

Laurie Zielinski
Mt. Menoikeion Seminar 2017
June 26, 2017

June 14

I decided to start my journal in Munich, because I'm having such a bizarre experience here and it needs to be documented. The Munich airport is easily the fanciest I've ever been in. The bathrooms are definitely imported from the future. The stalls have tiny soapy water dispensers, there's an ethereal tune (probably recorded in outer space) playing, and there are electric cloth towel dispensers (why??). The man sitting next to me is dressed as Santa Claus. It's June. Why is Santa here? For a while he was sitting next to a Jewish man (perfect photo op), but by the time I got my camera out the Jewish man was gone (I still got a photo of Santa, though). The stores are all incredibly fancy. There's even a "thinking park" that consists of a bunch of bizarre statues and probably six different types of chairs. I'm writing this from atop a pyramid next to the gate.

My adventure continues in Thessaloniki, in the taxi on the way to the hotel. I'm already feeling incredibly out of place—my luggage was placed in a tiny room in the airport (along with the luggage of the other American girl on my flight) and it took me almost an hour to find it. At the very least, I wasn't alone. It's crazy to be in the place I've read so much about over the years—it's hard to imagine that the birthplace of Alexander the Great is so close to me right now. I love all of the Greek graffiti on the walls; by far the best so far was κοβφεφε—a touch of humor about American current events or an actual Greek word?

Now in the hotel, where I'm not sleeping though even though I should be incredibly tired. It's my first night in Greece and already Zeus seems to be irked by my presence—there's a raging

thunderstorm right outside my window. It's weird being in a hotel by myself, especially with a foreign city right outside my doorstep. I got room service and ended up staying up almost all night reading—there's something deeply energizing about being here.

June 15

Now things are getting crazy and I don't have as much time to write. I had a delicious breakfast with the other Seminar participants, and then a few of us went to a grocery store to buy some things. I got some sunscreen and super-cool Greek bandaids. We started touring some of the monuments in Thessaloniki this morning—I was particularly interested to learn that the Jewish presence in Thessaloniki was once very large. In the afternoon, I had a strawberry peach mango smoothie and walked along the waterside with my newfound friends. We also went to a gelato place but I didn't buy anything this time (we will be returning later). Unsurprisingly, it was a very hot day but I had a wonderful time sightseeing and learned a lot. I'm beginning to think of Thessaloniki as a real-life version of Y'Ghatan (for my dear readers, that's a reference to my favorite fantasy series)—it's built on multitudinous layers of the past and the dead. These layers are particularly evident in places with ongoing excavation, where one can peer down into the city's past identities. For dinner, we shared a bunch of mezes in a restaurant with racially offensive American posters, which was interesting, but the food was expectedly wonderful.

June 16

This morning we visited the city walls and met some adorable kittens. We also visited the Vlatadon monastery and met some peacocks. I'm starting to doubt my own powers as a journalist, since the kittens and the peacocks are by far my most vivid memories of this morning.

We walked back down into the lower city, with beautiful views all along the way. We also saw the Rotunda and Ataturk Museum (a learning experience). We had a meze lunch outdoors, and in the afternoon a few of us went to a delightful rooftop bar for a quintessentially Greek afternoon. For dinner, we went to a fish place with live music. Later at night I finally got the gelato. I'm having the time of my life—it's amazing to be in such an interesting place and to have so much freedom. Alas, I am very tired so more astute comments will have to wait.

June 17

Another busy day. We took a bus and now a taxi to the monastery. Our driver has to keep dodging cows that have taken up residence in the middle of the road. At the same time, he's maintaining a conversation with Joe; from my minimal understanding of modern Greek, I gather that they're talking about Trump. It's a little surprising that so many of the Greeks I've met are so ready to discuss American politics. On the bus ride, some of the other Seminar participants were having a philosophical discussion that I wanted to remember for future reflection—it made me realize that a training in the humanities can help us distinguish between real and fake news. It's important to keep learning about the humanities because they help us pursue the truth for ourselves. Hopefully this seems as relevant and sensible to future Laurie as it does to present Laurie.

