

– LIBRETTO –
(final draft 19/3/2019)

ELENI

A DRAMATIC OPERA ORATORIO

based on the book by Nicholas Gage

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A Historical Context of Eleni

Greece occupies an important geopolitical position linking Europe with Asia Minor and the Middle East, and during World War II it inevitably became a bone of contention between the allied and the axis forces. While the Greek army managed to repel the first invasion attempt by Italian fascist troops in 1940, soon the more powerful German army occupied the country.

The village of Lià lies only one kilometre from the Greek-Albanian border. Its strategic significance was well understood by the Greek resistance movements. The two largest of these organisations, the Greek People's Liberation Army, known by its Greek initials, ELAS, and the National Democratic Greek League, known as EDES, were at loggerheads over their views on future loyalties of the country that would be formed after the war. In broad terms, initially the EDES supported the exiled Greek government's position of holding a referendum on the restoration of King George II to the throne, while ELAS, which was aligned with the Greek Communist Party, favoured a Soviet-style republic. Unfortunately for the Greek people, after World War II the extreme polarity between the political wings of these two movements resulted in civil upheaval and ultimately led to civil war. With the geographical advantage of borders with the new Soviet satellite states of Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, the Northern section of Greece was a natural stronghold for the communist-backed rebels, now calling themselves the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG), while government troops ensconced to the South tried to break the DAG's hold on the country's northern rim. In the autumn of 1947, the DAG moved into the villages on the Mourgana mountain range, the largest of which is Lià.

As living conditions became increasingly intolerable for civilians in Northern Greece, the DAG proposed a mass evacuation of all children from the villages under their control, including Lià, to the surrounding socialist states. The international community saw the evacuation of children beyond the borders of Greece as inhumane and unnecessary, while accusations were made by the Greek government that the children were being taken away to be brought up as 'good communists' in preparation for their return to a new communist Greek state. Initially the evacuation was carried out on a voluntary basis but the raging controversy over whether this was really a voluntary evacuation or a form of abduction only served to strengthen the DAG's resolve to forcibly evacuate the children. In Lià, the guerrillas demanded that at least one child from each family be handed over to be taken to indoctrination camps in Eastern Europe. By the end of the civil war in 1949, more than 28,000 children under the age of fifteen had been taken to Poland, East Germany, Romania, Albania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria.

The story of Eleni tells of one mother's attempt to save her children from abduction by the communists and the sacrifice she was ready to make for her choice. The author of the book *Eleni*, Nicholas Gage, draws on over twenty years of research and personal memories not only to tell the moving story of his mother's sacrifice, but also to create a sense of both the political and social atmospheres surrounding the events he describes.

Synopsis of the Oratorio

A charismatic rebel leader talks to the crowds in the town square. His rousing speech in support of the rebel fighters is rounded off with a warning to those who might turn against them. At the same time priests can be heard at the cemetery where Eleni is attending the exhumation of her mother-in-law, Fotini. Eleni describes her difficulties, now that her husband is away working in America.

Two tableaux then depict the enmity of the resistance movement and the extreme hardship of village life. The first is an account of the battle of Keramitsa where the machine-gunner Vasilis Poulos became the first man from Lià to die in action during the conflict between the opposing resistance groups ELAS and EDES. The second recounts the story of how an old woman, carrying bags of corn over the mountains, had walked through a blizzard and finally frozen to death. A children's nursery rhyme about the same event contrasts with the shocking reality.

When civil war breaks out after the German retreat, Eleni's daughter, Kanda, is forced to join the rebel army. She returns safely, having been rejected after repeatedly fainting during her training. Eleni has a dream in which she sees her dead mother-in-law calling to her. She goes to a fortune teller who reads her coffee grounds. The prediction is terrifying; her house will be empty within the year.

As the hostile government troops attack the village, Eleni is called away to cook for the rebel fighters. Her children are sent to safety, but are moved away by guards. When Eleni comes looking for her children, she finds a wandering government soldier. They talk about how dreadful the situation is for everyone.

A trial takes place the next day in the village square. A 'judge' sentences a captive government soldier, the same one that had spoken with Eleni, to death. The 'judge' incites such hatred in the gathered people they end up screaming for the prisoner to be killed.

Nicholas the young man tells of his new life in America, his vivid memories of his childhood and the need to discover the truth about what had happened to his mother.

A female rebel tells the mothers of the village that their children will starve if they stay in the war zone. She talks of an evacuation plan to take the children to the neighbouring communist states. One woman agrees to give up her children. The others are warned to do the same. Nicholas the boy overhears the rebels planning to take the children by force and tells his mother. Eleni goes to Lukàs Ziàras, and together they make a plan to get the children out of the village. Eleni worries about the success of the escape plan and shares her fears with her son. The rebels call Eleni to the harvest just before the escape. Ziàras then leads the children to safety.

