

Loty Petrovits

# **THE LITTLE BROTHER**

(Original title: **O MIKROS ADELFO**)

Summary - Extracts - Reviews

Women's Literary Club Prize

1st edition 1976 - 28th edition 2000

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## Summary and extracts

On the eve of World War I, 16-year-old Angelos lives in a small town with his family (parents, an older sister, Argyrie, and a brother of 12 -the mischievous Alexandros). The War reaches suddenly their town, forcing the inhabitants to abandon hastily their homes and seek refuge in other parts of the country. Angelos's family manages to catch a train, but Alexandros does something foolish and gets lost...

(Extract from Chapter 2)

*...They had finally managed to find a cart. It was not a big one, but getting even that at a time like this made them happy. People were running to and fro, with frightened expressions on their faces. Some carrying bundles. Others pushing handcarts or dragging loaded donkeys. Women clutching children, old people leaning on canes, sick ones walking on trembling legs, young and old, all with panic written in their eyes, were running away, getting away. ....*

*At the station people were swarming and pushing each other anxiously. One train had just arrived. God, how narrow its doors were, for so many desperate people!*

*They reached the steps of the train with difficulty. Argyrie got on, Alexandros, mother, old Katerina next, then father. Angelos last. He wanted to make sure everyone was on. The train moved on almost immediately crunching its burdened irons on the rails, cruelly leaving behind all those who had not managed to get on. And there were so many!*

*Angelos spotted from the window a young man and a girl supporting their crippled father. They were neighbors. They had hardly reached the train's steps, when it started moving. "Bad luck", Angelos thought. "We were very lucky to have made it".*

*Then something quite unexpected happened.*

*A meowing cry was heard, and, quick as lightning, Alexandros jumped off the train. Mother let out a scream, and all leaned out of the window.*

*Alexandros could be seen running after his cat, which frightened had taken to its heels. Beside them the little basket he had been carrying remained uncovered and empty. They understood... He had taken his cat along, even though they had all explained to him that cats do not easily leave the place they were born in, he had done it again.*

*And the train moved on without stopping.*

*"It does not help crying now, Elisabeth", father said firmly, seeing mother holding her head and repeating over and over "Oh, my God! What has befallen us, my God! What has befallen us..."*

*"At the first opportunity I'll get off", he tried to assure her. "I'll find him, and we'll join you on the next train".*

*His words were again drowned in his cough. He dropped on a seat. He was burning with fever...*

*"No, father! I will go back to look for him", Angelos stated. "I can walk and run faster; you are sick. You must stay with the women".*

*And then! The train slowed down unexpectedly. Some obstacle... Angelos did not waste time. He looked into the damp eyes of his mother and cried out to her: "Don't worry, mother! I'll bring him back to you."*

*At a jump he found himself lying on the dry August earth. The train was again moving on hastily.*

*He run to the station. He looked everywhere. Not a sign. He kept running about in the town. The streets were deserted. The agony was choking him. His only hope was their house.*

*He found the door open. At last! Surely, the little one would be here. Oh, this wild child! Oh, this pest, the little scoundrel! Even in these difficult hours he had to have his own way. Angelos's face burnt with anger. "Little"... But at his age, Angelos was always called "the big one". Ah, he would give him a good telling off.*

*Alexandros was standing in the doorway. Again these clouded eyes...*

*"Look", he said holding the cat in his arms and lifting up his elbow towards a large trunk. "I found it on top of that... It must have managed to squeeze through somewhere".*

*Angelos turned to look. The trunk with Argyrie's dowry! Now he remembered. He had heard father say "no, no, impossible, there will be no room for this, we cannot take it!" So, it was Argyrie's dowry he had meant. That is why Argyrie was so quiet, silent all the way, as if made of marble. So much trouble, so much work, all done with so much love...*

*Alexandros also looked at the trunk, and there was a tear in his eyes.*

*Angelos would never understand this child. Often so carefree and indifferent, and yet so sensitive at times! His anger calmed down. There was time enough to tell him off on the train. Now they had better hurry. He took him by the hand, they locked the door again, buried the key in the same hidden spot, from where the little one had unearthed it a few minutes ago, and set off...*

*At the station, people were all shouting and gesticulating at the same time. Dusk was falling, but there was no sign of a train. They sat on a step. They waited. Only the cat played with Alexandros's fingers from time to time.*

*The voices and the weeping ceased as time went by. Finally people became silent. Only the noise of the telegraph could be made out. Messages were constantly arriving.*

*Night had fallen but no train had shown up. Then, loud but broken, the voice of the stationmaster was heard:*

*"The bridge has been blown up. No other train can cross. There will be no other train".*

*The two brothers looked at each other. Angelos felt his legs melting away. But he was a man. He had made a promise to his mother. He straightened his back and got up. "Let's go, Alexandros", he said firmly. "We'll find another way".*

*Indeed he would find another way. At any cost. If only to take the little one back to their mother. He could still feel her wet eyes looking at him with despair. How true mother's words were..."It's people that count". His thoughts returned to Argyrie's dowry. Argyrie would soon console herself over her precious trunk. But each day mother would suffer more and more over Alexandros. Angelos must do every-thing possible. He would now be a brother as well as a protector to the little one. He was ready to fight for him against all the hardships of the world. Alexandros was a pest, no doubt. He should not have done something so foolish. By*

*now they would have all been safe on the train, travelling together. He deserved a hard spanking. But when Angelos remembered the look in his eyes...And then that tear! A strange child and, at the same time, so lovable. His adorable little brother; with his pranks, his fantasies... There would come, he used to tell them, a time when people would be walking on the moon! And other such things -the things the boy said!*

*Yes. He would even give his life for Alexandros.*

.....

