

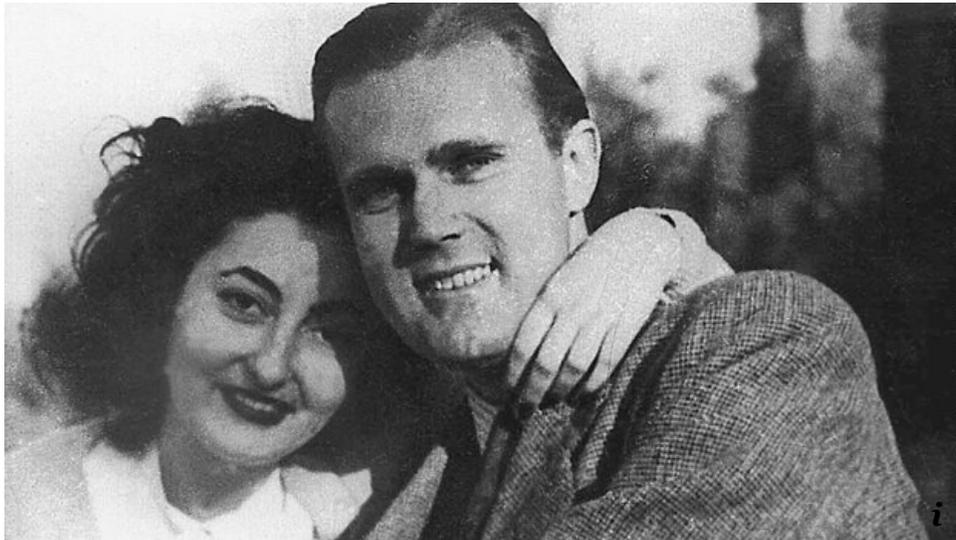
postcards

# An American's Death, Still A Greek Mystery 65 Years Later

by JOANNA KAKISSIS

October 27, 2013 7:46 AM

Audio for this story from Weekend Edition Sunday will be available at approximately 12:00 p.m. ET.



*Megaloeconomou/AP*

George Polk may have been born to make history. He was descended from the American president who led the conquest of Texas and much of the southwest. But for George, Texas was too small, says his brother, William Polk.

In the 1930s, "Texas was a little backwater at the time and very few people even knew where other countries were — what the names were, what the languages were that were spoken," William recalled. "And he had a tremendous sense of curiosity."

So he became a journalist, reporting from China, Japan and France. During World War II, he served as a fighter pilot in the



Milbry Polk

Pacific and was badly wounded. After the war, he watched the trial of Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg, Germany.

"So he had the remarkable experience of sitting just a few feet away from Hermann Goering and the various other leading Nazis, whereas six months before he had been in a foxhole in Guadalcanal, where a Japanese soldier tried to kill him with a knife."

He was determined that the world not fall back into the grip of fascism, his brothers says. And that's one reason he was attracted to Greece, his base for broadcasting as the CBS radio correspondent for the Middle East.

### **A Gruesome Discovery**

In the late 1940s, Greece was the front line of the Cold War. Communist guerrillas were fighting a right-wing government. More than 118,000 people died and more than a million were displaced. He suspected Greek officials were, at the very least, stealing aid money from the United States.

"He found that what the Greek government at that time was doing, and what it was like, was not the kind of government he fought to save during World War II," William Polk recalls.

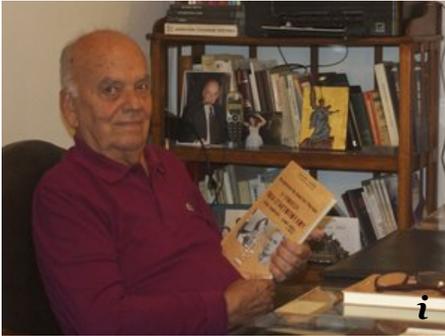
The Greek government was so unhappy with George's reports that they asked CBS to reassign him. (CBS refused.) He got death threats and was constantly followed. Undaunted, he traveled to the port of Thessaloniki in the embattled north. A few days later, a fisherman found his body floating in Salonica Bay.

