

BASIL S. LAOURDAS

1912 - 1971

Basil Laourdas was born on the 21st of March 1912 in Piraeus. He grew up in the crucial years of the Balkan Wars and the First World War and as a child he witnessed the tragedy of the refugees coming to Greece after the defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor in 1922. Those horrible pictures were to remain vivid in his memory and later inspired the article about the "Lesson Drawn from the Asia Minor Disaster" written in 1945 when Greece was facing another disaster.

It was during his early years that his father died and his mother, a brave woman of Cretan stock, raised him along with her other three older children to the song of Erotokritos and the hymns of the church. He was always proud to say how much he owed to her for his piety and his love for the church and later for Mt Athos. In Piraeus he finished his elementary and secondary education and in 1931 he entered the Faculty of Letters at the University of Athens. There he was influenced by a brilliant young professor, the philologist Ioannis Sykoutris, who inspired his students of the entity of the Greek culture, from the ancient times through the byzantine to the modern period.

After his graduation from the University in 1936, Basil taught for ten years in Gymnasiums in Athens and in Piraeus. His concern in education dating from that period, when he was able to evaluate the curriculum and the textbooks used in schools, was expressed later (1954) in a series of articles on the subject. Since 1932, he had already started working on philological topics and his first extensive work, his book on Plato's "Ion" appeared in 1937. During the troubled years of the Second World War and right after, he published a number of monographs and translations of ancient texts. Deeply concerned with the problems of the period he was living in he saw its closeness to the changes of the 4th cent. B. C. It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new one that witnessed the destruction of material things and spiritual values, imposing the imperative necessity for solid values and firm ideals. Thus he speaks of the duty of the philologist to present the "ancients" as living spiritual forces who offer us ideals for the present. ("Isokrates and his Age," "Solon the Law Giver").

Equally he was interested in modern Greek literature on which he contributed essays and critics on Prevelakis, his favorite author, and on Kazantzakis, Venezis, Delta and others.

In 1947 he was in Crete teaching at the Lyceum Korais in Heraklion. There he became acquainted with the intellectuals of the city and helped in the founding of the "Society for Cretan Studies" and the Society's journal *Κρητικά Χρονικά* ("Cretan Chronicles") to which he has contributed many papers on the byzantine history and literature of Crete.

His desire to pursue higher studies was fulfilled when in 1948 he received a British scholarship to study at Oxford where he worked under Paul Maas on classical and byzantine subjects. The next year he went to the United States. He became a Fellow of Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Center in Washington D.C. and under the guidance of Albert Matthias Friend Jr. he started working on the manuscript tradition of the Homilies of Patriarch Photius (published in Thessaloniki in 1959) and Photius' Letters (unpublished). While in Washington he taught Greek in George Town University.

In the summer of 1953, on a Dumbarton Oak's mission to Mt Athos, passing through Thessaloniki, he met the late Professor Stilpon Kyriakides, president of the Society for Macedonian Studies, who discussed with him the idea of his coming to Thessaloniki to head the newly founded Institute for Balkan Studies. It was in 1954, after a year spent in Athens that Basil came to Thessaloniki to take over his duties as director of the Institute. Everything had to start from scratch: building up a library on Balkan subjects, organizing the work of the Institute such as publications, meetings, lectures, the necessity of international collaboration, Balkan language courses. Living in this part of Greece for the first time he got involved and interested in both the ancient and the more recent history of Thessaloniki and that of Macedonia in general and in 1957 he started a large editorial project of the Macedonian Struggle of the beginning of our century. He edited memoirs of the leaders of the struggle and organized lectures on the various aspects of the subject. During that period he also published a number of papers on byzantine writers and started editing the byzantine and post byzantine "Encomia" on Saint Demetrius. It was among his future plans to make a synthesis of these "Encomia" in order to show how Saint Demetrius was viewed at different periods.

