

**Fofi Lazarou: Against all odds (1922-2015)**

**Maria:** «Ο πόλεμος, η κατοχή, η αντίσταση ήταν μια κοσμογονία. Η ζωή άλλαξε. Άλλαξαν και οι άνθρωποι, τα μυαλά, οι αντιλήψεις. Οι νέες εργάτριες βρήκαν τη δύναμη να αλλάξουν και τη δική τους μοίρα, Νοιώσαν πως είχαν και αυτές ευθύνη να παλέψουν για τη λευτεριά και σπάσαν τα δεσμά και τους περιορισμούς του σπιτιού. Οργανώθηκαν, αγωνίστηκαν. Κι απόχτησαν γνώση, δύναμη, αυτοπεποίθηση, σιγουριά. Μέσα στην οργάνωση και στον αγώνα αποκάλυψαν ικανότητες που μέναν καταχωνιασμένες και αχρησιμοποίητες μέσα τους και βάλθηκαν να τα προλάβουν όλα, σα να θελαν να αποτινάξουν μονομιάς τη σκλαβιά και την καθυστέρηση αιώνων.»

“War, Occupation, Resistance was a cosmogony. Life changed. People changed, minds changed, and perceptions changed. Young working women found the strength to change their destiny, they felt that they too had a responsibility to fight for freedom and broke the shackles and restrictions of home. They organized themselves, and they fought. And they gained knowledge, strength, confidence, and self-assurance. In the struggle, they revealed abilities that had remained unused, and they set out to catch up with everything as if they wanted to shake off centuries of slavery and backwardness all at once”.

**Spyros:** These are the words of Fofi Lazarou, the story of a law student at the University of Athens who during the Second World War became a leading member of the resistance through her participation in United Panhellenic Youth Organization, EPON. This choice would lead her into a reality full of difficulties. We will narrate her story, the life of a woman who lived in illegality, in prison, and even in exile as a political refugee.

(MUSIC INTRO)

**Spyros:** Fofi Lazarou was born in Athens in 1922. She was the third child of a middle-class family from a village in Central Greece. During the 1940s her siblings Dimitra and



Thimios joined the resistance movement. The Lazarou family lived in Kypseli, an old urban neighborhood in the centre of Athens, with an intense cultural and intellectual life. This environment made her develop progressive beliefs a fact not self-evident for the position of women in the inter-war period.

The fascist regime that was imposed by the dictator Ioannis Metaxas in 1936 interrupted the democratic freedoms but, at the same time, activated the political dynamism of the youth. Although Lazarou was forced –like all students– to join the regime’s fascist youth (EON), the family’s liberal political background and her political convictions led to a complete disregard for this membership. As she stated in an interview:

**Maria:** «Most of us joined the EON mandatorily, although we did not want to go.»

**Spyros:** While in the EON, Lazarou had already developed contacts with two young communists who were operating illegally, and she was instructed to boycott, as much as possible, the organization’s activities.

**Lambros:** Her admission to the Law School of the University of Athens coincided with the declaration of the Second World War in Greece. During the Greek-Italian War from October 1940 to April 1941, Lazarou was supporting the Greek soldiers at the front, and at the same time she began to join the illegal Communist Youth Organization. During the Occupation and as the resistance movement began to spread, Lazarou became a member of the Student Office of the National Liberation Front (EAM) and at the same time, she contributed to the founding of the women’s resistance group Lefteri Nea (Free Girl), one of the first illegal youth organizations founded in May 1942. The Free Girl was the first exclusively female organization, and accepted young girls regardless of ideological and political views.

**Maria:** “Through the Free Girl we were educated in empowerment, fostering confidence in our abilities. It was the first women’s organization that even scarcely raised the equality of women in the family”.



**Lambros:** Lazarou read feminist books in her free time which helped shape her beliefs about women's rights. Along with joining the Free Girl and being a student, Lazarou had an important organizational role in the coordination of the resistance movement of male and female students at the University of Athens. As she states,

**Maria:** “We had a very busy life, that is, leaving home in the morning, going to the University, waiting for the food, making our propaganda, preparing a demonstration. And in the afternoon, we had meetings to write action bulletins”.

