

Nikos Kavvadias

Greek poet, writer and a sailor by profession

Kavvadias was born in Nikolsk-Ussuriysky, where his father was a merchant. He believed that this had established a permanent connection between him and the Far East as he wrote in one of his short stories titled "Li". His parents were Greek, originating from the island of Kefalonia and as a young child he had the

opportunity to travel extensively. He wrote his first poems while in school.

In 1928, after having graduated from high school he sat an entrance exam for medical school but as his father fell sick the same year, young Kavvadias was forced to get a job as an office clerk in a shipping company to help his family. After his father's death, he went on board the freighter ship Agios Nikolaos (Saint Nicholas) as a sailor. For the following years he worked on freighter boats, returning home wretched and penniless. At that point he

aspired to train as a captain but settled for a diploma as a radio officer instead, which he got in 1939. By that time however, World War II had started and he was sent to fight in Albania.

During the German occupation of Greece, he joined the National Liberation Front (EAM) and became a member of the Communist Party. When the war ended in 1944, he embarked again and traveled continuously, this time as a radio officer, until November 1974. These experiences at sea and the exotic ports he visited became the material for his poetry. Returning from his last trip and as he was preparing the



publication of his third collection of poems, he died suddenly from a stroke on 10 February 1975 after only three months off sea. Since his death, his poetry has been popularized in Greece, partly because of Thanos Mikroutsikos who released an album with Kavvadias's poetry set to his music in his very popular albums Σταυρός του Νότου (Southern Cross) [1979] and Γραμμές των Οριζόντων (Horizons' Lines) [1991].

His first collection of poems, Marabou was published in 1933 when Kavvadias was in his early twenties and carries the spirit of a romantic young man, impressed with the marvels of the world. His other collections are titled Fog, published in 1947 and Traverso published after his death in 1975. His second short story titled "Of War", which was to be his last and was also published after his death in 1987, recounts the story of his rescue by a local during a storm. His experiences during World War II affected him profoundly and as a result, his later works became increasingly political and in support of both the communists in Greece and the general leftist movements throughout the world. One of these poems is about the death of Argentinian revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara, written as an answer to the criticisms received by some of his more

He used his travels around the world, the life at sea and its adventures, as powerful metaphors for the escape of ordinary people, outside the boundaries of reality. His poems are widely regarded as belonging to symbolism, and he has been characterized by some as a poète maudit.



polemic comrades who thought that his poems over-romanticized the harsh and dangerous life of sailors who were potential symbols of class struggle. His only novel *The Shift* was published in 1954 and recounts the stories told by the sailors on their night shift at the ship's bridge.

Some of the poems that have been set to music since 1967 are:

1979: Woman

1979: Esmeralda

1979: Cambay's water

1979: Federico Garcia Lorca

1979: Kuro Siwo

1984: Black and White

1986: Yara yara

1987: The Monkey

1989: Letter to a Poet

1992: A bord de l'aspasia

In the nor-wester the waves boiled;

we were both bent over the map.

You turned and told me how in March

you'd be in other latitudes.

(The Southern Cross, translation by Gail Holst Warhaft)