ask the Greeks to vote for you. Could you tell me what led you to this decision?

Vassilikos: It was taken in the spur of the moment. The man Tsipras sent, he was sitting exactly where you are, was a writer I had met 15 years ago and hadn’t seen since. He told me: “Will you think about it and get back to me tomorrow?” And I said: “I have nothing to think about”. Right then and there. Why? Because I was very hurt by the European elections results. SYRIZA didn’t deserve that poor performance.

¹ born 1948, Greek politician, founding member of the Communist Party of Greece (Interior) and of the Greek Left Party, in 2010, he became the leader of the newly-founded Democratic Left (DIMAR)

I could, of course, understand that the fact that people turned their back on SYRIZA was the result of a situation that had been harmful for all of us. But the idea that *New Democracy* [Liberal-Conservative political party founded by Konstantinos Karamalis in 1974, currently in office under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis] would come back, just like it did, with a majority government.

So I accepted immediately because it made me feel less sad about the situation. I just couldn't accept that the Right was going to achieve a landslide, even after having absorbed various far-right elements. I thought this was really unfair, and it is in my nature to support people that have suffered injustices. It was for that same reason I had supported Kouvelis in the previous elections and took the part of Varoufakis later on, when everybody was trying to turn him into a scapegoat.

Sideri: So every time you decided to run for something you basically did it because you wanted to stand by the side of someone who has been treated unjustly.

Vassilikos: Precisely. That pretty much sums up my involvement with politics. Maybe with the exception of the 1981 elections. I had never thought I would vote for *PASOK* [Panhellenic Socialist Movement: Social-democratic party founded by Andreas Papandreou in 1974] but when I was asked, during an interview, who I would vote for, I thought, "what is it that I really want?" And I knew that what I didn't want was for the right-wingers to come back to power and that the most likely candidate to prevent this from happening was Andreas Papandreou [the leader of *PASOK*]. Andreas heard the interview and was ecstatic. He invited me to his home and after five hours of conversation I realised that we're just a few days away from the elections and he hasn't the faintest clue about what's going through people's heads. So the following morning I wake up and think: "I need to tell him what to say at the rally tonight. He doesn't know how to win this himself and his advisors are too afraid they will upset him." I made two suggestions and he incorporated them both into his evening speech. Afterwards, as a token of his gratitude, he offered me the Ministry of Culture but I said: "I want 300 ministries of culture." "What do you mean?" he asked. "I want the TV network." (laughs)

Sideri: So that's how you ended up Deputy Director of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation.

Vassilikos: But let's talk a bit more about Europe. What happens after I realise there is a problem with the Maastricht Treaty.

Sideri: If it's okay with you, I will ask you a question just to help frame the conversation. I would like you to tell us if you think that the European Union, in

its current configuration, still has a promise to make to all of us; and also if there is something that frustrates or bothers you about Europe in its present form.

Vassilikos: I believe that increasing the EU members to 28 was a good idea indeed but in fact a very dangerous decision. Some of these countries have suffered tremendously under the Soviet Union — for example the three Baltic states, Poland and Hungary — and the result is that they are now adopting an anti-European, in my opinion, attitude whose consequences are particularly negative.

And then there is the Euro. When it was first introduced in Greece, I went on holiday with my wife and daughter and we went to Vouliagmeni beach for a swim. Before the Euro, I used to tip the valet at the parking lot 500 drachmas. That day, I gave him 5 euros, so 1,500 drachmas. “Goodness, what did I do?” I thought, so when we went back the next day I gave him 2 euros, that is, 700 drachmas. I could see in his face that he didn’t like it so I raised the tariff to 3, that is, double the amount I was paying before.

Second incident, I go to the supermarket and see an old lady who refused to take back the 30c the cashier was handing her as change. “I don’t want it, dear, I don’t want that small money,” she said. “Take it, grandma, it’s 100 drachmas,” the cashier said but still the grandma didn’t take it.

So I ask my economist friends: “Can you please explain to me why we set the euro at 340.75 drachmas?” They start going on about the reserves and this and that. And it was not just Greece. In France too, a coffee used to cost 1 franc, then it was 80c, meaning 4.5 francs. In Italy also, the same situation. So I started noticing that in all countries I knew more things about there was a rise in prices that would, I could already foresee, have very negative results. And this is exactly what happened.

