

# Why communism was all *Greek* to me

Growing up in Hungary under Soviet rule made for a stodgy diet of collectivist propaganda. At least until one young reader discovered the exploits of the gods in ancient mythology

MY MOTHER COULDN'T FORGIVE THE SOVIET ARMY FOR BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE SHE WAS BORN IN, FRYING UP THE SWANS ON THE LAKE AND DRIVING OFF THE THREE FRENCH NANNIES who had educated her as a child. She took it personally. If you have lived on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, you tend to have an unorthodox take on Russian cultural icons. *Swan Lake*, for Mum, would never be inhabited by fluffy, flying ballerinas, but by bellowing, hammer-headed troops auditioning for a surrealist version of *The Last Supper*. My mother could never get over her loss and was secretly plotting to bring down the system from within. Being a clever woman, she disguised it as classical education.

Growing up in a communist dictatorship, I was constantly fed Soviet propaganda tales like *The Dog And The Wolf*, where the dog was the good comrade, trustworthy, hardworking and obedient, while the wolf was a decadent, unreliable, lazy drop-out, even opportunistic at times, which is remarkably versatile for a beast. My mother told me not to bother with the school curriculum. Instead, she encouraged me to read Greek mythology – tales of fights, orgies, rape, revenge and sacrifice. Stimulating stuff for a seven-year-old.

I started seeing parallels with everything that was happening around me and slowly gathered that mythology provides not only a great escape, but also offers solutions to my everyday struggle. In the myths, whenever there's a problem or some scheme goes wrong, they always try to solve it with human sacrifice. If that doesn't work, they actually do something about it, but first they always go for sacrifice. The subway doesn't come on time, let's sacrifice the daughter of the king. The polls are running low, let's attack some obscure little country on the other side of the sea. The Greek heroes seemed to have all the fun while we just kept building friendship between nations.

One of the myths I came across in my reading was the story of Europa. A beautiful princess, she went down to the beach one sunny day and was kidnapped by Zeus. Countless artworks elaborate on how Zeus appeared as a bull and carried her off to the island of Crete, where he turned into an eagle and made love to her. She must have been confused. The highlight of all guided tours on Crete is a tree revealed to tourists as the very one under which Zeus "landed" on Europe. The Soviet tales transformed humans into animals, while the Greek tales turned animals into gods. My beautiful mother was on to something.

LIVING IN A COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP IS A DRAG. YOU'RE LOCKED UP IN TIME LIKE A BEETLE IN AMBER. WHICH IS DELICATE TERMINOLOGY. YOU ARE A STINKING, YAWNING, UNDERINFORMED SLOTH stuck in a giant block of radioactive glue. Nothing ever happens, but you don't even notice because >

By Péter Zilahy  
Illustration by Jackie Parsons



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myself kicked out of school and headed for the Greek islands. I had been captain of the school soccer team, a model student and an expert on Greek gods. I was going to combine all my talents and see what they were worth. For a moment it seemed that there was even a reason why I had had to wait so long behind the Iron Curtain. The sloth stepped out of the glue, blinking. An alluring new world was on the horizon, I was going to leave animal farm and be like the gods.

The melancholic Hungarians, thanks to their revolutionary history and a passion for Molotov cocktails, were kept on a long leash and could travel to the west every three years. When my time came, I took my red passport, then the train, then the boat, and there I was on the island where the story began. All the other kids went to Amsterdam to smoke pot or hitched a ride to Rostock to check out the nudist beach. I went to Crete to meet the gods. Guess who got higher.

On Crete, the infant Zeus had been hidden because his father wanted to eat him alive. I could picture their hide-and-seek. "Where's little Zeeeeeus? Come out, my boy, daddy's not gonna hurt you!"

It's not easy to be a god. Or at least that's how I felt when I arrived in Crete on a searing summer day. I got myself a Honda 500, not one of those tiny scooters tourists go sight-seeing with. Having read the Greeks, you know it's all about

there's only one channel on television, where the same stuff gets repeated again and again. You either start drinking or you pick yourself a myth – or you do both if you're creative enough.

As I was coming of age, puberty and mythology created an explosive mix. The Greek stories were a thousand times sexier than Soviet lip service. Naturally, I rooted for the wolf not the dog.

When it dawned on me that there wasn't enough alcohol to keep me in the country, I got

wind. Odysseus could not get home for 10 years because of stormy weather. When you live in mythology, it comes as no surprise that the logos of Honda are a wing and an H, which can also stand for Hermes, the herald of the gods whose symbol is a winged sandal.

**I CRUISE AROUND THE ISLAND, CHECKING OUT THE BEACHES BEFORE I TURN MY BIKE TOWARDS THE MOUNTAIN WHERE ZEUS WAS RAISED. IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY.** I am doing a hundred, a hundred and twenty, which is clearly not what the road was made for. If it ever was made rather than created. Coming out of a curve I face a hole the size of a swimming pool. Time flies, they say, and so do I, a spread eagle looking for Zeus on the mountain of Ida. As happens with accidents, your memory rewinds and your life passes in front of you, which in my case didn't take very long. But you also see everything in slow motion – so you actually have time. I'm flying in the air and taking a good look around. As I said, it's a beautiful day, I see far. The sea, the mountains, the clouds – right above me a particularly gorgeous little cloud in the shape of a bull's head. I see the hole below gently closing in on me with millions of little cracks opening into canyons, and billions of even smaller cracks growing sideways. I land, I skid, I burn, filling all the little cracks with my skin.

