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editor  
Vasilis Boskos

editorial intern  
Suzanne Vallejo-Gomez

copy-editor

Alain Ayers  
photo editor

Vassilis Charalampidis  
Graphic design

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# MAGIC KITCHEN

This is the story of the Magic Kitchen of Exarcheia, a cooperative vegan eatery in the center of Athens, founded by a migrant trying to escape the solitary life of an academic. The project turns into a journey of personal development as she chases the dream of a self-organized kitchen where individuals from different backgrounds learn from each other and work together in harmony, making good food at accessible prices.

## – 1

October 2019, I found myself in distress in Athens. I had migrated here together with a friend. We wanted to build a new life for ourselves and have fun. We could have stayed in Turkey but we liked Greece as it was more peaceful and a part of the European Union. In our first Athens summer in 2018 we were shining with joy. Then our tourist visas expired, just around the time that Turkey fell into a currency crisis that would last. In time we started to perceive our migration less like a choice and more like a rational obligation, a chore that we had to carry out for our future. The bureaucratic “problems of migrating into the EU,

together with the homesickness and isolation of immigration, crushed our joy. Eating together in our apartment in the evenings, we could only talk about obstacles and hardships. I noticed at some point that I had stopped hearing her heartfelt, careless laughter. Our relationship of mutual love and care frayed as we became vulnerable and diminished. We were too fragile to support one another but we pushed it, to the point that our friendship broke.

In the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020 I started a master's degree in the University of Athens. I had enrolled in the university mainly to get a residence permit, since I did not have 250,000 euro to invest in real estate and get a *Golden Visa*<sup>(1)</sup> I was not persecuted in Turkey more than average to demand asylum and live in Greece as a political refugee, nor did I have a stable relationship with an EU citizen who could marry me, nor any desire to work in the call center that employed Turkish speakers and got them work permits. Among the limited options of legal migration into the EU, I had the academic resumé and basic language skills to become a graduate student, so I did that. In class, I would be thinking about what to do with my life. The isolation of academic studies, of individually producing abstract knowledge on a restricted domain with the hope of, one day, being useful to the greater society one day, had to be balanced with a more concrete activity. I wanted to have a stable income doing something that connected me to my immediate environment, for I knew how precarious an academic life could be.

I lived in Exarcheia, a central neighborhood of Athens with a diverse population of migrants and refugees, political movements, and squats that hosted them. My house was near the dodgy, gloomy and vibrant square. Many other people from Turkey lived in Exarcheia, most of them political refugees but I didn't seek their company as I wanted to integrate into the society around me. My Greek was improving fast but strangely the more conversant I became, the more isolated I felt. A tavern run by a group of political refugees from Turkey eventually became a second home. I fell for a young political refugee who worked at this tavern, who was also thinking of what to do with his life. Maybe to open a restaurant, but migrants making food was such a stereotype. I wanted

to be part of a meaningful community, work-oriented, one that has unity in its objectives. We kissed and commented on the fate of revolutionaries turned political refugees, who made food because it was the only thing through which they could exist in another society, which helped them communicate without need for language.

There was a small takeaway restaurant on Themistokleous street, run by some other people from Turkey. It was a rented place, and someone I knew from the tavern was trying to sell the lease. I ran into him on the street one summer morning. They had opened this restaurant to create jobs and livelihood for political refugees from Turkey. It made money, he said, but it was failing because nobody had a vision for that place. They needed someone to buy it, or to invest money and become a partner. Months later when I heard that he was looking for me to discuss his offer which I could not afford, I felt happy that someone in Athens was looking for me. We had a series of *tête-à-tête* meetings. Before the end of October 2019 we agreed he would give me the keys of the restaurant without any monetary exchange or official procedure. I would start a cooperative, make it work, and pay him later when it would be making a profit.

It was a radical move, and seemed strange to the people around me. People warned me a deal could not be safe if it didn't specify how much would be paid in return for what. A business model defined by socio-political values rather than numbers was likely to be a scam, and such scams were rampant between self-proclaimed revolutionaries, in migrant communities. The restaurant business is hard and I had no previous experience so getting into such an adventure in a foreign land was perhaps an overextension of my courage. Furthermore I didn't have a social security number in Greece<sup>(2)</sup> nor the legal right to have an enterprise.<sup>(3)</sup> I just had a strange, compelling conviction that it would work. How difficult could it be to improve a restaurant that had failed because of bad management? Wasn't it about the quality of the food and some mathematics, after all? I would be part of a community by joining an existing project, by filling a lack of *vision* that could go towards helping the lives of others. This work would also help my integration into Athens and to my life in general, which so far seemed to be

a series of clumsy, suboptimal decisions made under anxiety.

