

Peace in our way

**Grigoris Lambrakis
Michalis Peristerakis**

Tony Simpson

A memorial meeting for Michalis Peristerakis, lifelong peace activist and lawyer, was held in Athens on 21 April 2013. Michalis had died in 2011 (see Spokesman 113). The memorial meeting was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the first Marathon Peace March in 1963, initiated by Grigoris Lambrakis, which Michalis had witnessed. The Russell Foundation was invited to participate in the memorial meeting, and this short article is based on Tony Simpson's address there. Enduring acute hardships that threaten social catastrophe, Greek activists remember their history.

One bright Sunday morning in April 2013, we stepped through the archway of Athens First Cemetery, in search of the grave of Grigoris Lambrakis. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the first Marathon Peace March, which Dr Lambrakis had initiated, and we had come to pay our respects at his graveside and lay flowers. We were a small group of activists in the peace movement who firmly believe that Dr Lambrakis's brave example should be known to a new generation.

Of course, 1963 was the year of Dr Lambrakis. In January, at CND's invitation, he visited Oxford to attend a conference which gave birth to the International Confederation for Disarmament and Peace.

In April, Dr. Lambrakis was back in Britain for CND's annual Easter March. He laid a wreath at Lord Byron's handsome memorial near Hyde Park Corner in London. He had already marched about 80 kilometres, all the way from the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston, carrying his banner marked 'ELLAS'. Manolis Glazos and Leonidas Kyrkos, long-time activists on the Greek Left, accompanied Lambrakis on the march, as well as many people from Cyprus

A few weeks later, Lambrakis was murdered, but not before he inaugurated the first Marathon Peace March, on 21 April, carrying the same ELLAS banner he had raised in England. In Greece, at first, he marched alone, but then with thousands of others who defied the official ban on this signal event. Whilst in England, Dr Lambrakis and his colleagues had gathered support for the Marathon March, the Greek 'Aldermaston', and against the Greek government's ban on it.

When he heard of the ban, Bertrand Russell said he would come himself to Athens to march from Marathon. A Greek government spokesman was reported as saying that if Lord Russell did so, he would be arrested. Russell had not endeared himself to the Greek authorities by his consistent support for political prisoners in Greece, and his life-affirming preference for 'better red than dead' to 'better dead than red'.

Later, Russell sent a clear message to those many hundreds of thousands of Greeks who came on to the streets of Athens for the funeral of Dr Lambrakis, following his brutal murder in Thessaloniki. He said that responsibility for the murder of Dr. Lambrakis 'must lie squarely with the Greek Government'.

Russell expressed the hope that many thousands of citizens of Greece who know that their Government do not represent them, would attend the funeral – 'and remind the Government and police how much they are deposed for permitting the assassination of such a good man'. In the event, a multitude attended.

During those epic years, as a young man, Michalis Peristerakis responded to Russell's call to save the world from the nuclear peril. In 1962, he became president of the Bertrand Russell Youth Movement for Nuclear Disarmament. As Panos Trigazis has written, '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'. Michalis was to become a strong protagonist of the Marathon Peace March. His arrest on that day no doubt reinforced his support for the Marathon Peace Marches down the years.

Following the murder of Dr Lambrakis, Michalis took another notable and courageous initiative in inaugurating with others the Lambrakis Democratic Youth, in June 1963. His was to be a long life in the service of 'The Glorious Art of Peace' (as John Gittings entitled his recent, splendid book), playing a unifying role in the peace movement in Greece, Europe and the wider world.

Part of Michalis's activism, during the 1980s, was in support of what was sometimes called the 'Russell Appeal' for European Nuclear Disarmament, which is how I came to meet him. Russell had died a decade earlier, in 1970, and the Appeal was drafted by several hands, including Edward Thompson, Ralph Miliband and Ken Coates. The call for a nuclear-weapons-free Europe resounded across the continent, north and south, west and east, and Michalis, Panos and others responded with characteristic creativity, generosity and commitment.

In so doing, Michalis made many firm friends including Bruce Kent of CND, who, in a message to his memorial meeting, said ‘Mikis I will never forget. Unpredictable, full of ideas, big smile, and great enthusiasm. Everything was possible with Mikis. He was a joy to be with; a model of never giving up’.

Later, Michalis established contacts with the Palme Foundation, inviting Lisbet Palme, Olof’s widow and secretary of Unicef, to Crete for a conference. Michalis was by now actively engaged with the International Peace Bureau, based in Geneva. It’s Secretary General, Colin Archer, has written how, in 2003, Michalis helped convene a unique, two-centre conference at Athens University and in Olympia, during preparations for the magnificent Olympic Games of 2004, in which participants were reminded of the ancient Olympic Truce, another Greek gift to civilization.

In 2011, when the terrible tsunami struck Japan, Michalis instantly wrote to the Mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, saying, ‘we pray that the catastrophe will stop now, and that the people of Japan will find the courage to rebuild their country, and that peace, joy, life and creation will return again to the Japanese people’.

Michalis Peristerakis and Grigoris Lambrakis, in their different ways, exemplified the passion, courage and dignity that characterise those in Greece who work consistently for peace. Kate Hudson, CND’s current General Secretary, in a timely message, has written that ‘international solidarity remains fundamental to our movement and Grigoris Lambrakis was an exemplar of this principle ... His assassination did not kill his spirit, and that great spirit remains an inspiration to us today.’ Much the same can be said of Michalis, for we urgently need such examples as his as we strive to rid the world of nuclear weapons and war.

*Remember, lads, the life of old
Which Peace put in our way:
The myrtle, figs and little cakes,
The luscious fruit all day,
The violet banks and olive groves,
All things for which we sigh,
Peace has now brought back to us,
So greet her with joyous cry!*

*Aristophanes, Peace
Translated by John Gittings*