I'm alive – I know because I see the bike half in the air on the edge of the abyss, the wheels spinning in opposite directions, and I couldn't make that up. I'm black from the asphalt that has burned into my skin and there's a substantial amount of blood to give it some colour. No one wore helmets in those days. It is, of course, Zeus who has saved me. I get my bike, it's broken here and there, but the wheels look okay, so I begin walking it along. I'm kind of limping, but doing all right and soon the road starts to go downhill. The bike gains momentum and it's getting hard to keep up with it. Anyway, it's kind of humiliating limping next to a Honda 500, so I think to myself "what the heck" and I mount the bike again. I start the engine, and it works! Zeus, who else?

I'm driving along, not going fast, max 80, boring. I'm taking the curves real easy, it's mid-afternoon when I arrive at the foot of the mountain, and start my ascent. The trail is steep, it's scorching hot, I'm bleeding, I'm badly burned, but I can't help putting on a little smile that I survived and will be seeing Zeus in a moment. With every step I'm getting faster, I'm climbing rocks, jumping creeks, going through bushes and cacti, leaving drops of blood all along the way. It's going to be easy to find my way back. All I have to do is follow the blood. I'm looking into every cave, every hole, trying to find tracks and traces, but not a soul, no one there, neither human, nor divine. Not a vulture circling above my head.

I'm getting sour. I came all the way for nothing. Blood pudding peeling off my skin. Feels like being part of this wasteland. I'm naturally eroding with the hillside. Just then, from the distance, I hear the faint but clear sound of a bell ringing.

Thank God! I'm saved again! I see a bunch of wild goats sliding down a hillside – very professionally, as if they have been doing it all their lives, which in fact they have. They are semi-wild goats, occasionally milked by the locals and otherwise left to wander. Their leader has a little bell and nicely trimmed whiskers – a touch of class. Needless to say, it all comes down to me as a message from high above and finally everything falls into place. I understand why I had to come all the way to Crete – I have a revelation. In this crystallised and perfect moment, which can never be repeated, I finally grasp that I'm here to sacrifice a goat to Zeus.





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sense in the air. I am about to faint from blood loss, but I can't help noticing a group of Greek gods bursting into eternal laughter from behind a cloud. I join in, and wind up laughing all the way home, laughing for the next three years, during which I pull myself together. I turned my attention from mythology to more earthly matters. I found my Europa and she found me, too.

**I HAD NEARLY FORGOTTEN ALL ABOUT ZEUS, WHEN, THREE YEARS LATER, I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS.** Although we had just passed from dictatorship to democracy and had held our first free election, Hungary was still a dodgy place.

I received a magnetic card at the door and had to wait in a glass room until they called my name. When I entered the room, an official threw my moneybag on the table. The moneybag I lost on Crete trying to sacrifice a goat to Zeus.

The complete staff have gathered to watch my agonising flashback. Is this yours? I keep staring. Check out what's in it, says the civil servant, so I take a look and there is all my stuff, my money in Swiss francs and Greek drachmas and my ID, all intact. Apparently a

Greek shepherd found it on the mountain and handed it over to the local authorities. But how it had travelled all the way – first to Heraklion, then to Athens, then to the Hungarian embassy and on to Budapest, all in the course of three years in the midst of major political change, is a mystery. I am sorry, but this could be explained only in mythological terms. Somehow my sacrifice had been accepted.

Even if I had delivered it in a clumsy way, all I was trying to say was that I wasn't going to be part of a system where only a dog can have a career. I wanted to reach out to a higher value. Holding my moneybag, I suddenly felt at home. I figured it doesn't matter which side of the Iron Curtain you're standing on, if the gods are with you. I took some of the Swiss francs and changed them for forints. Then I went to a bookshop and bought a gigantic, heavily illustrated, rare volume of Greek mythology as a present for my mum. ■

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**THE TRUE NATURE OF MY MISSION IN VIEW, I REGAIN CONTROL OVER MY FAILING LIMBS. I FEEL FRESH BLOOD OOZING DOWN MY NECK, BUT I CAN'T STOP.** I'm chasing the goat. I'm driven like a maniac, trying to fulfil my duty to Zeus. But these goats are very good, they can climb trees. They even jump from tree to tree. And they have the home-team advantage. At one point, I nearly catch the goat with the bell, but I fall short, and a clump of hair remains in my hand. Holding the clump, breathing heavily on the edge of a boulder overlooking the Libyan Sea, I realise the absurdity of my situation. I have neither a weapon, nor the instinct to kill. I'm not the murderous type. What am I going to do if I catch it? Tickle it to death?

At that moment, a second revelation hits. As I wipe the blood off my neck, I realise that my moneybag is missing. The moneybag that was hanging around my neck, under my T-shirt. The moneybag that has all my money in Swiss francs and Greek drachmas and my ID. Apparently, Zeus did not want a sacrifice in blood, but in cash.

I'm bleeding, burned, broken and broke. I smell of goat, but it's the smell of mortality more than anything else that I