Sideri: You were telling me about Europe, how you consider that some fundamental steps in the process of European integration — such as the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty and the introduction of the single currency — were, for you, deeply flawed. Unless you have something to add, let us now move to the next question I would like to ask you. You personally, when do you feel Greek and when European?

Vassilikos: (sighs, laughs) I will tell you but first let me indeed add something to what I was saying before. I knew a family of four in Keratsini [Piraeus] that could get by very well on a 400,000 drachma income. They could go to the cinema once a month, have dinner at the restaurant, etc. When they started getting 1,200 euros instead of their 400,000 drachmas they couldn’t afford their former life. This was when I started feeling sceptical about the single currency.

Sideri: Do you believe, then, that at that moment a threat was created that is still menacing the future of Europe?

Vassilikos: I do. And let me add that, as a writer, I have actually invented the new myth of Europe. There was a book that came out a few years back, let me find it for you.

[VV gets up and looks for the book.]

Here it is. It is a collection of texts written by highly acclaimed writers from 12 different countries. My text is entitled 'Europe and Thassos'.

Thassos, you see, was one of Europe's two brothers. The second one was called Kadmos. When Zeus kidnapped Europe, her parents, Telephassa and Phoenix, sent the two brothers after her. Kadmos went south towards Thebes, whereas Thassos went north. After looking for his sister everywhere to no avail, Thassos found an island he really liked, settled there and named it after himself. My father, as I told you, was born in Thassos and I have lived there for many years. So, in the short story — which was actually written before the euro, in 1996 — I say that Thassos has been looking for his sister for 3,000 years and finds her serving as the CEO of Deutsche Bank. I will give you a copy before you leave.

Sideri: I am looking forward to reading it.

Vassilikos: The notion of the "European" is not one I have lived with since my childhood but instead something I acquired only recently. On top of that, I feel very disillusioned because of Maastricht, the euro and that last thing that happened in Greece, when they prescribed the wrong treatment for the patient.

Sideri: You mean the bailout programmes?

Vassilikos: Yes. I believe that the person responsible for leaving us in this state was our former prime minister, George Papandreou [born 1962, Greek-American politician, son of PASOK founder Andreas Papandreou and former leader of the party, he served as prime minister of Greece from 2009 to 2012, when he resigned to make way for a national unity government], who willingly agreed to everything they asked him. All countries negotiated. Even Uganda, when the IMF went there to discuss a loan, they knew that if they said yes to everything some of the tribes would revolt. Whereas here, Papandreou was actually receiving phone calls from Strauss-Kahn [born 1946, French politician and IMF Managing Director between 2007 and 2011] telling him not to sign the memorandum with the IMF, that he should first go to the Europeans and ask for some guarantees. He didn't need to ask for much, just get them to agree that the following two things wouldn't be messed with: the pensions people have

worked for all their lives and the roof over the Greeks' heads. These two are off the table, he should have said. But he didn't. Where were we?

Sideri: You were telling me that it's not easy for you to feel "European" because this, for you, is a newly acquired identity.

Vassilikos: And the proof is that in the 100 and more books I have written over the course of 40 years I spent abroad, not once did I write about another country! There might be mentions of other nations here and there but an Italian character, for instance, I never managed to create. With the exception maybe of just one book, *The Monarch*, in which a writer is commissioned to write the biography of an Arab monarch exiled in Rome who is going to be assassinated. The editor wants the book quickly as they have already found the actor who will play him in the film — Omar Sharif. It takes place in Rome, where there aren't that many Greeks, but in fact the book tells the story of the 1967 coup d'état in Greece.

[VV searches for the book in his library.]

There it is. Euphratia was the name of the monarch's country and he was exiled in Rome, just like our King. What I mean to say is that even in this book, where for the first time the plot is not set in Greece, in actual fact what I am portraying is a satirical take on Greek reality.

Sideri: You transfer Greek reality to another context so you can speak about it more freely.

Vassilikos: Exactly. That's exactly it. There are, of course, descriptions of cities but the psychology, which is the most important element of a character, is always that of a Greek person.

On the other hand, as a European I was happy with the creation of the Schengen area and the chance it gave us to travel freely around the continent using just our ID cards.

Sideri: Do you see the abolition of borders as synonymous with freedom?

Vassilikos: Yes, both that and the fact that there is now free trade among EU member states. I can find any French product I want now in Greece, the cheese, PAUL, do you know PAUL?

