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WRONG, Mr. NEUGER!

(Original title: *Lathos, Kyrie Neuger!*)

Summary – Extracts – Reviews

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Summary

Who was this Mr. Neuger? What was he exactly? Up to that summer day, when he suddenly disappeared, his pupil Philippos believed that he was a rare young man and a perfect German teacher, even though giving private German lessons was not his main job. The 27-year-old Greek-Austrian handsome Alex Neuger, who loved children and music, had actually studied archeology. What is more, he was working on his doctoral dissertation about the ancient aqueducts of Southern Greece. That was the reason why he had decided to spend that summer of 1988 away from his girl-friend Daphne and go to a strange small but wonderful village in Peloponnesos. At that same place his 13-year-old pupil Philippos was spending his summer vacation together with his grandparents and his step sister and brother, Gerda and Hans, 7 and 5-year old, "the little Germans", as Philippos was always calling them teasingly, because their mother (his father's second wife) was German.

At that village, Alex Neuger was going to study an ancient aqueduct and explore the whole area around. During his leisure time he had promised to teach German to Philippos and Greek to the "little Germans", since his knowledge of both languages was perfect. He had promised one more thing: to always take Philippos with him when going for his excursions and explorations. Philippos was delighted! The 1988 summer vacation would certainly prove to be the best one for him, since the divorce of his parents. The village was indeed beautiful. "Trapeza" was its name, which in Greek means "table". And it was really like a table, since it was built high on a flat area, a "geological table". In front of it lay the Corinthian Gulf. Behind it there was a high green mountain. Up there, next to a small deserted old monastery, lay the ancient aqueduct. And in the area around there were numerous remnants of ancient houses, temples, cemeteries, as well as ruins of small Byzantine churches. Philippos was anxious to explore all these antiquities with his teacher.

The summer lessons started immediately. One of the first things Mr. Neuger taught the "little Germans" was the Greek verses of an old German song: "Roslein, Roslein, Roslein rot..." Everything seemed to go as planned. However, after a few days,

Philippos started to get disappointed. Mr. Neuger was avoiding to take him along on his explorations. He examined the ancient aqueduct not with his pupil, but with an old villager, named Kavantis, who seemed distrustful and suspicious. In addition, Mr. Neuger was giving the impression that he had some secret. Many different things, apart from his study, evidently preoccupied him. For instance, he was interested about an old German lady who had settled in that village before World War II and had lived there until her death in 1967. Mr. Neuger was anxious to learn how she died and where she was buried. On the other hand, Mr. Neuger seemed to enjoy the company of a new neighbour, Miss Connie, an attractive young lady. This was very unpleasant to Philippos. He considered his teacher's affair with Daphne a serious one. The thought that this bond could be endangered unconsciously reminded him of what he suffered when his parents divorced.

During an excursion to Mega Spelaion Monastery (Big Cave Monastery) where they all went - Miss Connie, Mr. Neuger, Philippos and the "little Germans"- Mr. Neuger found a pretext for preventing the children from seeing what was called "the monks' martyrdom site", and learn what was all about. However, he himself had a strange secret talk with the abbot. The "little Germans" paid no attention to these movements. On their way back, they sang carelessly "Roslein, Roslein, Roslein rot..." with Miss Connie, while Philippos got more and more surprised, more and more angry with his teacher.

Then one day the children waited in vain for Mr. Neuger and their morning lesson. Their teacher had vanished. The small house he had rented, in the outskirts of the village, high near the mountain, was empty. No one in the village knew where he had gone. That same morning they learned that Miss Connie had also departed suddenly.

Now Philippos could not hide his disappointment and anger any more. The love he felt for his teacher changed little by little to dislike; he considered himself deceived and betrayed - like the time his father had left home to emigrate to Germany. The next day, this anger became a real wrath. A visit to the nearby town of Kalavryta was the cause. Philippos went there with some family friends and his stepsister Gerda. While sightseeing, they visited the monument of the World War II victims and learned about the Holocaust of Kalavryta by the Nazis. On December 13, 1943, the Nazis slaughtered all the male population of the town, i.e. 1300 men from 14 year olds and up, as a reprisal to the guerillas of the Greek Resistance. All women and children were locked in the school of the town and they would have been burned, had an Austrian young soldier not

opened the door. This soldier was shot on the spot by the Nazi guard, as a punishment for his humanitarian act.

Philippos felt horror for the Nazis, as the whole story was vividly revived through a recorded description, which they all heard at the place of the executions. He was so very upset that he could not even bear the idea that he had two siblings whose mother was German. The anger for his teacher found its outlet and was expressed as an antipathy for the World War II criminals. The explosion became evident when Philippos learned that the Nazis had also slaughtered all the monks of Mega Spelaion Monastery, a few days before the Kalavryta Holocaust. He assumed that his teacher had purposely prevented them from learning all about it and visiting the "monks' martyrdom site" at their previous excursion, presumably because Mr. Neuger was pro-Nazi?

