Back from the afterlife

MARK MAZOWER

Peter Bien, editor and translator

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS
875pp. Princeton University Press. £69.95.
978 0 6911 4702 4

Zorba (Anthony Quinn) and Lola (Eleni Anousaki) in *Zorba the Greek* (1964)

It is easy now to forget that the novels that were to make Nikos Kazantzakis famous around the world were written in a frenzy of creative energy that started in the German occupation when he was approaching sixty and only ended sixteen years later with his death in 1957. His fame continued to grow thereafter. When *Zorba the Greek* – the film based on the first of those novels – premiered to sensational acclaim in 1964, Spetses had already worked its magic on John Fowles and Hydra was inspiring the young Leonard Cohen. The counterculture found authenticity on the parched shores of the Aegean and in Zorba Greek tourism got a boost from which it has never recovered. America's ambivalent embrace of Kazantzakis's *Last Temptation of Christ* generated the author further notoriety. After Martin Scorsese fell in love with the book, Mayor Teddy Kollek was enlisted to scout out possible Crucifixion sites around Jerusalem, but a brilliantly successful Christian counter-campaign to have the film scrapped dragged things back before it was eventually made in the teeth of bitter opposition in 1988. Hollywood and the Christian Right between them certainly helped make Kazantzakis a household name. But household names can hide as much as they reveal. Who today remembers Kazantzakis's plays, his translations of Dante, Goethe, and Nietzsche, his travelogues? He himself prized his reworkings of Homer above everything else but they are little read today, least of all in his native Greece. "Who is Kazantzakis?" asks a young man in one of Greece's most-watched soap operas. Who indeed?

If anyone can help answer the question, it is Peter Bien, the foremost living Kazantzakis scholar, the man who translated *The Last Temptation of Christ* back in 1960 and the author of a major two-volume biography of the author. This collection of letters, conceived on a scale that the author himself would have approved of, and scrupulously annotated, is perhaps his crowning achievement and the best possible place to start to try to understand a remarkable writer and to seek to extricate him from his strange afterlife.

Ending his days amid the scandal of Vatican proscription and unrelenting opposition from the Orthodox Church, Kazantzakis had started life much more conventionally. The son of a moderately prosperous merchant in Ottoman Crete, he was born in 1883 and thus came of age amid the nationalist ferment that convulsed the island in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. Like many of his school friends, he was an ardent nationalist, a supporter of one of the last great figures of liberal revolutionary Europe, Eleftherios Venizelos, who led the fight for the island's emancipation from the Ottoman empire and eventually became the most important statesman in modern Greece's history. Kazantzakis enjoyed a good schooling both in Crete and at the hands of Catholics on Naxos – with the result that by the time he was twenty he was very well read in the European classics. As a student in Athens, he started to make a name for himself as a writer. And then came Paris, where Henri Bergson's lectures in particular made an indelible impression on him. Already a jobbing journalist – this activity is about the only important aspect of his life which the letters do not greatly illuminate – he became an ardent popularizer of both Bergson and Nietzsche in Greek, publishing translations of both between 1912 and 1914 and writing his doctorate on the latter's contributions to political and legal philosophy. Bergson especially – with his idea of an *élan vital* and his emphasis on feeling, intuition and the spirit – remained with Kazantzakis to the end.

Two other cultural forces shaped his outlook. The shock of the encounter with Darwin presented him with the spirit–matter binary as a conundrum he was to wrestle with his entire life; at the same time, the impassioned debates taking place in Athens over the language question saw him range himself with total commitment on the side of the demoticists against the classicizers. In this way, alongside the relatively conventional nationalism – which he was shortly to abandon – Kazantzakis found the twin obsessions – the quest for spiritual truth in a world of matter, and the salvation of the Greek language – that always stayed with him.

The letters reveal a young man from the Ottoman provinces, polite and deferential to his father, beset with money problems, always balancing his journalistic commitments against his dream of greatness. Once in a while he tried to use his connections in Athens to get a civil service posting – a consulate somewhere, perhaps, or even a nomination as a deputy – but despite his friendship with Venizelos and other members of his Liberal entourage, these never came to anything. Probably those who knew him understood he was cut from a different cloth, too restless, too questing, and unlikely to be satisfied for long with the suffocating atmosphere of Athens salon politics. And indeed Kazantzakis was not a party man and only once – to his great credit – did he return to politics, very briefly, to try to help his country patch itself together in the aftermath of the Second World War, first leading a small new socialist party that was intended to bring together the non-communist Left and then accepting the post as minister without portfolio, which he held for only a few weeks. His position made untenable by the start of the civil war, and by growing right-wing hostility to his writings, he left Greece in June 1946 and never returned.

