LETTER FROM ATHENS

AUGUST 1

WHILE I was checking in at the Grande Bretagne Hotel here a few weeks ago, I noticed a poster in the lobby, signed by the National Council for Public Enlightenment, that read, "Do not take for granted what you are told by anyone. . . . Give Greece a fair chance by investigating yourself. False impressions innocently spread may harm Greece more than guerrilla raids." It seemed to me a very maladroit, where-there's-smoke-there's-fire piece of public relations. A couple of days later, I stopped in at the office of a member of the National Council, and he informed me that because of the Cominform countries bordering on Greece, she "has to protect herself against adverse propaganda spread by a Moscow-directed fifth column." He handed me a pamphlet, in English, and entitled "Truth About Greece," which began, "The enemy's agents are many and cunning. Often his first victims are inexperienced foreign correspondents hoodwinked in their search for sensational news. Sometimes the agents even try to gain the confidence of embassy and foreign-mission officials."

As it turned out, all the adverse comment I heard about Greece came either from loyal, pro-government Greeks or from foreigners who think that the Greek people deserve a better break than they're getting, and are much concerned about this country, with its great past and its problematic future. Greece was poor even before it became a battlefield in the Second World War; only one-fifth of the land was arable, and there was no coal, not enough hydroelectric power, and no industry to speak of. During and after the war, Greece had the distinction of being the only country to fight against Mussolini, Hitler, *and* Stalin. After the Italian and German invasions, there was a long and lacerating occupation by the Bulgarians as well as by the aggressor countries. Then came the liberation, the pitched battles between the British forces and the Leftist resistance units, and the long and costly civil war, which ended only on October 16, 1949—ten years after the big war had started. By that time, the country was wrecked. Fifty-seven thousand civilians—out of a total population of about eight million—had been killed and fifty-three thousand dragged off as hostages. There were forty-nine thousand casualties in the Greek Army, including fifteen thousand dead. Casualties among the Greek Communists were seventy thousand, including twenty-nine thousand dead. A whole generation of Greeks had been laid waste. One-sixth of the survivors were homeless, most work animals had been slaughtered and all technical equipment destroyed, communications were almost nonexistent, capital was concentrated in the hands of a small band of war profiteers, the middle class was wiped out, and the peasants, who make up two-thirds of the population, were reduced to penury. Conditions, in fact, were ideal for the spread of Communism. In view of all this, it is astonishing that today there are only a few underground cells of the outlawed Communist Party in the bigger cities and only a few hundred guerrillas in the northern mountains. Neither crushing poverty nor the strong propaganda that emanates from the neighboring Cominform countries—Albania, Bulgaria, and Rumania—has had any large-scale effect on Greece's underprivileged classes, partly because the Greeks have had first-hand experience with the blessings of Communism and partly because Marshall Plan aid—which now totals about three-quarters of a billion dollars—has, on the whole, done its work well.

This doesn't mean that the danger is over. There is still that shocking disparity between the rich and the poor that is always a breeding ground for Communism. Last year, the average per-capita income in Greece was 1,920,000 drachmas, or a hundred and twenty-eight dollars, the lowest of any Marshall Plan country in Europe. (The figure in France, for example, was around five hundred dollars.) Inflation has gone on unchecked. The dollar is presently worth about fifteen thousand drachmas. Members of Athens' foreign colony have been wearily watching the price of dry Martinis at the King George and Grande Bretagne hotels go up, from 7,500 drachmas last Christmas to 17,000 drachmas at the moment. The populace cares less about dry Martinis and more about fresh eggs, which cost 1,600 drachmas apiece. There is little confidence in the local currency; long-term leases, real-estate transactions, and big industrial deals are reckoned in British gold sovereigns, currently quoted at

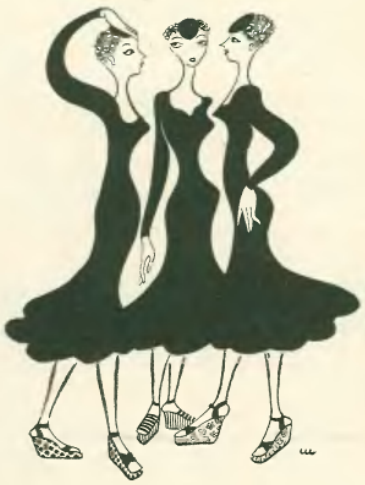
225,000 drachmas. Most people simplify financial negotiations by dropping the bothersome zeros. When the price of a meat course is listed on a menu as "25," it means 25,000 drachmas.