The monastery is so beautiful! The nuns are much friendlier than I'd expected. I can't wait to explore the grounds more. Dinner was rather short for my taste, but the food was undeniably delicious. Afterwards we had a conversation with some of the sisters, in which they explained the monastic life as a sort of marriage to Christ. I find this idea rather puzzling—how can they

make such a flippant comparison between humans and the divine? I also was intrigued to learn about the nuns' roles as spiritual advisers for the community. There was a bat in the room when I got back, so that was a source of excitement. Everyone is friendly and I love it here.

I feel the need to write about Vespers in some way, but it's a little difficult to put the experience into words. Perhaps it's the fact that I haven't been using technology as frequently for the past few days, but my head just feels so clear right now. I'm experiencing everything a little more vividly. Every sensation is just so strong and I don't really know what to do with it all. Anyways, the evening service was by far the most beautiful and moving thing I've ever experienced. The way the light hit the wall at an angle, the scent of the incense, and the melodious chanting—I can't even finish this sentence because I don't know how to make sense of the whole experience. I'm not Christian and I didn't even understand what the sisters were singing, but I found myself crying silently at the sublime beauty of it all. Needless to say, I'll be returning to Vespers for the rest of our time at the monastery. If I'm able to experience these feelings just once more this summer, I won't need much more in life.

June 18

Wow, yesterday was intense. Much chillier day today. Hollis gave her presentation about Carthusian fasting. For lunch, we had stuffed zucchini and peppers that just might have changed my life forever. The food here is so absurdly good—how do the nuns manage to justify these kinds of decadent feasts? We set up my computer as the group computer, and now I'm lying in the courtyard getting ready for a nap. Apparently this is not an appropriate place to write in my journal (I should have listened to common sense) and I'm getting kicked out now.

After that, we had coffee (I love Greek mealtimes) and then David presented about liturgical music. More food at dinner, then Vespers. Alas, not the same overwhelming feelings as last night, but still very beautiful. We had a conversation with Macrina about the monastery's old state and the fire that destroyed much of it. She was very emotional—it's touching how deeply these sisters care for the monastery and their fellow sisters. I then took a shower and should probably turn the light off now because I'm keeping everyone up.

June 19

I woke up at 7:00 to garden, then had breakfast, then more gardening, then frappe break, then more gardening. I love this life. I met a friend named Elias. He's a 60-year-old man with sun-burnished skin and smiling eyes who compares me to Laura Ingalls Wilder. He kept trying to get me to marry his unemployed son and told me that he could imagine me as a very playful child with pigtails and that my father would watch me play (?). He showed us around the garden, then we planted cucumbers, watered the ossuary, harvested mint, and gathered it into bundles. We also met a man who made the world's largest bougatsa, now working as a gardener at the monastery. Each sheet was the size of a shed! After lunch (beans, fries, eggplant, salad, honey doughnuts [made by the former baker-gardener], and honey dew melon), I gave my presentation and it went pretty well. Ambra gave her presentation about the modal system of music and showcased her lovely voice. Then I listened to the song "Elias" because I was deeply moved by my gardener buddy's story. We had a coffee break with delicious pastries, and then Izzy gave her presentation about her research in Cameroon and mental illness here at the monastery. By this point I was pretty tired but Carolyn gave a cool presentation about exorcism and the problem of

evil. For dinner we had pasta, beans, potato dumplings, more donuts, and watermelon. After dinner, I had a great conversation with Carolyn and others, then I showered and went to bed.

June 20

Great Greek miscommunication:

Nun (I forget which one): “Where is David?”

Richard: “I had too much to eat.”

So Richard ate David, which might turn out to be problematic. I got up at 9:15, had breakfast (fried dough with honey), went to work in the garden and Elias gave me a big hug and a kiss. I pulled flowers out of the graves (somehow I understood that even though Elias doesn't speak English and I don't speak much Greek—is this a common practice? It felt so weird) and then watched loukoumia-making with Parthenia. After coffee I pulled more flowers out and trellised zucchinis with Hollis and Izzy, then lunch and a nap. Ashley presented on monastic herbal medicine. Pria presented on desire and poetry and other wild stuff. More coffee, then I tried to contact the parents (potentially successful). Joe presented on Byzantine medicine. Dinner (pita with fries and onions [orphan sandwich], more delicious vegetables, beets, watermelon) and Vespers. Tonight we talked with Macrina and Vrieni about religion and cancer and monastic administration and a bunch of other interesting things. I've been having a great time watching and getting to know the sisters. Theologia has a very interesting gait and Parthenia remembers me from when we met on the first day, which is amazing because I haven't even seen her since then. I'm looking forward to talking with her more as she makes loukoumia—she must have a very interesting story.

