

28th October 1940 and Sofia Vembo, “the singer of victory”

Following the rapid collapse and occupation of France by the Germans, Mussolini could not comprehend that Italy –as he visualised it- would just remain a spectator and without participating in this war that would lead mankind to paranoia and brutality. Mussolini’s plans to create Rome’s new empire was finally implemented with the occupation of Albania on 7th April 1939, which was the basis for the military preparatory work of the Italian forces for their next target – Greece.

A preview of the war that was to follow was the cowardly attack and torpedoing of the light cruiser “ELLI” in the port of Tinos by an Italian submarine during the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on 15th August 1940.

At 03:00 hours on 28th October 1940, the Italian Ambassador in Athens, Gratsi, delivered an ultimatum to the Hellenic Prime Minister, Ioannis Metaxa, by which Fascist Italy demanded that its forces be allowed to enter the country and take control of strategic sites on Greek sovereign land. The immediate rejection of the ultimatum by Metaxa would mean not only the beginning of the war but also the decision of the Greek people to fight for its honour and its history, for the ideals of freedom and self-determination.

The Italian forces, not waiting for the three-hour deadline to expire, immediately launched a full-scale assault throughout the Greco-Albanian borders, with simultaneous air strikes by the Italian Air Force against strategic targets inside the country, causing many civilian casualties. In Epirus, the Italians launched their attack from Drinos valley with the 23rd “Ferrara” Infantry Division and the 131st “Centaur” Mechanised Division. In the Thesprotia sector they attacked with the 51st Division and in Pindos with the 3rd “Julia” Alpine Division. Facing them were only the VIIIth Infantry Division commanded by Maj. General Haralambos Katsimitros and the Pindos Detachment led by Colonel Konstantinos Davaki. These forces bore the brunt of the first Italian assaults until the mobilization plan was completed. In Northwestern Macedonia the Italians remained in a defensive stance and limited their actions to intermittent artillery shelling against the Hellenic defensive positions. The Italian war machine was able to supply modern war means to carry out its military intentions, such as tanks, and of course its forces were much greater arithmetically with respect to the Hellenic Army, which in contrast had to justify the struggle to defend Greek sovereign land, the enthusiasm and zeal for victory by both military and civilian Greeks. The Greek forces were able to repulse the Italian assaults and the only threat that was created was in the Pindos sector where the “Julia” Division managed to infiltrate “offensive pockets” between Grammou and Gamilas, pushing back the weak Pindos Detachment. Thus began the first phase of the Greco-Italian war, which lasted until 13th November 1940, when the Hellenic Forces began their own offensive actions. The unexpected resistance put up by the Hellenic Army, the high morale of the Greeks and the erroneous estimations of the Italians as to the military preparedness of the Hellenic Forces were the main contributors to the victory by the Hellenic Armed Forces.

With the declaration of war, the Greeks did not seem that they were facing a major threat; in fact, they seemed to be preparing for celebrations where everyone wanted to participate. Every living fibre of Greek society –including entertainers and academics- was mobilized for

the struggle against Fascism. Throughout the duration of the Greco-Italian war, the social and cultural life of the country moved in conjunction with the rhythms of the military events, with its ulterior motives being to boost the spirits of the Hellenic soldiers and to cheer up those who had remained behind and were worried about their loved ones. Cultural events depicted the military climate of that period through theatrical performances and songs, praising the children of Greece and caricaturizing Fascist Italy and its dictator.

A dominating role in this multifarious cultural and artistic festival was played by Sofia Vembo, the legendary “singer of victory”, as she was “baptized” by journalist and theatrical critic Achilleas Mamakis. Sofia Vembo was born on 10th February 1910 in Kallipolis in Eastern Thrace. Her real name was Sofia Bembou but she changed it for artistic purposes to Vembo. Her first appearance was in the review “Papagalos” on 25th October 1933, where she sang a song by Lola Votti, “Tsingana Mavromata” The audience immediately detected her rich vocal abilities and plethoric stage presence. Her interpretative capabilities were such that she could render any type of song with great success – whether a love song or a satiric one. Love songs such as “Το καινούργιο φεγγάρι” (“Το Kainourgio Fengari”, “Ζεχρά” (“Zechra”) and later demotic traditional songs such as “Χωριάτα” (“Choriata”) and “Στη Λάρισα βγαίνει ο αυγερινός” (“Sti Larisa Vgeni o Avgerinos”) became great hits.

In the war of 1940, she became a symbol in the fight against the Fascist invaders and her songs became military paeans. The people sang “Βάζει ο Ντούτσε τη στολή του” (“Vazei o Duce ti Stoli tou”), “Κορόιδο Μουσολίνι” (“Koroido Mussolini”) and “Τα τανκς και τα κανόνια δεν είναι μακαρόνια” (“Ta tanks ke ta Kanonia den eine Makaronia”) throughout Greece... songs that characterised the satiric climate of the period. The nuances of her deep voice accompanied the military youth to the Front Lines in songs that included Mimi Traiforos’ “Παιδιά της Ελλάδας Παιδιά” (“Pedia tis Ellados Pedia”), as well as “Αντε στο καλό και η Παναγιά μαζί σας” (“Ante sto Kalo ke I Panagia Mazi Sou”), warming their hearts during the freezing nights and filling them with faith and hope for victory. This was HER battle. Her songs were transmitted continuously over the radio, even by the BBC. The “singer of victory” continued to sing during the Occupation Period from the Middle-East, where she had escaped to.

Sofia Vembo was a special person of distinction with a dynamic personality, who managed to create her own mark in the history of Greek songs as well as a complete generation that characterised that era.