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REMEMBERING TIKAS: A PILGRIMAGE TO LOUTRA

In the late spring of 2011, Dr. Timothy Patitsas, Assistant Professor of Ethics at Holy Cross Theological School in Brookline, Massachusetts, led a group of graduate students to Crete where they visited the birthplace of the young Greek-American union organizer, Louis Tikas, murdered by the state militia in Ludlow, Colorado in 1914 while defending a tent colony of striking miners. A few weeks after the pilgrimage, *Road to Emmaus* interviewed Dr. Patitsas in Thessalonica.

RTE: Professor Patitsas, what inspired you to make a pilgrimage to Tikas' birthplace?

PROF. PATITSAS: The sense of the fragmentariness of his memory. I'd heard of the Ludlow massacre only as an oral tradition among Colorado Orthodox that the Orthodox had played a role in the U.S. labor movement. The fragility of Tikas' legacy—the sense that we don't know much about him, that he died very young, and that he is not given a great deal of honor within the Orthodox or Greek communities—this, along with his bravery and the real historical impact he made, has a poignancy to it. When you find a story like this which is in danger of being lost you put more resources there.

I hadn't taken it any further until a student came to my office who'd been asked to write about Orthodoxy and labor relations. I said, "Why don't you run down this oral tradition from the West and see if there's anything to it?" But before he'd even left the office I got onto the United Mine Workers website and the Wikipedia about the massacre at Ludlow and within a half-hour we found an online Paschalion to determine the date for Pascha that year. In a short while, things became clearer. Something I'd regarded as perhaps legend was coming into focus, and as I'd already hoped to take the Holy Cross senior trip to Crete this year, it seemed important to stop at Tikas' village of Loutra.

RTE: In 1866 Tikas' great-uncle, also from Loutra, had fought in the battle that destroyed the famous Arkhadi Monastery, a massacre of Cretan Christians by Ottoman troops. What did you find at Loutra?

PROF. PATITSAS: The first people we asked weren't sure where the house was, and some young village boys thought they'd never heard of it. But the pictures on Wikipedia were good enough that I recognized the street and went up and found the house. The house is made of stone, an old typically Greek house, pie-shaped like a wedge where the roads cross – one road leads down to the *plateia* and the other branches back into the higher part of the village. There was a plaque on the house, so he is remembered.

RTE: What strikes you the most about Tikas' life?

PROF. PATITSAS: He is a symbol of any immigrant to a new country whose status is so marginalized that his life isn't worth much – and that's where

Opposite: Louis Tikas' house in Loutra, Crete. Photo courtesy of Aaron Friar.

almost all of us have come from through our immigrant forbears. I think the interesting thing about Tikas' life is how much impact he had as a foreigner, as a stranger to the United States. His integrity trumped all that. He didn't simply bow to the biases and the assumptions of the people in power. The theme of his life is absolute integrity; you admire someone who had that kind of moral influence in a country he'd just become a citizen of the month before.

RTE: Yes, and eight weeks after he arrived in Ludlow, he was leading the striker's camp. But this wasn't a position they voted him into; he'd earned the miners' respect and he earned it quickly. Also, a number of these striking miners had left the U.S. a few years before to help free northern Greece and the Balkans from Ottoman rule and were back as seasoned soldiers, so these were not people who were easily cowed or led.

Tikas was born in 1886 and left for America in 1906, when he was twenty. He died eight years later. In that short time, he not only became part-owner of a Denver coffee-house, a miner, and a union organizer, but he had learned enough English to write a decent letter and was able to act as a spokesman for the strikers with both mine bosses and union leaders. The fall before he died, he was sworn in as a U.S. citizen. He was obviously someone who seized every opportunity that came his way.

PROF. PATITSAS: Yes, I like that about him. He didn't succumb to the notion that as an immigrant you only keep your head down, obey all the rules and pay your dues. You do that too, of course, but if you stand on your integrity you begin to make an impact from the first moment. We can ask ourselves, "In the century that we've been here, how many Greek-Americans have had such a decisive impact on U.S. history as Tikas?" The answer is "No one". Yet here is a guy who came at twenty and was dead by twenty-eight. Of course, it was a particular moment in history, but you realize that *he also created that moment* because he had so much integrity.

Sometimes as Greeks we think that we are standing on our principles, on our ideals, but the truth is we rarely really stand up for justice. We're just taking what our brilliant civilization, our culture teaches us, and it easily makes us good citizens, good bourgeois, but we're not standing up. The American West at that time was much more decisive in its reliance on character; you didn't have classes, you just had your character. It wasn't a world without hierarchy, but the hierarchy was completely existential. Tikas came with his princeliness, his nobility, and his ability to love people and to sacrifice.

RTE: He saw injustice and went after it.

PROF. PATITSAS: You wonder if a person like that could live long. We're sitting here in Thessaloniki discussing him, and St. Demetrios, the protector of the city, was the same age when he was killed. It wasn't merely his confession of faith that got him martyred, but that he provoked those in authority who were unjust. There was something not just faithful, but rebellious, about his action before the Roman emperor. I'm amazed by people like this, who from a young age consistently do the right thing.