The women working on the harvest hear rumours about the escape. Eleni feels Fotini's presence as she sits in prison, but she sees a ray of hope when a rebel soldier tells her that the children have escaped successfully. She is interrogated by the 'judge', who makes her swear on her children's lives that she knew nothing of the escape plan. Eleni is then brutally tortured, and finally confesses to the 'judge'. Privately she longs for death to come.

Eleni is tried and sentenced to death for her part in the escape, along with twelve other villagers deemed enemies of the revolution. Before she is executed, she explains that all she feels is love for her children and that she will love them forever. She is marched to the ravine and executed. As the shot is fired, she calls out, "my children!"

Cast of Characters

Narrator:

Nicholas Gage (*speaker*)

Main characters:

Eleni (*dramatic soprano*)

Devoted mother

Nicholas (*lyric spinto*)

Eleni's son in 1963, now a reporter

Nicholas the boy (*boy soprano*)

Eleni's young son

Judge/Rebel leader (*character bass baritone*)

Local leader of the rebel forces and judge

Kànda (*high mezzo soprano/soprano*)

Eleni's teenage daughter

Supporting roles:

Milià (*soprano*)

Fanatic rebel supporter

Soldier (*baritone*)

Government soldier

Nàkova (*alto*)

Village woman

Lukàs Ziàras (*tenor*)

Eleni's cousin

Part I

1. ORCHESTRAL INTRODUCTION

2. FIRST READING

This is the story of a sacrifice; a very personal sacrifice without which I wouldn't be here tonight.

I was born in a small village in the mountains of Northern Greece, just before the outbreak of World War II. In those days, the religious festivals and feast days that marked our calendar also governed the pace of life in the village. People would remember events by feast days: they would say things like, “she was married on Saint Dimitri's day”, or “he returned on the eve of Saint Michael's day”.

Superstition was a part of daily life – the evil eye, curses and fate were all taken very seriously. It was also common then for men to work far away from their families for extended periods, and the women would spend long months, often years, alone looking after their children and their homes. My father worked in America and my mother was left to bring up five children with only the help of her beloved mother-in-law, Fotini. But when Fotini passed away, life suddenly became much harder. Then war came.

The village was only a mile away from the border with Albania, and when the Italians tried to invade Greece in 1940, we could hear the gunfire and shells exploding close by. We would hide in the caves high up in the mountains until the bombing stopped.

One day a left wing resistance militia came to the village. Their leader spoke in the square and all the people cheered. No one knew then how terrible things would become.

This is also a tale of courage and defiance – the courage of one woman to take a decision she knew might very well cost her her life – a courage driven by a deep love for her children.

This is an account of that courage and sacrifice.

3. Scene: PEOPLE OF LIÀ (*Chorus, Rebel leader*)

CHORUS

*àghios o theòs, àghios ischiròs,
àghios athànatos, elèison emàs.¹*

REBEL LEADER

People of Lià, today our men stood courageously against the fascists! Brave people of Lià, we will not fade or falter until freedom is ours at last!

CHORUS

Zito i ELÀS! Zito i ELÀS! Zito i ELÀS!²

REBEL LEADER

It is for you, just people of Lià, that we go into battle! To put food on your table, clothes on your back, and shoes on your feet! To end this poverty, to end this suffering, to reclaim your human dignity!

CHORUS

Zito i ELÀS! Zito i ELÀS! Zito i ELÀS!

REBEL LEADER

Righteous people of Lià, our movement will tolerate no treachery! And traitors will be met with the harshest of judgement. But beware, good people of Lià, there are those who claim to fight for you, but they are traitors, they conspire with the enemy! Trusted people of Lià, all of you are privileged to be part of our struggle! And those of you who join our cause will have nothing to fear. But those who side with the enemy will not evade our wrath, no matter where they hide.

CHORUS

Kàto i prodòtes!³

¹ Original Greek: Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός, Ἅγιος Ἰσχυρός, Ἅγιος Αθάνατος, Ελέησον ημάς.
English alternative: *Blessed is the Lord, God in heaven above, Everlasting Father, Have mercy on our souls.*

² English alternative: *Long live Elàs!*

³ English alternative: *Down with the traitors!*

4. Miroloi: KALÌ SOU MÈRA FOTINÌ (*Female chorus*)

FEMALE CHORUS

*Kalì sou mèra Fotini*⁴, be you as you may,
You are ever on my lips and melting in my heart,
All your children shed black tears today,
Why do the stars not fall from the skies
Or the mountains tear apart?

⁴ English translation: *Welcome back, dear Fotini.*

5. Aria: IN THE CLOSING DAYS OF SUMMER (*Nicholas, Chorus*)

NICHOLAS

In the closing days of summer,
By the shady cypress trees,
The somber mourners murmur
While my mother's on her knees.

