

SPAROZA

HILL OF LITTLE BIRDS

BY LIZZY DOUGLAS



Metaxa

Serendipity is everywhere and, like Greek bees to mountain flowers, it is drawn to hard, creative work, good will and generosity – qualities that link my daughter Lizzy Douglas to her remarkable aunt, Sally Razelou. Lizzy is a true niece of her aunt, and they were both fortunate to discover each other towards the end of Sally's custodianship of Sparoza, the Mediterranean garden near Athens that she nurtured and developed in her last thirty years. Like her aunt, Lizzy is a lover of nature, families and children, with a strong sense of hearth and home. She is also an artist, and particularly an artist in her wise and humane work as a butcher, as was her aunt in floral collage and in her vision and tender care of Sparoza. Good fortune then that the circling wheels of serendipity have led Lizzy to pen this piece on the garden and the gardener.

– Gawain Douglas



An abandoned birds nest in the doorway of Sparoza



One of Sally's magnificent pressed flower artworks



Sally's plastic knife plant label found in the garden



The main room of the house with Jacky & Sally's books on Greek flora on the left & the south facing veranda at the back



Sunrise on the east veranda



Sally's last pressed flower piece loved by her daughter Sophie for its sense of freedom

Sparoza marmalade, made by me on my last day with Sally



Sunrise & silhouettes



Prickly pears



Looking back into the main room with the kitchen on the right where the sun shines, the front door at the far left & the bedrooms beyond

‘On the eastern side of Mount Hymettus lies the Plain of the Mesoghia, spreading its green carpet out towards the sea. The rich, deep red earth has nourished vineyards and olive groves since ancient times. Low hills surround this fruitful garden protectively. Between the hills to the east one glimpses the Aegean and on certain days four islands appear against the opalescent sky. The landscape is never static. As the earth revolves the patterns of light change: the sea is sometimes incandescent, blue, or reaches a vanishing point; the grids of vegetation on the plain seem to shift their alignments as the day completes its cycle.’

— Sally Razelou, in her preface to Jaqueline Tyrwhitt's *Making a Garden On a Greek Hillside*, which she edited and published in 1998.

Sally Razelou (1931–2021), my ‘Greek’ aunt, lived the last thirty years of her life in a beautiful hillside home and garden called Sparoza, situated just outside Athens. While we had always known Sally, because of a long-unacknowledged family truth regarding my mother’s ancestry, my mother hadn’t realised that she was her sister until eight years ago. Our story began then, when my mother and I arrived for the first time in Athens’ hot dusty airport to meet her. I watched these two older women, one in her sixties, one in her eighties, meet each other for the first time as sisters. There was much ground to cover and no road map as such, but tenderness and hopefulness as well as grief were in abundance.

Sally drove us back to her home – me in the back seat listening to their conversation and feeling the accompanying emotions. I dipped in and out of it all like a child, and, looking out of the window, immersed myself in the new country. Red earth, dry mountains, rows of low-trained olive trees stretching away in lines with white paint on their trunks, along roads with no markings. Large stark mountains defined the backdrop to the route and Sally named them and explained things. I only half listened because arriving in a new country is always a sensory overload and I just soaked up the heat, the smell of the air, the strange writing on signs and the way people looked. The large road turned into smaller roads and then, unexpectedly, Sally turned right, up a small track with barking dogs behind fences and dwellings on either side. At the top, the steep road split into a U-shape and directly in front of us was Sparoza. I will describe how this enchanting, private garden came into existence and went on to become the founding garden of the Mediterranean Garden Society.

