

The Journey through the “My Greek Village” and the Lens of Wolfgang Bernauer



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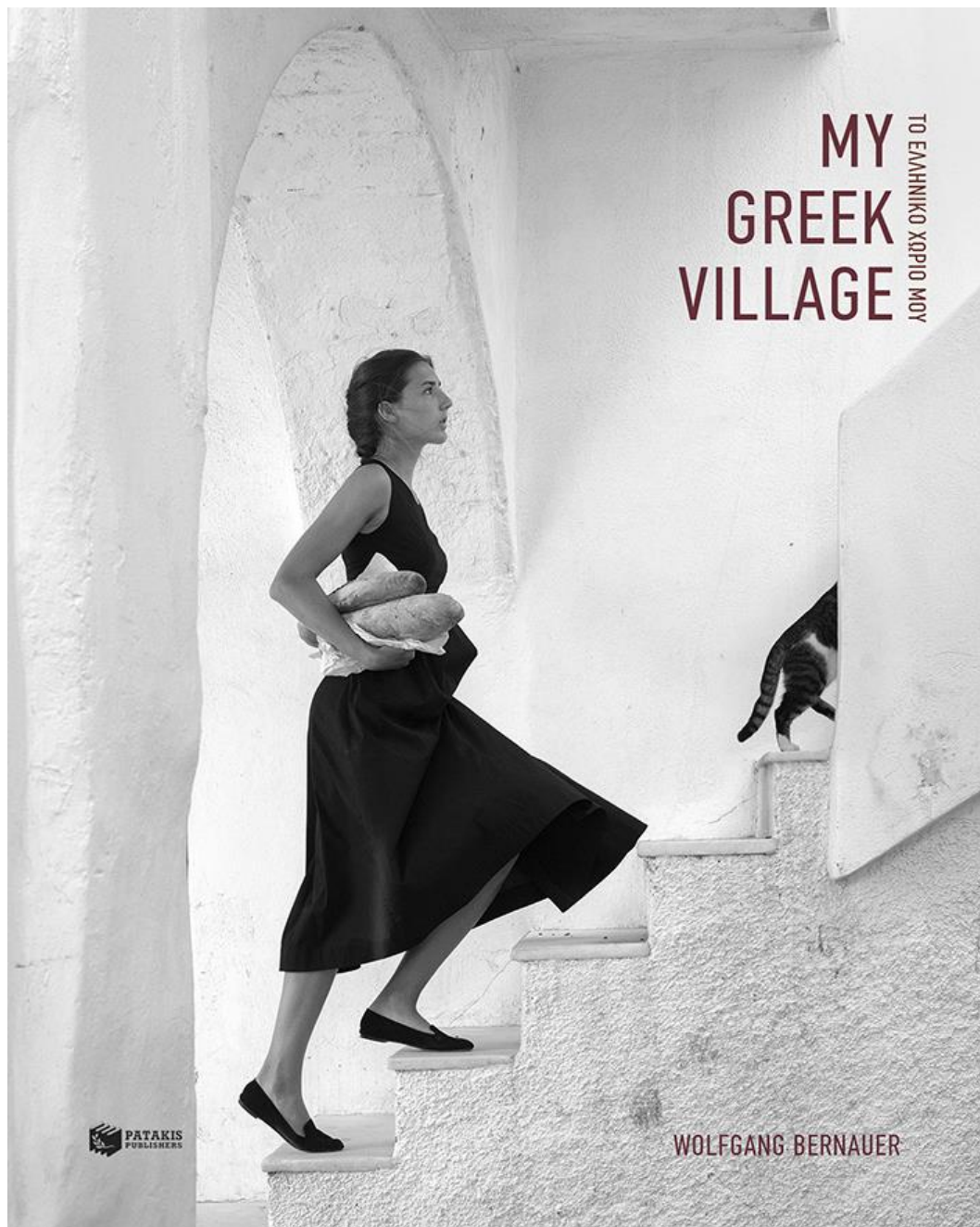
The photographic depiction by Swiss photographer Wolfgang Bernauer of a village that exists everywhere, but above all, within us

When I one day retire, I dream of taking the roads that lead to every small village in the Greek countryside. To linger at corners and squares, at crossroads where lives intersect; to listen closely to what remains and record the traces of a memory that never fades. To remember the roots of this land and connect them with my own story. And then, to photograph them, before I too vanish. For each click carries within it something of the eternity of the moment-and the breath of the photographer.