The children keep their distance,
Only one sits by the grave,
Glykeria's bold persistence
Makes her spirited and brave.

As the hour draws ever near
To reclaim the buried bones
And to face your deepest fear.
Move aside those sacred stones.

As the fading light grows dull,
A tear rolls down her face
When the sexton lifts a skull
From the soil's cold embrace.

CHORUS

*àghios o theòs, àghios ischiròs,
àghios athànatos, elèison emàs.⁵*

NICHOLAS

A draft of wine, they're told,
If drunk from such a cup,
Will lift a curse of old,
So in turn they raise it up.

One by one the family savour
Redemption through this rite,
But Eleni bids no favour,
Nor fears she ever might.

But she also knows she cannot stop the hand of fate.

⁵ Original Greek: Άγιος ο Θεός, Άγιος Ισχυρός, Άγιος Αθάνατος, Ελέησον ημάς.
English alternative: *Blessed is the Lord, God in heaven above, Everlasting Father, Have mercy on our souls.*

6. Recitativo and Aria: MY PLACE IS HERE (*Eleni*)

ELENI

Recit.

O dearest Fotini, you always stood by me.

And you know I loved your son.

A man of the world.

The father of my children!

Do you remember? I was only seventeen

And Christos had just returned from America.

And then he decided to stay for a whole year!

Oh, how we smiled that day. Do you remember, Fotini?

Aria

Do you remember when I was ill

and he came back to look after me?

He paid for the finest doctors

And bought me a big brass bed!

And a sewing machine!

Oh, how we felt like a family again.

But all too soon, he had to leave.

How I wept that night. Do you remember, Fotini?

Day by day, this burden builds a prison in my soul!

Alone, within the deepest dungeon of my heart,

I weep. A load so hard to bear,

I feel the whole world fall apart.

Kyrie, I pray in hopeless sorrow to be saved,

I always turn to You in times of despair.

But now, I'm praying for my children to be spared the grief of war,

Protect them from the storm that comes our way.

And I, I'd gladly give my humble life for theirs.

Into Your arms I place my dearest love,

And beg to feel Your merciful grace for them.

Protect them from the storm that comes our way.

And I, I'd gladly give my life for them.

7. Chorus: THE DEATH OF VANGELIS POULOS (*Male chorus*)

MALE CHORUS

On the mountain's wooded steep,
Men of Lià, a vigil keep.
To a man, they dare not sleep,
Lest charge the foe!
Lest charge the foe!
Lest charge the foe!

Endless days in thankless heat,
Force the fascists to taste defeat,
Make them scatter in full retreat.
Their rout complete!
A killing blow!

Hunkered down inside the snipers nest,
Gunner Poulos does his best,
putting Zervas to the test.
He takes a bullet to the chest—
The first to go.

Crimson river, take him home!
Crimson river, take him home!
Float him on the carmine foam,
Set him in the scarlet loam,
Six feet below.

Crimson waves in crimson strains,
Swathe our comrade's proud remains.
Crimson grave with crimson stain,
Soothe our comrade's mortal pain.

8. Chorus and Aria: FOUR AND TWENTY BAGS OF CORN (*Children's chorus, Nicholas*)

CHILDREN'S CHORUS

Four and twenty bags of corn,
Scattered in the early morn.
Get up at the crack of dawn!
Get there fast before they're gone!

Six bags of corn, twelve bags of corn,
Four and twenty bags of corn!

NICHOLAS

It seems the bell of Saint Dimitri rings
More often than before,
As Winter's dagger coldly stings
The helpless to the core.
A week ago they brought her back,
Found lifeless on the mountain track.
Her eyes were petrified, her mouth a gaping sore.

Her son had helped her through the gruelling trip,
But not a mile from town
A blizzard rose up like a whip
And forced the couple down.

CHILDREN'S CHORUS

Hurry up the mountain track.
Hurry up and don't look back!
If you're slow your face turns black!
You'll be brought back in a sack,
And packed and stacked upon a frozen rack!

NICHOLAS

When the son awoke at last,
He found his mother, frozen fast,
Her lips were black, her hair was bonded to the ground.

CHILDREN'S CHORUS

When the blizzard starts to creep,
Find a ditch that's six foot deep.

NICHOLAS

In the early morning's amber glow,
As blackbirds swoop and rise,
Four men retrace the footprints in the snow
With hunger in their eyes.
Two dozen bags of corn were found
Still resting on the frozen ground.
It seems the bell of Saint Dimitri fills the skies.

CHILDREN'S CHORUS

Four and twenty bags of corn,
Scattered in the early morn.
Get up at the crack of dawn!
Get there fast before they're gone!

