



Lychnari

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The history of the shipyards of Syros

From bad to worse

In Lychnari of the year 2003 we reported, in 3 episodes, our discovery of the Cycladic island of Syros and how we decided to go and live there. In great detail, we wrote about the purchase of a ruin and how we finally and with great effort magically converted it into a jewel of a little house. Looking back, it is a weird and wonderful series of events, because the first impression of the island was far from inspiring. The main culprit was the iron and concrete background of the Neórion shipyards, with a harshly illuminated rusty tanker in the dry-dock.

LIENKE AND ANKE VAN NUGTEREN

You will most certainly wonder why, then, did these ladies disembark instead of continuing their voyage to a more charming island on the route to Santorini?

Because we had to fulfill a promise made to friends in Athens, in a bizarre bet that we needed to win. Moreover, along the quay beckoned an abundance of terraces. Thanks to those same friends, we also knew that, behind these terraces, hid a lively town in 19th century architecture. We discovered busy shopping streets, trendy bars and restaurants, but also cozy, old fashioned tavernas, a theatre, two cinemas, a marble square ringed by yet more terraces underneath stately palm-trees, and as a backdrop a second hill with the medieval town of Ano Syros. It was as if you uncovered a fabulous stage behind a hideous curtain.

Our Greek house

We chose a spot at the edge of the upper town of Ano Syros, devoid of cars and with a unimpeded view on the hills and on part of the port, 'including the Neórion shipyards, for these belonged in the picture, whether we liked it or not'. We realized that this industry was one of the reasons why this island remained lively no matter the season, even without tourists.

The ruin we bought underwent a true metamorphosis and at last the day arrived when we could move into our Greek house. With every new day we enjoyed the wide view, about which Hans Christian Andersen already wrote in 1841: 'It is so beautiful, how the lower town and the port stretch out towards the little island with its white lighthouse'. Other great advantages of life in Ano Syros were the clean air and especially the silence, only 'disturbed' by the ship's horn announcing a ferry's arrival or departure, the bells of the sheep and the goats grazing on

the slopes behind the house, and, when the wind blew from the south, the buzzy hum downtown. The shipyards hardly bothered us. We grew used to that piece of industry in our view. At that time, little did we know the sort of highly polluting work that was carried out in the shipyards. The fussing of the tug boats, whenever a vessel either entered the port for repair work or when, work done, it was ready to put out to sea, reminded us of a brood of ducklings paddling around their mother. We often interrupted our walks downhill to watch the tireless ballet of the brightly painted yellow and blue cranes. Reaching the quay at the spot where the road makes an abrupt bend to the left, the view on the bay would suddenly be obscured by a wall of steel. We got used to the sight of one of these mammoth tankers, its bow towering almost threateningly over the fire station just opposite, over the bus station, the café terraces... in short: the entrance to the town! Naturally, the city's most popular watering holes are located there where the ferries arrive, right next to the shipyards.

The Greek shipyards

The island continued prospering ever since the middle of the 19th century. This swift progress was primarily due to the natural harbour; the bay on whose shores the new town, Ermoúpolis (after Hermes, god of commerce), fanned out towards the hills. The Neórion shipyards saw the light in 1861. The first steam powered ships of the Mediterranean were launched from its docks. But, around the middle of the last century, the industry was dealt a big blow by the shifting of the shipbuilding activities to Piraeus.

The second blow fell with the beginning of the crisis. In the years that followed, it grew more and more quiet around the port. From our balcony, we only rarely saw a ship in the

dry-docks. Since 2011 we detected, at the most, two ships at the time. Such work as was carried out was still, for the largest part, repair work; we could hear this from the noises coming from the patient's belly.

In Lychnari 2017-33 we wrote about the Neórion's missed opportunity in the already stagnant nineteen-sixties. Because, with more foresight and less meddling of the oil producing companies, the shipyards would have had a second life as producer of electric cars.

2012 arrived. The stranglehold of the crisis grew ever tighter. Sometimes, the docks remained empty for weeks on end. A blow for the more than four hundred workers employed by the yards. But then, all of a sudden, another rusty vessel would appear. Less repairs; instead, extremely polluting patching up on the outside: sandblasting and spray-painting. The ballet of the cranes came to a stop. Sometimes, employees had to wait for months before getting paid but they dared not go on strike, for fear of losing out on their pension as well. The management was unable to pay the water bills: the water supply was shut off. A little later, the same problem occurred with the electricity. That was the end; the shipyards went under lock and key. Neighbouring shops, even the large Neórion supermarket, closed their doors. We felt sorry for the many people who lost their jobs, but we were hopeful, too, because... this would not be Greece if the wildest rumours were not circulating. The shipyards and the abandoned warehouses would become, just like those of Thessaloniki, a cultural 'port of call': art galleries; bars and restaurants with waterfront terraces, a cinema... And why not a film studio as well: 'Syros: the Hollywood of Greece'? No: a luxury marina with repair facilities that would offer plenty of jobs to the experienced former workers of the shipyards. Again, no? Alright: a parking lot, of which there is a great lack on the island. Or maybe a combination of the above, plus other environmentally friendly activities, creating lots of new "clean" job opportunities.

