

## *Gavra - A social history of a Greek Village and its emigrating Villagers. Authors: Gunnar Olofsson & Thomas Thomell.*

We published our book on the Greek village of Gavra in late 2012. It is written in Swedish published by the Swedish quality publisher Arkiv förlag ([www.arkiiv.nu](http://www.arkiiv.nu)) We are now planning to translate the book into English,

Here you can find a short summary of the book, its key arguments, and the kind of data and conclusions it contains. The Swedish edition of book has 316 pages, including maps, graphs, tables, photos, endnotes and bibliographies.

### **Content and structure of the book**

The book is divided into two sections, *The Road to Gavra* (ch. 2-9) and *The Roads from Gavra* (ch. 10-16). The two sections are preceded by an *Introduction* and followed by an *Epilogue*.

In the *Introduction* the theories drawn upon, and the methodological design of the research project, as well as the book are described. The structure of the arguments and explanations in the book build upon the biography-history-literature. We are methodologically inspired by C.Wright Mills and Daniel Bertaux; theoretically by Sayad, Bourdieu, Elias and the recent migration literature. The biographies, more precisely the life histories, of the villagers, which are at the core of the book, are used and understood against the background of three other levels of history; the life and times of the Village, the regional and national history of Greece, and the European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These four analytical levels are invoked in our analysis of the history of the Village and the life trajectories of the Village population.

We show how we in our research process came to shift our focus from a first effort of following the Greek emigrants in Sweden to that of a “biography” of a village emptying itself of 80 % of its population during the 1960’s. The migration out of the village was divided into two streams, internal migration to the cities nearby, mainly Thessaloniki, and external migration to the North of Europe, with a few going to Germany but the absolute majority going to Sweden.

### **Part 1 The Road to Gavra (ca, 1- 9)**

The first part describes how a group of Turkish-speaking orthodox Greeks from Tsintskaros in Georgia came to Greece in the early 1920’s and how they came to inhabit a former Ottoman village in the Kilkis county, north of Thessaloniki. The arduous and complex migrations of this group of Greek families in the Ottoman Empire, from the Trapezunt and Erzerum areas in Podos to Tsintskaros (close to Tiflis) in the Russian- Georgian area, are told.

Under the spell of the *Megali Idea*, meaning that “All Greeks should come together”, they set out for Greece in the aftermath of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. Their long and arduous travels, the passage through the refugee camps and relocation centres, the role played by the Greek state and the relocation support of the League of nations channelled to the those arriving to Greece under the umbrella of the population transfer agreements between Turkey and Greece, is a story told in the first four chapters (pp.39-74). This led to the *first formative period of the village* which included the building of the first generation of new houses, while the new villagers engaged in tobacco planting and the agrarian life of otherwise

self-sufficient smallholders. The consolidation of this resettlement village came with the final distribution of the land in 1935-36, when the size of plots allotted to each household was finely adjusted to the food and maintenance needs of each family.

In the elections of 1928 these villagers, in line with most of the resettled Greeks from Pongos and Caucasia, supported the liberal party of Venizelos. However, their voting pattern started to shift to the left during the 1930's. A small kernel of communists was formed in the Village in the late 1930s.

In April 1940 the Second World War came to the Village, with German troops going south to occupy Greece, in an alliance with Bulgaria and Italy. The village almost to a man supported and enlisted in the resistance movement, both in its civilian arm, EAM, and in the army of the Left forces, ELAS. In this period the village was transformed and the ideals and organisational forms of the resistance movement became the structure of village life. Socially and politically, this became *the second formative period of the village*. Due to the War, the village lost ten to twelve of its then about 250 inhabitants.

For this village and its inhabitants the Civil War in Greece, lasting from 1946 to 1949, had more important and long-lasting effects than the World War. Almost ten percent of the population (between 28- 30 persons) was lost in battles and executions. Another ten to twelve persons left Greece for the Eastern bloc after the end of the Civil war. The villagers were forced to move from the village to the nearby city Kilkis between 1947 and 1950). It was a massive population transfer with the explicit aim to empty the area in order to drain potential support for the Democratic Army, the armed forces of the Left.

After the return in 1950 to a devastated village, with most of the houses damaged or burned, the village entered a long period of repair and resettlement. This period, "the long 1950s", was characterised by on the one hand the institutionalised persecution of the Greek authorities (the villagers were, correctly, suspected of sympathizing with the Communists) and on the other hand a strong sense of cohesion and cooperation within the village. Being communists, or suspected as such, meant that many villagers were sent to the prison islands. They could not obtain a loyalty certificate, necessary for getting public employment, but also driving permits, loans from the agricultural bank etc.