It began in 1962 when an Englishwoman named Jaqueline Mary Tyrwhitt (1905–1983) decided to buy a hillside upon which to build her first and final home. She was in her sixties and had lived and worked all over the world with her career in architecture and urban planning, but her latter years were in Greece where she found the climate to be kind to her asthma. After years of searching and subsequent negotiating, Jacky bought up a bare and stony, sun- and wind-eroded hillside with perfect views, clean air and potential. She had to do this patiently in strips and chunks as they became available from different owners over the years. Although Sparoza is now approximately four acres in size, Jacky initially bought far more than this – around twenty-five acres. This

outlay took up most of her budget but she ingeniously sold off large plots around the central area of her home to friends so that she could control the nature of the dwellings she was surrounded by, while funding the creation of her new home. She dictated that there could be no hard boundaries between properties other than low dry-stone walls and that houses could be no more than two storeys high. Today only Sparoza and one other house at the top of the hill have retained this original defenceless, low-wall feature but it’s enough to give one a sense of the trust and openness that must have originally prevailed. It is evident from the care that Jacky put into the planning of Sparoza that she greatly considered the effects of homes and environments upon communities, and that she felt town planning should grow organically, responding to the needs of society rather than being an imposed pattern.

What Jacky began with was an almost barren hillside plot, a landscape Sally’s friend Derek Toms described... ‘There, under pitiless sun, often on terrible soil, in sporadic rainfall and sometimes literally maddening winds, the bougainvillea can seem a small reward for all the plants you can’t grow.’ Jacky must have been both courageous and imaginative to be undeterred by this terrain. She transformed it with the building of the house and the planting of hundreds of trees such as cypress, eucalyptus, Aleppo pine, almond and many more, using dynamite to break up the ground for planting, and by installing the road and water and electricity supplies.

The house was designed by Polish-American architect Jerzy Soltan in the style of Le Corbusier and was a statement of design in its time. It consists of vernacular Greek stonework, a supportive concrete infrastructure and fascinating small windows, obscurely placed and with angled recesses for light and drama rather than views. The large central space, which is the absolute heart of the house, has a huge south-facing window and doors – now plastic, mercifully, from an insulation viewpoint, but originally Crittall steel. These windows take up the whole wall and lead onto the south veranda. The view from inside the house, which draws one magnetically outwards, is of a large structural concrete cross, darkly silhouetted against the open sky. When I visited in spring, the view was beautifully softened by an old and winding wisteria, whose soft masses of lilac flowers cascaded intriguingly over the flat concrete. The traditionally small Greek kitchen is delightfully situated just off this main room and has a sweet (still Crittall) window next to the sink which looks out to the east veranda

‘A third garden, perhaps the most beloved of all, was the garden of Sparoza that she envisioned extending into perpetuity; her sharing of this happy place with future generations. Though deprived as they are of the joy of knowing her and feeling the added dimensions her presence gave to the place, they who will pass unknowingly the sleeping mandrake root will nevertheless, thanks to her vision, thoughtfulness and love, be able to walk through those timeless fields of asphodel and enjoy the peace and beauty that she brought to the “Hill of sparrows”’.

—Ray Alexander, in a tribute to Jacqueline Tyrwhitt

and the hills and sky beyond. It has a lovely domestic touch of being useful for passing out refreshments or communicating with someone on the veranda.

Beneath the east veranda are terraces reminiscent of a colonial English garden – there grow Seville orange trees and pomegranates and, in Jacky’s time, an allotment, but today shrubs. Finally, to the lower left of the house are the pools – a concrete oval of two halves, Brutalist in style, one half being for nature and the other for people. When I think of these pools I fancy I can almost hear the laughter and chatter of partying friends from Jacky’s era; glasses of wine being carried back and forth from the house and resting on the concrete shelf of the poolside against the sunny skies and mountains – with the Aegean shimmering in the distance like another world. The house nestles halfway up the hill with the ground gently rising up behind it and giving way in front. Like a monument, it is orientated towards the sun and the valley of Athens.

Jacky’s trees served to give the shade and protection required for all living things to thrive. They also gave form and structure around which elements of the garden were designed. Landscape architect Marina Adams helped to create the paths and the terraces, and the wonderfully flat, plateau-like circular lawn where the family played badminton. Much of the rest of the garden was left wild.

