

«The poet-sandal maker of Athens, at 89 Pandrossou Street (between Ermou Street and the Acropolis), will make you a pair of sandals (your design or his) for 95-130 drachmas. This fantastic man is also the sandal supplier for the Beatles.»

(EUROPE ON \$ 5 A DAY, 1968-70) Page 478)

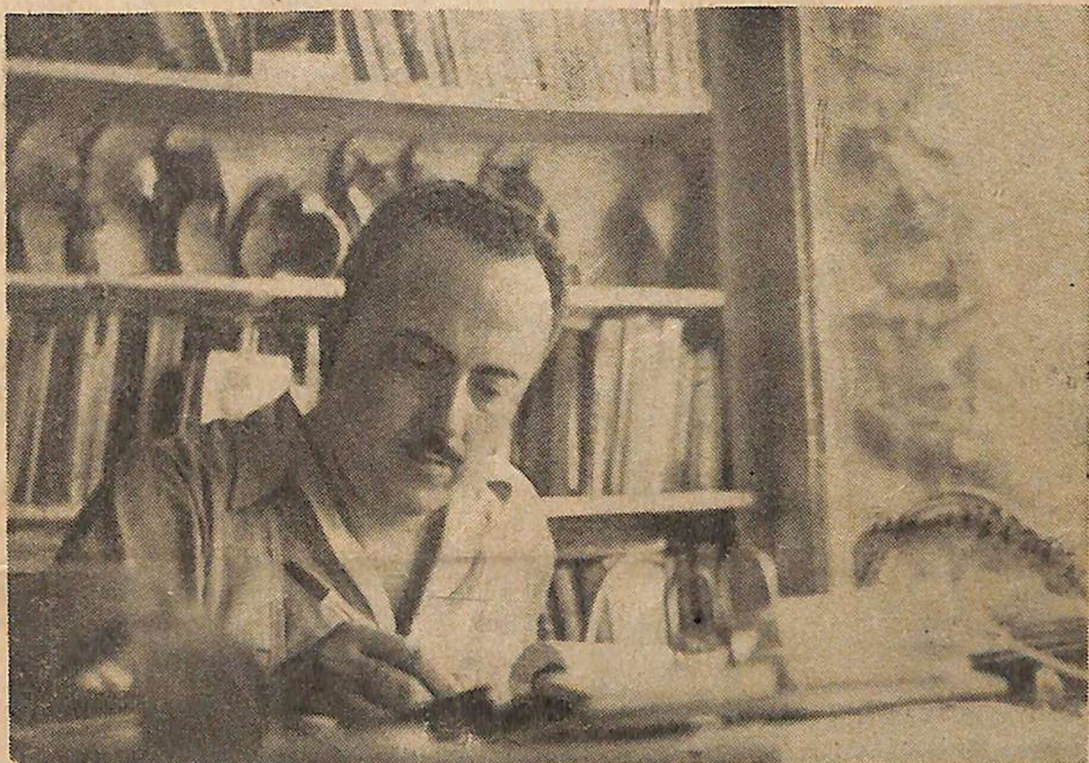
STAVROS MELISSINOS

THE POET - SANDALMAKER OF ATHENS

«... A NEW TENNESSE WILLIAMS !» (N B C March 1965)

«... THE GREEK HANS SACS !» (German Television)

«... THE FOSTER BROTHER OF OMAR KHAIVAM !» (B.B.C. T V.)



STAVROS - THE POET - SANDALMAKER OF ATHENS

by EFIE S. SMITH (The American Almanac)

It's no sleek display window, that's for sure. The glass front of No. 89 Pandrossou Street is more a frame for the apron wrapped sandalmaker who often sits at the makeshift desk just behind. If you peer closely through the careful-in-a-careless-sort-of way arrangement of leather straps, odd sandals, large mosaic vase, bright strings of beads, a browning personality, article from a

Greek magazine, the framed cover of Frommer's «Europe on \$ 5 a Day» with the book's descriptive blurb advertising his sandals cut out and superimposed, and a liberal sprinkling of his own «Persian Rubaiyat», you can see that he is absorbed in his work.

But a step inside the pleasantly jumbled shop reveals he is intent, not on fashioning a piece of new leather,

but on a poem or manuscript.

This is The Poet and Sandalmaker of Athens, and it isn't easy to decide just which is the hobby and which the vocation. Probably Stavros Melissinos himself doesn't even know. To him, they go hand in hand.

POETIC SALES

«Because of my poetry more people come in to look, and

so I sell more,» is very logical explanation, though his verses are by no means a sales gimmick. In fact, the business side passes almost unobserved in a conversation with Poet Stavros. Indeed, it seems almost mercenary to broach questions of sales, etc., for he obviously has much more enthusiasm and interest in publicizing his literary achievements.