In his bilingual photo book *My Greek Village*, Swiss photographer **Wolfgang Bernauer** walks the same alleyways, stands in the same squares, converses with the same people who make up the microcosm of the village. With a tender gaze, he

delivers a complete narrative of the soul of rural Greece—a soul that feels not only Greek, but universal.

As we leaf through the book, images converse with the photographer's own words: *"It smells of smoke, of burnt wood. The strong north wind has once again brought cold to the mountains..."* Snapshots from the café, the stove around which men gather; from the clanging hammers of the bladesmith; from the butcher's shop, the barber's chair, the square filled with children's voices; from the alleyways where farmers return with their mules. A microcosm pieced together like a mosaic—sparse and majestic at once.



As **Marc Schwitter** writes in the book's introduction, for many today the question of homeland is synonymous with the question of identity. Homeland is where you can truly be yourself. But for the people of the Greek village, homeland is defined otherwise: it is the familiar piece of land where their entire life unfolds. Rooted in history, family, and soil, they live where they were born—in the house of the village. **The faces of the elders carry the past: hard labor, hardship, but also the love and cohesion of a community determined to resist inevitable change.** Change that comes not with noise, but with the quiet trickle of sand in the hourglass of transience.

Wolfgang Bernauer – The photographer behind the gaze

Wolfgang Bernauer did not begin with photography. After studying medicine came his training in photography and his first historical art reports. But soon life drew him elsewhere—to the countryside: to the Alps and to Greece. There, he focused on traditional daily life, customs, festivals, and crafts surviving through time.

The starting point for his long-term project *My Greek Village* was his stay in Olympos, Karpathos, in 1996. As he recalls:

“As a young student I read a travel article about Easter in a remote village on Karpathos. A few months later, I experienced it myself. The hospitality, the devout celebration, the authentic atmosphere moved me deeply. When I looked at the photographs of those days, I realized I had found my subject: the life of the Greek village.”

Since then, Bernauer has traveled thousands of kilometers across Greece: from the villages of Pindos to the southern Peloponnese, from Chios to Crete. He has documented testimonies and moments—from the Naxos baker whose loaves recalled the Occupation years, to the shoemaker who discovered secrets by cutting apart German boots; from Popi's Easter *magiritsa* in Olympos to harvesting mastic with Aris and Fotini in Chios, and beyond. For him, the human being is always at the center—man within his cultural environment.

His method is strict and restrained: wide-angle lenses, a tripod to compose the frame, sparing use of color. An aesthetic reminiscent of his Swiss predecessor Frédéric Boissonnas, who traveled through Greece in the early 20th century. His aim, he says, is to complement and extend that work with the tools of contemporary photography, without betraying authenticity. *“If I manage to broaden people's gaze toward this unique European culture,”* he notes, *“I will have more than fulfilled my goals.”*

And so, through Bernauer's eyes, a journey begins into the most characteristic corners of the Greek village: the café and the marketplace, the hinterland, the church, and the festival. Places where people, objects, and rituals weave a mosaic of everyday life.

The coffee house

On the square stands the café “Panellinio.” For more than ninety years, it has remained almost untouched by modernization. Thanasis, the elderly owner, stands behind the counter observing what happens around him. With pride he recalls how in 1974 Theo Angelopoulos filmed scenes of *The Travelling Players* there. Since then, the place carries its own aura of history, a beloved destination for students and visitors alike.





A little further, at the corner of the square, is Charikleia's tiny café. Her warm hospitality, the bright faces of her patrons, and an old teapot on the shelf sparked a spontaneous conversation about life in Switzerland. Encouraged by friends, Charikleia and Panagiotis happily posed by the teapot, which a cheerful customer deliberately turned toward the camera.

The Market street

The market street is the heart of the village. Here, family businesses stand side by side, like links in a chain holding the community together. The sound of scoops dipping into sacks of rice, beans, and peas; the smell of fresh sausage preserved in barrels of olive oil; the eggs of the day—all speak of a rhythm of life that remains authentic.