From speaking to Jacky’s relatives and reading articles written about her, it is clear that, in common with many gardeners, she was passionate and well informed about all areas of the arts. Her life was greatly enriched by music and art and design, and the accompanying friendships she made. Her loyal friend John Papaioannou, an architect and musicologist who helped oversee the building of Sparoza while Jacky was teaching at Harvard, wrote fondly of her, ‘Jacky’s house, being spacious, offered hospitality to all sorts of people: family members (many), friends (numerous), international personalities, students from both Third World and developed countries and so on. There was rarely a day, throughout the year, when the house, both in Jacky’s presence and absence, was not occupied by at least one, often several, visitors. This was natural hospitality in its most beautiful expression. Jacky used to organise frequent large parties to celebrate local and national holidays and her own anniversaries and special events. “Clean Monday” at the beginning of Lent was one such annual ritual, where community members, friends, family and colleagues would come to eat traditional food and

fly kites. Such feasts, involving large numbers of guests, were lovingly and carefully served – with simplicity and generosity.’

Jacky died with no direct descendants and she bequeathed Sparoza to the Goulandris Natural History Museum in Athens for the conservation of the flora of Attica. She put in place a covenant requesting that the gardens be maintained, that her home be used for musical events and lodgings and that her extended family forever more would have the right to use it as a family home for a few weeks every summer. It seems that in doing this, she sought to protect her legacy for as long as possible. It was nearly a decade after Jacky’s death that Sally, a widow in her sixties with little to her name, was found as the next tenant of Sparoza. The offer of security and a beautiful garden must have felt like a gift from God. As Jacky had done before, Sally embraced the huge undertaking that is required for tending a four-acre garden and described these years as the happiest of her life. She approached this new chapter with drive, vision and humility, taking ownership with both hands. It was serendipitous that a woman of similar artistic and cultural interests should follow in Jacky’s footsteps and take her place as custodian of this unique home.

The driveway to Sparoza follows a low stone wall uphill until the house, in a slight dip, comes into view. The entrance is charming with an overflowing nursery to the left and a towering eucalyptus, whose leaves whisper in the wind, to the side. A desert garden full of agave, aloe, cacti and a giant leaning yucca sits to the right. By the front door is a very old small spindly tree whose branches have reached out in a perilous canopy over the years, an old rusty cow bell hangs from its boughs. In this first moment of arriving at Sally’s house, my eyes were offered a feast of sights to settle on – an empty tortoise shell, the way a plant cascaded down a wall, the bird’s nest in the porch, Sally’s handwritten plant labels, the careful ways the plants were tied up. All these things spoke to me of Sally’s sense of duty and love towards the garden. Happiness, peace and beauty were tangible and the vision of Sally smiling and welcoming us into her world on this threshold is etched in my mind.

By the time I knew Sally in her eighties, she did just a little of the manual gardening, leaving most of it to her assistant. She still, however, took her rabble of stray dogs – to whom she showed endless love and patience – for walks up the hill twice a day. She continued to look after the plants in the nursery, keep a firm grip on the management of the garden, write articles for the Mediterranean Garden Society journals and stay well abreast of



Seed heads & seed collections
- photo by Lucie Willan

The concrete cross of the south veranda draped in wisteria



The hillside in February
- photo by Lucie Willan

Sally's humble kitchen



Giant fennel which grows prolifically in Greece - it is related to common fennel but not edible



The calming arboreal art of cloud pruning - Sally enjoyed its charm



Sally's last day working in the garden with her favourite hat on & a sweet patch on her elbow - photo by Lucie Willan

'All great gardens die to a certain extent when their creator dies, they are incredibly personal works of art. They absorb as much time and money and love as you are prepared to give, and live or die by the passion and dedication of the gardener. Sparoza, while supported financially by the Mediterranean Garden Society, was Sally's private garden and the challenge is to find a new sense of purpose now she has gone.'

