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**A Tribute to Grandmother Lela Carayannis  
By George Pararas-Carayannis**

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GEORGE PARARAS-CARAYANNIS



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Then and now. George Pararas-Carayannis is the adopted grandson of Lela Carayannis who during the war led the largest resistance organisation in Greece. *Left:* George is pictured outside the family home at No. 1 Limnou Street in Athens. *Right:* After the war George became one of the world's leading authorities on Tsunamis and the earthquakes which trigger them. He retired

as Director of the International Tsunami Information Centre of UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. Today the street has been renamed Lela Carayannis (Karayiannis in Greek) (*below*). A plaque on the front door reads: 'This house was lived in and used as her headquarters by the heroine of the oppression. Lela Carayannis 'Bouboulina' killed on 8-9-1944.'

# A TRIBUTE TO GRANDMOTHER LELA CARAYANNIS

On September 8, 1944, on the outskirts of Athens, Greece, the hush of the morning dawn was broken by harsh rattle of German machine gun. This was a familiar sound in the foothills of Dafni, near the concentration camp of Chaidari, as German execution squads routinely carried out their orders. Many of the occupants of the camp were Greek patriots, and on this particular Friday it was the turn of a grandmother, Lela Carayannis, to be executed. She was the leader of the Greek resistance/intelligence organisation known as 'Bouboulina' and she was shot along with 71 of her followers and co-workers. Death for Lela was a form of freedom and probably a welcome release for her mortal body which, for three solid days, had been subjected to cruel torture by her SS interrogators. One by one her fingernails had been forcibly removed and wounds inflicted on her body with razor blades, the cuts being salted for maximum pain.

Witnesses observing from the hills above Daphni reported that just before the execution the group of prisoners, led by Lela Carayannis, began to sing and that Lela led them in the *Zallogos*, a symbolic Greek dance of defiance in choosing death rather than loss of freedom or submission to the enemy. This had been the song and dance of the women and children of Messolongi in the War of Independence from the Turks (1821-29) when, one by one, they jumped off the cliff at Messolongi, choosing death rather than capture by the Turks.

Following the German invasion of Greece in April 1941, it was in the first few days of the occupation of the country that Lela Carayannis had begun forming her organisation. It started with efforts to help those Allied soldiers left behind after the evacuation. Lela came to their rescue setting up temporary safe havens. Soon more and more Commonwealth soldiers were brought in by Greek patriots combing the countryside.

The rescue operations quickly grew and became more demanding and more daring. Lela's initial efforts were to provide care and refuge for hundreds of Allied and Greek soldiers and airmen trapped in the country. She organised safe houses where the wounded could be treated and prepared for escape over the mountains to rejoin their units. She helped their escape by using fishing boats which moved the men from island to island, coming ever-closer to the Allied bases in the Middle East. Quickly Lela's resistance organ-

isation grew in numbers as more and more Greek patriots answered the call to duty.

By George Pararas-Carayannis





Lela's organisation was named after Laskarina Bouboulina, the Greek heroine in the country's War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire in 1821. She was shot dead in a family argument in May 1825.

Lela Carayannis was a woman with remarkable self-control, nerves of steel and an iron will. She also possessed admirable organisational skills. Her leadership qualities were recognised and she inspired the respect of everyone around her. Within a very short period she managed to set up a team of more than 150 Greeks from all walks of life whom she could trust and who were willing to join the resistance. She formed them into intelligence units and later into assault teams to fight the invader. Her organisation was given the code-name 'Bouboulina' after her own great grandmother, the Greek heroine in the war of independence over 100 years earlier. She collected men to fight with her against the enemies, and raised the Greek flag on board her largest ship, the *Agamemnon* to begin a naval blockage against the Turks, losing her eldest son in the action which culminated — after her death — in the battle of Navarino in 1827 — the last major battle fought between wooden sailing ships.



The Italians invaded Greece on October 28, 1940 followed by German forces which opened a front in the Balkans on April 6, 1941. *Above:* This parade was held in front of the Memorial to the Greek Unknown Soldier. *Below:* The memorial is located by the Parliament building on Syntagma Square in Athens. Lela managed to operate successfully for three years until a member of her group was apprehended and, under brutal interrogation, betrayed her. She was arrested in the Red Cross Hospital in the city.

