

Testimony of Viaros - Avgustinos Capodistrias on the bombing of Corfu by Nazi German forces in 1943

Viaros - Avgoustinos Capodistrias (1932 - 2017) was the last male descendant of the Capodistria family line that traces back to Governor, Ioannis Capodistrias. He was the great-grandson of his brother Georgios.

He studied electrical engineering at RPI Polytechnic Institute of New York

and got a Master in Business Administration at Miami Ohio.

He married Dorothea Capodistria, née Stergiadi, and had three daughters: Corina, Tatiana, and Natalia.

It was September 1943. I was turning 12. I remember we spent our holidays at Moraitika¹ and returned to the city in early September. The "grown-ups" were talking about the Italian surrender. They said that now the Germans would soon occupy Corfu. They had troops opposite Igoumenitsa and Sagiada. I remember my father saying that we should not expect bombings, that the Germans were a civilized nation and would respect such an ancient city—a jewel—which was not a military target anyway. Nevertheless, people were anxious.

Because our house had sturdy stone walls, people from the neighborhood gathered in the basement. Shelter. We remained in our house—on the top two floors. My father did not believe we were in danger.

We went to sleep. At dawn, around 2:00–2:30 a.m., the bombing began. The first image that comes to mind is the old Venetian shutter, like a lit firework, crashing down onto the street. The whole room lit up and I was curled up in bed. The second image is that of my mother rushing into the room like a madwoman, trying to get us up in order to leave. Clambering down to the basement, we saw the surrounding houses in the neighborhood burning. The first bombs they dropped were incendiary, we were told later. They scattered like thin burning sheets of paper everywhere. Then came the explosive ones.

So many people had gathered in the basement that my father decided we should leave. We would go to Koukouritsa² for greater safety. He ran ahead and we followed through the streets. There were many others around us. Those who had relatives or their own homes in the countryside were leaving the city. On the road, while running, we lost Eleni³ who was carrying the baby, my younger sister.

This escape was terrifying. The Germans were bombing constantly, and we were huddled in the ditches on the right and left of the road. In those days, there were no toilets in the suburbs, and ditches were usually public latrines. So, amid the mud and filth, we rushed to hide from the bombs exploding around us. We arrived to Koukouritsa at dawn. We were scratched, covered in feces in our hair, on our hands, and on our clothes, but we were alive. Only my mother was crying for Eleni and the baby.

Marie⁴ gave us clean clothes. We washed and ate. Late the next afternoon, poor Eleni arrived with the baby she had saved in the chaos. Two days later, my uncle Tasos arrived. He and his family were at their country house in Perama⁵ on the night of the bombing. He walked back to the city to see what was left of his house—one floor below ours. He told us that the house had burned down completely. Within two days, my father melted like wax. I have never seen a person shrink like that.

Two floors. Fourteen rooms filled with family heirlooms. Bookcases, manuscripts, silverware, engravings and paintings, old and beloved furniture. I remember my father's gold-inlaid chessboard, carved with tartaruga, which I was not allowed to touch. Lessons⁶ were given with my hands tied behind my back. And then there was the roll-top desk, which was full of papyrus and parchment, much of it, my father said, dating from 800 AD.

I managed to save from the fire a wooden cross I had in a small bag. It opened in the middle and they said it contained Holy Wood, as well as my scissors and some embroidered rags, works of my own hands! My mother saved the case with the Governor's Diplomas from Switzerland, the topaz with the family coat of arms that was in the middle of the rotunda table and some «engravings in a small suitcase. Almost all that remained of a family's journey through the centuries. The rest was blown away by the bombs of a civilized people who targeted the defenseless civilians of an unfortified city that had not even put up any resistance.

1. **Moraitika** is a village in southern Corfu. The Capodistria family owned and still owns a country house and land with olive trees and grapevines in the area. In fact, this property was Ioannis Capodistrias' favorite. In correspondence with his father from Russia, he gave instructions about the crops, hoping that when he had fulfilled his obligations to his homeland, he would retire there for the last years of his life.

2. **Koukouritsa** is another estate owned by the Capodistria family. It is located 7 kilometers north of Corfu town, in the area of Evropouloi. Since the 1980s, it has been bequeathed to the three major cultural associations of Corfu and operates as the Capodistria Museum.

3. **Eleni Rari**, lived with the Capodistria family from a very young age until shortly before her death, in 1980. She was basically working as nanny and cook.

4. **Marie: Maria Desylla – Capodistria** (1898 – 1980), was mayor of Corfu and great-granddaughter of Georgios Capodistrias, brother of Ioannis Capodistrias, governor of Greece. She was the first woman elected mayor in modern Greek history and cousin of Viaros - Avgustinos Capodistrias. At that time she was living at the Koukouritsa farmhouse.

5. **Perama** is an area in southern Corfu.

6. At that time, the aristocracy of Corfu largely had their children taught at home by private tutors.

The testimony was given in 2014 as part of the annual events commemorating the anniversary of the bombing of the city of Corfu, under the auspices of the Municipal Regional Theatre of Corfu, headed by actress – director Natalia Capodistria, daughter of Viaros – Avgustinos Capodistria.

The text has been as well been published in volume no 30, 2021, Reading Society of Corfu.

The text of the testimony is as well included in volume 30 of the 2020-2021 annual publication of the Corfu Reading Society.