The morning is especially propitious for such a talk, the slow season precluding the usual troupes of tourists swarming through the street's souvenir stalls and a steady downpour discouraging even the natives shoppers. We have the shop to ourselves. The Poet tells his history while his guest sips the hospitable cup of Greek coffee and munches the tangerine that he has offered.

ARMY STINT

«I began to study radio electrology as a student. Then I went into the Army as an officer—you know, one star—yes, in the signal corps, and that's when I started writing poetry. After the Army I stopped my studies because I like to be myself and if I continued I'd have to be an employee. I don't like to have influence from other people.

«You can understand when my family and friends found out, how worried they were—just like in Baudelaire's «The Blessing.» Do you know that poem, how it describes the mother's feelings when she

finds she's given birth to a poet?

«The mother is so up-set and courses against Heaven because a poet doesn't care for the practical life but sacrifices many things to hunt his illusion. My father didn't like my decision. He wanted me to follow my studies and come into his shop.»

The senior Melissinos was a sandalmaker by profession also in the very same shop since 1928. Poet Stavros has headquartered both his pursuits there since 1954.

In that year he introduced his first book of poetry, «Mosaic,» followed by «The Swan Song» (an elegy,) «Lambros» (a completion and expansion of a famous unfinished poem by Dionysios Solomos,) and two plays in one volume: «Chastity Belt» and «Ulysses' Helmet.» His most popular edition of verses is his «Persian Rubaiyat,» patterned after Omar Khayam's. «I've always tried to be free, to be myself. A rubaiyat is a collection that doesn't follow one train of thought, each verse depends on the author's mood, some humorous, and so on...» Sample:

No 10

«Life without cares» I asked—
«Is every man's longing,
But how can our days become
like gently flowing honey?
And everyone, with one accord,
Wisely replied:
«Dear fellow be either a priest
or a barrel cork at least»

A query about his English brings this comment from

The Poet. «Funny thing about my English. I started from the top, from the most difficult because I liked the poems of Edgar Allan Poe and wanted to read them in the original. So I took a dictionary and Poe's poems side by side. Bit by bit I learned words and then structure.»

Just then a couple from South Africa wandered by, and Poet Stavros called out a cheerful invitation from the doorway to come have a look around. «Oh, yes,» said the woman, who was heading in anyway, «We know all about you from 'The Book!」

This diversion gave a chance for our own further look around, at the «Spoon River Anthology» and «The Prophet» book covers tacked on the wall; at the poster reminiscent of the six-month run his play «Laura» enjoyed at Athens' Florida Theater; at his latest published work, «The Lady and the Gamekeeper,» a stage play based on «Lady Chatterley's Lover,» at the many framed newspaper clippings from Germany, Brazil and other countries, showing his prolific publicity in the foreign press.

«You know, the University of Pittsburg is interested in putting on one of my plays, volunteers The Poet, returning from his departed customers. In October he made his first—but he hopes not his last trip to the States, to Pittsburg at Gimbel Department Stores' invitation to participate in

a Mediterranean V promotion featuring craftsmen from France, Italy, Spain, Israel «and me from Greece, I sat in a sort of kiosk all day demonstrating the art of sandal making. And I read my poetry on TV.»

In his native Athens during the peak summer season, each of the shop's six or seven straight-backed, cane-bottom chairs is occupied by a steady stream of tourists, and the wooden settee crowded in opposite among the racks of shoes and boxes of materials is worn smooth from the many posteriors that have

perched there while their owners leaned over to scrutinize the fitting of a pair of sandals made for them on the spot. Not only the already well-heeled tourists stop to browse.

The Poet's fame, the durability of his goods, and his pocketbook prices (90 to 140 drachs) have become a legend among the hitchhikers and hippies who flock through Athens. For them, a pilgrimage to The Poet's is almost mandatory, to ensure lasting shoe leather underfoot for their treks on East or back home.

Even The Beatles have put their money in The Poet's till. First came Ringo, who had seep one of his pamphlets. That was in 1967. Later, the whole group paid a return visit.

But rich, poor, visiting dignitary or transient hippy, it doesn't matter, the price is the same. This very guest can remember buying a pair of sandals here during her early days in Athens, and trying to lower the sum a bit. She got the very courteous reply, «Fixed prices.»

The Poet just doesn't have time to barter.