One evening Philippos noticed from afar a light at his teacher's house. He assumed that Mr. Neuger had returned. Furious with him and still upset about the Kalavryta story, he decided to announce to his teacher that he would discontinue the German lessons, the next morning. However, his teacher did not appear as expected. Instead, something horrible was discovered: A woman from the village found the dead body of Kavantis, Mr. Neuger's old assistant, in the mountain near the aqueduct. Soon it was proved that this suspicious man had actually been a smuggler of antiquities.

While the police searched for the murderer, Philippos, in his anger, was suspecting Mr. Neuger, who was still absent. Neither his previous love and respect for this teacher, nor the culture of Alex Neuger could prevent Philippos from making such terrible assumptions. On the contrary, he was pushed to such thoughts by something he had read those days: some of the Nazi officials were music lovers, know how to sing beautiful songs -like the "Roslein, Roslein, Roslein rot" - had even studied ancient Greek and could recite by heart Homer or Thucydides passages. Their education, however, had not prevented them from committing war crimes. Philippos was lead to his conclusions by one more thing: that light he had noticed in his teacher's house the night before the crime.

However, in the next few days, a series of events would solve all the mysteries, one by one. A dangerous adventure experienced by Philippos and his siblings would jeopardize his own life, but would also lead to the discovery of the real murderer - an antiquities dealer. The unexpected arrival of Daphne in the village would give an explanation for the light Philippos had seen that night. Miss Connie's return with her fiancé would persuade Philippos that his teacher had never betrayed Daphne. Last but

not least, the thrilling narration by an old inhabitant of Trapeza, named Dourekas, hero of the Greek Resistance, would help Philippos discover that the Austrian soldier, who saved the women and the children of Kalavryta, in December 1943, was his teacher's father, Franz Neuger. Wounded by the bullets of the Nazis, he had pretended that he was killed. That same night he escaped to the mountains. After a three-day wandering, covered by the bloodstained frock he took from the dead bodies of Mega Spelaion monks, he reached the small old monastery in the mountain behind Trapeza, half-dead. An old nun, the only one who had remained there, hid the soldier in the nearby ancient aqueduct. When he recovered, she sent him to the house of the old anti-Nazi German lady residing in Trapeza, where he would be safer. A few days later, at Christmas Eve, the then young Kavantis betrayed him to the Nazis. But the old lady saved Franz Neuger, using the song "Roslein, Roslein, Roslein rot" as a signal. Before leaving, Franz Neuger had promised to come back one day and bring her a bouquet of roses.

Philippos was terribly upset for a second time. Now he knew what else Alex Neuger had in mind, apart from his dissertation: a promise he had given to his father, the day he died, that he would fulfil one day whatever Franz Neuger himself had not managed to do.

When, at last, Alex Neuger returned to the village, the last mystery - his unexplainable disappearance - was resolved. His urgent, unexpected departure was due to a message from his family. His Greek grandfather, a veteran of both World Wars, had fallen suddenly seriously ill and wanted to see him before he died.

Now everything was clear. Only one last debt remained to be fulfilled - a visit to the grave of the German old lady, who had saved Alex's father. About this visit, Alex himself wrote in his notebook:

"...Philippos came with me... the "little Germans" too, who were told the whole story by their brother, that same day. Mr. Dourekas took us all to the cemetery of Trapeza. So, now you can rest in peace, my dear father! I did not forget anything. I followed your escape course; I found the small old monastery in the mountain of Trapeza and the ancient aqueduct next to it; I learned what exactly happened at that Christmas Eve of 1943...Yes! There was a traitor. There are always traitors. And brave men too, like Dourekas. Last but not least, I donated the small token to the Abbot of Mega Spelaion Monastery, for that precious bloodstained frock, which protected you then... I bought the roses too.

That is why I say, you can rest in peace now, father. Like the old lady rests in this cemetery. Like so many others over here. Good people, such as her. Evil people, such as Kavantis, who caused her death and tried to betray you that winter in 1943. They all rest side by side, in a mystical place, between a holy mountain -Holy Trinity- and a never-ending water -the sea of the Corinthian Gulf-, which bows down to It. One cannot help but think that here is the entrance of a new life "of water and spirit".

I laid the roses on the ground, which lovingly covers the old lady, and I whispered to her, on your behalf: "Danke shon, meine Dame!"

"Is it all right if we sing for her?" little Gerda asked in a whisper.