The country's economy is still shaky. There are few new industries, few communications, few exports. The peasants don't raise enough food for the country, and most consumer goods have to be imported. Here in Athens, housing is a serious problem. The rich live in magnificent villas and apartment houses. The poor live in some of the world's worst slums, without water, electricity, heat, or sewers. More than three hundred and forty thousand Greek children were uprooted from their homes during the war because of the death of one or both of their parents; more than twenty-five thousand of them are now behind the Iron Curtain. The country's orphanages can accommodate only eight thousand children. A lot of the children I have seen around Athens were wearing rags and no shoes. They are apt to have meat just twice a year, at Christmas and Easter. The most effective form of relief is private aid, which comes chiefly from America. The Foster Parents' Plan for War Children has rescued twelve hundred and fifty Greek waifs from disease and utter misery. Many of those who lost arms and legs to mines or shells now have artificial limbs and get medical treatment, along with food and toys, and—extremely important—letters from their American foster parents, which give them the feeling of being cared for. Mrs. Katherine Clark, the American field director of the Foster Parents' Plan in Greece, and her Greek staff workers have travelled all over Greece and the islands by boat, rail, jeep, car, donkey, and mule to bring the children their packages of clothes, rice, sugar, flour, and evaporated milk. Sometimes there are gifts of money from the kind, faraway Americans. "People mean well. Some of them send radios," Mrs. Clark told me. "How can they know that in many villages people have scarcely *heard* of electricity?"

As is usual in the dispensing and receiving of charity, on either the private or the governmental level, there is a wide divergence between the donor's good intentions and the recipient's appreciation of them. Every time the E.C.A. Mission starts building another much-needed hard-surface road, some chauvinist section of the community can be heard muttering that "the Americans are only trying to foist off some of their second-rate cement on

us." Americans who advise the Greeks to preserve some of their food supplies against spoilage in hot weather are told that canned food is bad for the health. Voices—and not necessarily Communist-influenced voices—have been raised to the effect that the Americans are in Greece only for their own selfish ends. In fact, the United States has been blamed for most of the country's economic and political ills, although it is not hard to guess what would have become of Greece without Marshall Plan help.

Many Greeks complain, perhaps with more justification, that Marshall Plan help doesn't always flow down to the people. Some of the E.C.A. projects *are* puzzling. Why was a race track reconstructed in Athens, where hospitals and schools are so urgently needed? The official, and possibly lame, explanation is that profits from the track will be used to finance educational projects that would otherwise be impossible because the government finds it so difficult to levy and collect taxes. As in most Balkan countries, the burden of taxation falls on the poor. Hidden taxes absorb a quarter of the meagre earnings of the small clerk or shopkeeper. The rich get away with murder. One magnate, who owns three large apartment houses and a big industrial enterprise, told me proudly that he has never paid more than ten per cent of his income in taxes. Cheating on taxes is considered smart. The government introduced higher taxation on big earnings only after the Americans made it unmistakably clear that in these days of high defense budgets the rich must contribute more. Even the newspapers that ordinarily support the American "reform plans" were shocked at an American demand that all Greek stockholdings be registered in the names of the owners. Previously, wealthy



Greeks had put their money into corporation shares made out merely to the bearer. A new law forced the corporations to call in these shares and issue new ones in the owners' names, opening the way to individual assessment and to gift and inheritance taxes. There is almost no social awareness among the Greek minority that runs the country. An American woman in Athens who tried to get small donations from rich Greek women to buy children's books for poverty-stricken orphans was turned down at every door.