-2

Before moving to Athens, while I was still living in Ankara, I daydreamed a lot. It was the period before and after the Coup attempt of 2016 in Turkey, when frequent suicide attacks and armed clashes in urban zones made it fearful and sometimes outright dangerous to inhabit the public space. The terror subsided in 2017, leaving behind intensely securitized public areas. A central street on my way from home to university was permanently cordoned off to prevent the protests of academics and teachers who were dismissed from their lifelong careers with the decree of one single person. Crowds shouting Islamist slogans roamed the streets of my secular neighborhood late at night, while anything that resembled a protest group against the government was dispersed immediately. Daydreams helped protect my sanity while I made sense of the situation and at night I dreamt of walking streets that were not under the blockade of security forces. I imagined beautiful encounters with others who were free like me. My dream neighborhood somewhere in this world, had a little square with trees where there was also a magically delicious kitchen cooperative, where I also worked. I dreamt of dancing with thousands of strangers holding hands, our joy filled the streets of the neighborhood, and spilled over into the whole city. This utopia was my refuge. I had not been there but I knew its cityscape by heart. In Athens the takeaway on Themistokleous Street, in every detail, resembled the place in my dream.

I had moved to Athens because among the cities I knew, it came closest to this utopia. Here, access to the public space was not regulated by the police or restricted through privatisations. After years of protest against austerity measures there was pervasive disillusionment and cynicism in Greek society. I too was cynical against anything that passed as political, or spoken about in big abstract goals. I desired the



solemn and strong unity of stray cats that are fed by a neighborhood, or of ants that gather food for their community in silence and harmony. The direct and simple communication of food could bring us together in a place where abstract goals had become divisive. A kitchen that created the optimum outcome in taste and price because it knew what to do, with the expanded sense and reason of a diverse community, might be what we needed.

I met many people who declared interest or whom I thought could be interested in joining a kitchen cooperative. The name and the keywords that explained the enterprise came by through conversations. A co-worker from the first team casually named the place the Magic Kitchen. I was delighted to realize that MK for *Magic Kitchen* was MK for *Mutfak Kooperatifī*, as it was MK for *Μαγική Κουζίνα* but also for *Μαζική Κουζίνα*.<sup>(4)</sup> In the symbolic realm things came together perfectly. In the real everyday realm, there was defeat. The fast food place that I took over had to close in early December 2019, when the shop window was smashed for the second time in one month by unknown attackers. It just didn't make enough money to repair the glass twice a month. The people whom I thought I could depend on, were absent. My search for community had brought me to a new level of loneliness and exposure, as I had to take care of a failing shop in the center of Exarcheia all by myself.

### – 3

Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela argue that knowing and doing cannot be different things for a living being<sup>(4)</sup>. Living beings have to maintain compatibility with their environment, which always includes other living beings <sup>(5)</sup> All existence is coexistence. Living beings are also made up of other living parts, who individually and as a whole constantly recreate themselves while in coexistence with the whole environment. Knowledge is obtained through repeated interactions in an

environment and subsequently how to coexist in that environment. We don't perceive knowledge unless we see the appropriate behavior.<sup>(6)</sup> All living beings in any particular environment change together, depending on themselves and the others. Being means being able to learn how to coexist in an environment that is always changing.

I was changing within the landscape of Exarcheia, within the interplay of different groups that made up the neighborhood, all of which was under a constant transformation with the post-crisis influx of capital even before the pandemic. Making a cooperative kitchen in this neighborhood meant putting myself in a radically different setting, and I yearned for all the novelties that it would bring to my life. The first encounters were discouraging. I was being too self-righteous, and alienating others. My temperament and attitude had not been welcoming, as I came to understand after many quarrels with people who abandoned the project. People had various reasons for quitting, but the inconsistency and vagueness of my dream came up frequently. What others saw in me was a middle class activist who did not know how to run a business, made big claims that I was unable to deliver, was not kind, and spoke the language of non-profit when inviting people to work for me. I could tell that others were being warned that I was a scam. The crucial point for my survival, as that for any living being, was the compatibility between myself and the environment which had to be maintained through my actions. If I was not able to act adequately here and now, I would have to leave, the street was a tough place and my chances were limited. It would be sad to fail in my utopia.

The pandemic that started in March 2020 allowed the Magic Kitchen to have an embryo phase. Teams came together and fell apart. When the restaurant finally opened in October 2021 with five choices on its menu written on an A4 paper, no proper sign or advertisement, our permanent team was made up of just two people. One was me, the other was Zela. She had joined the project at a later phase, with the specific task of making village bread like they do in Turkey. She knew many things I didn't know, like how to knead dough or how to make a rolling pin out of a branch. It was the two of us who were at the Kitchen constantly in the beginning, during times that required a lot of effort with little outcome.

We became the pillars on which the project started to rise. I was scared that she would leave too. Why did she stay? I imagined some of her motivations would resemble mine - lack of other truly interesting options, the wish to one day have a stable income, a desire to spend time outside, the need to be part of a community that came together for a purpose. How could I know someone else's motivations when I found it hard to grasp my own? Staying together in a cooperative was not about knowing another's reasons. It was about being able to stay together.