By then much had happened to make the ardent Venizelist of the Balkan Wars a distant memory. A decade of wars in the Levant between 1912 and 1922 ended by plunging Greece into a crisis the magnitude of which dwarfs the country's current predicament. All the imperial dreams of the previous half-century went up in the smoke of burning Smyrna, and more than 1 million refugees, most of them destitute, arrived to make new lives in a land barely able to feed the 5 million or so who already lived there. If this was the birth of the modern Greek state, it was one achieved through very great suffering. Kazantzakis was in Berlin as it happened. For him, it was a time of exhilaration and catharsis, the birth pangs of a new world. He despaired of his homeland – "Greece is a lost cause", he writes in November 1922 – and turned his back decisively on the nationalism of his youth. Travelling ceaselessly, and spending much more time outside Greece than inside it, he found communism in Weimar and followed the Bolshevik revolution closely. Never a paid-up Party member – his own spiritual strivings prompted him to end up writing a kind of "meta-communist credo" – he was nevertheless sympathetic enough to be invited to visit Moscow in time for the tenth anniversary of the Revolution in 1927. Roaming widely across the USSR and Asia, he returned to Greece in the early 1930s a man of the Left whose detachment from the Revolution never pushed him to anti-communism. If he belonged to any group at all, it was perhaps as the chief Greek exemplar of the so-called "non-conformists" that François Azouvi has identified as one of the legacies of Henri Bergson between the two world wars.

Back in Greece, he enjoyed a double emancipation in his always unsettled personal life – from his first wife, Galatea, from whom he had been long separated (who remarried in 1933), and from his father, who died in 1935. One of his first responses was to purchase a plot of land on the island of Aegina. The stone house he built there – an austere exercise in interwar modernism – still stands on the rocky coastal road that skirts the island's low north-western shoreline. It was close enough to Athens for him to be in the capital in a few hours; far enough away to forget the hassle and the hustling. The postman delivered a steady stream of erudite philological monographs from his collaborator Yannis Kakridis, and Kazantzakis took such time as he could spare from his other work to continue on his epic – there is really no other word – translation of Homer into modern Greek. At a time when the country seemed to be torn apart by the political feuding between republicans and royalists, Kazantzakis wanted to restore a new richness to the national language and in this way to facilitate its spiritual rebirth. Many years' labour were needed before his *Odyssey* was finished, a work that despite being pretty much untranslatable (and indeed unreadable as well) still stands as one of the great works of philological invention. It was from his beloved Aegina that he witnessed Europe's slide into a "new Middle Ages", watched the Germans take over his country, saw at first hand its descent into famine and wrote the novel, *The Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas*, that would finally bring him fame.

Kazantzakis's fiction has not lasted well. Like other novelists of his generation who were also forging in the most self-conscious way a national literature for their peoples – one thinks of the Egyptian Taha Hussein, the Yugoslav Ivo Andrić or the Yiddish novelist Sholem Asch – he was basically a story-teller and his novels were often baggy sagas that turned their backs on the demands of modernism. Irony-free, they suffer from crude characterization, bad gender politics, and just too many words for modern taste. Not least of the merits of these letters is to remind us of Kazantzakis's many virtues – his compassion and broad perspective, his clarity and his single-mindedness. He saw a lot in his life and he sums up scenes and places beautifully. Above all, this book remind us of a time long-past, an earlier time of global crisis when writers believed it fell to them to help humanity find a new path, when they believed in the future and the wider social meaning of their own vocation.

Diary of a Somebody

RITCHIE ROBERTSON

Peter Fritzsche

THE TURBULENT WORLD OF FRANZ GÖLL
An ordinary Berliner writes the twentieth century
260pp. Harvard University Press. £19.95 (US $26.95).
978 0 674 05531 5

In Alfred Döblin's great urban novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), the narrator briefly mentions, among the random travellers on a tram, a fourteen-year-old boy named Max Rüst, and turns aside to summarize his future up to his death in 1969. The reader inevitably reflects that since Max was not facing the orderly, predictable future that Döblin imagined, but one that included the Third Reich and the Second World War, he would be lucky to live that long. Now we can learn about an obscure Berliner who not only lived through these events but recorded them in his diary, recently discovered in the Berlin state archives by the historian Peter Fritzsche.

