



Fact stranger than fiction

Renee Pappas speaks to Elias Kulukundis, whose book *The Amorgos Conspiracy* traces the true story of George Mylonas' confinement and dramatic escape from Amorgos during the junta years.

A man meets and falls in love with a young woman whose father is held as a political prisoner by a repressive regime. He decides to use his own wealth and ingenuity to spirit her father from his island prison. He travels around Europe meeting with exiled politicians, former revolutionaries with multiple aliases, and two young journalists looking for that big story that will jump-start their careers.

If this sounds like “*A Tale of Two Cities*”, “*The Bourne Identity*” and “*The Scarlett Pimpernel*” all rolled up into one you’re correct. The difference however, is that *The Amorgos Conspiracy* is not fiction. It is the gripping story of Elias Kulukundis, scion of a Greek shipping dynasty, who organized the escape of his father-in law, George Mylonas, from the island of Amorgos where he was in detention during the Greek military dictatorship in the late 1960’s.

George Mylonas was a minister in the government of George Papandreou Sr. and unlike other members of the government such as Constantine Mitsotakis who escaped to France, or Andreas Papandreou who was released from prison after intense pressure from the international academic community, Mylonas was arrested and exiled to a tiny Aegean island.

I caught up with Elias Kulukundis when he was in Athens to present the Greek edition of his book published by Ekdoseis Pataki. Mr. Kulukundis has had a multi-faceted career as a shipping magnate, author, playwright, documentary film-maker, and an opera singer (in his spare time).

Born in London and raised in Westchester, New York, he lived in a bi-cultural and bi-lingual household. He was a member of two worlds, the international circle of Greek ship owners and the Eisenhower era suburbs in the United States.

When he was in the 9th Grade he went with his uncle, the legendary Manuel Kulukundis, who was also the President of the Greek Ship-Owners Association of New York, to visit his cousin, Michael, who was enrolled at Exeter. His uncle felt that the more innovative teaching methods at Exeter would suit his nephew’s inquisitive character. The open-style classrooms at Exeter were the best training for problem

solving and “thinking on your feet”. Both attributes would serve Mr. Kulukundis in his diverse pursuits.

Kulukundis’ interest in Literature began in his junior year when he pulled a book off the library shelf which would change his life. He devoured *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Here was a book about a world that was familiar to him. Although he loved *Ivanhoe* and *The Count of Monte Christo*, he felt that he, himself, could be a writer of contemporary subjects. Fitzgerald was, after all, only 23 when his book was published so this was a goal that was possible.

In his senior year, he and Michael Hobson, whose mother, Laura Z. Hobson had written *Gentlemen’s Agreement*, took a special class for students interested in writing. The class met at the off-campus house of their teacher, George Bennett, on Friday nights. Sometimes Mrs. Bennett, who was French, joined the class; and Kulukundis was exposed to what was called then as a “bohemian life-style”.

George Bennett died in 1965 and in 1968 Kulukundis established “The Bennett Fellowship” at Phillips Exeter Academy which enables aspiring novelists, poets and playwrights to focus on their writing, which would be their first published work. Former fellows have gone on to publish 100 books. The fellowship gives the writer a year of room and board at Exeter with a \$5,000.00 allowance. According to Kulukundis “They have no duties, just writing their opus and being available to talk to students about writing, informally, the way George Bennett did.”

He then attended Harvard University where he earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Literature. After reading Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in English, he decided to learn Russian and went on to translate *Both Sides of the Ocean*, the Soviet novelist Viktor Kerkasov’s account of his travel in America and Italy.

After graduating from Harvard he was a teaching fellow at Exeter in 1961-62. Torn between writing and his sense of obligation to join his father’s shipping business, his mother told him he should do both. “She didn’t care if I taught. At that time, I thought teaching was something to do while writing. Now I do it because I like it.”



His first book, *The Feasts of Memory*, was written in 1965. Travelling to his ancestral island of family, Kasos, he verified and added to the numerous family “myths and legends” and created a book which the *New Yorker* called “funny and most engaging... and excellent anecdotal history of Kasiot lore...a beautiful and imaginative exploration of a writer’s relationship to his origins”.

In 1967 he met Eleni Mylonas who was studying journalism at Columbia University and they immediately found much in common. He agreed to travel to Greece and deliver a letter to George Mylonas who was in hiding. Upon his return to the US, he and Eleni married and subsequently Mylonas was arrested and exiled to Amorgos. After visiting his father-in-law with Eleni, he decided that he had to help Mylonas escape. The story of this modern day “Scarlet Pimpernel” is the subject of *The Amorgos Conspiracy*.

At that point, he and Nick Gage, who was a journalist living in Athens and on leave from the *Wall Street Journal*, decided to collaborate on an article about the Greek Junta. Gage would deal with events in Greece, interviewing the members of the dictatorship; while Kulukundis travelled around Europe interviewing Greek politicians in exile. He visited Andreas Papandreou in Sweden and Konstantinos Mitsotakis in Geneva. Mitsotakis encouraged him to help Mylonas escape, while Papandreou was opposed to an escape attempt.

At the same time he was introduced to exiled Greeks fighting the junta from Switzerland and Italy. Entering a world that included the makers of false passports and Marxists with several aliases, he finally put together a plan to rent a motor yacht, and with five Italians set sail for Amorgos. One of them had secured the boat, another drove it, one was a sailor who worked for the boat’s owner and the group was rounded out with an aspiring journalist and a very attractive young woman. They looked like a group of friends on a cruise through the Greek islands.

The story received enormous international publicity thanks to Nick Gage’s article in the *New York Times* and the recounting of the escape by Mario Scialoja, one of Kulukundis’ fellow shipmates, in the Italian newspaper, *Espresso*.

When the Greek junta supported a coup against the government of Cyprus in 1974, the island nation was invaded by Turkey and subsequently divided. Kulukundis travelled there and made a documentary film, *Cyprus: Anatomy of a Crisis*.

Later, after he and Eleni divorced, he joined his father’s company in New York. After six years in the family business he decided to set out on his own. Encouraged by his second wife, Lucy Platt, he founded Kulukundis Shipping Investments, Inc. and was successful in asset playing in shipping investments.

Kulukundis then went on to write a play, *Three Brides for Kasos*, which is based on one chapter from his book, *The Feasts of Memory*. The play became a musical with music composed by Mark Kolt and was presented at the Winnipeg Fringe festival of 2005.

Raised in a home with classical music, in 1995 Kulukundis began attending the Mannes School in New York where he studied vocal repertoire. He then went on to study with Marshall Williamson at Julliard where he sang the roles of Papageno in *The Magic Flute* and Prince Gremin in *Eugene Onegin, in Russian*.

After the passage of four decades, Kulukundis started writing the story of the escape in its present form in 2011. *The Amorgos Conspiracy* was published, in Greek, by Ekdoseis Pitaki Press in late 2012 and will be published, in English, in the United States in fall 2013.

A documentary of the adventure will feature Kulukundis, and a number of the protagonists on Stelios Kouloglou’s ERT programme, “Reportage Without Borders” and will be broadcast around April 21st, the 46th anniversary of the start of the Greek military dictatorship.

Elias Kulukundis’ life is like a movie...a little bit of “*Revolutionary Road*”, a little bit of “*The Dead Poet’s Society*”, a little bit of “*On the Road*”, as well as “*Z*”.

All in all Mr. Kulukundis has, and continues to live, a very productive and exciting life. 