For the dead, people lament; angels sing. I assured her that it was all right.

In a low voice, hardly being heard, all the three of them - Philippos, Hans and Gerda - started singing:

Roslein, Roslein, Roslein rot

Roslein auf der haide....

My dear Lady... Many people, when they die, leave offsprings behind, in this world. Others leave achievements equally important. You, apart from many excellent deeds and memories, left to those three children the belief that humanness has no nationality. "Danke shon, meine Dame..."

In the last chapter, it is Philippos turn to note his thoughts. The 1988 summer vacation, having been so adventurous, proved indeed the best one for him. Jumping to conclusions was a mistake. That's why he admits "Wrong! I was wrong Mr. Neuger!"

NOTE: This novel, which is based largely on real events, is written in the form of three monologues: that of Philippos, of Alex Neuger and his fiancée Daphne.

Extracts from reviews:

"... An interesting and pleasant story with many characters taking part, all playing important roles: from Mr. Neuger and Philippos down to the villagers and the small children of the family which the story is primarily about.

Starting from simple, everyday incidents, L. P. proceeds to dealing with general and historical events; retaining a pleasant and friendly atmosphere throughout, she creates a fascinating narration with many unexpected happenings. The heroes manage to co-exist, each with his/her own peculiarities and find their completion. Information about the area is given in the form of "reports", though always in combination with the everyday events, so that the past is introduced to the present and time becomes contracted. The narration is fast-paced, progressive, well linked, and finds its peak in the diary pages. It often follows a fluctuating line so as to create an atmosphere analogous to the course and development of the story, without disturbing the balance between the use of two different levels of language... It is additionally characterized by directness and powerful descriptiveness... A remarkable social-historical contemporary novel..."

DIAVAZO (monthly literary magazine) No 252, 12 December 1990

"... Excellent plot perfectly narrated. Real characters designed with imagination and efficiency. An essential, true, and at the same time optimistic approach to life. L.P.'s incision into the phenomenology of events is deep and brings us close to the truth..."

Ioannis Theoharis, critic

PROINOS LOGOS (newspaper), Ioannina, May 3, 1990.

Also published in *EPEROTIKI ESTIA* magazine, February 1992.

"... *Wrong, Mr. Neuger!* is not simply another book by Loty Petrovits. In my opinion, it is an outstanding novel of inspiration and maturity, which could be compared to the classics. It has all the characteristics of a real literature: perfect technique, variety in the narration, excellent plot, inner balance, flowing language, clearly designed characters. What I find particularly interesting is the parallel way of writing at two levels: one for the young hero, Philippos, and the other for the German-teacher Alex Neuger... This novel can be read with enthusiasm by both children and adults..."

V.D. Anagnostopoulos, Ph.D.

DIADROMES Magazine, issue No 17, Athens, Spring 1990

"...This book is an important event in the development of Greek Children's Literature. It is open to many levels of reading. And this is what distinguishes good writers from the mediocre ones."

Antonis Delonis, writer - critic

Athens, 31st January 1990

"...Clarity and vividness in the narration, successful description of feelings..."

Nikos Dokas, critic

KYRIAKATI KI ELEFTHEROTYPIA (newspaper), Athens, December 24, 1989

" ...I liked very much the way serious and delicate themes are treated and combined in the plot..."

Dr. Maria Vertsoni-Kokoli

Institute of Neohellenic Studies

University of Thessaloniki, December 12, 1989

"... The book deals with important contemporary issues, such as human relations, family, culture, history, tradition. Beyond these, it deals widely with modern society. The reader will come across additional elements, the flowing narration of which will keep one interested till the end.

An exciting, vivid and very modern book written in a graceful, powerful language".

Maria Pyliotou

PEDIKI HARA (children's magazine) Vol.32, issue 2/249

Nicosia, Cyprus, November 1992

From the International Jugendbibliothek Bulletin, Munich, 1989:

"Der Roman besteht aus Berichten, die der Jugendliche Philipp und dessen Lehrer, der Oesterreicher Neuger, schreiben. Die Autorin ist bestrebt, sowohl stilistisch, als auch weltanschaulich die Welt des Jugendlichen und des Erwachsenen wiederzugeben. Philipp findet standig Gründe, um seinen fur kurze Zeit verreisten Lehrer zu verdächtigen. Schließlic muß er zugeben, daß er sich laufend geirrt hat und versuchen seine Fehler gut zu machen. Der Roman spielt in der Gegenwart; dennoch bestimmen der Zweite Weltkrieg und die jungste Vergangenheit die Handlung und weisen einen Weg zum friedlichen Nebeneinanderleben und zur weltweiten Volker-verständigung."