Sideri: Oh yes, I do know PAUL.

Vassilikos: A few times I have thought that maybe I should write in English or in French directly, and be done with translators! But when I tried once to write

about my island in English, the first sentence read: "On Thassos, a north Aegean island."

Sideri: You became too explanatory?

Vassilikos: Goodness, I thought, how strange that sounds! So I stopped there.

Sideri: At the first sentence! (laughs)

Mr Vassilikos, as you are first and foremost a writer and I know that literature is what you love the most, let's finish with a question about literature.

Vassilikos: Let me first tell you something about the word. Surely you've noticed yourself that the Greek word for literature [logotechnia] is the reverse of technology. I have actually written a text about this, comparing the two, where I say, for example, that in terms of technology Anna Karenina wouldn't have been able to commit suicide in the way she did, jumping in front of a train.

Sideri: How do you see the future of literature?

Vassilikos: Listen. From 1994 to 2004 I was presenting a weekly programme on TV about books and writing, so I know the field rather well — especially prose, as it is rather difficult to present poetry on TV, despite the fact that there are many good Greek poets. My main observation is that contemporary writers are more outward looking. The previous generation, especially writers from Thessaloniki publishing before and shortly after the war, relied a lot on the technique of interior monologue. This trend later spread to southern Greece but I see, now, that the new generation of writers tends to tackle social issues. This was far from the norm in the past. We have, also, this new genre that has emerged in the last few years, the so-called social detective novel, whose main representative is Petros Markaris — the only Greek writer whose books are translated into other languages.

Sideri: One of the very few, yes.

Vassilikos: Exactly. In that sense, I believe that Greek prose is on the right track. What will remain from all this I cannot tell you and I don't care that much, to be honest with you, just as I don't really care if anything will survive from my own work... There is a tendency to open up the space of literature to include various social phenomena. Books are being written about Jews, the Greek diaspora and of course women have burst into the literary scene. Nowadays, the best Greek writers are women: Rea Galanaki, Ioanna Karytianni, Maro Douka and another four or five who are top. As for men, there are again three or four very good ones but they too have been around for a while: Giorgos Skampardonis in short stories and Christos Chomenidis in novels, who is a truly gifted fiction writer.

Sideri: Do you have any advice for my generation and me?

Vassilikos: I have often been asked this question and I always prefer not to answer it. The only thing I can say is that you should rely on your own strengths and not care about the opinion of others. Literary critics only review the books of the 7-9 writers they have already decided they like. It is a very closed milieu that is impossible to break into. So when a new writer comes out with a first book, the so-called critics won't write any reviews, either good or bad. It is a dead-end situation. On the other hand, nowadays there is the internet and people can use it to their advantage but I don't have an opinion on that.

Sideri: You said you wouldn't answer the question but this is actually a very good answer. Thank you very much, Mr Vassilikos.

Vassilikos: Did we at least partially cover the topic?

Sideri: We didn't stay very close to the questionnaire, as perhaps would be expected from two Greeks, but I believe that everything you told us was most interesting and useful.

Vassilikos: To tell the truth, though, I am deeply saddened and disappointed with the present state of Europe. I never thought we would get to the point of forgetting that migrants helped shape Europe as we know it. People who left their countries in the past were welcomed in various European cities, especially in Paris, and greatly enriched the culture of the receiving countries. People like Picasso, Costa-Gavras and other great artists, France took them in its arms and they became part of it. All of this is finished now, from the moment we entered the reign of money. For my part, I have understood that money exists in its own right. It doesn't need any products. Money is "plastic" in the sense that it exists for and by itself. "Art for art's sake" we used to say back in the day, which was a bad thing for art. Nowadays we could say the same about money. "Money for money's sake." That is the end of the road and of human existence. If money is God, without a base, without even a church to be worshipped in except for banks and the exchange market, then this is not a good place to be. This is where Europe is right now and Greece had to pay a high price for this as it was given the wrong medicine.

What do you write? Prose?

Sideri: Prose and theatre.

Vassilikos: Have you published anything?

Sideri: Yes, I will give you my last book before I leave.

Vassilikos: Let me see it.

Vassilikos: Great. Will you sign it for me?

Sideri: Of course. I already have.

Vassilikos: Thank you. I will be happy to read it.