**Lambros:** Her activity extended beyond the university as she took part in the demonstrations in occupied Athens. Lazarou and other young girls went on to set up their crews and go around the city at night illegally writing slogans on the walls against the German and the Italian occupiers. The Occupation's special conditions and especially her intense involvement with the Resistance resulted in her neglecting her studies. When the United Panhellenic Youth Organization (EPON), was founded in February 1943, it merged many of the earlier resistance movements and Lazarou joined the new organization. Apart from her activities at the University, from 1943 she was responsible for recruiting young working women into the resistance movement. In this context, she contacted young women who worked in the factories of Piraeus, to improve their working conditions. The conditions for the recruitment of women workers were not easy. Along with the risk of arrest by the occupation authorities, the opposition of Greek employers to trade union demands, as well as the women's hesitance were slow down factors.

However, as the resistance movement strengthened, the oppression also increased. The first time, she managed to escape but the second time she was detained in a police station, where she was severely beaten. Eventually, she was released with the mediation of a relative. After these incidents, unable to act in Nea Ionia, Lazarou took over as secretary of a district organization of the EPON in the centre of Athens, where she remained until the Liberation.



In October 1944, Athens was liberated, and slowly the whole country too. The people were in the streets celebrating. But a few months later, in December 1944, an armed civil conflict broke out in Athens with thousands of dead and wounded. With the retreat of EAM from the capital, Lazarou moved to another city, walking for days on foot. When she returned illegally to Athens, she heard that her brother was killed during the clashes.

During the short period of peace that followed the December events, she was chosen as the only woman in the EPON's Bureau in 1946. From this position, she organized the Women's Bureau, which was subsequently defunct, while she was also assigned to communicate with the political prisoners and the exiles.

**Spyros:** Being a fugitive since 1947, in January 1952 she left the country illegally after a directive of the Communist Party first to France and then to Eastern Europe. The trip turned out, however, to be another adventure for Lazarou, because when she was travelling from Paris to Berlin, she was arrested in Saar. She remained in the French prison of Metz for five months.

Lazarou applied for political asylum in Poland and her demand was accepted. After living for a short time in Warsaw she traveled to Bucharest, where she arrived in November 1952. The Romanian capital was the home for a large community of Greek political refugees.

**Maria:** "I went almost immediately to the Bellogianni Party School, where, among other things, we learned typography and radio production, after 8 months I returned to Bucharest and worked in the Party's publishing house, first as a printer and then as a proofreader. In general, life as a political shelter was anything but idyllic. We only had communication with the Greeks.

**Lambros:** She returned illegally to Greece in December 1954, with fake passport. She joined the illegal communist organization in Athens and from then until her arrest in June 1957 she lived in conditions of total illegality.



She was arrested and imprisoned in June 1957, and she remained in prison until March 1966. In 1960 she was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of espionage. She was released from the Averoff Women's Prison in 1966 and then, for almost a year after her release, she was employed in the Organizational Department of the United Democratic Left (EDA), the legal party of the Greek Left at that time, since the Communist Party was outlawed after the Civil War.

She lived only one year in liberty, since from 1947 to 1966 she was in prison or underground. Of that period of her life, she remembers:

**Maria:** «I experienced a great deal of disorder and a lot of prisons, in reality, I did not have any life. When I was released from prison and I later worked for the EDA, it is not that I wasn't me, I was me, but prison insulates you, makes you somehow...»

**Lambros:** Lazarou did not enjoy her freedom for long, as a year after her release, in April 1967, a military dictatorship was imposed in Greece. Having managed to escape arrest in the first days, she returned to illegality, participating in the anti-dictatorial struggle. She joined the ranks of the Patriotic Anti-Dictatorial Front (PAM) and for two years until October 1969, when she was arrested, she operated illegally in Athens. She was sentenced to 16 years imprisonment.

**Spyros:** She was released from prison in 1973 and at the age of 51, she decided to continue her studies at the Law School, which she had left in 1946. She obtained her degree in 1975 and started working as a lawyer. After the fall of the Junta in 1974, she continued to be involved in politics –in the Communist Party Interior– but not as systematically as in previous years. At the same time, she actively participated in the organizations of the resistance veterans and in the feminist groups that emerged from the mid-1970s onwards. She was one of the founding members of the “Woman in Resistance Movement”, through which women fighters demanded recognition for their role in the National Resistance, and at the same time sought to preserve the memory and promote the history of the Resistance. She died in Athens in 2015. In total, she spent 13 years in prison and 10 years as an outlaw.



