

Life is Beautiful

When men are called to war to fight against an unknown enemy, to go to unfamiliar places and be put in inhumane conditions, it is understood that their lives will change forever. The situations soldiers go through are only fully understood by their company of equals: the ones who have gone into battle with them. Civilians can only try to understand or imagine what these men have had to experience; and even then it can still be hard to fathom. Put yourself in a WWI soldier's shoes: if you were in a filthy trench with incredibly disgusting conditions for many days, not knowing whether or not you were going to die while you hear shells being shot at you from your enemy less than a hundred yards away, how could you walk away from that and still believe life is beautiful? How could a soldier in WWI not be changed mentally, physically, and emotionally in a negative way? In the case of Sergeant Kostoulas from the novel *Life in the Tomb* by Stratis Myrivilis, his understanding of life was completely changed for the better. It was through Sergeant Kostoulas's closeness with death and destruction around him that he was forced to look for something greater: life itself. Kostoulas began to appreciate the goodness of others, the beauty of nature, and the works of God while he was witnessing atrocities as a Greek soldier during WWI because he believed life was beautiful.

The Greeks joined WWI in an effort to free enslaved Greeks of Anatolia and Thrace. It was a noble cause to join the Great War, and the youthful twenty-two year-old Kostoulas signed up as a volunteer on this endeavor. He would be leaving behind many loved ones, including his parents and his fiancée. It is through Sergeant Kostoulas letters to his fiancé, however, that we learn about his experiences during the war. Kostoulas describes any experience he has, good or bad, and as he tells about these experiences the reader can

begin to grasp what this young soldier had to go through. Sergeant Kostoulas' first encounter with the reality of war shocks the reader with the realness that these young men are truly being stripped of their youth, and as he describes other encounters we see his innocence being stripped away as well.

Kostoulas describes his first WWI experience by saying how much it has affected him mentally. "Here is another scene that has remained in my memory, affixed there like one of those numbers branded with red-hot irons on the haunches of army horses" (Myrivilis 31). He begins to describe a row of thirty-two men, sitting by a river, while his own company marches on. A peaceful place for these men to take in the countryside and nature, but the ones sitting by the river all have black bandages bound tightly around their eyes. Kostoulas sees one of them light a match and unwaveringly let the match burn until the flame burns his hand, almost as if the bandaged man couldn't tell how close the flame was to his hand. As Kostoulas takes in this scene, he comes to grip with one of the consequences he might face while fighting his enemy. He describes these men sitting on the bank: "All are handsome olive-skinned sons of Italy with raven-black hair and childlike mouths. All have been blinded by tear gas" (Myrivilis 31).

Sergeant Kostoulas' endeavor was not wavered by seeing these young men's lives changed forever, and instead he began to appreciate his own eyesight more. As his company continued to march on through the countryside towards the front, Kostoulas took in the countryside and beauty that was inside of it. His company came upon a hill, "blessed with abundant springs. Its flank was scarlet with poppies" (Myrivilis 39). They were ordered to rest and eat lunch amongst the hillside, and were soon joined by a Russian company. The Russians were also young men like the Greeks, and both found a common

similarity in believing in the same religion. As they began to share their food with each other and try to express their excitement, Sergeant Kostoulas realized there weren't many differences between the two groups, even though they both came from different backgrounds and countries. This understanding of how men from different places and backgrounds can be similar speaks volumes to Kostoulas' understanding of mankind. His appreciation for other men unlike himself (in this case, the Russians) reveals his kind-hearted nature towards humanity. This would be tested later on in the war.

When the Greeks were commanded to leave the poppy-filled hillside, the Russian soldiers began to place poppies in the rifle-muzzles of the Greeks' guns. This was an act of kindness that Kostoulas observed with great affection. "Such quantities of love exist in this world! An entire hillside scarlet with poppies begging to be picked, and to pick them is so very, very, easy. All you need to do is bend down" (Myrivilis 41). Already we see this young man being affected by seeing something horrible (the Italians with bandages over their eyes) and then appreciating the more positive experiences he goes through later on in the war. Kostoulas never lets the bad experiences weigh him down, but instead, uses them to look for something greater that could come out of all the madness that WWI had to offer.

But Kostoulas wasn't near the front lines yet. He hadn't seen the destruction that the fighting had caused and would continue to cause. So when he got to the trenches, it was interesting to see how his positive outlook on life could possibly change. He described the unsanitary conditions involving lice and mice, as well as the constant fear and turmoil from not knowing whether the shells or gunfire from the enemy would injure or kill him. All of these affected him mentally and physically, and yet, he would be challenged even further. One particular experience made Kostoulas contemplate the decency of mankind, and how

war could be unfair. At this point his company had made it to the trenches and had been living there for quite some time. One of the daily rituals for the soldiers in the trenches was to go to a spring located nearby so that they could have water for the day. This spring was not necessarily a safe distance away from the fighting for it was in range of the enemy's cannons. Even though the watering hole was somewhat protected by a hillside, a perfectly shot shell could be lobbed over the hill and hit those who were refreshing their canteens for the day. This didn't occur often because of the difficulty of precision needed to hit the spring, but the possibility of getting hit still frightened the soldiers who were just trying get a basic necessity for living.