During the 1950's the economic situation for tobacco farming in Greece became increasingly harder. In conjunction with the population growth and the coming to age of those born between 1930 and 1940 there was an intense sense of poverty and of declining prospects for their future among most individuals within the younger generation in the village.

A trail of migrants had begun to find their way to Thessaloniki already in the 1950's – their family connections, often living in the Polichni area, helped them to find a place there. Since the villagers were seen as politically suspect only jobs in some sectors – mainly within construction and in some services – were available for them.

The political situation did not change until after the 1963 elections, when G. Papandreou and his Centre party won the elections. Then it became possible for the villages to obtain a passport, without having to sign the humiliating "loyalty declaration", so that they could emigrate. In 1963-64, a window suddenly opened...

## Part 2. The Roads from Gavra

In a few years time, mainly in the mid 1960's the migration wave swept away 80 % of the village population. Some of the villagers moved to the nearby cities of Kilkis and, for the most part, to Thessaloniki. But since it had become possible for the villages to obtain passports, the main road from the village, with its grim life of agrarian poverty and the bitter memories of persecution from the State and its officials, led them to emigrate. A few left for Germany. But then, during a few years in the mid 1960's – chiefly from 1964 to 1966 – a great part of the young working population of Gavra, emigrated to Sweden. This emigration was part of an extensive movement out from the villages in the agrarian plains of Northern Greece (Central Macedonia) at this time. Most Gavra villagers came to the small village of Lessebo (in the south-eastern part of Sweden) to work in its large paper-mill. It was a tightly knit group where large flocks of siblings and cousins were common. The pattern of migration of this group follows the principle of chain migration – contacts via relatives and friends made even more people leave the arduous work of tobacco cultivation in the village.

### *What they inherited from the village*

- The Greek State as an enemy - the scars of civil war and persecution
- Reliance on self-help and collective organisation (village level and beyond)
- The key role of family, kin and neighbours
- Consensus and Reciprocity (Caucasian roots) in Village Life
- Left politics as an heritage of the Wars – fortified by police persecution and harassment
- A Communist tradition – in the tobacco farmer, small peasant version
- High Value on culture, education, theory, politics
- But also Self-employment as a natural goal

In the second part of the book we first follow those who migrated to Thessaloniki. We analyse their life trajectories in the city, with biographical sketches of a construction builder and two taverna-owning families and that of an owner of a small textile factory. Most of the villagers that came to Thessaloniki succeeded in finding self-employment or set up small firms, mainly in construction, services or textiles. Among these we find some of those emigrants who returned to Greece after 8 to 15 years in Sweden to start a business there.

The bulk of part 2 (ch. 11-16) is devoted to those villagers who left for Sweden and who settled there, for a longer, or in most cases, for the rest of their working life. We show how they arrived in Sweden, what met them there and how they reacted to the new conditions and new surroundings. They all began as factory workers in the industrial district of Southeast Sweden. They worked in paper mills, metal and porcelain factories, and wood and textile mills. Sweden and Swedish employers at that time were hungry for new workers – industrial employment reached record highs in the mid 1960's – so these Greek workers were needed. All of them found work immediately on reaching their first destination in Sweden.

They found employment in manufacturing - hard manual work, low-skilled work. Coming from the arduous and cruel working conditions of small-scale Greek tobacco farming they accepted the conditions of factory work. Eager to earn money – in order to save, in order to return – they also accepted overtime to a greater degree than their Swedish colleagues. The men and also the women worked full-time, and sometimes more than that. Many of them took on extra jobs, e.g. in cleaning, in order to make more money.

The villagers felt, even if they were immigrants in a new country, that they were recognized as persons and workers to quite a different degree than had been the case for them in Greece. Their first positive encounters with uniformed Swedish personal – railway employees, policemen etc – and even more the personnel in the local authorities, labour exchanges, schools and medical care, made a great and lasting impression. They also felt recognized and valued as workers, in a condition of reciprocity (“if you employ us and pay us and also respect us, we will loyally work for you”).