In 1960 his dream of an international cooperation materialized by starting the publication of the bi-annual journal "Balkan Studies," the only foreign language scholarly journal published in Greece, and the first of its kind in the Balkans. Scholars from Europe, from the Balkans and the United States were welcome to discuss topics concerning the Balkan area and as editor in chief

of the journal he wished to make it a forum for international scholarly collaboration and understanding. Other publications such as monographs on Greek subjects and Balkan ones written by Greek and foreign scholars were included in the program of the work of the Institute and their number has reached the impressive figure of 125 up to now.

Every year a series of lectures on a special topic was organized at the Institute for the public of Thessaloniki, such as "Mount Athos," "The Orthodox Patriarchates," "The Phanariots," "Macedonian Cities in the 18th and 19th Centuries," "Thessaloniki in the 14th Century," and others to which scholars from Thessaloniki, Athens, and from foreign countries were invited to read papers. He himself felt that the duty of an intellectual and that of the director of the Institute was to communicate with the society he was living in and for this purpose he never declined invitations by various associations to lecture in Thessaloniki, in Athens in Piraeus, in Crete, in Patras and in many cities and towns of Northern Greece. These carefully prepared lectures are important texts mostly unpublished.

The language courses at the Institute for Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian, Rumanian, Turkish and Albanian was part of the initial program realized in 1963. These courses for students and assistants at the University and other scholars offer the opportunity for broadening the knowledge on the Balkans and for the understanding of its people.

Besides his work at the Institute: editing all the publications, organizing lectures and meetings, administrative duties, etc. he would find time for his private scholarly work and for preparing papers for international conferences which he attended in the United States and elsewhere, as in Belgrade, Sophia, Bucarest. These travels were very fruitful for making contacts and forging friendships for cooperation with the Institute and, as its representative, he invited scholars to visit it in Thessaloniki, to spend some time in the city to pursue their research work, to collaborate in "Balkan Studies" or have their books published by the Institute. He loved to help young scholars in their work and there are many who remember with what pleasure he would go out of his way to facilitate their research. Very often he was called by his foreign friends a "bridge-builder" and rightly so this has been true all these years. His knowledge of the classical, the byzantine and the modern Greek culture extending in the philological, theological and historical aspects of the cultural tradition of his country were great assets for collaborating with his colleagues and for directing and helping students seeking his advice.

In 1961-1962 he was invited at the University of Buffalo as guest professor in classics and in 1967-1968 he again was invited at the University of Madison

Wisconsin as Johnson Professor of the Institute of Humanities. In Madison, he was instrumental in organizing under the auspices of the University of Wisconsin the symposium on "Greece since the Second World War: The Twentieth Anniversary of the Truman Doctrine" and encouraged professor B. Tsangadas in his plans for a symposium on "Medieval Greece: Background and Legacy" in Boulder Colorado.

The next year he attended the symposium on "Modern Greek Culture" at the University of Maryland and was happy to see at its closing the forming of the "Modern Greek Studies Association" about which he was very much interested.

In August 1968 the symposium on "Ancient Macedonia" took place at the Institute which was a plan discussed between Professor C. Edson and Laourdas in Madison 1967. It was the first time that a meeting on such topic was held. In 1969 the symposium on the "Imperial Concept in Byzantium and the Western World" was also held at the Institute as well as the one on "The Phanariotes" in October 1970, for both of which its director assumed all the responsibilities.

These symposia as well as the six week summer courses in Thessaloniki for students of the Center of International Education of the City University of New York, Program for Study Abroad, and the five days program for Adult Education for the Alumni of the University of Wisconsin were all parts of the idea of bringing together scholars for exchange of ideas and students to learn about Greece.

Among these activities and many others it should not be overlooked that his vast correspondence with friends and colleagues, some of whom he had never met, was another aspect of his indefatigable nature and another link with people outside Greece with the Institute.

The Institute had become his life. He was obsessed with its growth, its success, its future plans, its place in the scholarly centers of its kind. This Institute, he left so abruptly, he served to the end March 19, 1971.

C. TSOURKAS

Member of the Board of the Institute for Balkan Studies