

The Pencil Factory

A novel

Soti Triantafillou

“The Pencil Factory” is a novel of ideas that covers eighty years of European history, beginning in Cairo in the 1860s and ending in Athens on the eve of World War II.

Stefanos Assimakis is an engineer at Suez and his son Markos goes to Djibouti to work for the railway. But before this, in Zurich, he meets the revolutionary Nicos Vangalis who smokes sixty cigarettes a day and drinks sixty cups of black coffee.

“The Pencil Factory” is the story of this great friendship, as well as the story of a girl, named Luselle, who loved parties and Paris nights; and of another girl who hanged herself on a tree; it is also the chronicle of social dreamers in turbulent times, a novel about being madly in love and about being mad, about bloody crimes and a bloodless one that happened in a Congo villa in the early 1930s.

“The Pencil Factory” is a novel about the people who travelled to the depths of Africa, who met Lenin in Geneva, Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin, Trotsky in Saint Petersburg. And who, in spite of betrayal, illness and loss, led wonderful lives.

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Over 100.000 copies sold so far.

Soti Triantafillou was born in Athens, Greece, in 1957. She got a Ph.D. on American History and Civilization from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris and NYU in New York. She has published three collections of short stories, two books on film, eight novels, Saturday Night on the Edge of the Town 1996, Tomorrow, Another Country 1997, The Subterranean Sky 1998 (published in German by Zsolnay), The Pencil Factory 2000 (German, French, Hebrew, Turkish and Catalan rights sold), Poor Margo 2001 (originally written in English), Albatros 2003, Chinese Boxes 2006, Some of your blood 2008, the novellas The Flight (Melani, 2004) and Forgiveness 2005, a children’s book, Marion on the Silver Islands and in the Red Forests 1999 and a young adult book, African Diary 2008.

The pessimistic attitude that considers every change as a tendency towards deterioration is a matter frequently encountered in history and which history has repeatedly disproved.

G. Barraclough, «Introduction in Contemporary History», 1970

«The Pencil Factory» is a historical novel written with a cross-cutting technique like a movie with parallel action. The story begins in 1866, when the Suez canal started being built: the first character who appears is Stefanos Assimakis, the son of a wealthy silk-maker from Chios, who has studied Engineering in Lyons, and goes to Cairo to work for the French at the canal. Stefanos is a visionary, a liberal, a man of grace and taste, and believes in the industrial civilization, the emancipation through technical progress. He is a railroad enthusiast and a republican. In 1871 he marries a middle-class young woman from Athens, Antho, who is quite intelligent but not well educated, plump and cross-eyed; she also has a penchant for witchcraft and oriental nostrums; Stefanos is a man of the Occident, the prototype of the nineteenth century Homo Constructor, while Antho remains the daughter of an Athenian petit-bourgeois family, divided between her almost subversive ideas and the Egyptian influence. They have two children, Markos and Alicia, but Stefanos seems more interested in the public works than in his children. When still a child, Markos befriends Gaston Wolf a German explorer, member of the French Legion, who has been part of the Richard Burton expedition team in East Africa - Wolf becomes a symbol for all the Assimakis family, a bigger-than-life figure who represents freedom, adventure and open-mindedness. Stefanos falls in love with Wolf's wife, Annie, an opium-eater. Annie is the daughter of a French egyptologist (most characters, as this egyptologist, are based on true people) and she gets pregnant while Wolf is away at Lake Victoria in the wilderness of Central Africa. When he gets back to Cairo, Annie has fled to Marseilles where her father has established a museum of Egyptian art; Wolf accepts the facts gracefully, even humorously. As he is Markos's best friend, they stroll together in the streets of Cairo, and Wolf substitutes for a while the boy's reluctant father: Markos is fascinated by Wolf's African stories - the slave trade, the elephant hunters and the magic of the dark continent. The German leaves a deep mark on his early years. Then, Wolf leaves for Zanzibar where he dies from a tropical disease, from worms that eat up his eyes.