RTE: Oddly enough, there is a direct connection between St. Demetrios and the Colorado coal miners. According to Tikas' biographer, Zeese Papanikolas, in November of 1910 the Greek miners of the Victor-American Mine in Delagua, Colorado had taken the day off to celebrate the feast of St. Demetrios when the mine exploded. Of the over 100 Italian and Mexican miners below ground that day, 79 died. Because of their holiday, the Greeks were spared. Also it comes to mind that, like St. Demetrios, Tikas went consciously to his death. The morning of the battle he said good-bye to two of the miners' wives in the camp, saying that they wouldn't see him again, and the strikers said that when he went down unarmed to ask the National Guard for a cease-fire so that his men



Prof. Timothy Patitsas with His Holiness Archbishop Irenaios of Crete.

could put out the fire in the tent colony, he knew he wasn't coming back. He had followed the *epitaphion* through the streets of the Greek camp on Good Friday, venerated the icons, and celebrated the Lord's Resurrection the night before. All of that must have been resonating inside of him.

PROF. PATITSAS: Perhaps because St. Demetrios was a soldier and Tikas was in the coalfield wars, they knew clearly whom they could trust. In these situations you find your own integrity and you are ready for a great sacrifice. Who's to say what the sacrifice is? It's not that you pity these martyrs: they are in heaven, but it's the world left behind that has to mourn, because it has lost its light, its salt. This fallen world can't sustain hospitality towards people that good.

RTE: Would you identify that lack of hospitality as a spiritual basis of sin, the lack of desiring real spiritual good for our neighbors or our own souls?

PROF. PATITSAS: I don't know. But later when, as a result of their death, you change the law and curtail injustice, even that is a loss because it's not the same as when someone is pure enough to simply stand up against injustice. Righting the wrong by law is an admission that the rest of us can't live with the integrity the martyrs did outside of a rules-based framework. So, there's something sad for us even there, in the accomplishment of change and justice.

RTE: It's fair and right, but feels lukewarm?

PROF. PATITSAS: The letter kills. Another question we can ask about Tikas is, what was his nationality? He grew up in Crete under the Ottomans, then naturalized in the U.S.

RTE: He filed for citizenship in 1913 on the very day the Ottoman Empire gave Crete its freedom.

PROF. PATITSAS: Wow. So he was never really a son of free Greece! That is a peculiar kind of homelessness. You are in a kind of liminal space, where your identity as a naturalized American is still rejected because you are an immigrant, and yet it is your blood that sanctifies the ground. It doesn't sanctify it to any particular nation; it sanctifies it to no nation and to all nations.

RTE: Perhaps we could say that it sanctifies the earth, not a political territory.

PROF. PATITSAS: The earth as the extension of the Church, an extension of the Incarnation, because Tikas was a baptized Orthodox Christian and his blood was spilled here. This is intense, and it's one of the things that speaks to me the most. In Greek-American terms we still think, "Maybe someday a Greek will be president!" This is ridiculous. A hundred years ago this young



Memorial plaque at Tikas' home in Loutra, Crete.

Cretan came and he was a man with so much integrity that he was martyred and he changed everything. This is the promise of Orthodoxy, that it's not just about the elite. It's the promise of America, too, the image of God in each, "endowed by their Creator." This is where the strength comes from for this "liturgy of the whole" that democracy is supposed to become.

RTE: How does that work today with Greece as a democracy in crisis?

PROF. PATITSAS: In Greece today the elites are utterly confused about what economics is, so why should the common person be thought to have some absolute self-determination that could justify their punishment through "austerity measures"? No one said to them "When you sign onto the euro you are signing away your sovereignty." Surely, the elite knew something and concealed it from the people, so, in that sense, the European Union is based on a deception. Their actual goal was a degree of union that would require one European sovereignty. Now people are waking up and realizing they want out. It's like the mine owners saying to those Ludlow miners who signed up and became slaves, "You should have signed up somewhere else if you didn't want to work here. It's a free country."

Louis Tikas makes you proud to be Greek-American, but he also annihilates national categories. It's the apotheosis of most Greeks in America. He's gone further than anyone, but he did it "without succeeding." He simply cared for all of these people in the camp, most of whom weren't even Greek. There's something tragic in the notion of a nation-state, in the notion of eth-

nicity, and that's why Greeks today are confused by the European Union. They have a long memory of Byzantium, and they'd like to get out of their own nation-state.

RTE: Yes, as the moral leader of the camp, Tikas somehow embodied that older, broader sense of the Byzantine *oikoumene*.

PROF. PATITSAS: Yes, and we need to respect empires more because of that ecumenical character. Even the Ottomans had a sense that went beyond nationhood. Democracy is more like a family that is meant to act passionately as one, all the time, but in doing so it threatens to become more and more exclusive. The Greeks today need to be part of the E.U., but to also have their own military to defend their borders and to have their own inter-relating city-states. I believe they need to exist on all three levels.

Now Greeks are being told by the E.U. what miners were being told by the bosses. "You just have to work harder, to be more responsible. Who do you think you are that you're voting yourself these social benefits that you can't pay for?" These things are all so irrelevant because anyone with a brain knows that that's not how democracy works. Democracy flows out of these manipulative leaders, and the voters are a mix of good and bad and many motivations. The voters aren't really voting for this or that. There's a lot of deception that goes on, just as there was a tremendous deception of the Ludlow miners. People who operate from a position of power and status can get the rules waived when they need to. Other people cannot.

You know, you almost can't teach Tikas to your schoolkids. What are you saying he stands for? To live fast and die young? He fulfills everything and negates everything at once. That's true of any young martyr. St. Demetrios is the glory of Thessalonica, and yet he didn't live to enjoy it.

We must escape from a modernism that says that there is only one perspective. But we also need to escape from post-modernism which says that truth is relative, and that chaos and violence are appropriate responses. With St. Demetrios and Tikas, it is something else – living death and resurrection together at once – absolute truth is in a Person, so it's absolute yet also Personal. It's Jesus Christ, and those like him. ✦