Part II

9. SECOND READING

When the German occupation ended, my mother re-established contact with our father. She wrote asking him to bring us to America as soon as possible because civil war had now broken out in Greece, and the rebel army was moving westward from the mountains of Macedonia toward our villages.

My father sent trunks of food and clothing, but the official papers for our departure did not arrive before the Democratic Army of Greece, now under the control of the Greek Communist Party, entered Lia on November 27, 1947.

My mother obediently tried to appease the guerrillas. They sent her on daily work details to build fortifications and carry the wounded. She surrendered our livestock and supplies for the cause. Although they taunted her because she was an *Amerikana* – the wife of an American – she endured their insults. She allowed our house to be commandeered as the security headquarters while we moved in with my grandmother. When they began to conscript village girls and took my sister Kanda, my mother did not oppose them, but she told Kanda to use her wits to save herself.

When Greek government troops tried to reclaim our village, my mother became separated from us during the turmoil. While she searched desperately to find us, she ran into a government soldier who had lost his way. She showed him the best path down the mountain and eventually found us after the government troops had retreated.

The next day we were called to the village square to witness what the rebels called a *people's trial*. My mother was shocked to see the lost soldier from the night before on trial. Within a few minutes he was condemned to death.

As life in the village became more dangerous, my mother had terrible dreams of her mother-in-law, Fotini, calling to her from beyond the grave.

10. Duet: WEEP NOT, DEAR MOTHER (*Kanda, Female chorus, Eleni*)

KANDA

So that all my worries could be swiftly put away,
 Let the sun sleep on a while and forget about dawn for a day.
 Oh rise not, let the night remain just for a day!

FEMALE CHORUS

Twilight comes but let the night remain.

ELENI

Oh, my dearest Kanda, from the day that you were born,
 I have dreamed about the day that you'd walk out that door as a bride.
 But never had I dreamed of this!
 The dreadful day when I would have to watch you go off to war! Ah!

KANDA

Weep not, dear Mother! Weep not for me!
 Weep not, dear Mother! Please, shed not a single tear for me!
 Mother, weep not for me! Mother, weep not for me today.
 How could your tears, your suffering, ease my hardship?
 Please, weep not for me, I beg of you.
 Mother, shed not a tear for me today!
 Weep not, I beg you. Weep not for me, please, weep not for me!
 Oh, weep not!
 Shed your tears for those who are not coming back.

11. Aria: ELENI'S DREAM (*Eleni*)

ELENI

Last night I dreamed of Fotini,
Her gentle smile, now pale and bleak.
Her snow-white hand reached out to me,
Her fingers, long and thin, against my cheek.

She held me in a cold embrace,
I felt her tearing at my heart.
'Come now,' she whispered to my face,
'Oh, come to me and never let us part.'

I suddenly sat up in fright,
With tears now falling on my bed.
What omen was revealed that night?
What message was she bringing from the dead?

The morning broke a stormy grey,
But vividly the dream remained.
'Its meaning is as clear as day,'
The fortune teller cunningly explained.

She also read my coffee grounds,
And spoke to me of woes to come.
However strange her vision sounds,
My house will stand an empty slum.

'There is no doubt,' the Gypsy gave a sigh,
'The coffee grounds and dreams, they never lie.
Only death and terror lie ahead.'
And so my aching heart is filled with dread.

12. Scene: THE NIGHT OF FEAR (*Nicholas, Male chorus, Eleni, Soldier*)

NICHOLAS

The distant crack of rapid fire,
The sickening thud of mortar shell,
Grows ever closer by the hour –
The prelude to a living hell.

The front advances up the slope,
The battle roars behind these walls.
Eleni fears their only hope
Is to slip away when darkness falls.

But just as they're about to leave,
A fist knocks loudly at the door.
The hand of fate, one might conceive,
But with an order from the rebel corps.

MALE CHORUS

All the women have to work tonight,
All the women have to work!
To feed our hungry comrades in the fight.
To feed our hungry men!
A piece of bread is all they need
To keep them on their feet!
Get to work! Get to work! Keep them on their feet!

NICHOLAS

Eleni sends the children down
to the mill beside the brook.
They wait there in the cellar's gloom
While she goes away to cook.

MALE CHORUS

As much as they need ammunition they also need to eat!

NICHOLAS

As soon as they get settled in
another knock upon the door.

Another rebel messenger,
With an order from the corps.

MALE CHORUS

The enemy's advancing fast, they're just beyond the hill.
Within an hour at the most, they'll be outside the mill.
Evacuate immediately, and get to higher ground.
Just move as quickly as you can. Try not to make a sound.

NICHOLAS

Eleni finally completes her duty as a cook.
But at the mill, her children are nowhere to be found.
She searches all the corners of the storehouse by the brook.
But only finds a soldier looking helplessly around.

ELENI

Have you seen my children?
I told them to wait for me here.

SOLDIER

I haven't seen a soul since I lost my battalion.