When the E.C.A. started operating in Greece, road-building equipment often disappeared, to turn up in the home districts of powerful politicians. Water pipes earmarked for one village would be sidetracked to another, whose mayor had good connections in Athens. Old hands here claim that this sort of thing is rare now, but obviously there is still some corruption. On the day I arrived, the *News Review*, a mimeographed release issued by the United States Embassy, reported, "Public Works Minister Zervas asked [Prime Minister] Venizelos to request of the American Embassy that investigations concerning . . . road-construction misappropriations be speeded up and public works resumed." On the same page, farther down, I read, "Investigations have been ordered in the Piraeus Port Authority, where new misappropriations are reported."

ATHENS' political arena is a free-for-all, and it's not easy for a foreigner to evaluate the local situation. It is said that America has occasionally backed the wrong horse here, as elsewhere, but even a well-informed American isn't always able to pick the right one. There are believed to be around eighty political parties in Greece, of which nine principal ones are represented in Parliament. The parties are generally referred to by the names of their leaders, and not by their political drift. The Liberal Party is known as the Venizelos Party; the National Progressive Union of the Center is known as the Plastiras Party. Politics in Greece is a matter of personality and charm rather than ability and integrity. It also seems to be a matter of age; in order to become a power in Greek politics, apparently, a man must have white hair or none at all. Of the leading politicians, Plastiras was born in 1885, Tsouderos in 1882, Tsaldaris in 1885, and Papandreou in 1888. Almost all the party chiefs are graduates of Athens University and ex-lawyers, and they play the old musical-chairs game

on the Ministerial benches. In the past two years, Greece has had eleven governments.

The Greeks have little use for doctrines, but they are fond of dialectics. At Greek parties, the guests carry on interminable arguments. "We rarely say anything nice about other people," one Greek remarked to me at a dinner party. "We like to attack people. All of us criticize. It must be the heritage of Demosthenes." Not only the upper-class Greeks but the peasants and the poorer people in the cities are deeply conscious of the three-thousand-year Hellenic past. A peasant told me that he had named his two sons Demosthenes and Archimedes. He hoped that Demosthenes, aged four, would go into politics when he grew up, and that Archimedes would become a mathematician. "They owe it to their names and to their country," he said.

The Greeks are optimists—they have to be to survive—and, like all optimists, they tend to be vague and unconcerned about bothersome details. How many of the inhabitants are illiterate? No one knows exactly; possibly thirty per cent of the population. What proportion of the national budget is devoted to defense? No one can tell you. A Government Minister talked to me with great enthusiasm about Greek industry's contribution to the nation's defense, but it turned out that uniforms and shoes are practically the only military equipment produced in the country. A middle-class Greek's conception of success in life is to go to America, return with a few thousand dollars, buy a house and a piece of land or a small shop, and die in the country of his ancestors. A Greek who has saved ten million drachmas—six hundred and sixty dollars—thinks he is a rich man. The really rich people send their children to France to be educated; French is the country's second language. All Greeks, rich and poor, make a cult of hospitality. Like as not, they will use up a whole week's supply of food to entertain a casual visitor.

THERE are more than fifteen hundred Americans in Athens, working for the E.C.A. Mission (the biggest in Europe), the Army, the Embassy, or private business firms. They and their dependents enjoy living in Athens, even though food is scarce, the climate hot, and the water supply capricious. Business hours are from eight to two, six days a week, and from five to seven two afternoons a week. In the early afternoon, everybody takes a siesta. During that time, telephone exchanges are tied up by subscribers who dial the

first digit of a number and leave the receiver off the hook; in some districts, automobilists who blow their horns in siesta hours may be fined forty thousand drachmas. The Americans are very popular with most Greeks who are not distracted by chauvinism. The British are not so well liked. Britain's intervention in the civil war is remembered with resentment, and there is widespread bitterness at the British refusal to turn over to Greece the Greek-populated island of Cyprus.

