

MR. BOUKAS AND ODYSSEUS

by
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I should have known better. I should have realized that my Hellenic sense of hearing is genetically incapable of picking up the subtleties of Slavonic. When I mentioned in an earlier article that we named our new automobile the *Krestny Hod*, I should have expected all sorts of criticisms from my Slavic friends, and I got them. I received a variety of corrections to my pronunciation, — Russian, Ukrainian, Macedonian, Serbian, or whatever — and to my Hellenic ears, it all sounded pretty much the same. Asking a Greek to reproduce some sounds is like asking a color blind person to paint an icon. It would be a disaster.

The Greek language has a very limited number of sounds in its alphabet. For example, Greeks will listen with astonishment to the English language, which, to them, seems to have at least a million vowel sounds. The modern Greek language has only a measly five vowels.

Then you have the languages that seem to be nothing but consonants, like Polish, Serbian or Georgian. Really, how can any human being be expected to pronounce a word like *Mtskheta*, the ancient capital city of Georgia?

This reminds me of my father, who had a vineyard in California's San Joaquin Valley. One of our neighbors was a wonderful man, Mr. Burkhardt. He and his wife were from Germany, and they loved my folks. They also liked Greek cooking, so they would come over to socialize quite often. Mr. Burkhardt was very much impressed, as well, by our pet cat, Odysseus. What impressed Mr. Burkhardt the most was that Odysseus, like the livestock of Ninevi in the time of the Prophet Jonas, kept all the appointed fasts along with the family. Whenever the family sat to eat its Lenten food, Osyssueus would settle down at his bowl and eat his lentils or the *fasouláda* (bean soup) without any complaints. If, on the sly, he broke the fast by catching fresh protein (in the form of a rabbit or gopher out in the vineyard), he never confessed this.

Also, Odysseus spoke only Greek. If you addressed him in English (or German, as Mr. Burkhardt found out), Odysseus would ignore you. However, if you called out, "Odysseus, come here," in Greek, he would trot right over and look at you expectantly. Mr. Burkhardt thought this was hilarious.

My dad, on his part, had a great deal of respect for Mr. Burkhardt. There was only one problem. There was *no way* anyone who had grown up speaking Greek could *ever* manage to correctly pronounce a word with the combination of vowels and consonants like "Burkhardt." So, our very good and dearly beloved neighbor, Mr. Burkhardt, became "Mr. Boukas" for my mom and dad. A good, solid Greek name, with good, solid Greek vowels and consonants. No fancy stuff or tongue-twisting frills.

Odysseus, too, probably would have approved, as any cat that keeps the fasts and speaks only Greek would.