At the Velonis family bakery, bread is not only a daily necessity but a ritual. Nikos, who took over from his father and grandfather, proudly describes how olive wood gives the loaves their unique flavor, and how the bread seal bearing the letters ΙΣ-ΧΣ-NI-KA is prepared for church liturgy. In summer the bakery produces over a thousand loaves a day; in winter, barely a hundred. And yet, the smell of the wood-fired oven spreads across Naxos' castle town, drawing locals and travelers alike.





Nearby, shoemaker Nikos leaves his own imprint. For more than thirty years he has been making and repairing shoes. His traditional boots feature soles crafted from pieces of old car tires-a trick he learned decades ago dismantling German soldiers' boots, which revealed to him the secrets of a fading craft.

And then, Pantelis with his ouzo. Since 1901, the anise-flavored distillate has filled glasses and marked the days of village life. Once, at midday, the marble counter became a gathering spot for ouzo, meze, and conversation. Today the space functions only as a shop, but its memory remains full of voices and laughter.

The marketstreet, with its bakery, shoemaker, ouzo distillery, and small groceries, is not merely a place of trade. It is a place of life, still keeping the community together, even as times change around it.

The land

Greek villages, built sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of stubbornness, found their place inland: away from the coasts to avoid pirate raids, nestled in mountains and stone, where people built terraces, raised dry-stone walls, and cultivated the land. For centuries, small-scale farming was the foundation of life.

History repeats itself. After the great migration to the cities, many fields lay abandoned. But with the economic crisis, thousands of young people returned; they cleared their grandparents' fields, pruned long-neglected olive trees, began organic farming-even snail breeding or truffle hunting. A sign that the hinterland, despite its wounds, can come alive again.

Here we meet **Eirini**. From dawn she works with her mother and neighbor preparing for Easter. The old stone oven needs hours to heat; first go in the loaves and cheese pies, then the Easter roast. Family and community prepare for the great feast.



And a little further, **Manolis**. As a young man he had joined the Resistance; even today he wears the headband of the partisans. With his woodcarving workshop, he reminds every passerby of a land that learned to stand tall.



The hinterland, in Bernauer's gaze, is the ground where resilience takes root.

The Church

In rural Greece the church remains a point of reference—a place of faith but also of social cohesion. There memories, customs, and traditions converge. In its icons and rituals, believers often seek dialogue with the transcendent, a refuge for health and protection.

The priest, a familiar figure in cassock and kalimavkion, is no stranger to everyday life; he often shares the same chores and burdens as the rest of the villagers. The church is the nucleus that keeps the community united.





The feast

Every Greek village has its own festive pulse, tied to the religious calendar but also to collective memory: Easter, the Dormition of the Virgin, local saints' days. The church or chapel is always at the center. Preparation begins days before: the church is whitewashed, the courtyard cleaned, bunting and lights strung across the alleyways. The Greek flag flutters alongside the Byzantine one. Peddlers arrive with trinkets, toys, and sweets, bringing a taste of fairs from another time.

On the eve, vespers; on the feast day, the solemn Divine Liturgy and the procession of icons through the alleys, olive groves, and fields, blessing people and crops.







Then, the village transforms into a great banquet. Grills are lit, the aroma of meat and sausages fills the air, corn roasts on embers. Musicians play without pause, conversations and laughter weave the sound of community. A circle forms. The dance begins and lasts deep into the night.

The very word *panigyri* comes from *pan* (all) and *agora* (assembly): the gathering of everyone. And indeed, the festival is exactly that: a great assembly where the village reintroduces itself—inside churches, beneath candle flames, around fires and music. A moment of collective memory and joy that keeps the place alive.

The village as home

In my own dream, the village has always been a place of return. In Wolfgang Bernauer's work, it becomes something even greater: a metaphor for human community itself—for what sustains us when everything around us changes. It is a metaphor for what we all seek: companionship, authenticity, memory, the faith in a shared life.

A village that belongs not only to Greece, but to every corner of the world where people strive to keep their values alive.

The photo book *My Greek Village (bilingual edition)* is published by Patakis Publishers.