In 1882, the Egyptian revolt against the British, results in a blood bath: Stefanos and Antho privately understand and pity the natives (and even support them) but they feel they have to protect their lives, so they flee for Athens. The Assimakis family settle at Antho's house in downtown Athens, a neighborhood under the Lycabettus hill - but the town is not really a town, it's a dusty village. Cosmopolitan Stefanos is in distress - he hasn't seen Greece since the early 1860s - but manages to survive amidst the emerging local middle-class, working at the Isthmus of Corinth, a miniature of the Suez Canal. Not that his family is not considered a bit quirky: it is. Antho seems totally exotic, Markos looks absorbed by the African dream and Alicia is free to do whatever she wants, whenever she wants it - and later on, she is seen to ride a bicycle, waving both her hands, in the suburb of Kifissia. (In the 1880s bicycles are considered as «diabolical machines», and inappropriate for girls.) That's not all: the Assimakis' servants are scandalously treated as family members and Stefanos expresses provocative anti-royalist views, he even mentions equality for women. But he is disarming: he

waits eagerly for the «electrical revolution», he is afraid he won't be there to see it - he waits for the express trains, the electric railways; and is delighted when the Orient Express is finally launched, «the symbol of modern times!» he exclaims.

As Alicia grows up many young men ask to marry her, but she seems unhealthily indifferent to men and marriage. She spends all day listening to music boxes and combing her hair under the yard tree (a plane tree or a poplar - the different characters have different views of it) where the birds gather. She sort of talks to the sparrows.

In 1893, Antho gets sick and dies, and Stefanos decides to take that trip by the Orient Express. But while waiting for the train in Istanbul he dies of typhus. In the meantime, Markos has gone to the Zurich Polytechnic to study railway engineering: he plans to go to Africa and work on the new railroads. In Zurich, Markos feels spellbound: Zurich is the freest city in Europe, it's like a strange planet to him. The first person he meets is the central character of the book, Nicos Vangalis, the son of a rich Greek industrialist («Swiss-Greek Tobacco Conglomeration») who has spent most of his life in a Swiss boarding school. He is estranged from his family, and his mother is in a private clinic for the mentally sick - «in the loony bin!», he says. Nicos Vangalis is a whole new world to Markos: his intelligence is intimidating and his behavior unconventional - he is a marxist and a libertarian, an atheist, a manic-depressive (at that time the name of the illness was «cyclical melancholia»), a compulsive talker and smoker (he coughs a lot, he spits blood, Markos fears he's got TB). Vangalis shares his apartment with a theology student, Louis Beaujean, a French-Swiss, as well as with a tortoise to which he is oddly close. He keeps the huge terrapin as a pet. Markos moves in with them, «a real menagerie!» and soon has an affair with Louis's mistress, Gitte - a cabaret girl who dreams of going to Paris and dancing at the Folies-Bergère; nevertheless, his friendship with Vangalis remains the most important thing that ever happened to him. Through Vangalis he meets the revolutionaries that gather at that time in Zurich organizing strikes and uprisings in Germany, Poland and Russia: listening to Rosa Luxembourg (whom he gets to like instantly although he is jealous of her comradeship with Vangalis) Markos realizes for the first time that his father was a social pioneer and he keeps remembering what he used to say and how he used to challenge the conservative communities in which he lived. But Markos is not yet a person: he is a work in progress - till one day he discovers in the Polytechnic library a medieval book on pencils, «the epitome of engineering, art, craft and knowledge» and decides that this is what he really wants to do: pencils. A pencil factory in poor and retarded Athens, where few can write and fewer can draw. One night at a party at the Zurich apartment he meets a charming young girl, Louis's cousin, whose name is Luselle Wolf, and falls for her. A few days later he is due to leave for Africa, to work as a technical advisor for the Addis-Ababa - Djibouti railway, and the girl offers jovially to go with him. But the night before their departure Markos receives a letter from his sister Alicia, who lives alone in Athens, together with a bundle of letters written by his father to Annie Wolf that reveal that Luselle is their half sister. He hesitates, for a moment he wonders if he should just forget the whole thing and go ahead to Africa with Luselle, but he doesn't have the guts to do it: he gets on the boat all alone feeling a coward and a loser.