In American hands

The shipyards remained closed for one year and a half. During this period, we enjoyed total peace and quiet along with fresh air, which one would expect from an island in the Aegean. At the start of last year, we took the evening boat from Piraeus to Syros. Our ferry

berthed right next to a blindingly white dry-dock, bathed in blue led lights, making it look like a luxury cruise ship. On this shining white background, the name NEÓRION SHIPYARDS flashed in black lacquered letters, preceded by an unfamiliar emblem with the name ONEX.

The next day we went exploring. At the gate, now under strict surveillance, the American flag fluttered alongside the Greek and the European flags. Three container ships - gigantic even without their cargo - were lying in the docks, their rusty hulls in stark contrast to the blinding exterior of the company. We learn that ONEX SYROS SHIPYARDS S.A. is a Greek company that was founded at Halandri, Athens, in 2018. We are told that ONEX is, in fact, a Greek-American company; with a shared capital of 24.000 €. The Ambassador of the USA in Greece has proclaimed himself to be a great supporter of this "great American" investment in Syros. Be that as may, the management has made it known that debts have to be paid off first, which means that, unfortunately, they are obliged to take on 'dirty work'. 'At this point in time, we cannot afford the luxury of being choosy'.

Half a year has passed. The noise of the sandblasting is constant, and, even on our hill, it is deafening. It goes on day and night, also on Sundays and holidays. At times, the shipyards are filled to capacity with seven or eight ships at once. On those days, a veil of highly health hazardous sandblasting floats above the port. It contains rust and old antifouling paints. Depending on the direction of the wind, the veil covers large areas of Ermoúpolis and rises upwards to the hill of Ano Syros. Apparently, business is booming. When the wind blows from the south, throat and eyes get irritated and in the once pure air of the old town one can detect a whiff of something chemical. On those days we frequently have to sweep up a layer of powder - a mix of sand and rust - from balcony and patio. This rust is piling up under the open sky between the docks and the old *karnáyo*, the small port where traditional wooden fishing boats are being repaired. This is where some of the island's most popular tavernas are located. Our personal favourite, appropriately named "to Karnagio" owned by a Norwegian, closed for obvious reasons. The dirty work is done by teams of local and foreign workmen. We hear that, sometimes, they all labour for sixteen hours a day, at a high salary, but without a

fixed contract with ONEX SYROS SHIPYARDS S.A. They are employed by a subcontracting company and sent to work as per requirements. The islanders themselves do not really benefit from the presence of the foreign workmen: apparently, they live in poor conditions and send their income to their families in Pakistan, Rumania, the Philippines... Nobody believes in any improvement. 'This is Nigeria! you hear more and more.

Dirty business

There is hardly any protest against the environmental pollution and the relevant health hazards; both caused by the toxic substances that are released the atmosphere and in the sea during sandblasting and painting. Ever since last October, we are part of a group of campaigners; at that time these numbered about a hundred and fifty. People on the island are afraid of reprisals. They receive phone calls or personal visits, and are asked not to mess with Neórion. If they do not heed this advice, their businesses might lose a lot of customers. This would mean that quite a lot of money is paid out in bribes. After all, to this day, a great deal of the island's custom depends on the shipyards. During one of the gatherings we listened to a paediatric specialist from Patra who cited frightening figures: in the whole of Greece, the number of cases of cancer in children is among the highest on Syros. A doctor from Athens proclaims: 'One could fill an entire wing of the Evangelismós-hospital with patients from Syros suffering from lung disease'. On the island, it is a public secret that the Metaxà Cancer Hospital in Piraeus sees a large number of cases from Syros. We have checked the contents of the two local newspapers of the last half year: there is a lot of complaining about illegal dumping of rubbish, holes in the road surfaces, faulty sewers... About everything except the pollution caused by the shipyards. 'One' says that ONEX generously doles out hush money. The campaigners are getting nowhere, not with the management of ONEX, nor with the municipality of Syros. These two simply ignore both figures and reports: 'Just try and prove that this is our doing'. Institute legal proceedings? It is difficult to match the army of lawyers employed by ONEX, as well as its political support on both local and central government level.

But suddenly, there was hope: first of all, the article in *I Kathimerini* of the 5th February. In this article we see worrying figures. The

percentage of heavy metals in the sea-floor in the vicinity of the port transcends many times the allowed maximum. The journalist mentions no names, nor does he mention the air pollution, but it is a start. One would think that his rhetorical question 'Who is the culprit?' cannot remain unanswered for much longer. Shortly afterwards we read in *syrostoday* that the shipyards are going back to becoming, once again, a real shipbuilding industry. We were delighted: better the noise caused by construction/revival than suffering under the present circumstances. But then we read the pompous prose: it concerned a recently concluded contract with Israel, for the construction of war ships! On the pictures we see self-satisfied ministers from Athens, along with businessmen from the U.S. and Israel. These days, the only ships in the drydocks hail from Israeli ports. The sole purpose of their presence on Syros (read 'Nigeria') is to be sandblasted and painted. This is the situation at the moment we are writing the above. Meanwhile, the shipyards continue their highly polluting and sometimes illegal work. The lament of the people on Syros sounds ever more despairing: *Pnigoúmate ke mas pnigoun!* (we are suffocating and we are being suffocated). 🐳

The photographer wishes to remain anonymous.