— Lucie Willan, in the journal of
The Mediterranean Garden Society, 2021.

the news, both at home and abroad – mainly via *The Spectator* magazine. She phoned her family and friends every evening, drank ouzo every lunchtime, had a long afternoon sleep and loved to smoke. Sally had a huge number of friends and even though her life was governed by the garden, she was not isolated or lonely. In fact, the opposite was true. She drew people to her – people talked to her and opened up to her... maybe it was in part the beauty of the garden and the therapeutic work she would set one to, but beyond that her clear, honestly spoken views and questions gave comfort and insight into the burdens that we all carry. She offered me that quality, and it was the reason I was drawn to see her as many times as I could in the time that we had.

On my last visit, with thanks to Sally's last assistant Lucie Willan, who remains as the sole gardener at Sparoza, I was able to gather a fuller understanding of Sally's place in its history and the substantial contributions that she made. What I didn't know before meeting Lucie was that mediterranean climates exist in several zones around the world, including the Mediterranean Basin, California, Southwest Australia, Chile and South Africa. They characteristically have hot dry summers and wet mild winters. Jacky had pioneered the introduction of plants to Sparoza from many of the other mediterranean climate zones, and under Sally's care the garden developed further into one of the best examples of a mediterranean garden in Greece.

Sally undertook to cultivate the large oval slope that fell down to the side of the house. This area is called the *Phrygana*, a term given to dry rocky slopes where only very drought-tolerant plants can survive. She cleared the ground and used the stones to make meandering paths through the small trees. It is parched and bare in the summer but is covered in cyclamen, agave and iris flowers in spring. She changed the circular lawn into a threshing floor of wild flowers in an attempt to make the garden less water-dependant, and experimented further with the boundaries of drought tolerance within the garden. Sally also stopped filling the pools and let them become havens for nature – water lilies, reeds, irises and a huge number of resident green toads, dragonflies and mosquitos. They became watering and feeding holes for a procession of birds, mammals, neighbouring dogs and reptiles. Snakes and tortoises make their way down the sloped pool entrance that would have once been frequented by humans. Sally intuitively wanted to work with nature and to understand

it. She continued Jacky's meticulous recording of rainfall and was ruthless in her principle of not watering more than was entirely necessary and of allowing nature to take its course. The opening of the autumn rainclouds after the long hot summer must have given immense relief. She wrote for the Mediterranean Garden Society journal in 2019, 'The autumn renaissance is the most dramatic happening in our mediterranean climate, the candles of squills, the swathes of cyclamen raising their slender throats. This autumn it was as if an interior decorator had laid pink – tree to tree – carpeting the garden.'

Sally's fortuitous first meeting with Derek Toms, a gardener and artist who was to become a lifelong friend, led her to set up the first branch of the Mediterranean Garden Society in Sparoza in 1994. It had a simple mandate: to educate and exemplify successful mediterranean gardening. Sparoza thus became a place that people could visit, where they could learn about appropriate plants and methods, and today the society has branches in other locations, both in the Mediterranean and worldwide.

What I loved and admired about Sally – as well as her indomitable spirit, her wit, her hard work ethic and her soothing ways – was her charming artistic and frugal nature. When I visited this last time, after her death, Sally's style and approach to gardening and living were all the more tangible, especially because Lucie so sensitively leaves things untouched. She concentrates on the aspects of the garden that are living and demand attention, such as the new growing irises in the *Phrygana*, the fallen tree branches, the watering and the clearing – and later the pruning and new planting. She leaves the 'Sallyisms' of which there are many: the broken hand-written labels on plastic knives that would otherwise have been only rubbish, the pergola fixed up with a piece of spare electrical cable, the blue plastic child's stool that became a gardening stool, the broken dining chair onto which you have to lower yourself with care, the wardrobe of donated clothes many of which Sally had adapted to her personal style, the pictures of loved ones everywhere and pressed flower works of art, the stray dogs that arrive asking for food and a home, and lastly the prayer to St Francis of Assisi that is stuck with magnets to her fridge. All these things seem to speak directly of the feelings in Sally's soul. My mother and Sally, while waiting a lifetime to know each other, shared this lifelong sentiment of wanting to go gently into the world. ☺

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