In Djibouti he realizes that Africa is a circle of blood and death, of isolation and boredom - and feels trapped in the dream of his father - the trains - and in Wolf's romanticism - the illusion of Africa as a land of enchantment. His only contact with the outside world is his correspondence with Vangalis who divides his time between Zurich and St. Petersburg: sometimes Vangalis' letters are scary - he is often suicidal - sometimes they are full of revolutionary fervor, funny, poetic, ironical, self-deprecating, the work of a genius.

In 1900, Markos marries a Greek beauty, for no particular reason, and settles in Alexandria where he works as a superior technician at the Cairo-Alexandria railway. The girl, Sophia, is breathtakingly beautiful but Markos doesn't love her - for once more he feels a coward and a loser. In the meantime, his pencils have become an obsession that nobody understands, Sophia least of all: she is interested in diamonds and cocktail parties and acquaintances in high places. When she gets pregnant, Markos decides to have a break, he even toys with the idea to leave Sophia forever: he goes to Zurich to see Vangalis and Louis; he finds Louis in their old apartment and Louis tells him, as discreetly as possible, that Vangalis is in Berlin with Luselle. After a moment of shock, Markos feels more relieved than betrayed, even happy, after a long-long time - without even knowing why. He takes the train to Berlin and just outside Fürth, the train breaks down and Markos spends the night at an inn next to Faber's pencil factory. He thinks this is a sign for a dream that will come true.

He stays for a week with Vangalis and Luselle in their tiny apartment in Berlin where the atmosphere is cheerful but too intense for quiet and uneventful Markos: the two of them are a wild couple, they fight and reconcile, they receive lots of guests - members of the socialist party - and they smoke, drink and spend white nights talking and typing on noisy typewriters. Markos feels like a stranger to this fast and boisterous life, but while lying sleepless in his bed he thinks that Vangalis and Luselle are his most beloved creatures in the world. When he returns to Alexandria he knows this is where he must be, he can't afford being anywhere else but in this provincial, pseudo-cosmopolitan Mediterranean town.

Markos leads a life of bourgeois contentment in Alexandria - but he is far from happy: in late 1900 his sister Alicia hangs herself from that tree where the birds gathered - and Markos thinks: She was a joyous kid and she turned out to be a desperate woman, I was an adventurous kid and I turned out to be a bore. His life with Sophia is really a drag: Markos escorts her half-heartedly to the receptions of the Greek consulate and the parties of the British diplomats. Vangalis is in St. Petersburg where great events are about to happen and he is devoured by the revolutionary activity: he and Luselle live in the house of a Bolshevik, if aristocratic, couple - Ossip and Elsa Petnov - where they fight more tumultuously than ever, smashing things and slapping one another. Vangalis is devoted to this cause, and spends his family money on it while Luselle is an unwilling revolutionary, fancying a good life in Paris, and not in party gatherings and riots. (Meanwhile, Markos's former mistress, Gitte, has really gone to Paris, to the Folies-Bergère: Paris these days seems like the capital of fun, «and atheism», Vangalis adds). During the revolution of 1905 Luselle dumps Vangalis brutally and he falls apart. But life goes on, and when everybody is convinced that he is going to jump out the window, he recovers and goes to Geneva with Lenin whom he respects - though not

without reservations; Lenin tells him: Do you know, comrade, what makes you so ill? Doubt! Doubt is your illness.

Time goes by, the Russian and German movements develop separately but remain entwined - there many disputes and defeats and some victories. Vangalis is in constant war with the world, with the capitalistic order and the narrow-minded, communist puritans. During the Great War he is in Zurich, and in 1916 Markos comes to meet him, passing through Europe that is in pain and ruins; but Switzerland is an island and Vangalis dreams of a socialist revolution bold and funny enough to integrate the dadaist madness. Markos has the time of his life hanging out in Cabaret Voltaire and round the Niederdorfstrasse where the twosome had spent their student years.