ELENI

I haven't seen a soul but I need to find my children.
I told them to wait for me here.

SOLDIER

I'm cold and tired of fighting. All I want is to go back home.
My wife and child are starving in Athens. Please don't tell anyone you saw me.

ELENI

My children have been swallowed up in this Hell.

SOLDIER

All of Greece has been swallowed up in this Hell!

13. Scene: PEOPLES' COURT (*Judge, Soldier, Female chorus, Lukàs Ziàras, Nàkova Daflàki*)

JUDGE

People of Lià, you are about to witness the dispensation of real justice! This man was captured in your village after the failure of the fascist attack and now, before you all, we shall put him on trial.

(to the soldier)

Well now, are you, or are you not one of Zerva's men?

SOLDIER

Yes, I am.

JUDGE

Did you volunteer to fight, or were you forced to fight against your will?

SOLDIER

I'm a volunteer, but I have to feed my family!

JUDGE

I think we have heard enough already!

The court has reached a verdict. This man is guilty!

This traitor is sentenced to death!

FEMALE CHORUS

And so he should!

LUKÀS ZIÀRAS

Hasn't there been enough killing?

JUDGE

Don't interfere with the course of justice!

SOLDIER

Don't make things worse for yourselves!

JUDGE

We must implement the will of the people.

It's only fair that we hear all the witnesses.

FEMALE CHORUS

What does he mean, 'worse for ourselves?'

JUDGE

You, Nàkova, was your husband not murdered by Zerva's mercenaries?
So, what should we do with this traitor?

NÀKOVA

Kill him!

JUDGE

(turns to the men of the village)
And you, what do *you* say?

FEMALE CHORUS

Kill him!

JUDGE

(turns to the women of the village)
And you, comrades, what should be the fate of this man?

FEMALE CHORUS

Kill him! Yes, kill him!

JUDGE

Your sisters and daughters are fighting as rebel soldiers, are they not. This man came here to kill them. What do you say we should do?

FEMALE CHORUS

Kill him!

JUDGE

Yes, you all want to kill him!

FEMALE CHORUS

Kill him! The murderer! Kill him!
He came to murder our children!
Kill him! The traitor must die! Kill him!
Shoot him, hang him, kill him! Kill him!

Part III

14. THIRD READING

One day at the beginning of April in 1948, the women of the village were called to the square. There, a young rebel woman told them about the Communist party's plan to "rescue" their children. They didn't understand at first, but they soon realised they were being asked to surrender their children to be sent to "people's democracies" behind the Iron Curtain. The policy was meant to show the world the Communist Party was determined to protect children in the war zones but the real intention was to create future cadres for the party.

At first the policy seemed to be voluntary, but one afternoon as I lay daydreaming in my grandmother's bean field, I heard two passing guerrillas saying that few mothers seemed willing to give their children and party leaders had decided that they must be forced to do it. As soon as they disappeared down the path, I ran to my mother as fast as I could. "They're going to take me, Mana," I cried. "I heard them. They're going to take all of us no matter what any mother says."

I can still feel the touch of her cheek on my brow as she tried to calm me. "Quiet, my soul," she said. "You mustn't be afraid. No one is ever going to take you away from me." At that moment, my mother realised that she could not save her family no matter how much she tried to appease the guerrillas. She had to defy them.

By the end of 1948, more than 28,000 Greek children were taken from their parents to camps throughout the Communist bloc. Some three hundred of them came from the sixteen villages on the mountains around Lià. Through my mother's resolve to save her children, I was not one of them.

As a young man in America, I went to college and graduate school, studied journalism and worked as an investigative reporter for *The New York Times*, acquiring the skills I knew I would need to uncover my mother's story. And after a decade of preparation, I returned to Greece to begin the quest.

15. Aria: AMERICA (*Nicholas*)

NICHOLAS

Safe here from all the madness,
Home is now America.
America, the land of hope and promise,
The blessed land of plenty.
But now I'm here, a world away,
And all I have are memories raging madly,
Memories flooding my imagination,
Like timeless photographs in my mind.

Haunted by such a sadness,
Shadows of tragic history.
I picture her, a gentle smile,
Her loving arms' embrace.
I hear her voice, yet my soul's in torment!
This blessed land of plenty.
The streets of gold seem empty.
A promise of a happy life,
Yet all I have are memories raging madly,
Memories, memories now cascading through my mind as clear as day!

16. Scene: ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE EVACUATION (*Milià, Female chorus, Nàkova Daflàki*)

MILIÀ

Mothers of Lià, your children are in danger. The attacks on your village are not going to stop anytime soon. And even if the bombs and the bullets don't find them, they are already starving to death. You know there is not enough food, not even enough to feed our fighters. Who can say they don't hear their children crying themselves to sleep in hunger?