The two brothers remain blockaded in the enemy's territory and go to live temporarily with some relatives. Yet, Angelos desperately tries to find a way for them to escape. He wants to take his little brother back to his mother as promised. A good chance appears, but is purposely missed: their young cousin is in danger, so Angelos decides to stay in assistance, instead of living with his little brother. He feels that his little cousin is a "little brother" too.

Soon after, Angelos is taken hostage to the enemy's country and the two boys are separated. Desperate about his little brother's fate, Angelos keeps seeing him in the face of every child in need of help: during the hard march to the concentration camp he offers his last drops of water to a wounded little friend -so much like his brother; later, when a chance appears for him to join a team and escape, he changes his mind at the last moment and stays in help of a fellow-countryman, a young boy at his brother's age, who broke his leg during the attempt.

After many adventures, the two brothers unexpectedly meet at the same concentration camp. But Angelos's "little brothers" are now more than one. A sick young ally is considered as a little brother too, since their countries fight against the same enemy. Angelos takes his place and is tortured for the ally's sake.

When at last the War ends and the two brothers are free to return to their country, Angelos once more endangers his return home for the sake of a child. It is one of the enemy's children, lost and abandoned among the crowd; a young boy with his little brother's name...

(Extracts from the last chapter:)

.....  
*They woke up at daybreak. Each gathered his few belongings and they set off for the railway station.*

*The platform was crowded with all sorts of people. They all waited impatiently for the train. A lot of them were hostages returning to their country*

*So peace would return, Angelos was thinking... His family would return to their land, their town; they would build their home again. Argyrie would sing again, sewing perhaps clothes for a baby. Father would once more sit in his armchair, quietly reading in the evenings. Mother would fill the house with her care, and old Katerina with her comings and goings. Alexandros, now serious, would study to become a politician, or so he said...*

*From far away, they could discern the whistle of a train.*

*"It's coming"! yelled Alexandros.*

*A child's crying was heard, and Angelos turned his head to see where it came from. A little farther back a skinny child was crying his heart out. Nobody could be seen near him. Angelos halted. The child could have been no more than five years old.*

*Angelos took a few steps. He went near the child. "Why are you crying? What's your name?" he asked in the enemy's language.*

*The little boy lifted its eyes and looked at him bewildered. Smudges of tears*

were on its grubby cheeks. "My name is Alex", he whispered.

"How did you get here? Where are you staying? Where are your people?"

More weeping shook the child. Then he stopped and looked up again at Angelos. Regaining courage he said in a voice still broken from crying:

"They dropped bombs on my village. Mum and dad got killed. I was dragged out from under the stones by the neighbors. Then they took me with them and we went on the train. They would have taken me to this town, to my aunt, but I lost them..."

"Where did you lose them?"

"Right here, when everybody got off the train".

"And your aunt, where does she live?"

"I don't know. She has a bakery in a square in this town. Our neighbors knew". And he began to cry again.

"Poor little thing", Angelos thought.

"Stick together", the doctor's voice was heard, while the train was entering the station puffingly.

"The little boy can get pushed, even hurt, where he is standing", Angelos thought again, walking back to his friends. "What if nobody helps him? What if no one takes him in? Some institution should..."

A row of carriages passed in front of them, interrupting Angelos's train of thoughts.

"Here! Here! There's room in this carriage!" his friend Manolis shouted pointing out the carriage

The others ran pushing Angelos along too. The four of them went on.

They stood at the far end of the corridor. Inside, the carriage was crammed. People continued to pour into the other carriages, pushing, squeezing, clambering.



*Among the shouting and fussing the crying of the child was still audible.*

*"Maybe he's hungry", Angelos thought. "Somebody must look after him. Besides he'll be scared by all this crowd."*

*The train started to move slowly. Yet before it pulled out of the station, it stopped again. The voice of the stationmaster was heard loud through some tube:*

*"The train will stay here for half an hour for repairs!"*

*"Don't you move from here", the doctor said. We might lose our space. We'll wait here."*

*"The woman at the bakery!" Angelos thought suddenly. The woman who'd lost her son... Could she perhaps be the aunt of the child? Unlikely, he considered, such a coincidence, but so many coincidences had already happened to him! And then, even if she were not, she would surely know all the bakeries in town. He had to... Yes! There was no other way.*

