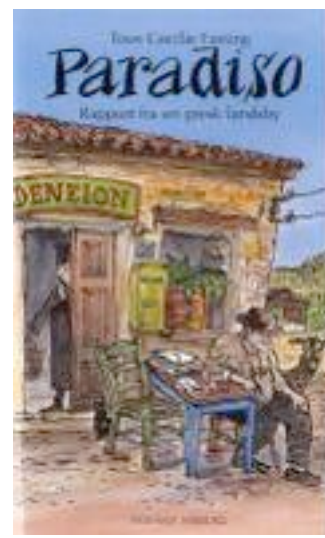


PARADISO -

A REPORT FROM A GREEK VILLAGE



It's a hot day in June. We're standing on the outskirts of the village Paradiso looking at an old stone cottage in the middle of a huge field. Scattered here and there are ancient olive trees with knotty trunks about a metre thick. Their grey leaves glitter and sparkle with a silvery shine in the sun and the light summer breeze. The air smells of dry soil and sunburned grass. From the field, vineyards and olive groves slope towards the sea. The sky is wide and open and the view so grand and breathtaking that it has left us speechless.

For years my husband Christos has had a dream about the good life in the countryside and this morning, while the kids are at school, he has managed to persuade me away from the dusty city streets to at least look at a place in a village. Up till now we've been renting a house in town hardly big enough for a couple very much in love. But as time has passed we've had two boys, and the house now feels so small that if the boys are to grow any more they'll burst through the windows. We need to move to something bigger, but where?

I have lived in the centre of cities all of my life. I've always felt more comfortable living somewhere where drug addicts may fall asleep on my doorstep rather than in a place where foxes and other wild animals that I don't even know the name of are lurking around the corner of the house at night. I find it perfectly normal that you can both see and smell the air. The morning rush hour starting outside my bedroom window wakes me up and makes me alert and ready to face the day and I wind down and fall asleep as the streets get a little quieter in the evening. The shrieking sound of brakes or the heavy thunder of a truck that passes by and shakes the house only lulls me deeper into my dreams. Cities are supposed to be noisy. I feel safe and secure living in the middle of civilization.

I've heard it's supposed to be quiet in the countryside, but the noise here is just incredible! A few sparrows sit on the ridge of the roof of the stone cottage and they sound like they are in the middle of a discussion on Greek politics. Now they are ready to begin to attack each other physically. Glued under the edge of the roof is something I believe must be a bird's nest. Indeed, there's a swallow that dives quickly towards it, and we hear a wild cheeping concert and see the tiny red beaks stretching out of the nest.

"And look over there!" Christos exclaims and points towards an old olive tree. "A woodpecker!"

There's no doubt that the bird with its orange feathers and red comb that pecks on the dead tree trunk is a real, live woodpecker. I haven't even seen one in the zoo. And what's that, circling over the vineyards below us?

"An eagle!"

The old stone cottage isn't a proper house, it's an old barn. "Can you imagine a bougainvillea climbing the wall?" Christos asks.

"Fuchsia red," I answer.

"And there, outside the entrance, we can build a pergola and have a huge table with place for loads of guests. We could build a fireplace in stone close to that wall, where we can grill food."

"We have to plant vines to climb over the pergola."

"Here is enough land to plant at least fifty vines. We can make our own wine!" Christos says enthusiastically; he knows he's got me moving.

"Merlot..." I answer dreamingly.

We become quiet again and just stand there staring.

Suddenly happiness isn't to be living within walking distance of the shops, cinemas and restaurants. There is no longer a point to living so centrally that friends and acquaintances easily can pass by. I must have been blind just not to have understood until now that the children won't be able to unfold themselves physically in town. What's playing on a climbing frame compared to climbing in real olive trees!