He was blindfolded, hands and feet bound, with a bullet wound in the back of the head. George Polk was 34 years and had been married to his Greek wife, Rea Kokkonis, just seven months.

### **A Show Trial**

The Greek government blamed his murder on the communist

rebels. In a trial the following year, two were convicted in absentia. A third man, a journalist named Gregory Staktopoulos, confessed to involvement. But William Polk wasn't buying it.



Joanna Kakissis/NPR

"The trial was a joke," he recalls. "The defense attorneys never raised any of the issues they could have raised. They never called witnesses they could called. It was like a Soviet show trial."

William was then just 19 and had dropped out of Harvard to find out what really happened to his older brother. He wondered whether a secret organization called X may have been involved. Then he started getting death threats, too. And he got no help from Americans, who supported the Greek regime.

"The American government at that time said, OK. it's corrupt, OK, it's deceitful ... but it's our group," he says. "We can't deal with the communists."

The U.S. government seemed content with the verdict. And the man accused of involvement in the Polk murder, Gregory Staktopoulos, went to jail for more than a decade, until he was pardoned. But until he died in 1998, he never stopped professing his innocence. Staktopoulos also wrote a memoir that alarmed writer and Princeton University Professor Edmund Keeley.

"He described in detail how he'd been mistreated, how he'd been beaten, how he'd been held in police headquarters in Salonica under terrible circumstances," Keeley recalls. "He was forced to make a number of confessions, and the confessions changed as [the authorities] found new evidence that did not corroborate what they'd made him confess before, so he had to confess again. It was clear he had been railroaded into confessing things that he hadn't done."

### **Searching For Exoneration**

Keeley wrote the definitive book on the case, *The Salonika Bay Murder*, published in 1990. Several books on the case, in both

Greek and English, have come out since then.

The latest is by a retired prosecutor named Athanasios Kafiris. He'd first heard about Polk when he was a sixth-grader in a rural school in the Peloponnese.

"All we knew about the story then was that communists had killed an American journalist," says Kafiris, who now lives in Athens.

As the case faded away, ignored by a succession of Greek governments, Kafiris never questioned this narrative, until 2002, while serving as a prosecutor on the Greek Supreme Court. The widow of Gregory Staktopoulos asked him to help her exonerate her husband. It was the family's fourth appeal.

It did not take long for Kafiris to conclude that Staktopoulos — and the other two men convicted for Polk's murder — were scapegoats. But the Supreme Court, once again, rejected the appeal. He resigned from his post as prosecutor in protest.

Now Kafiris, who's 75, is trying again. He's enlisted the help of another prosecutor as well as his publisher, Angelos Sideratos, who's trying to make a documentary about the still-unsolved Polk case.

Kafiris says Greece must right this wrong and face its past. The social turmoil in Greece today is not just a product of the deep economic depression, he says. It has its origins in a bloody civil war that pitted families and friends against each other.

"What's happening in our country today is directly related to the civil war," he says. "The rise of neo-Nazis like Golden Dawn, for example, that's a result of deep hate that still exists after so many years."

William Polk is now 84 years old and a noted scholar of the Middle East. He agrees that overturning the verdicts in his brother's murder case could be cathartic for Greece. But he doesn't expect it will help him find his brother's killers.

"The documentation has now all been destroyed, illegally I should say," he says. "It was supposed to be in the national archives. But it

has been 'lost.'"

And he says that would have galled George, who believed that "the message is the really important thing. If the public doesn't receive the message, it cannot be responsible as a citizen. And therefore democracy and freedom simply will wither away."

George Polk is buried in Athens. Shortly after his death, the George Polk Awards, honoring brave journalism that lays bare the truth, were named in his honor.

**greece**

**older**

'Little Maria' A Symbol Of The Many Missing Kids In Europe

**About**

**Subscribe**

**Foreign Dispatch Podcast**

©2013 NPR