*"I'll be back soon!" he called.*

*And he jumped off the train.*

*"Where are you going?" Alexandros shouted.*

*But Angelos did not turn back to answer. He ran, he reached the boy, and lifted him up into his arms. The child stopped crying.*

*"Come!" Angelos said. "Let's go find auntie!"*

*He would be quick. As quick as he could. The bakery was not far away; he would make the train. But, even if he missed it, he would take the next one. Alexandros had the others for company. Besides, his little brother was grown-up now... He knew the way. He would go to mother alone...*

*But no, no, he would run, he would be back in time.*

*What if the bakery was closed? Or if the woman at the bakery said the boy was not her nephew and she could not take care of him? Ah! Angelos was sure she*

would not refuse. But even if she did, Angelos would take the boy with him. He could no longer leave this child behind. He would take him to mother, to raise him at home like a brother, until his people could be found. What difference did it make whether he was an enemy's child? If some creature from another planet -let say from the moon, where Alexandros insisted that one day people would walk on- looked down on earth and saw its people, would they not all look alike in his eyes? Just as other beings -animals, plants, birds of the same species- look to humans? Would he not take them all for brothers?

In his ears father's voice sounded, as if it had never stopped: "Stand like a man by your little brother". Now he knew whom he should consider his brother. It did not matter if the same blood as his ran in his veins. It did not even matter if he was his relative, his fellow-citizen, fellow-countryman, ally, or even an enemy. It was enough to be a human being. Any human being on this earth who needed him. And he had to stand by him, sympathize with his pain, share his fate, which sooner or later would be his fate too...

... He clutched the child, and started to run again, convinced that he was holding a little brother.

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Notes:

This novel is based largely on real events, which occurred in the Balkans from 1914 to 1918.



## Reviews

(In translation)

... A marvelous novel for children, written with deep humanity and grace...

EFTHINI (monthly magazine) - Athens, June 1976

... The dove of peace and the olive-tree branch emerge from the feelings of wild hatred between nations...

MACEDONIA (daily newspaper)- Thessaloniki, 22 Oct.'76

... Our children's literature has gained a rare book...

*T. Gosiopulos*, MACEDONIA Radio, Thessaloniki, 22 Oct.'76

... It could have made a wonderful film. However, what makes the book really special is its spirit. Sympathy and care for those who suffer, passion for peace and freedom, bitterness towards injustice, indignation at betrayal whatever the source. The objective viewing of facts and situations gives worldwide dimensions to its content. It describes the horror of slavery, the strength and fortitude of those whose aim is to resist violence. A message of brotherhood and humanity beyond any linguistic or national barriers...

*Calliope Moustaka*, TO VIMA (newspaper)-23 Dec.1976

...How could we label *The Little Brother* as a novel "for children" when it can be equally enjoyed by adults? In 150 pages and using the simple language of truth and reality, Loty Petrovits managed to combine the spirit of kindness with the spirit of heroism, the sense of patriotism with the sense of human brotherhood, History with Art, Desperation with Optimism...

*Dim. Yakos*, GREEK-BELGIAN Review, Issue 16-17/1977

... It constitutes a brilliant combination of children's literature and appropriate education...

*M. Maratheftis*, Director of the Teachers' Academy of Cyprus - Nicosia, 26 April 1978

... The whole book is a hymn to love, world peace and a condemnation of war...

*Maria Pyliotou*, PEDIKI HARA (Cypriot monthly Children's magazine) - Nicosia, November 1978.

... Love and self-sacrifice beyond borders are what make this book valuable spiritual food for our children and a must for every library...

ECOGENIA KAI SCHOLIO (Family and School), Cypriot bimonthly magazine - Nicosia, January-February 1979

... Through these adventures, young readers will experience incidents and events of war that do not lead to hatred and stirring of nation differences, but to passion for freedom and reconciliation...

AVGI (daily newspaper) -Athens, 2 September, 1984

... I recommend this book to children of my age without reservations. They will experience the meaning of a timeless message...

*S. Plastiras*, High School student,  
NEOI KAIROI (journal) - Karditsa, 24 October, 1986

... The iron unity of the myth, the fast development, the wonderful plot, the truth and persuasiveness of the characters, the important messages, all these cooperate in the creation of an authentic piece of literature...

*Heraclis Kallergis*, Professor, University of Patra,  
(letter) 11 January 1987

... A children's book which reminds of the work of our classical author Penelope Delta and deals with a geographical area irrigated with blood and tears. By avoiding to poison young people's soul with chauvinistic messages, this novel inspires and guides to the right direction. The *Little Brother* is an example of finding the golden section between patriotism, good quality of literature for children and "historical" novel.

*K. Valetas*, AEOLIKA GRAMMATA, issue No 101, 1988

... *The Little Brother* is one of those books that beat the time. It combines the truth of life with the truth of art... The real events on which it is based and the adventures of the Greek family are objectified through the roads of art, so that the story acquires a tragic timelessness, beyond the "there" and the "then".

*Dr. V.D. Anagnostopoulos*, DIADROMES magazine  
Issue No 3, Autumn 1986

See also <http://w4u.eexi.gr/~loty>