Here on this field I get a glimpse of the good life. It's as though the sight of the barn with its golden, sun warm walls has awakened a dream I didn't even know that I had. I imagine long lunches with plenty of good wine in the shadow of the vine-clad pergola. I see myself sitting by the white scrubbed wooden table with my sexy little laptop, and inspired by the birdsong and the fantastic view I write potential international bestsellers that have publishers fighting over the rights. Between the olive trees I have my own little vegetable garden. I pick tomatoes that are warm from the sun for salad. I bake bread spiced with my own herbs. I even make my own pâté. Hens and geese trip in the grass, the purring cat lies on a rock in the sun, and the children run around, barefoot and happy. All this I see while the lizards scurry in the yellow grass, the birds sing and the insects buzz.

We have found our paradise.

"But how much will it cost? Can we afford it?" I ask.

We do a rough calculation. The barn can become a living room. We'll need to build kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms. The house will need a roof. Our conclusion is that we can not afford this.

"Why don't we go for an ouzo?" Christos suggests.

After a couple of ouzos at the local kafeneion, coffee shop, the numbers suddenly look far more optimistic. We absolutely can afford to buy this property.

Chapter two

The buying and selling of properties in Paradiso takes place in the kafeneion, the coffee shop. No one decides to go through an estate agent to sell property or a piece of land. An estate agent only wants to charge a large amount of money for their services - and what do they really do? They tell people that your house is for sale, but this you can manage to say for yourself - you're not mute! It may be that it will sell quicker if an estate agent advertises the property, but what's the rush? One

thing is for sure, and that is that properties don't lose their value – quite the opposite - every year the value increases. Now that xenoï, strangers, have started to take an interest in properties here you can be sure that the prices will rise even more. It could even be that 'The Rich German' will show up one day.

In Paradiso, like in other Greek villages that haven't been discovered by wealthy foreigners, there are lots of old houses falling apart. Usually these are owned by several brothers and sisters and their children. Eight or ten owners is not unusual and everyone has to agree on the sale and also at what price to sell it. With so many owners of the property, the share each person gets is rather modest. Frequently there will be so little money once it is shared out that you might as well sit on the property and wait and wait for The Rich German.

When you finally agree on the sale all of the papers have to be in order. If one or two of the owners for instance didn't pay the inheritance tax or one of the other taxes you take the risk of the state taking possession of the property until that issue is settled.

We have decided to buy the field and the stable and we are now sitting at the kafeneion with Dimitris, as Dimitris knows the owner of the stable. Dimitris is a lean man in his sixties, with white hair and a blue wool cap on his head. Like most of the inhabitants in Paradiso he grows grapes and makes tsipouro, a drink that resembles ouzo. He also has a good idea about the property market in Paradiso, but unlike an estate agent he just wants to have a good time at the coffee shop, meet some new people and be treated to a drink or two.

The other guests stare curiously at us, and especially at me. It doesn't take long before a couple of them sit at our table. "Is she German?" a toothless old man asks.

"No, she's Norwegian," Christos answers – the question was directed to him.

"Sehr gut," the old man smiles. "I lived in Germany for five years. Deutschland sehr gut!"

When the first Greek moved to my hometown in Norway in the early 60s this event was covered in a huge front page article with photographs. Back then there were supposedly only two foreigners there - this particular Greek woman and a Spanish painter. Here we have a few more xenoï but not that many that we don't get attention.

Who are you?

What on earth are you doing here?

Poverty and unemployment meant that many Greeks moved to foreign countries, either permanently or for a few years to work and save up some money. While the islanders mainly left for America and the Cypriots for Great Britain, the Macedonians went to Germany. There are more than 350 000 Greeks in Germany, most of them from northern Greece. Some marry German women. There are hardly any tourists here in Paradiso and when people try to place me it's only logical that the first question is:

"Deutch?"

The one who asks is likely to have an uncle in Stuttgart, a brother in Berlin or he has worked in Dortmund. The toothless man tells us that he used to work in his cousin's Greek restaurant in Frankfurt but that it needed to close and so he then got a job in a car factory. He never learned any German except this "sehr gut". All his friends and most of his colleagues were Greek and so there was never any need to learn the language.

“Volkswagen. Sehr Gut!” he says and lifts his glass to me. He then adds “But my heart was in Greece.”

“Well, I doubt Frankfurt can beat Paradiso,” Christos says.