June 21

I woke up late and went to the garden again. Elias told me I was like his daughter because I'm smiley and like plants. It's amazing how I've fostered such a deep connection with this man despite my own rudimentary grasp of his language. We picked chard and chorta and weeded the celery, then we had breakfast (olive bread—fantastic). This morning we had a talk from Nikos about the monastery, but I didn't catch much of it because I had a bloody nose in the middle. After breakfast I went back to the garden with Richard and David, but Elias and the other gardeners weren't there. I had a great time unleashing my inner flower child vibes (I was running around barefoot with flowers in my hair, savoring the freedom afforded by privacy in the garden). Despite all common sense, I pulled the other flowers out of the graves and weeded the flowers. This afternoon we ate lunch outside (stuffed veggies, salad, peppers, zucchini pastries, watermelon) and then toured the cool secret chapels. Elias joined us for coffee and we had some great cold snacks. Later we went for an amazing hike with horns (in retrospect I'm not sure what this word was supposed to be). Dinner was stuffed veggies, eggplant, peppers, and garlic bread, served with a side dish of snake-fueled excitement! After David got up to get dessert, he noticed that a snake was poking its head out of the pipe next to where he was sitting. The nuns, in an alarmingly well-rehearsed ritual, chopped its head off with shovels. Vespers were a relaxing change of pace. Tonight, I had some great conversations with Izzy, Theologia, and Parthenia. The moonlit courtyard was the perfect setting for a thoughtful, personal conversation.

June 22

This morning we left the monastery at 8:30; breakfast was just a piece of sesame bread. We took taxis to the Serres acropolis, which had a beautiful view. We walked down to see some beautiful

churches and to eat some bougatsa and cheese pie. We went to the Byzantine museum, the Ottoman mosque, and a fancy bar before taking taxis back to the monastery. Many people have joined our party and I'm not entirely sure who they all are. After a garlicky lunch, I took a nap and then toured the church. The tour continued after coffee and we saw more secret chapels than I knew existed. We got to go up to the belfry, which was really cool, and then we bought stuff at the gift shop. For dinner we had orzo soup, yummy salad, beets, more skordalia, cherries, and fruit salad).

Vespers tonight were almost as moving as the first day except I wasn't an emotional wreck like I was the first time. Still, going to Vespers has become my favorite nighttime ritual—it provides an ideal setting for deep introspection. Late tonight we transferred our photos to my computer in preparation for Synaxis. Today also marked Vicky's fourth telling of a certain very funny joke. It's surprising how much fun we're all having here at the monastery. One would expect the isolation to foster a sense of austerity, but in fact the nuns are very friendly with us and the Seminar participants have no issues laughing and joking with one another. Sometimes it seems that the sisters would like to join in, but find that their nunnish duties prevent them from participating in our joy. I wonder whether the nuns look forward to Princeton's annual visit—Theologia said they like the peace and quiet, but it must still be nice to have such exuberance in the monastery for short periods of time.

June 23

Today was an unusually special day, even by Menoikeion standards. I woke up at 7:00, hiked to three chapels optionally, which was incredibly beautiful but David and Joe both fell in rivers and

waterfalls so it was a bit wet. Afterwards we had breakfast (vegan pizzas), and then went to gather wild peppermint and thyme in the mountains with Paisia and Elias. It was incredibly hot and sweaty but I felt like I was getting in tune with my inner Greek peasant. We wore silly hats and rode in the back of Paisia's truck. Back at the monastery, we sorted the herbs with Pachomia. For lunch we had bean soup, green beans, zucchini cakes, awesome salad, incredibly delicious peppers, skordalia, and watermelon. I took a nap and then helped to plan our presentation and skit. For coffee we had that awesome ice cream-type thing again. This afternoon I cleaned benches and outside tables and inside cabinets with Pira—I couldn't believe that the nuns do this every day. They work so hard and the monastery is spotlessly clean! Next we had rehearsal for Synaxis, followed by dinner (bean soup, green beans, awesome salad, more awesome peppery things).