When Sergeant Kostoulas went to the spring one day, he began to think about his uncle Stylianos, whose sole passion was hunting. "Now this mountaineer maintained in his heart a tender compassion for the love of birds and beasts if he happened to find them drinking" (Myrivilis 149). Kostoulas reflected, "all the while the birds drank, he pointed the muzzle of his gun into the grass. They were unsuspecting souls imbibing God's water beneath God's heaven, a fact that filled his mountainous soul with piety and reverence" (Myrivilis 150). Kostoulas goes on to describe the decency of his uncle who had no wife or children, but absolutely adored his four dogs. When one of his dogs attacked a group of partridges that were drinking from a puddle, he shot the dog's paw. The birds were innocent while they drank from the puddle, doing something that was a necessity in every living thing's life, and Stylianos had the decency to let them be. Kostoulas' ideals of mankind were affected by Stylianos actions of being decent to the animals he hunted, and every time Kostoulas visited the spring he thought about this story.

“Early this morning I went to the spring. From our platoon Gighandis was the only one. When he saw me, he gave me a friendly wave” (Myrivilis 151). If the enemy were decent like Kostoulas’ Uncle Stylianos, then Kostoulas and his friend Gighandis would not have to be afraid of to get water everyday; even though they needed water to survive. But nevertheless, they were both at the front lines of a brutal war, where decency and fairness were non-existent. “No one noticed the shell until it landed and burst – at a distance of two meters from the spring. When I arose from the ground in a daze I had no hearing in my right ear, Gighandis was seated on the ground with his head reposed on his knees and his hands hanging down at his side like broken wings” (Myrivilis 151).

When your friend dies in front of you from a shell fired from an enemy’s cannon far away and out of sight, all because he was only in the wrong place at the wrong, how could your views of human beings not be altered? The lengths that humans would go through to kill other human beings should shake the very foundation of your views of human decency. Kostoulas’ childhood views of human beings, which had been shaped by people like his Uncle Stylianos, were now being challenged. “All day I have been thinking of Uncle Stylianos the hunter, who never in his life killed birds while they were drinking water” (Myrivilis 152). But life moves on, and seeing this death and destruction would not hinder Kostoulas from living. He begins another search for something greater like he did after seeing the young Italians who were blinded. Kostoulas refused to let this war be the standard for which to compare life’s attributes to.

Nature has a funny way of bringing the beauty of life to reality, and Kostoulas was allowed a much needed break from the barren trenches one night as he went on a walk. It was days after the experience he had encountered at the spring nearby where he lost his

friend that Kostoulas came upon a poppy growing amongst the destruction of the front lines. "There, among the rotted sandbags, a flower had grown and had suddenly been revealed to me on this night so filled with miracles. It was a poppy. Shudders of happiness passed through me as I felt its tender petals contact the balls of my fingers" (Myrivilis 158). The trenches were a place full of death, but this poppy was a symbol that beauty can still exist in such a desolate place.

Juxtapose this situation with when Kostoulas lost his friend at the spring. Even though soldiers would witness the worst of what human beings can do to each other, there would always be hope that there's something greater out there. There had to be a poppy amongst the death and destruction, otherwise there would be no hope for these soldiers. Kostoulas took this poppy as a sign from God; he thought of it as miracle. This man had just lost one of his friends, but God was giving him hope of something better than what he was witnessing. Kostoulas finding the poppy in the trenches uplifted his well being, and this is when he started to appreciate everything life had to offer because of what he had experienced with war. Jumping ahead a little later on in the war, Kostoulas best describes his belief that life is beautiful after he has recovered from a leg injury when he has gotten out of the trenches. He says, "I am an enthusiastic connoisseur of life, and I affirm that my life is worth living" (Myrivilis 180).

Although many soldiers in WWI may not have thought life was beautiful like Kostoulas did, especially since most of them couldn't get past the death and destruction (who could blame them?), they all could appreciate the beauty that humans could produce for the pleasure of one another. Take for instance the experience that Kostoulas describes when his company heard an enemy's voice singing from across no man's land. It was during

Koustoulas's second visit to the trenches with his battalion that his company found themselves in a more quiet section of the battlefield than usual. This section of the front line rarely fired at each other, an appreciated relief from the destruction that both sides had seen during the duration of their fighting there. "As usual in our sector, there was not a single rocket, shell-burst, or machine gun report" (Myrivilis 263).

"Suddenly in the midst of this tranquility there came a song. It issued from the darkness, from nearby, directly across the way" (Myrivilis 263). Koustoulas goes on to describe the voice as "warm and tender", so much different than what their guns produced. The sound of a beautiful voice intrigued Koustoulas's company and filled their hearts with hope for something greater. None of them were seeking out the beauty that life could give them, but instead the beauty of life found them. And ironically, it came in the form of their enemy's voice. "Each day, hoping that we would hear him again, we all waited impatiently for evening to come. And whenever he started up, we all felt happy – that is, happily sad" (Myrivilis 265). This man was their enemy, and yet the enemy was filling them with pleasure. His singing was a true escape from the hard realities of war, a moment Koustoulas greatly appreciated.

The enemy's singing didn't last long, however, because the French batteries bombarded his trench once they had caught word that this enemy was singing songs for both sides. His voice would be silenced, like so many others during this war, including Sergeant Koustoulas' after he was burned to death during an effort to capture one of the enemy's fortified garrisons. But Koustoulas' words will forever be with us in the form of his letters, and his message will speak to generations to come as people keep reading his epistolary. It is Koustoulas' appreciation for the beauty of nature, the goodness that humans

can produce, and the works of God that we can all take away from reading about his experiences in WWI; that even amongst all the death and destruction, we can still believe that life is beautiful.

Works Cited

Myrivilis, Stratis. *Life in The Tomb*. River Vale, NJ: Cosmos, 2004. Print.