“No, you’re absolutely right about that!” the old man answers. “Here’s to Paradiso!”

“Yia mas, cheers!”

“Ta pedia, the kids,” Dimitris says and nods towards Christos and me, “ta pedia want to buy Sakis’ property, the one with the old stable. They want to build a house and live here permanently.”

The other guests nod approvingly.

“There’s no better place to live than Paradiso”.

“We have a school with teachers on every level.”

“And a pharmacy - they don’t have that in Rodochori.”

“There’s a bus to town every hour.”

“The climate is fantastic.”

“Much better than in Rodochori.”

“Simply the best climate in all of Greece!”

“We’re high enough above the sea to not have that humid air.”

“Here it’s cool in the summer and mild in the winter.”

“We can grow lemon trees. They don’t survive the winter down there in Nea Smirni.”

We eat crabs and drink tsipouro. Christos pays the bill and Dimitris promises to talk to Sakis about the sale.

Three days later we’re back at the coffee shop. This time with Sakis, a melancholic, elderly man. Sakis doesn’t really want to sell. But his brothers and sisters push him and so do his nephews and nieces. They need money and yes, you can always do with extra money. But money isn’t everything - Sakis has a lot of memories connected to this place. He’s thinking about the great stable that his father built with his own two hands. He remembers the old donkey they called Mitsos and that he was scared to death of because it would kick out in all directions if you got too close. He remembers how during the war, they would smuggle part of the olive harvest and hide it in the stable so that the Bulgarians wouldn’t find it. His mum would sit there at night and press the oil by hand.

The occupation claimed 90 percent of the harvest and you could be killed if they found out that you’d hidden food. Aunt Lea was arrested when they found half a corn bread in the pocket of her apron. As the weeks and months passed by everybody thought she’d been killed. But then one day a man came riding from one of the villages behind the mountain and was seen whispering secretly with father in the stable. They thought Sakis didn’t hear, but he was standing quietly behind the door listening to every word. After being abused for 24 hours his aunt was suicidal and through herself out of the window. She only broke a leg and incredibly enough the guards didn’t discover

her. She managed to drag herself up to the mountains where she hid for six days and nights without food or water. The niece of the man that came riding into the village was out herding her sheep and eventually came across Aunt Lea. This man took care of her until the war ended and it was safe for Lea to come home. Sakis remembers how his aunt smelled so differently when she returned - he didn't really believe it was her.

No, Sakis doesn't feel like selling the stable and the field. Both he and his brothers and sisters are too old to farm the land but it could be smart to keep it in case there would be another war. When there's a war there's a lack of food, but if you have a plot of land you'll always survive. His son just snorts at these thoughts. However, even his son filled up his cupboards with canned food when the Turks occupied the tiny island of Imia a few years ago. At that time everyone was sure that there'd be a war. When the Americans bombed Kosovo many people were convinced the conflict would spread and this was even written in the papers.

Land is safety. Land is a guaranty that you'll have food but his son will never understand this. His son has never been hungry. His son has never been forced to walk barefooted because his family couldn't afford to buy him shoes. His son has never had to queue up at the school to get food along with all the other skinny, undernourished kids in Paradiso. Pretty girls from the Red Cross would hand out dried milk and bread with raisins for breakfast and buckets of a delicious American soup for dinner.

Sakis sighs and takes a huge sip tsipouro.

"We have agreed to sell for 16 millions drachma."

"We?"

"Yes, we are eight brothers and sisters."

Luckily all brothers and sisters are alive – the real complications start when tens of cousins sit on a property and try to agree.

Two days later Sakis calls:

"My sister in Thessalonica has changed her mind, she doesn't want to sell."

"Maybe we could talk to her?"

"You can always try."

The sister is the one of the siblings who's moved up in the world. She lives in a modern flat in Salonica, a city of almost a million inhabitants. She's married to a man who is retired from his job in the civil services and now receives a good pension. She herself used to work for years in a shoe shop. She talks patronizingly about her brothers and sisters who are only poor farmers and don't understand much. For instance, they don't understand that there is a difference between xenoi and natives. No, it's not that she doesn't want to sell but the price is now 18 million.