Synaxis itself which was incredibly special, with the skit and Macrina's video as definite highlights. The whole experience was so filled with love and kindness. The gift (poster) was awesome and so were the loumades. Vicky said the sisters really like us and we're an especially awesome group and I'm tempted to agree. It seems that "awesome" is the word of the day. I was IT and it was crazy to figure out technology with a nun (Macrina). She'll give me her phone number so we can stay in touch, but it's sad to be leaving new friends so soon.

Tonight after my shower I walked barefoot across the uneven cobblestones in front of the church in my pajamas with wet hair and the scent of fresh gardenias and so many stars all around. It was such a powerful, sensory experience that I was overcome by the impression that this has been a truly life-changing experience. I'm so thankful to be here and that all is going well in my life.

June 24

I got up and had a bit of bread, left the monastery at 8:30 and got on a big bus (apparently Nikos prefers small buses because everyone starts singing and dancing on small buses). We stopped in this very random small town to get coffee, but it was really hard to find a place that could take a group our size. In the meantime, it was a little bit like the Twilight Zone because literally every person we saw in the town was a white old man with white hair (and we saw a lot of people—it seemed that everyone was out drinking their morning coffee). Vicky said it's fairly typical in small towns for the men to drink coffee in cafes all day while the women make the money in cottage industries. Finally, we found a place where some people got bougatsa and I got a frappe with sugar, even though it didn't come until the last minute. We set off again and stopped at an archaeological museum, where Hollis and I spent more time than the rest of the group. Then we went to Amphipolis, a classical city with an absurd number of basilicas. It was fun to play around in the ruins and we had a glorious view. We went to a beautiful beach bar and swam in Olympiada, then had a great conversation with Richard over a seafood-heavy lunch. After lunch we toured Stygeira, birthplace of Aristotle, and jumped off of the rocks there. I wore shoes but Hollis got a bunch of urchin quills (which, in a funny instance of miscommunication, Joe told Pachomia were street urchins). Other people got a few as well, but my Swiss army knife came to the rescue! On the way back we stopped in a random village to see a bust of Euripides at the site of his death and approximate location of Aristotle's school for Alex (the Great) and pals. There also happened to be a village festival occurring, which consisted of the least exciting dancing imaginable. Our bus driver picked up two women there who had had great experiences on the bus in Asia Minor and wanted to smell it (??). We had a rather meaty dinner in Serres, but there

was still plenty for me to eat. We took a cab back to the monastery with a woman cab driver (my first time with a woman cab driver) and the taxi had a television in it. The best part of the night was probably sticking my head out of the window and gazing at all of the stars in the sky overhead. Truly a wonderful day.

June 25

Today I woke up naturally (*I never* wake up naturally at home) and showered. Today is the Abbess' name day so there were a billion people and I had to avoid the crowds on the way to the shower (including Elias). There were also a billion people at breakfast but we escaped outside, where we met Theologia's mom and brother (he's 56, she's 40). They were very nice and love the monastery and are very happy that their family member is here. I helped Izzy check in and book her bus ticket from London to Oxford but afterwards the internet stopped working on my computer. Actually a low-key day. I kind of packed and kind of helped with the festivities. I met Elias' wife and talked with her (she thinks that I could be an actress and that Hollis could be a singer because of her deep voice). In the afternoon we had a forum about suggestions for the seminar in the future. We left for Serres at 7:00 and had dinner with Elias, Vasili, Demetrios, Elias' son, and Vasili's son. For dessert we had a 15-foot-long crepe filled with ice cream. It was a wild night of conversation and song. It's incredibly sad to be leaving but I'm too tired to offer more sage reflections on my time with these new Greek friends.

June 26

I got up at 6:45, showered, packed, ate a quick breakfast, and left the monastery by 8:00. So sad! We got to Thessaloniki and said goodbye to a bunch of people at the hotel. I wandered around

with Richard, Joe, Izzy, Thalia, and Hollis—we had masticha lemonade on the pier and cheese pie in the city. I went back to the hotel and Thalia, Richard, and Izzy left. I wandered with Joe and Hollis to a street food place and had a Greek salad. Joe and Hollis had to leave so I went to the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki. It's wild to be on my own again, and crazy that the Seminar is already over. I hope to get the chance to return to the monastery someday!