ULYSSES HELMET (a synopsis)

The People, near suffocation after many years of being oppressed by the Nobility and Priesthood, are about to explode into the air of insurrection. At this critical moment, Paris, Prince of Troy, kidnaps the beautiful Helen, wife of Menelaus, a Greek king. The Nobility, immoral and corrupt to the bone, confused in their sexual identities, see in the situation a saving raft in sea of their decadence. With empty words of hypocrisy — «Honor» «Home» etc.—they exhort the People to invade Troy. However, underlying the patriotic show of raising an army to rescue Helen is actually the vision of pillaging Troy and its treasures. As the gathered Army is about to embark on their campaign from Aylice, an epidemic of dysentery decimates its ranks. As the condition of the Army grows

steadily worse, an oracle is sought from Kalchas a Priest of Zeus. The oracle says that Agamemnon has angered Artemes, Goddess of the Hunt, by killing one of her favorite deer and that the deed must be expiated by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. Ulysses, experienced in persuasion, is chosen to inform Agamemnon, (who suffers from heart disease) of the oracle. Through a scene of a meeting of Priests, it is revealed that the epidemic is in fact caused by Kalchas, who scatters purgative herbs in the army's water supply. Kalchas scheme is to use the oracle to punish Agamemnon. The reason for Kalchas' wrath is revealed in a scene in which Ulysses confronts Agamemnon with the oracle. Agamemnon explains that he has earlier stolen the «nephew»

of Kalchas, a beautiful homosexual named Stisypigo and that Kalchas seeks revenge out of jealousy. Kalchas emerges from a hiding place and admits the truth of Agamemnon's statements. Ulysses the clever mediator, warns then that their personal quarrel will end in the People rebelling and throwing off the oppression of the Priests and Nobility. A compromise is reached: Stisypigo will be disguised as Iphigenia and sacrificed in her place, thus neither Priest nor King need be jealous of each other and the innocent Iphigenia will be spared. On the day of sacrifice, Ulysses drugs Stisypigo with Hashish and delivers him to the sacrificial altar. Accidentally Stisypigo's robe catches fire; in extinguishing the blaze, his genitals are exposed; he awakes from his stupor and relates

his sordid story to the People. The People rebel, capture the Priests and Nobility, but the important conspirators, Agamemnon, Kalchas, and Ulysses manage to escape momentarily. In the prison, the captive Priests and Nobles, still ignorant of the reason behind their imprisonment accuse one another of various crimes: robberies,

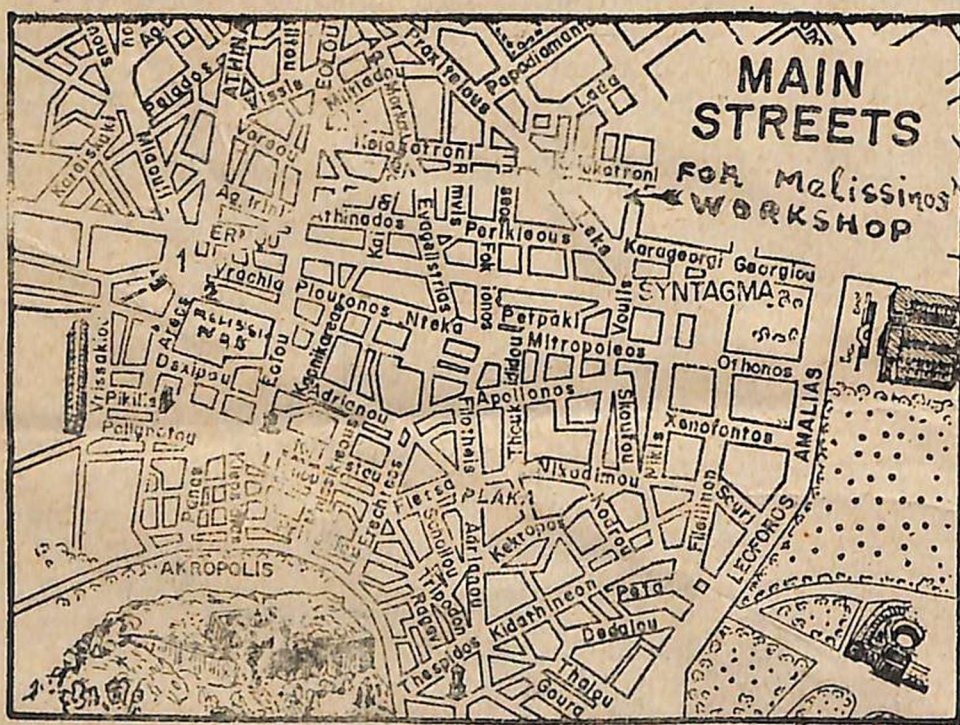
fraud, blackmail, forgery—things presented to the People like «miracles.» However, with the arrival of the arch-conspirators in prison the misconceptions are dispelled. Additionally, sly Ulysses has sent Theophector another Priest, to the oracle at Delphi with bribes of gold and Flesh for the beds of the Priests there. The Del-

phic oracle in return informs the People that Aphrodite, the Love Goddess and a patroness of Troy, created the disorder among the Greeks in order to disunify them and thereby protect the Trojans. The confused and innocent People «believe» once again and free the Priests and Nobility «to live happily ever after.»

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