All villagers started as factory workers. Most of them remained in manual work until their retirement, early or regular. Many of them came to end their work careers as cleaners. We present a number of biographies of their working lives in Sweden, some of them ending in early retirement and disability pension. A number of the villagers tried to start a busyness of their own in Sweden – restaurants, other services such as bingo-halls and small shops. This followed from the insight “a worker can’t get rich in Sweden, only a business owner can”. A number of such life histories are told in a separate chapter.

### *Stay or return?*

Some of villagers returned to Greece, mainly to the Thessaloniki area, after having worked in Sweden between eight to fifteen years. Those who returned did so in order to start a small business or work as self-employed. This was the case for ten to fifteen percent of those who originally emigrated. They started small textile businesses, a small bus company and construction firms.

But most of the villagers stayed in Sweden, until their retirement. If you were a worker, your position was better in Sweden than in Greece, in terms of salaries, working conditions, as well as in terms of social insurance and welfare.

Very few of the children from those families that stayed in Sweden returned to Greece. Among those who stayed, children and grandchildren became a key reason to stay in Sweden for good or to divide their life as retirees between Greece and Sweden.

Almost all villagers rented their apartments in Sweden. A common economic strategy was to invest the savings in a new house in Gavra or in an apartment in Thessaloniki. In the early 1980’s many villagers, both among the external and the internal migrants, began to build new houses in the village on their old family plots. Since early 1990s almost every house in Gavra has been rebuilt in the flamboyant Modern Greek style – the village is now filled with “palaces of those who returned”.

### *Living as Greeks in Sweden – and as Swedes in Greece?*

Today, Gavra bears clear traces of Northern European influence, in this case of Sweden. The lawns are well kept, the gorgeous flower beds in front of the houses make the village look like a small community in southern Sweden, in all its disciplined neatness. This is one exterior sign of how their long exile has influenced the returning villagers. What they brought back with them was also a *changed mentality* in terms of what they regarded as acceptable in terms of treatment from the public as well as private bureaucracies – their non-acceptance and strong dislike of personalised treatment in banks, local authorities, hospitals etc., in both the strong and weak forms of clientilism.

Those villagers who had stayed in Greece make a number of observations about the “Swedes”. They find it problematic when many Greek institutions and habits are being devalued by remarks such as “But in Sweden we have...” or “Sweden has better...”

The villagers lived in their Swedish exile as a tightly knit group of kin and family, mostly among other Greeks in the same situation. The overriding goal was to work and to save, to save to get a better future for themselves and, not least, for their children. Viewed from the perspective of their more successful co-villagers, who had stayed in Greece, those in exile did not learn to “live” in a modern city world – they continued their life as poorly educated peasants in the new surroundings, but not really adapting to the new times. The savings mentality constrained the lives in exile.

### *Communism, culture, the value of education and the practice of entrepreneurship*

The Gavra villagers came to Greece from Caucasia in the 1920s. The next generation left the village for Thessaloniki and northern Europe, mainly Sweden, in the 1960s. In the late 1930s and the early 1940s the villagers, almost all of them, became engaged in the communist movement, mainly through the resistance movement during the Second World War. Then they to a large extent supported the Left during the Civil War (1946-49). The long shadow of the civil war set the tone of village life in the period up until 1975. This meant that the villagers could not get public employment, that they met many difficulties in their encounters with the police and government authorities, had difficulties in getting e.g. a loan to buy a tractor. Due to the legacy of the Civil War, they were not seen as “loyal citizens” of the State. They were excluded from many of the concerns of the Greek state. These forms of exclusion and repression were met, not mainly by depression and despair, but mostly by a combative cohesiveness of the village community. When their demands for a new road to the neighbouring village were denied them, they organized the construction of that road themselves.

This village turned to the political left in the early 1940s. Many engaged in the communist party (KKE) and its youth organisation from that time onwards, which we show by interviews as well as election statistics for the village. Seen from the perspective of a Swedish labour movement dominated by Social Democracy, the communism of the Gavra villagers can be characterised not as a traditional worker’s communism, but rather as a “peasant communism”; peasants in the sense of smallholders.

