Sorrow in a Greek Village

Nicki Cappas

Although I hardly knew her, I wept at the death of the child. I wept not only because her death was a freakish accident but also because she was linked to our family by a holy sacrament—a baptism.

I remember how excited I was when I received the letter from my father during his visit to his hometown in Sparta, saying that he had Christened an infant girl and he had given her my mother’s name. Now five years later I was taking my first trip to Greece and eagerly looking forward to meeting my goddaughter. However, it is too bad that in the three days I saw her she was alive only once.

That first day she was wearing a blue cotton dress and white shoes from America. She was wearing her baptismal cross, too. She was a little girl—just five years old and typically Greek-looking in every way. Her eyes were extremely dark and deeply set into her face; her hair was black and very curly, and her skin was olive. She was so shy meeting her godfamily for the first time that even an American doll could not break the ice! She did stay for awhile, but there was a wedding in the town and she soon scampered off to see the bride.

In searching for her the next day, the police found only her shoes and the few walnuts she had gathered lying on the edge of the well. When they found her, she was dead—lying face-down in the bottom of the well. Now, in order to see her the second time, I came to her home.

That evening the child, wrapped tightly in a white sheet, was lying in the center of the livingroom floor. The only visible part of her body was her forehead with the wound she received when she fell forward and hit herself on the opposite edge of the well. The mother was there, and her grief was clearly evident in her face. She was completely in black and kneeling close to her daughter, grasping the ends of her mourning kerchief and chanting. As she was doing this, her body was swaying, and in some instances she would speak to her child. This lamentation of the dead is one of the oldest customs of the Greeks whereby the relatives of the deceased bemoan their fate and often speak directly to the dead in a song-like manner.

The following day I saw her as a bride, for according to Greek tradition, an unmarried person on the day of his funeral is always dressed for his wedding. Again according to custom, this task is performed by the godparent. Thus, a godfather will prepare his godson; a godmother will prepare her goddaughter. It is difficult, however, when the deceased is only five years old, to carry out the custom. It was impossible to find a veil and a crown that were suitable. Consequently, my mother had to use my white oblong chiffon scarf and a wreath of flowers as the head attire. Now the girl was
almost ready for her wake except that a valuable possession must be included in her casket: her baptismal cross. This time-honored custom dates back to the time of the ancient city of Mycanae when the kings and queens were buried with their riches.

My godsister's wake lasted until noon as relatives and friends brought flowers and kissed the icon that lay in the child's arms. Following this ceremony, the child was taken to church for the last time. It entailed a long procession through the village, led by the village priest; followed by four men holding the casket; the family; the relatives; and the friends. Next came the child taken in another procession to the cemetery. Here, while the priest read the death prayer, the cover of the casket, which bore her first name printed in large Greek letters, was fastened into place and my godsister was slowly lowered into her grave. When I think back, I realize how strange it was to see her holding in life and in death the one item that symbolized our close bond—the baptismal cross.

**El Barrio de Nueva York**

Judith Barnes

*El Barrio de Nueva York* is Spanish for village, locality, or ward of New York. The vermin-infested dwellings of this neighborhood, in which I experienced living, are what I am about to describe. I had the opportunity of living in Harlem with a Puerto Rican family two summers ago when I was on a church work caravan. I will use no hyperboles for the reason that there cannot be any exaggeration to describe these vile, crackerbox apartments that house several many-numbered families. Mothers are afraid to let their offspring play outside in Spanish Harlem. The dark, filthy streets are filled with swarthy, filthy people—prostitutes, addicts, and delinquents.

On one side of the obscene street exist the ruins of condemned buildings. On the opposite side of the street are the murky tenement houses. The windows of the structures have clothes hanging from them, as well as people sitting on the sills fanning themselves because of the sultry air. As one walks still farther down the street, he may observe a broken fence around hand ball courts on the school playground. Here and in the streets are the only places the children can play. The school has many broken windows and is, in general, a shambles. Unique sounds of the tambourine may be heard coming from the door of the store-front Pentecostal Church. There are sidewalk markets where unusual foods and fly-ridden fruit are sold. The many poverty-stricken people swarm through the market like the flies.

If one stops to go into an apartment house, he may have to walk around the loiterers who sit endlessly day in and out on the stoop. His eyes refocus to see down the dirty, dark corridor. He ascends the stairs and the stench of a dead rat hits him in the face like a brick