



Bruce Kent, president of the International Peace Bureau, presents Mikis Peristerakis with a special award for his services to the peace movement, Athens, 2003.

Michalis Peristerakis

A last farewell

*Panos Trigazis
Bruce Kent
Colin Archer*

*Panos Trigazis is
President of the Greek
Monitor of International
Organizations and
Globalization. For many
years, he worked together
with Mikis Peristerakis in
support of peace and
human rights.*

The Marathon race of Michalis Peristerakis's life, which began in Naxos 73 years ago, came to an end prematurely. An emblematic figure in the Greek peace movement, with significant international activity, for which he was officially honoured by the International Peace Bureau, Mikis – as his international friends called him – passed away suddenly on 4 May 2011, in his law office, from a heart attack.

Those of us who walked with him many times from Marathon for a world without wars, hunger and environmental degradation, or who protested against the 'Euromissiles' with Mikis in various European capitals, or who travelled with him to the opposite shore of the Aegean in support of 'citizens' diplomacy' and friendship between the Greek and Turkish peoples, or who co-organised events with him in solidarity with Cyprus and Palestine, or who collaborated in demonstrations against the wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere – we all feel we have lost part of ourselves.

'Uncompromising fighter and simultaneously a deeply sensitive soul, a true fellow man,' were the characteristic words of Professor G A Mangakis, a prominent anti-junta fighter and former justice minister, describing Peristerakis during an event at the Athens Bar Association in 2006, which his friends and fellow peace activists had organised in his honour.

Mikis had been in the front lines of the peace movement during difficult times. The struggle for peace was multi-dimensional in content in post-civil war Greece, but it also meant persecution and danger to the lives of its organisers, as attested by the execution of Nikiforides in 1951 and the murder of

Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963.

Mikis joined the peace and democracy movement very young, while a law student at the University of Athens. At the age of 24 he became president of the Bertrand Russell Youth Movement for Nuclear Disarmament. This was a movement with fresh ideas and very broad appeal during a period when the nuclear dangers were underlined dramatically by the Cuba crisis, and Greece was a ‘frontline’ state in the Cold War divide.

At that time, the development of the peace movement was part of the more general upsurge of student and youth movements, with major struggles for democracy and free education for all, accompanied by the demand that 15 per cent of the state budget be devoted to this sector.

A landmark was the first Marathon Peace March on 21 April 1963, which had been banned by the then government of Karamanlis. Defying the ban and mass arrests, most of the organizers, as well as international guests from CND, joined the thousands who marched. They were led by left wing MP Grigoris Lambrakis who, shortly after, became a martyr of the Greek and international peace movements when he was assassinated by fascists in Thessaloniki on 22 May 1963, following a peace rally.

Subsequently, the founding of the Lambrakis Democratic Youth, on the initiative of Mikis Theodorakis, was a milestone, and the name of Peristerakis was among the 30 signatories under its founding declaration published on 9 June that year. In the following years, peace marches from Marathon to Athens were held annually with tens (even hundreds) of thousands participating.

The democratic spring brought about by the ‘Greek May’ of 1963 was halted abruptly by the imposition of dictatorship on 21 April 1967, during which Peristerakis was among those who suffered the hardships inflicted by the US-supported regime on thousands of those of the left who advocated democracy and peace.

After the dictatorship fell, seven years later, Peristerakis once again became active in the movement in the post of vice-president and, later, president of the Independent Peace Movement (AKE). He was in the front ranks of new Marathon marches against nuclear weapons and US military bases. He contributed to collaboration between the three main Greek peace movements, AKE-EEDYE-KEADEA, and participated actively in the European and international anti-nuclear movement, contributing especially to the establishment of European Nuclear Disarmament (END) and to peace actions across Europe against the ‘Euromissiles’, for the simultaneous dissolution of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free Europe. This movement witnessed

unprecedented growth, contributing decisively to the historic intermediate nuclear forces (INF) agreement, between Reagan and Gorbachev in 1987, which led to the abolition of medium-range missiles.

Mikis worked closely with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, the International Peace Bureau, and other peace organisations, collaborating with prominent peace activists such as Ken Coates, Bruce Kent, Luciana Castellina and others.

In addition, he maintained warm relations with the Japanese peace movement, especially with Gensuikyo and Hidankyo, and invited groups of *Hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors) to Greece and also welcomed the 'Peace Boat' from Japan.

Even after the end of the Cold War, Mikis continued his activity in the front ranks of the anti-war movement, sparked by wars in the Gulf, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. He also said 'No' to the war on Libya which was getting under way.

The last time we met was shortly before his death, at a meeting in the Technical Chamber of Greece about organising a new anti-nuclear movement as a result of the recent great tragedy at Fukushima. He declared his support with enthusiasm, as always.

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***Bruce Kent**, past president of the International Peace Bureau, sent this short appreciation.*

Mikis was a really bright star in the peace world. We met especially in the 1980s and 90s at International Peace Bureau committee meetings and other rallies. His great strength was enthusiasm. He would burst into meetings with new ideas (not always on the agenda) and the conviction that they could be made to happen. And he helped to make them happen. In later years I would get, out of the blue, sudden messages of encouragement and hope. His interest was never in promoting himself – but always in opportunities to build a better, fairer and more peaceful world.

***Colin Archer**, current secretary-general of the International Peace Bureau, added these comments.*

During Mikis's long involvement with the International Peace Bureau there were two special highlights. In 1992, he organised a large-scale banquet in Athens in honour of IPB's centenary, to which many distinguished people were invited. In 2003, he helped convene a Greek Organising Committee to put together the programme for a unique conference which was held in both

Athens University and at the original site at Olympia, in the run-up to the 2004 Athens Olympics. The conference focused in part on the ancient Olympic Truce, now being revived for the modern age. At this conference Mikis was awarded a special IPB prize (see photo).

A good account of earlier, turbulent events, including Mikis's own role in the Greek struggle, can be found in Larry Wittner's *Resisting the Bomb* (volume two of his three volume *History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement*, Stanford, 1997, pp 238-240). Mikis is also briefly portrayed in the classic film 'Z', directed by Costa-Gavras, which informed the world about the assassination of Lambrakis.

Mikis recently sent this message to the Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

'We pray the catastrophe to stop now, and the people of Japan to get the courage to rebuild their important country, and peace, joy, life and creation to return again among the Japanese people.'

Ann Kestenbaum 1946 - 2011

Ann already worked at the Russell Foundation when I started in 1980. She and I collaborated on Spokesman's publishing programme. The appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament was under active discussion between Ken Coates, Edward Thompson, and others, and the subsequent campaign for a nuclear-weapons-free Europe was to change our lives. Ann became very active in Nottingham for Nuclear Disarmament, and gave that collective a strong internationalist direction. Her American husband, Al, reinforced this tendency. We thus found ourselves organising a coach-load of activists to attend the second END Convention in Berlin, in 1983. Every seat on the bus was booked. When we stopped in London to pick up some more passengers, two of them had brought huge bicycles, which they wanted to ride around Berlin. George, our stalwart driver, almost flipped. But we found the space and, in due course, the intermediate nuclear forces treaty saw off at least some of the nukes that were stashed across Europe. Ann could be seen jiving the night away as we took the ferry across the Channel on the journey home. She was fun to work with, and had loads of patience when confronted with exasperating situations. We shall all miss her.

Tony Simpson