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## **NIKOS KAVVADIAS**

Nikos Kavvadias (Greek: Νίκος Καββαδίας; January 11, 1910 in Nikolsk-Ussuriysky – February 10, 1975 in Athens) was a Greek poet and writer who used his travels around the world as a sailor, and life at sea and its adventures as powerful metaphors for the escape of ordinary people outside the boundaries of reality.

Kavvadias was born in Nikolsk-Ussuriysky (now Ussuriysk in the Primorsky Krai region of Russia). This, he believed to have permanently linked him to the Far East as he wrote in one of his short stories titled "Li". His parents were Greek, originating from the island of Cefalonia and as a young child he had the opportunity to travel extensively. His family returned to their island home for a few years before finally moving to Pireus, Athens' port, in 1921. He wrote his first poems while in grammar school.

In 1928, after having graduated from high school he sat an entrance exam for medical school but as his father fell sick that same year, young Kavvadias was forced to get a job as an office clerk in a shipping company to help his family. He lasted only a few months and 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 February 10, 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' poetry set to his music in his very popular albums *Σταυρός του Νότου* (Southern Cross) [1979] and *Γραμμές των Οριζόντων* (Horizons' Lines) [1991].

### **Early writings**

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. Most of the poems tell half-fictitious stories transpiring at sea and at the different ports Kavvadias visited during his journeys. The collection begins with a poem written in the first person about the writer's tragic love for a young wealthy girl he met on board and who later ended as a poor prostitute that he could barely recognise. Other poems recount the stories of a washed out Norwegian captain who died homesick watching a ship sailing to the Lofoten and of an enchanted dagger carrying the curse that its owner shall kill someone they love. Artistically, he was influenced by French literature and the poet Charles Baudelaire whom he cites in many of his works. Like a lot of Greek poetry, Kavvadias' work is characterized by a deep feeling of nostalgia.

### **Later works**

His other collections are titled *Fog*, published in 1947 and *Traverso* published after his death 1975. His second and last short story "Of War" was also published after his death in 1987, and recounts the story of his rescue by a local during a storm. The war affected deeply and these later collections are increasingly political, 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 polemic comrades who thought that his poems over-romanticized the harsh and dangerous life of sailors who were potential symbols of class struggle. Another is about the execution of Andalusian poet and writer Federico García Lorca by the Franco dictatorship which, in the poem, is connected with the destruction of the Greek village of Distomo and the executions at Kaisariani which were carried out by the Nazi forces that occupied Greece.

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. Images from exotic places, prostitutes, captains gone mad and memories of the war blend together, to form a dreamy world of lucid forms, part fictional, part true.

Although not considered an innovator of the height of Odysseas Elytis, he is popular among Greeks and his best poems taught at schools throughout the country. He is considered by many to embody of the Greek "soul" because of his romantic affiliation with the sea and its journeys and for his genuinely humane outlook.