"It's too expensive, don't accept it," Dimitris advises us. "The others are desperate to sell, so just take it easy."

We are desperate to buy and so it is difficult to keep an indifferent façade. On the other hand we'll blow our budget if we have to pay two million more. Two million is the price of a roof or a kitchen and bathroom.

“I know how to handle this lady. She’s always had a good way with me. Relax, it will be all right,” Dimitris says.

During a discreet telephone conversation with Sakis’s sister in Salonica, Dimitris makes an agreement that we will pay her 2, 25 million drachmas while the other siblings will get 2 million each. Nobody needs to mention the extra 25 000 that she will receive to anyone – especially not to her brothers and sisters.

We need a mortgage from the bank and here we experience new difficulties. It turns out there’s one paper missing - the document that shows that Sakis’ father legally got the land back in 1930. The thing is, and they know this in the bank, is that when the stable and thousands of other old stone houses were built all over Greece, it was done on land that “no one” owned. At that time you didn’t need a building permit - you simply built a house or a barn where no one would protest and claim that they owned the land. You would then put up a fence and what was behind the fence was yours.

1200 years ago Paradiso was a town with 17 000 inhabitants and 21 churches and the town even had its own bishop. At that time, there were probably town houses on the land where the stable was built later. An earthquake probably destroyed a large part of the town and after that came the Turkish occupation and brutal suppression which led many of the inhabitants to flee. Over time the town was reduced to a small village.

During the 400 years of Turkish occupation only Turks were allowed to live in the village and 2 mosques were built. The Greeks were expelled from their houses and land and lived in small, primitive cottages on the fertile fields between Paradiso and the sea. Here they worked as tenant farmers for the bey, the Turkish landlord. Paradiso was liberated in 1912 and after the First World War the Turkish families here were forced back to Turkey. Simultaneously, Greeks were expelled from Turkey and returned to settle in the village.

Sakis’ father was one of these people. He moved into a small house left by a Turkish family. The field where he later built the stable was on the outskirts of Paradiso. The land was so packed with buried stones from the former settlements that no one had claimed it. You couldn’t really grow anything here.

But Sakis’ dad spent a lot of time digging and carrying heavy stones. Eventually he dug out all of the stones and carried them to the edge of the property where he built a great wall. There were so many stones that there was more than enough to build a stable for the animals he hoped that one day he could afford.

Sakis’ father didn’t think much about getting some kind of document that proved that this land now was his. He wasn’t really good at reading and writing and then it became difficult. Yes, he had been to school for a year when he was a child, but then there were the Balkan wars. After this, the big war where he himself had to fight. When he returned to his village he found that his parents had been killed. His childhood home had been burned down and the Turks had taken his family’s fields. He never learned what had happened to his five brothers and sisters.

So, how important is it to have a paper that says the land is yours when soldiers with weapons in their hands can just come claim it?

The bank’s objection is that theoretically someone might show up from Athens or Australia or anywhere and bang some documentation on the table that proves that their ancestors owned the land back in 1930. If this happened we’d probably have to go through a court case that might last for years. If we stopped paying our mortgage, who would the bank demand the money from? The bank wouldn’t even be able to sell the property in a case like that.

“The only possibility is to get a court ruling to say that there were no owners to the land back then and that it now belongs to Sakis, his brothers and sister,” the man in the bank explains.

Can we find any old pictures from the village? Is there anyone who lived back then and can witness that this field was a free land? Are there any letters where the land or the stable are mentioned? The case will be heard in court in three months time.

Sakis’ old uncle is still alive. Now the 87 year old man stands in front of the judge and explains to her that his brother in law took the land that the Turks had left a few years earlier. He says that his brother in law asked around in the village first to be sure that no one else would demand the plot.

This is good enough for the judge! There is no way a Turk is going to come back and claim a land he had stolen in the first place! Bam! She hits her gavel on the table and declares that the land legally belongs to Sakis and his siblings. After this verdict we can now get a mortgage. Six months after deciding to buy the land with the stable it finally belongs to us.