FEMALE CHORUS

She's right, she's right.
What she says makes perfect sense.
She's right! Every night we hear our children crying!

MILIÀ

Your children are the reason we are fighting! We are making a better place for them to live. You're right to share the hardships of our struggle but why should your children suffer too?

FEMALE CHORUS

Oh, please! We shouldn't let the children suffer.

MILIÀ

And since we care so much about their welfare, the party has found a way to save them all!

FEMALE CHORUS

What can her solution be?
What could they possibly do?

MILIÀ

We have called you all here to tell you that the people's republics of Albania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and others have opened their arms to our children! They will clothe them and feed them and give them a new life, and when the war is over, they will be returned to you, ready to take their place in the new Greece! Now each of you must come forward and give the names and ages of your children. Who will be first?

FEMALE CHORUS

Can she be serious?
Surely if we all say 'no' with one voice,
there'll be nothing she can do.

MILIÀ

You shouldn't become so attached to your children that you yourselves condemn them to starvation. Now, I ask each one of you in turn, who will show the others how to make the right decision? My faithful comrades, would you deprive your children of the chance to live a life without fear?

FEMALE CHORUS

None of us will ever give up our children!

MILIÀ

I see. *(she pauses as she takes a note of names)*

NÀKOVA

(weeping)

I'll be the first. Take them all except the baby!

What more do you want from me?

When my husband was killed, you took my house and everything I had, so take my children too!

FEMALE CHORUS

What are you doing, Nàkova? We must stick together!

NÀKOVA

What else can I do? We sleep in a barn and have nothing to eat. I couldn't just watch them starve, now could I?

MILIÀ

Who else will follow this brave example?

No one at all?

Go home and think about what's best for your children.

If you really love them, you will let them go!

17. Aria and Duet: EARLY IN THE MORNING (*Nicholas the boy, Male chorus, Eleni*)

NICHOLAS THE BOY

Early in the morning, the moment I would rise,
 I'd go and watch the sun light up the skies.
 But at night I hear my mother's sighs
 And watch the sadness grow in her eyes.
 Day by day, I watch her smile fade.
 And in the afternoons, when once we would have played,
 She sits alone in prayer; a picture of despair.
 She sits alone, a picture of despair.
 What could make her this afraid?

ALL TENORS

We tried our best, but nothing seems to make them understand.

ALL BASSES AND BARITONES

It's not enough! They have to give them up on your command!

NICHOLAS THE BOY

Am I in a dream? Oh, tell me it's not true! I can't believe what they're about to do!
 I heard them say they'll take us all away! A thousand miles from you!
 A thousand miles away from you! You told me we would never be apart!

ELENI

Take my hand, Nicholas, my darling boy.
 I'll find a way to set us free.
 Put your hand in mine and open up your heart,
 All we need is faith to show us where to start,
 And love will see us through.
 I promise we will never be apart.

ELENI AND NICHOLAS THE BOY

Not for a day! We'll find a way to be free and leave this all behind.

ELENI

What do you say? America!

NICHOLAS THE BOY

I say America!

18. Chorus and Soloists: TEN LONG YEARS (*Chorus, Eleni, Nicholas the boy, Kanda, Lukàs Ziàras*)

CHORUS

Ten long years now, the fields are all scattered with corpses!
Rivers are flowing with blood! No end in sight!
Fields of blood with no end on the horizon, with no end in sight!

ELENI, NICHOLAS THE BOY AND KANDA

Slip away beneath the moonlight. Slip away over the glades.
Tip-toe down to the river. Crossing over the fields!

LUKÀS ZIÀRAS

The only way! Across the fields! Across the river!

ELENI

We must be brave and stay together! Ready to act as one!

KANDA

We must be ready to act as one! And brave until it's done!

ELENI

Wait for darkness to fall.

ELENI, NICHOLAS THE BOY AND KANDA

Yes! We'll be waiting down by the mill house!

LUKÀS ZIÀRAS

The only things we have to fear are the blasted land mines.

ELENI AND KANDA

Tell us you'll take us to the other side!

LUKÀS ZIÀRAS

I'll do it for the children. I'll take you to the other side!

ELENI, LUKÀS ZIÀRAS AND KANDA

I swear an oath on the Holy Cross not to breathe a word about tonight.

CHORUS

Hundreds have fallen in battle. Thousands have given their lives!
How many more will they send to the slaughter?
Land of widowed wives!

ALL TENORS AND BASSES

Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison!

CHORUS

Ten years of misery, ten years of endless misfortune.
Kyrie Eleison!

19. Duet and Chorus: NIGHTFALL (*Eleni, Nicholas the boy, Children's chorus, Female chorus*)

ELENI

Ah! That prison I had built inside my soul.
 At last, these walls will fall away and we will be free!
 Now I have an answer to my humble, honest prayer.
 My children will be spared this awful fate.
 And I, I'll be there right beside them all the way,
 Until we are free at last!
 At last the answer to my prayer has come.
 All we can do is wait. Wait for the night.
 Wait for darkness to fall.

