

Martin in Athens 1979-1980

I had known Martin, not as a poet, but as a familiar presence at student demonstrations and gatherings around Sydney University in the late 60s. I also knew Nadia from that time and remember when she and Martin got together and later headed off to Greece to write.

Towards the end of 1979, my partner and I bought a cheap return ticket to Athens, as an entry point to a train journey across Europe to France.

Nadia, who by then had returned from living on Crete with Martin, invited us to a Greek meal at her place in Newtown to enthuse us about Greece and the Greeks.

It's thanks to Nadia that she arranged our contact with Martin, who was then installed at the Hotel Tempi* in Athens, a hotel which he knew well, having stayed there many times with his parents and family. Martin was there when we arrived and became our good companion and Greek guide while we were in Athens, as well as helping us plan our trip through Greece.

Martin of course immediately introduced us to retsina on the first day...

We would meet Martin every morning as he speedily completed the Times Crossword, plan where to go during the day and where we'd meet for dinner in the evenings. We were often the last to leave late into the night, as we'd stroll home to the Tempi through the fairly empty streets of central Athens.

My partner and I probably looked like ordinary tourists, but Martin was 'unplaceable', still with fairly long hair, often with a scarf and casually dressed, obviously not Greek, but speaking perfect Greek – and with a quick appropriate Greek rejoinder, if he heard anyone trying to size us up quizzically – or critically.

Martin knew the best haunts in Athens, the best place to eat swordfish in the Plaka, the unusual old churches or museums to visit - and he so obviously loved Greece. If we accidentally left something valuable in a bar or restaurant, Martin knew it would be well looked after until we returned – “because the Greeks are so honest”, he assured us.

I think it was Martin who introduced us to Rembetika music, as he helped us plan our train, boat and bus trip through Greece - to Crete, Santorini, Kalambaka, Ioannina then on to Corfu.

Just before we left Athens, Martin explained he was desperately short of cash and asked us for a loan in his charming, embarrassed sort of way. We were happy to lend him a small amount of money to tide him over, and true to his word, when we returned to Athens and the Tempi on our return journey, we found Martin much happier, as his money had at last come through. He of course repaid our loan, as he was as honest as the Greeks.

*Hotel Tempi then the Hotel Tempe Aiolou Street Athens. Opposite flower markets, the hotel had a view of the Acropolis from its balcony windows – as well as a wall painting of the Acropolis in most of its rooms.

Helen Randerson