Greece reaffirmed her belief in constitutional monarchy in the plebiscite of September 1, 1946, when the people voted to reinstate King George II following the regency of Archbishop Damaskinos. George II died in April, 1947, and was succeeded by his brother, King Paul I, who is highly thought of in Athens, moves around in public freely, and enjoys racing his fast blue cabriolet between his summer palace and his city residence, followed by a few officers of his guard. His wife, Queen Frederika, who is the daughter of the German Duke of Brunswick, has done more for the welfare of Greece's destitute children and for other charities than any Greek-born woman. She supervises the King's Fund, which has set up a church-and-school program to care for refugees from the devastated areas of northern Greece, and the Queen's Fund, which has founded youth centers, children's colonies, and soup kitchens, and which is trying to raise the standard of living in the north. A collateral E.C.A. project is to relocate remote villages that were practically destroyed in the war; they are being rebuilt nearer main roads and railroad lines.

Everybody in Greece was pleased when General Eisenhower said he would like to see the country included in the Western world's collective-defense organization. There is a universal pride in the showing of the Greek soldiers in Korea. Casualties have been heavy, but no one has complained. Being quite sensitive to matters of military strategy, the Greeks realize the dangers of their country's exposed position in the event of a Russian or Cominform attack on neighboring Yugoslavia. They have no love for Tito, who helped the Greek Communists during the civil war, but they understand the necessity of making friends with the Yugoslavs. The rapprochement between the former enemies is one of the more cheerful aspects of Balkan power politics. Yugoslav and Greek border guards don't drink wine together yet, but at least they have stopped shooting at one another. Minis-

ters have already been exchanged, military attachés soon will be, and rail traffic has been reëstablished. For the first time in twelve years, one can take the Simplon-Orient Express direct from Athens to Paris. A good second-class road leads from Athens through northern Greece to the Yugoslav border.

The Greek Army, including reserves, is up to a hundred and fifty thousand men now, and American and British military advisers are enthusiastic about the high quality and excellent morale of the Greek officers and men, whose ancestors have distinguished themselves so often in the twenty-five centuries since the Battle of Thermopylae. Every young Greek wants to join the Army, where he gets a uniform, better food than he is likely to get at home, and a chance to fight, which means a lot to a Greek. Until the end of last May, the Army was under the command of Field Marshal Alexander Papagos, a sixty-eight-year-old former inmate of several German concentration camps and a great hero to his countrymen. Papagos took over in 1949 and achieved a major miracle in getting politics out of the Army. He was a tough disciplinarian, who once court-martialled his best friend. Within a few months of his accession to office, he fired three lieutenant generals, fifteen major generals, thirty-three brigadiers, and fifty-six colonels because of their political shenanigans or because of their incompetence. The average age of the officer corps has gone down. Papagos resigned after King Paul appointed to his entourage some officers that Papagos found unacceptable.

The Army has both American and British equipment. At a recent parade, it trotted out fifty tanks, which, according to an American officer, "were handled well even by our standards." The British military advisers here run the staff schools; the American military advisers run the infantry, artillery, and tank schools. Our military men have quickly learned the difficult art of getting their "advice" across without hurting the Greeks' pride. This accomplishment benefits both sides. The Greeks are receiving some good advice and we are developing some able military diplomats. The war the Greeks would most like to fight, I have gathered, is one against the Bulgarians, who have attacked Greece three times within living memory. To call a Greek a Bulgar is an inexcusable offense. The Greeks take a mildly condescending view of the Italians, whom they might well have thrown into the sea if Hitler hadn't

come to Mussolini's rescue. There was considerable surprise a few weeks ago when an Italian soccer team played an Athens team and scored a tie. "Imagine!" an astonished fan said to me. "The Italians almost won!"