NICHOLAS THE BOY

Leave it behind. Its walls will fall away and you will be free at last!
 Holy Mother, protect us. Watch over us until we are free at last.
 The answer to your prayer has finally come.
 Wait, wait! Yes, we have to wait until nightfall.

CHILDREN'S CHORUS

Ah! That prison deep inside her soul.
 O, Holy Mother, please protect us all.
 Watch over us. Watch over us all until we are free at last.
 The answer to her prayer has finally come.
 Wait, wait, yes wait until nightfall.

ALL SOPRANOS AND ALTOS

Ah! That prison deep inside her soul, at last these walls fall away!
 Lord, hear my prayer. Protect my child!
 Spare my children from this awful fate!
 Watch over all of them until they are free at last!
 The answer to her humble prayer has come.
 Wait, wait, wait! The day is ending but night is yet to fall.
 Dear children, waiting for night to fall, close your eyes and sleep.

20. Chorus and Aria: CALL TO THE HARVEST (*Chorus, Eleni*)

MALE CHORUS

Our cause is a just one, our vision is grand,
 And the needs of our fighters are great.
 To keep them in shape for the battle at hand,
 We have to feed them well – olives and bread, all on a plate.
 So gather the women to work on the land,
 To harvest the upper estate.

FEMALE CHORUS

As we march to the fields and the harvest,
 Let us thank God for this glorious land. Sing with all your heart!

ELENI

Please! I beg you, give me at least until tomorrow.
 There is so much to do!
 Fields to sow, and my children who need me by their side.
 So many mouths and you would have me leave them here?
 Ah, have I not given all you asked of me?
 Every request was met at once with all my heart and soul.
 Please, now give me one more night to say good-bye.
 Please, it's for the children! Until the morning!
 Please, until tomorrow morning has come!
 All I ask is one night!
 All my hopes now turn to bitter sorrow.
 My prayers have turned to dust!

MALE CHORUS

Our cause is a just one, our vision is grand,
 And the needs of our fighters are great.
 This is an order, you must understand.
 The detail is leaving at eight!
 It's an order that comes from the highest command!
 Now, go to the village and wait.

Part IV

21. FOURTH READING

That evening, the last time I was to see my mother, she took a silver cross and chain from around her neck and put it on mine. She whispered to me to throw a black stone behind me when we left, so that I would never come back to this place. I watched as the guerrillas marched the women away toward the harvest fields. Just as they were about to disappear around the last bend, my mother turned and raised her hand in farewell. Growing up in America, whenever summer turned to autumn and the harvest season came around again, I would see her in my mind's eye, turning back to me with that last good-bye.

On the night of our escape, guided by Lukas Ziaras, we stumbled across minefields and crossed the river into no man's land. Government troops found us at daybreak, shivering and starving. They took us to the nearest town, where we were questioned about the escape. I was only nine, but Kanda had been trained as a rebel soldier, so they gave her a map of the village and asked her to point out where the rebel command was stationed. But Kanda just shook her head. She would tell them nothing until she knew her mother was safe.

The day after our escape, my mother was arrested, thrown into a cellar with thirty other prisoners. She was then taken out to be interrogated, brutally beaten and tortured. She confessed only to doing her duty as a mother to keep her children safe.

On August 28, 1948, my mother, along with twelve other condemned prisoners, was led up the mountain to a remote ravine. They were seen by a solitary woman who was watching her sheep. The prisoners were lined up at the edge of the ravine where they were shot. The rebel leader put a final bullet into each victim and their bodies were thrown into the ravine.

Three weeks later, when the guerrillas had been driven out of the village, my grandfather managed to retrieve my mother's body. He took her remains to the cemetery of St. Dimitrios, the church where she had been married and where she had baptised her children.

When I returned to Greece, more than twenty years later, I found the woman who had been on the mountain that day. She told me that, seconds before being shot, my mother had raised her hands and cried out two words: "PEDHIA MOU!" – "My children!"

22. Chorus: RUMOURS (*Female chorus*)

FEMALE CHORUS

Did you really hear the rebels talking?
Are you sure that what you heard is right?
Did they really say the guards were stalking
Children that were fleeing in the night?

The rebels said all this and more.
They said they've now begun to make arrests.
So pray they don't come knocking at your door.
They have ways of making you confess.

23. Recitativo and Arioso: ELENI IN PRISON (*Eleni*)

ELENI

The blackest thoughts would swirl and crowd my mind,
With no assurance of my children's plight.
What morbid force would have me stay behind
To ponder on that dreadful endless night?