We argue that there are two key aspects of this form of communism. In all its peculiarity, communists even in the era of Stalinism, were one of the “peoples of the book”, that is they had a high regard for science, theory, education, culture and books. One of the ways that the children of the villages could find a better life was through *education*. This village has had a disproportionate number of academics and university graduates among their children. Even if most of “our generation”, esp. those born between 1930 and 1940, had only 3-4 years in school due to the war, their children have got a higher education than could be expected. This is also the case for those who emigrated to Sweden. When we compare the education levels of the villages with those of their Swedish “social twins” (e.g. workers of the same age, in the same localities) the Gavra children had a better outcome in terms of education. The high regard for knowledge and education is an important part of Greek culture; but the communist heritage of this village seems to have given it an extra push,

Another aspect of their “peasant communism” was propensity of the villagers to start a business of their own. In most of northern Europe, social democratic (or as in Britain, labour) working class culture raised cultural and ideological barriers to start a business of one’s own.

Among the Gavra villagers this was on the other hand a quite common strategy. Many of those who came to Sweden tried to start a business – and among those who returned from Sweden after 8-15 years almost all set up business of their own.

### *A Life-history based historical sociology*

In the conclusion we show how the history of the village and its population functions as a prism for understanding many of the key processes of European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among these we will point to: the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the Russian revolution, the first, large population transfer in European history, that between Greece and Turkey in the early 1920s, a land reform, German occupation during the Second World War, the rise of the Resistance movement, the armed resistance and the role of the partisans, then the Greek Civil war (1946-49) and its long authoritarian aftermath, the rapid decline of Greek agriculture, the rapid urbanization, the European labour migration of the 1960s, the dictatorial regime of Colonels 1967-74, the democratization of Greece (between 1963-67 and from 19974). During their exile the villagers faced the complex adaptation processes to a new society as labour immigrants, developing their working-saving strategies. Then we have the effects of their exile when returning from the north to the South.

These historical processes are here elucidated by the methods and theories of a qualitative historical sociology, based to a large extent on life-histories of the villagers as well as on many other kinds of data.

We conclude by showing how our four analytical levels – the life situations of the “emigrating generation”, the complex history of the Village, the history of the Greek state and Greek society, and the European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century - have interacted in shaping the life and times of this Greek village. The village of Gavra can thus be used as a model of how to analyse how different histories, from the life trajectory of individuals to historical processes of a national or continental scale, can be integrated into an analytically coherent narrative, where life histories are used both as data and as a major mode of exposition.

## **A short description of the Gavra Project – problems, sources, methods**

During the 1960's Greece experienced a massive emigration. From the village of Gavra a large part of the villagers left for Sweden, while others moved to Greek cities, mostly to Thessalonica. In this research project we wanted to follow the two migration streams from the village. We wanted to know

- If and how the life-courses differed between those villagers who left for Sweden and those who stayed in Greece
- Which impact these two kinds of migration had on the children in the “second generation” – in terms of education, job career, family pattern etc

In the project we have used *seven major sources of data*:

1. We have used the large *Immigration database* in Växjö that has data on all emigrants in Sweden in 1970. Here we find data on all Greek immigrants in Sweden - data on jobs, incomes, family situation etc up till 2000. We also have data on the children of the Greek immigrants.
2. We have conducted a *survey* covering all households in the Village (husband and wife) in the migrating generation (those born 1925-50). We have got 106 interviews about 55% of the relevant villagers. The survey was conducted in 2004-2005. These interviews focussed on the job career, geographical mobility, family situation, incl. data on the education and job careers of the children. This part of the project was done in co-operation with scholars at the Aristotle University in Thessalonica.
3. We have done a series of systematic *life-history interviews with villagers*, both among those who migrated to Sweden and those who stayed in Greece. We have done more than twenty life histories. Some were follow-ups of interviews done already in 1970.
4. We have constructed more than forty “family trees” including all the families in the Village.
5. We have done a postal survey *with the “second generation”*, both among those who grew up in Sweden and those who grew up in Greece, as well as some life history interviews.
6. We have used photos of the village, the villagers as well as the village graveyard as arguments in our text, not just for illustration
7. And we have of course used existing literature, administrative records, archival material, maps, election and population statistics etc.

In this way we have been able to link different sources of data, to do a systematic analysis of life trajectories through the use of biographically oriented life histories. This is how the Greek Village project have made use of the data on the Greek immigrants in Sweden and what has happened to them – and their children - over a time span of more than 35 years.

We have published a number of research reports, all published on the homepage of the project: [www.gavraprojektet.se](http://www.gavraprojektet.se), as well as a monograph (in Swedish), Gunnar Olofsson and Thomas Thomnell, *Gavra - Historien om en grekisk by och dess invånare* (Arkiv, Lund, 2012)