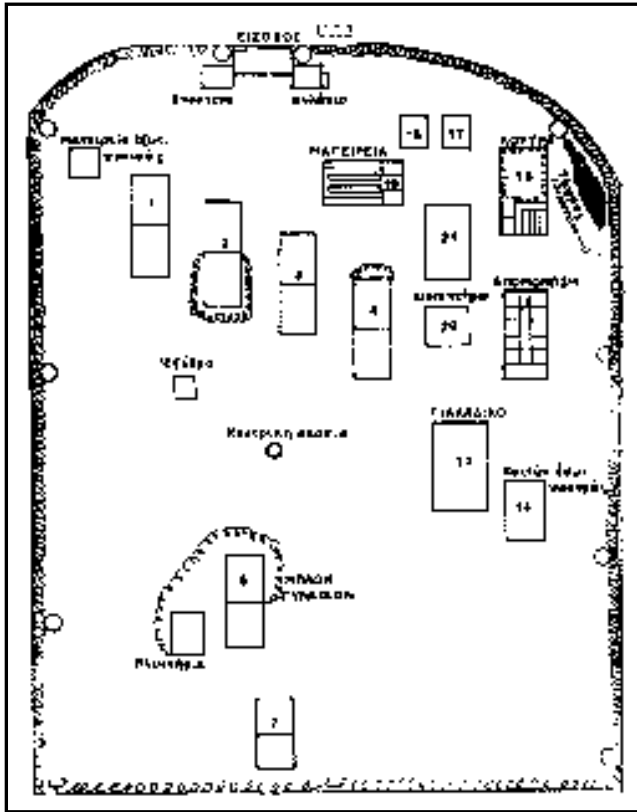


*Left:* She was taken to the Gestapo headquarters located in Merlin Street where she was subjected to horrendous torture to reveal the names of the other members of her organisation but her interrogators failed to break her indomitable spirit.



*Centre:* Today No. 6 Merlin Street in central Athens has been replaced with a modern department store yet one of the original cell doors has been put on display by the entrance as a reminder of the horrors of former days (*right*).





Lela, together with several members of her family, were taken to the concentration camp at Chaidari. This was the largest and most notorious camp in Greece, becoming known as the 'Bastille of Greece', and was established in 1943 on the grounds of a Greek army barracks. It has been established that during the following year over 20,000 people passed through its doors, the Jews en-route for extermination at Auschwitz, the others for using as forced-labour in Germany. It is believed that over 2,000 of the inmates were executed. Today photography is banned in the whole area but this Google image has permitted us to circle Block 15.

In the months following the German occupation, Lela expanded her activities to cover every aspect of effective resistance and intelligence. She managed to plant members of her team in many German offices, including the local Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe commands, and in the German and Italian high commands. Not only did she have Greek patriots helping her but she even managed to recruit agents from the enemy's own ranks: disgruntled anti-Nazi German officers; Italian anti-fascists; and Germans who had married Greek women. In the end she was receiving information on German army and ship movements, on enemy fortifications, and on movements of supplies and personnel. This intelligence was, in turn, wired or forwarded to the Allied headquarters in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, after working undercover for nigh-on three years, a member of her organisation was caught and interrogated. This led the Germans to Lela and on July 11, 1944, she was arrested at the Red Cross Hospital where she had been taken after she became ill. On August 14, in the office of the Gestapo interrogator Fritz Bäcke, (traced and eliminated by the Mosad after the war had ended) Lela was brought face to face with her assistant who had been tortured and broken by the German interrogators. For three days Lela was tortured cruelly by her captors but they were unable to get a word out of her. Frustrated and humiliated by Lela's courage and strength of character, Bäcke finally gave up. He closed the file on the 'Organization Bouboulina' with the words: 'Lela Carayannis, the most dangerous spy in the Balkans'.

On September 8, 1944 Lela and 71 of her followers were executed in what is now the Diomideios Garden — the Botanical Garden now in the grounds of the University of Athens. *Right:* The local municipality renamed Vas. Georgiou Street to Agoniston Stratopedou Chaidariou (Chaidari Camp Fighters Street) which was the road that many fighters walked down to their execution.



Above: For many years Chaidari remained neglected, all visits being forbidden as it lay within a military base and today only Block 15 survives, formerly used for the solitary confinement of its prisoners.





MUNICIPALITY OF CHAIDARI

In 1982 the first memorial ceremony took place in front of the camp entrance and later it became possible to gather in front of Block 15 which is now a listed monument.

Shortly thereafter, Lela and four of her children, her sons, Byron (my stepfather) along with Nelson, and two of her daughters, Ioanna, and Electra, were transferred to the concentration camp at Chaidari where they were subjected to horrific torture and abuse. In the early hours of that

fateful morning of September 8, 1944, before Lela and 71 of her followers were machine-gunned to death, Lela's children and some of her co-workers held in another part of the camp, destined for execution the following day, managed to escape with the help of an anti-Nazi German. They went

into hiding in Athens and did not learn of their mother's execution until several days later. Such was the fate of Lela Carayannis, a simple housewife forced by circumstances to rise to martyrdom, in defence of her country. After the war Lela was awarded the highest medals for valour, and members of the Allied forces whose lives Lela had touched and saved, wrote and expressed their gratitude and appreciation.

Lela Carayannis' heroic actions and ultimate sacrifice are remembered every year in Greece on the anniversary of her execution. Her old house in Limnou Street still stands among the high rises, and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Buildings. The street has been renamed Lela Carayannis Street and her marble statue can be seen in a small square near the Athens Museum. There, every year on September 8, Government officials and citizens gather to hold a memorial service paying tribute to her and remembering the fallen patriots of the Bouboulina.

The dramatic circumstances how war converted a simple housewife and mother of seven children into a resistance fighter of legendary proportions has led Lela Carayannis to become a national symbol in Greece. Today her example of heroism and altruism teaches and inspires younger generations of Greeks about the value of freedom and human dignity.

George — then eight years old — remembers searching with his mother for Lela's body. After the war, the Greek government had her remains exhumed and reburied in this tomb in the First Cemetery of Athens.



GEORGE PARASIS-CARAYANNIS