#### - 4

During our first months of operation the daily workload was so heavy, that getting a menu designed and printed on durable material seemed like an impossible ordeal. Running a restaurant six days a week as two amateurs, we could only do the bare minimum. Our food was good and the place was gradually becoming known. Two people turned out not to be enough but how would we decide on who to bring into our small team? The people that we had originally started with were either not available or remained unsuitable. New people came with various hopes and left because of insufficient material returns, disillusionment, or personal or health problems, or because we asked them to leave. We had to learn how to keep a team, but the issue remained that we couldn't define what outcome we wanted from an expanded team. We were bringing to life an entity whose needs were changing as it developed. Each person that quit the team left a trace for us to gather to answer the question of who the Kitchen needs and how we should behave.

A cooperative has to work like a business insofar as it exists in an environment made for businesses. But it also has to be a collective where decisions are made together, profits and losses are shared, where everybody has a sense of what the whole is about as they play their part in the operation. The logic of collectivity and the logic of profit-making seems incompatible, though they have to run in a cooperative. We had

to figure out by ourselves how to combine these two diverging logics, as there was no guide to show us the way. Our work was a cycle that was rolling and for so long as we could not get hold of it, it would keep crushing us at every turn. What we could not learn returned to us as exhaustion. We had to learn from the work itself, by observing it in its course.

## – 5

What was it that kept people together? Making a team was like making food. You could put the best ingredients together and work them elaborately, but if they don't match or if you cook them the wrong way, the result will not be appetizing. For a long time we supposed that the basic ingredient of team-making was material return, or money. It was not. Just like all other social phenomena, a team is built on trust, and love and care, which are intertwined and take time to build. We have to trust, but also to be trustable. We have to love, but we also have to find people who can love us and the thing that we are building. Love is, according to the Chilean biologists: "the acceptance of the other person beside us in our daily living <sup>(7)</sup>. It is about moving around and with them in such a way that they can exist with you <sup>(8)</sup>. It is the emotion that allows coexistence, while care is the practice of this emotion. Living together requires constant learning, and building something together a little more because you start to create your conditions of coexistence. One needs to take care to create what they can love, what permits them and other loved ones the space to exist.

The Magic Kitchen is an experiment in food-making as community-making. It is a living thing that recreates itself and its parts, learning how to be adequate to its objectives and efficient in its processes, and how to help the lives of those who make up its units and its environment. Can an eatery in the center of Athens be a space for the harmonious coexistence and collaboration of individuals who live side

by side, but do not share a common language? Will it be possible to have affordable prices and pay decent salaries in the coming future, considering the new economic crisis unfolding, triggered by pandemic and war? These external determinants are accompanied with adverse factors internal to the Kitchen. We might profess allegiance to collectivities, but we have come into being in a society that does not care for the commons. We are used to being screws in machines, the totality of which is alien to us, and we need to learn a new way of socioeconomic coexistence. Will we manage to learn? We will try, as that's what the existence of Magic Kitchen depends on. It is a baby that will have to grow up in a harsh environment. We need to give it a lot of love and care so that it can become a healthy adult cooperative, self-organized and autonomous as every proper adult can be, living a life in loving coexistence with others like itself.

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### Sanem Su Avci

Sanem Su Avci was born in Izmir in 1989, to parents who were white collar workers. In 1996 she moved with her family to Istanbul. She graduated from the Department of Political science in Boğaziçi University in 2010. She moved to Ankara to work in the public sector and to continue her studies. She worked in political parties and in the parliament, afterwards with foreign journalists, while she continued her graduate studies in the Department of Public Administration in the University of Ankara. In 2018 she moved to Athens with the aim of becoming a musician. In Athens she founded the cooperative "Magic Kitchen of Exarcheia" and completed a Master's Degree in Political Science and Sociology in the University of Athens. Currently she is preparing to start a PhD in the Department of Political Science and Modern History in the University of Panteion, sporadically working as a journalist, writer, interpreter, musician-performer and fortune-teller.

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Sources

- 1) George Papam, "Real Estate Cosmopolitanisms", in (Forced) Movement, Across the Aegean Archipelago (Athens: kyklàda.press, 2021), 57-64
- 2) Starting from the spring months of 2019 Greece practically stopped issuing social security numbers (AMKA) to its non-European residents. A social security number is needed to go to the hospital except for emergencies and to work legally. During the pandemic, the temporary social security number PAAYPE was introduced to circumvent issuing standard social security numbers to foreigners. Currently a regular immigrant from a third country such as Turkey into Greece cannot get a permanent social security number unless they have a written declaration from an employer.
- 3) A non-EU citizen residing in Greece with a residence permit for studies is not allowed to work more than 20 hours per week, and is not allowed to have an enterprise. This same condition is valid in many other EU member states.
- 4) Mutfak Kooperatifi, kitchen cooperative in Turkish. Μαγική Κουζίνα and Μαζική Κουζίνα, magic kitchen and mass kitchen, in Greece.
- 5) Maturana, Humberto R., and Francisco J. Varela. The tree of knowledge: the biological roots of human understanding. Translated by Robert Paolucci, Shambhala, 1992. (page 26)
- 6) Ibid p.172
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