Then, an awfully great adventure begins for Vangalis: the October revolution. In 1917 he is in St. Petersburg where he becomes a living legend, although Lenin calls him «the insufferable Swiss» - «I'm not a Swiss», Vangalis keeps saying, but Lenin never listens. It's an exciting time and for many years Vangalis struggles tirelessly: his sickness is recurrent, he plunges into melancholia and delirium, then coughs his way to recovery, almost magically - his state of mind is a threat to his life; but he says he'll live forever, because he feels he's needed! «I can't afford to die,» he says. «You can't afford my dying!» He backs Trotsky, he distrusts Kamenev and Zenoviev, he picks up painful fights with many party bosses and clashes relentlessly with Stalin. In 1932, still shaken after Maiakovsky's suicide and the growing incomprehension in the party, he leaves the Soviet Union and decides to go to Athens. He is certain that atrocities are about to happen and that he can't remain a communist in the Soviet Union. He means to remain one.

Meanwhile, in Alexandria, Markos has had five children: the twin sons Stefanos and Errikos - who, in the 20s, go to Athens and after a while they adhere to the Fascist party - and three daughters who grow up like all the girls in the Greek community: with a Swiss governess and a grand piano. Louisa, the youngest, turns out to be slightly strange: she reads avidly the books that Gaston Wolf had once given to Markos, and is secretly contemptuous to women's talk and needlework. She is quiet and has very blue eyes (the governess says: The eyes of a killer!), and a drawing talent. That's all she does: she reads and draws with her pencils. In 1931 Louisa marries Georg Van Muten, a Dutch tycoon who has a plantation and a coppermine in Congo; she follows him to Brazzaville, «a colonial backwater», but the marriage is a disaster, the husband is unfaithful and cruel and Louisa falls in love with an English cartographer, Leo Collins, a sweet man who seems to sympathize with the natives. Leo and the Georg go hunting together to the Skeleton Coast but Leo never comes back; Louise is crushed and her only consolation in this unfriendly tropical town is a Swiss missionary, Louis Beaujean, who dies from malaria. Louisa never knows that pere Louis was her father's friend (with whom they had shared an apartment, a friend, a mistress and a pet-tortoise) although she comes close to this discovery. After pere Louis's death, she decides to leave Congo and go back to Alexandria: but not before she poisons her husband and takes revenge for Leo's murder - in the meantime, Markos Assimakis also passes away - peacefully - and when Louise gets on the boat to Alexandria feels like taking her own life. On the strenuous journey to

Alexandria she changes her mind and the boat: a few days later she disembarks in Piraeus where a lanky old man with a cigarette between his lips helps her with her trunks. He is Nicos Vangalis. He is sixty two years old, coming from Russia, planning to spend the rest of his days in Athens - although he coughs as if he is about to die, he claims his days are innumerable: for Louisa, who has been hearing about him all of her life, he is a myth.

Louisa's brothers do not welcome her in Athens; they insist she marries someone respectable or live with them, the life of a house-maid. They are notorious fascists, although not totally deprived of charm: one of them, Errikos, is a race goer, more interested in horses than in politics - but they are fascists and they work for the Metaxas coup that finally materialized in August 1936. Louisa moves in with Vangalis (they never become lovers, but the reader feels that if Vangalis were younger they would) in an apartment he buys on Solonos street, and they decide to build the pencil factory together. But Vangalis is a famous communist (although in '38, after the execution of his friend Ossip, he leaves the Communist Party) and he is imprisoned - the factory is sabotaged, boycotted and closed down. Vangalis and Louise have spent all their money and they have nothing in the world except each other - a few days before the German invasion of 1940 Vangalis dies leaving his diary for Louise to read. The last entry sounds like a good-bye note: «Do you know what Emile Kraepelin, the doctor who classified psychopaths, once said? He said: A good psychopath is a dead psychopath - I'm not sure this was his phrasing but that's what he meant. Anyway, Shelley drowned in a storm with a volume of Keats's poetry in his pocket. If I were young and handsome, I'd choose to die like him, with a volume of Shelley, or Maiakovsky, or Nekrassov, - or, I don't know. See, I don't even know with what book I should exit this world. Well, I'm not young and I've never been handsome, so I'm thinking of exiting with a big cough. Ghhouhh! All right, then, here's a big Ghooouhh! I'm leaving you to cope with the war and all the rest. And the barbiturates which I missed and which might save me, and all the rest! Comrades, Camarades, Kamaraden, Tavarisch, I wouldn't want to be in your place for all the gold of the world. Honest. Ghooouuh.»

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