Franz Göll (1899–1984) kept a diary continuously from January 1, 1916, until December 31, 1983. It gave continuity to a life that otherwise felt episodic and purposeless. Reduced to poverty after his father's death in 1915, Göll worked successively as a clerk, a salesman, a printer, a labourer, and a nightwatchman. Being declared medically unfit, he never did war service. He was a withdrawn and solitary character. His diaries often lament his social ineptitude and the resulting embarrassments. An only child, he lived with his mother till she was hospitalized in 1952. His relationships with women were few and mostly unfulfilled.

Despite the lachrymose tone of his diaries, however, Göll did a great deal with his life. Self-educated, he read extensively in popular science, and later developed an eclectic interest in psychology and psychoanalysis. He had a fish tank (here grandly called an "aquarium") which he built himself; he tamed birds; he studied meteorology and kept a weather log. He enjoyed taking holidays in various parts of Germany, first by himself, later on trips organized by the Nazis' Strength through Joy movement. He even records a visit, chaperoned by two women friends, to a lesbian club called "Dorian Gray", about which he is refreshingly uncensorious. He enthusiastically visited museums, the theatre, and the cinema; in 1926 alone he saw seventy-four films. All these interests are documented less in the diary than in the household accounts which Göll kept meticulously, and which are themselves invaluable for the historian.

Fritzsche astutely observes that Göll's various "ego-documents" complement one another, while each one on its own would give an unbalanced picture of his life. If the diaries present a self-pitying loser, the accounts suggest someone much more in control of his varied life. There is also a memoir, in 123 sections, written between 1941 and 1948, in which Göll assumes a more confident tone and steps back from his own life to place it in its historical setting.

His reading in science, which began in the era dominated by Darwinism, gave Göll a naturalistic outlook. All life, including human life, was an amoral struggle for survival in which the strong must always dominate the weak. This naturalism fed into his understanding of history. Initially inclined to anti-Semitism and sympathetic to the Nazis, he was soon repelled by their use of terror and regarded them as biological predators who manipulated the passive and stupid German people. As early as July 1941 he knew what was happening to the Jews. "It is an open secret", he wrote, "that they are proceeding against the Jews in the most rigorous way with sterilization, removal to the eastern territories . . . expropriation by the state of private inheritances, jewellery, and other valuables." His largely non-moral perspective discouraged him from considering his own complicity or giving more than the briefest admission of German war guilt.

While Göll sometimes illustrates a widespread mentality, he also shows an independent mind. Visiting the exhibition of Degenerate Art in Munich in 1938, he was impressed by Otto Dix's triptych about war, concluding pungently: "The picture is not a bloody-minded depiction of the degenerate, war is". He did not accept the view that Germany's defeat in 1918 resulted from a "stab in the back", attributing it instead to the Allies' superior military strength. Nor did he exult over the annexation of Austria in 1938 or the German advances through Western Europe in 1940.

Altogether, Franz Göll is a notable discovery. Though his expositions of his scientific views can sound rather Pooterish, his is definitely the diary of a remarkable Somebody. It is only a pity that he gets so little chance to speak for himself, since most quotations from him are short. The two longest ones, describing the atmosphere during an air raid warning and the arrival of Russian soldiers in a cellar where Göll and others are crouching, are extremely vivid. Göll does not actually, as the author earlier alleges, "witness Russian soldiers raping his neighbors"; the Russians order selected women to follow them, saying "Come, or bang, bang!", and then: "After a while, very dispirited, the women returned and silently took back their places". Göll's understatement is quite as chilling as an eyewitness report would have been.

As this extract shows, the translations from Göll are stiff, unidiomatic, and occasionally unintelligible. I could only make sense of his sentence "Moving in with us is the misery" by imagining how the German must run, which removes the point of translation. Fritzsche's English style is also flawed: he uses "culminate" transitively, writes "disinterested" for "indifferent", "upholstered" for "bolstered", "exuded" for "exulted"; and some German words quoted are misspelt. A book of such interest deserved better editing from its publisher. I very much hope that selections from these diaries will soon appear in German, so that Franz Göll can take a modest but not undistinguished place alongside such witnesses to history as Viktor Klemperer and Theodor Haecker.

The Finishing Touch

for Oliver Reynolds

The man who steadies the wooden ladder
– though steadying is not required –
looks from side to side
he's looking tired
more tired than the man above
singing-stroke-humming of sadness and love
with sadness of love
in love with sadness
no lovelorn mood unsung

careful to the point of madness
his right foot planted on the bottom rung
our man below looks sadder
because there's always damage to repair

a mighty midday sun is shining
on one man busy the other pining
hm hm hm the lights down low

2 brushes a hammer 3 pots of paint
something taking shape or looking better
cleaner sturdier then that faint
outline of
a face? a letter?
initials perhaps
proof they were there

STEPHEN KNIGHT