I'd shudder as these fearful ghosts invade
My deepest hopes and grip my aching heart.
A prisoner now, I'd find myself afraid
That fate itself had played its final part.

But yesterday beside the spring
A rebel soldier whispered in my ear.
How soft the news he was to bring.
Oh, how it would calm my deepest fear.

He'd seen the children running through the valley,
and safely cross the river to the other side before the break of day! So now I have the strength
to face whatever fate
Might have in store for me, so come what may!

24. Recitativo: INTERROGATION (*Judge, Eleni, Chorus*)

JUDGE

Amerikana! You planned the whole escape, didn't you!

ELENI

I have no idea about any escape, I was working up in the fields!

JUDGE

You and that traitor, Lukàs Ziàras, were working together! We know that you talked to others about it! What do you have to say about that?

ELENI

It's all lies! It's all lies! It's all lies!

JUDGE

Did you or did you not try to include Konstantina in your plans?

ELENI

(aside) And if Lukàs had told Konstantina about the escape, what proof can they bring against me?

JUDGE

Speak up, Amerikana! Did you try to get others out as well as your children?

ELENI

Of course not! It's all lies!

JUDGE

Do you swear that you never talked to Konstantina about your escape? Do you swear on the Holy Virgin?

CHORUS

*àghios o theòs, àghios ischiròs,
àghios athànatos, elèison emàs.*

ELENI

I swear on the Holy Virgin.

CHORUS

*àghios o theòs, àghios ischiròs,
àghios athànatos, elèison emàs.*

JUDGE

Do you swear on the life of your son?

ELENI

On the life of my son, I swear.

(aside) Oh, my sweet Nicholas, how will you forgive me?

JUDGE

Let's see if there is someone who says otherwise.

Perhaps Konstantina's daughter, Milià!

ELENI

(aside) That girl is with the rebels.

If she talks, they will believe every word.

I'm finished!

JUDGE

Ha! You're finally ready to tell the truth, Amerikana!

Amerikana!

Take her away!

25a. Arietta: TORTURE (*Eleni*)

ELENI

When will this torture stop?

Please, just let me die and be free of this terrible fate.

Only the thought of my children give me solace!

My children are safe and I no longer need to hide the truth.

When will this torture stop?

Please, just let me die and be free of this terrible fate.

If it will bring an end to this dreadful suffering,

Then hear now my full confession!

25b. Duet: CONFESSION, 'COME NOW, DEATH.' (*Judge, Eleni, Chorus*)

JUDGE

So Amerikana, you're ready to confess?

ELENI

After ten years of war
My children are starving and miserable,
All I wanted for them was to be with their father.
Is that so wrong?

JUDGE

I'll decide what's wrong!

ELENI

All I did was save my children,
I only did my duty as a mother!
If you kill me,
I will die knowing my children are safe.

Aria

Without their love, I am no longer whole.
Come now, Death! Come gather in my soul!
Is that you, my dearest Fotini?
Come now, Death. Be swift, come set me free.

CHORUS

Come now, Death! Come now and gather in my tortured soul!

JUDGE

I think you've said enough, Amerikana!

26. Finale: TRIAL AND EXECUTION (*Chorus, Judge, Eleni, Milià*)

CHORUS

Come now, Death! Come now and gather in my tortured soul!
Come now, Death. Come gather in my soul and set me free.

JUDGE

I have here a written statement from Ziàras' daughter, Mariàthe. It says you offered Lukàs Ziàras American Dollars to smuggle your children out of the village!

ELENI

But Mariàthe isn't here to testify.

JUDGE

(he pauses) Milià, tell me what Lukàs Ziàras asked your mother?

MILIÀ

Lukàs asked my mother if she and I, would join the escape.

JUDGE

Did you hear him say that?

MILIÀ

No. But my mother told me everything.

JUDGE

Everything?

MILIÀ

She told me all about Eleni!

JUDGE

Eleni Gatzoyànni?

MILIÀ

Eleni told the women not to give up their children.

ELENI

That's not true! Show me anyone I told to give up their child.

JUDGE

Recit.

Who will answer the Amerikana? (*silence*)

You didn't need words to convince them!

By sending your children to the fascists, you've sabotaged our cause!

ELENI

I have no interest in your cause!

JUDGE

This woman has betrayed our struggle for a free and independent Greece!

Eleni Gatzoyanni, this court finds you guilty.

You are sentenced to death!

ELENI

My fate is sealed.

My life is all but through.

But my heart is full of love.

I will never see them again, it's true.

But my heart resounds with love,

For my children, *pedhià mou*.

Remember me at the fireside, singing.

Remember me in those few happy years together.

I will love you all forever,

My children, *pedhià mou*.

Pedhià mou.

JUDGE

Load! ... Take aim! ... Fire!

ELENI

Pedhià mou!!

– *Fine del'Opera* –