Tolerance, an old Hellenic virtue, is still widely practiced here. After the civil war, there were a few vendettas in the northern villages that had suffered terribly during the fighting, but, by and large, the era of revenge is over. Almost all Communist guerrillas who surrendered their weapons at the cessation of hostilities in 1949 were pardoned. Quite a few of them now sit peacefully on the café terraces of Athens, possibly sharing a table, now and then, with somebody they were trying hard to kill only a couple of years ago. There isn't even any widespread hatred of the Germans. "We Greeks can never hate very long," a Greek friend told me. "Hatred has no place among civilized men, and when it comes to civilization, what nation can match ours?"

MY friend accompanied me up to the Acropolis one afternoon not long ago. I had complained to him that the Athens of today seems a far different place from the golden city every schoolboy has read about. Perhaps, I said, one should come to Athens in one's teens, when the past looks more important than the present, or not come at all. Not many Greeks appear to grasp the classical language of Sophocles and Euripides, I went on. The great dramas are rarely performed. There is little cultural life in Athens—few theatres and almost no good music. It is distressing to see the architectural gap that separates the great monuments of Greece's classical period and the fine Byzantine churches and monasteries from the ugly products of a neoclassicism that is neither new nor classic.

My friend listened to me in silence and then led me up the steep flight of steps to the Propylaea. Down in the city, it had been hot and dusty, but on the rocky hill the wind was cool, and the sky seemed nearer and of a deeper blue than I'd ever seen it before. The shadows cast by the Propylaea's Doric columns were pitch-black, and the sun-drenched Pentelic marble of the old temples was so bright that it almost blinded me. A class of school children came up, and stopped in front of the Parthenon to hear a lecture by their teacher. He seemed excited as he talked, and so did the kids, listening to him. I asked my friend what the teacher was saying. "He's telling them about their great ancestors Phidias

and Pericles," he said, smiling. "And that's my answer to what you were talking about a little while ago. It's true that Athens today is disillusioning. But as long as our children are thrilled by our history, everything will be all right with Greece." For a moment, standing there in the sun, surrounded by so much ancient beauty, and hearing the happy murmurs of the children, I felt just as he did. —JOSEPH WECHSBERG

•

The how to catch a husband specialists have, I think, overlooked a rather simple, elemental device: Outdoor activity.

As a student of the subject of baiting and setting man traps, I find this whole subject has been ignored.

For instance, had you ever thought of starting to restain or otherwise treat the roof of your house? All you have to do is set up an extension ladder in the front, set some pots and brushes around. Before you set foot to ladder there will be at least six neighborhood males strolling across your lawn. They give advice, discuss, and obviously wait for a request for help.

There are few things more attractive to a man—of any age—than a chance to climb around a roof for a few hours. If you start to assemble pieces of a television antenna near a ladder, the audience in a few minutes runs around a baker's dozen.

Another sure fire attraction is a piece of broken machinery. I can run my power mower around the lawn for hours, drawing nothing more enthusiastic than friendly waves from passersby. But let the mower suddenly quit, male neighbors from blocks around start out for my house. Some of them carry their own wrenches, screwdrivers and oil cans.

Cement mixing is another good gimmick and apt to be slightly less expensive than machinery breaking or roof climbing. The attraction of men to cement defies all reason, but they flock to such a scene like hummingbirds to beebalm.

This system of attracting males, however, is unpredictable and hard to figure in advance. For instance, they'll come a-running if you plan to remove a tree with a block and tackle. But if you set to work with saw or ax, the eye of a male passerby is as hard to catch as a waiter's. You can draw a crowd with a non functioning car with a leaking radiator or dirty points, but you can work in blessed solitude over a flat tire that needs changing.—*Cynthia Lowry in the Modesto (Calif.) Bee.*

May you have dozens of them!

•

HOW'S THAT AGAIN? DEPARTMENT

[Frank Farrell in the World-Telegram & Sun]

Vice Adm. Daniel E. Barbey, fabled chief of Pacific amphibious operations in W. W. II, retired last month to become Director of Civil Defense for Washington. Amusingly advised friends via postcards from Olympia sketched with a ship's wake of hats he has worn since Oregon farmboy birth.