1 *The Making of a Physician*

My life is in many ways the classic American dream: poor immigrants come to the United States and work very hard; their children receive an excellent education and lead a better life. I was born just before the start of the Great Depression, in October 1929, in Westfield, New Jersey, where my Greek father and one of his brothers owned a shop that sold candy, ice cream, and snacks. In the next few years, times were hard for all of us, but we were cushioned from the worst effects of the economic crisis by our family. Children now grow up in a society less supportive than mine was even in the harshest days of the 1930s.

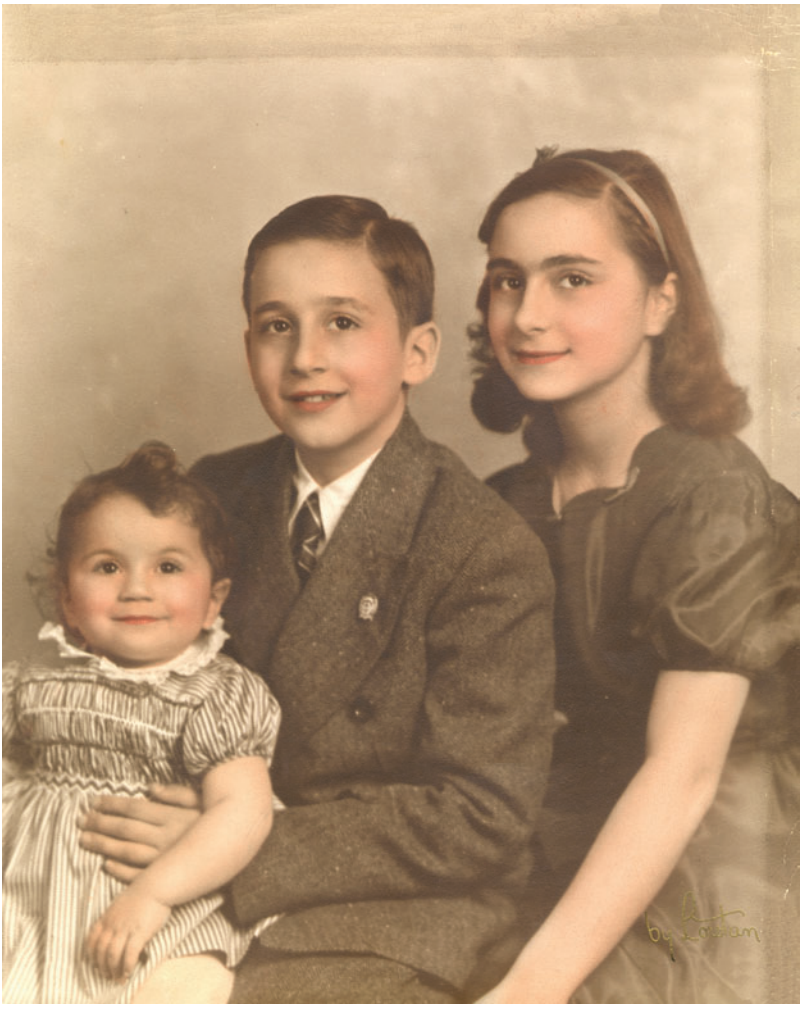
In elementary school I was a cutup who entertained the other students – but not of course the teachers. They were interested in teaching Pindaros Roy Vagelos (they wouldn't use my nickname, Pindo) to read and write in English, goals that seemed formidable to a first-grader who spoke only Greek at home. I was a slow learner. I wasn't interested in learning. It was much more fun to fool around and tease the other kids. Besides, I had recurrent ear infections that made it difficult for me to hear. Since my last name begins with a "V," I sat in the back of the class, where it was hard to hear even when I was healthy. I got used to not paying attention to the lessons, although I was clever enough to pretend to work when the teacher was watching.

My sister Joan, fourteen months older than I, was a different kind of student. She learned to read early and loved it. My specialty was wasting time. Nevertheless, Joan and I were very close because we went through school together and shared the harsh years of the depression, when our family was forced to move repeatedly into smaller and smaller apartments to survive financially. Joan and I did everything together (except read). We always went to the movies together, we learned to ride bikes and swim together, and we took music and Greek lessons together. I was afraid of the dark upstairs, so she would go with me. When we went fishing, she always put the worm on the

Vagelos family outing, 1930. Roy's mother and father at left with Roy (far left) and Joan.

hook for me. Our younger sister Helen, born nine years after me, was also a quick reader, but she had a different life. By the time she came around, the depression was fading and life became better for our family and Joan and me.

The year 1936, when I was in first grade, was an especially difficult one for the family. My father and his older brothers had settled in Westfield, an affluent bedroom community about an hour's drive from New York City. My father and his oldest brother owned the Westfield Sweet Shoppe located on Broad Street in the center of town. Like many other Greek immigrants, they gravitated to the candy and small restaurant businesses because they were largely uneducated and restaurant startup costs were small. They could thrive with minimal English, making up with hard work and warm personalities what they lacked in education and language skills. The Westfield Sweet Shoppe was modestly successful, providing our family with a very nice four-bedroom house on a wide, tree-lined street a few blocks from the store. But the hard times of the 1930s didn't spare New Jersey. Some of the shop's former



Roy with his sisters Helen (left) and Joan (right).

customers were now out of work and finding it hard to pay for their food and rent, let alone for ice cream and candy. In addition, my father had invested in real estate in Westfield and bought stock on margin. When the market collapsed, he had to sell the real estate to cover his losses.

I was quite aware that times were tough because, in 1936, we lost our house. Business was so poor my father couldn't pay the mortgage

on both the store and our home. Since the store was our only source of income, we moved into an apartment above a drugstore in Cranford, about two miles from Westfield. Gone was my sunny bedroom. Now I had to sleep on a sofa in the living room. I felt as though my life had lost all sense of order. We couldn't go visit the store for ice cream, candy, and sodas anymore because we now lived too far away. We changed schools and neighbors. In Westfield, three of our relatives had lived within one block of our house, and several other relatives and other Greek families lived in town. In Cranford, no relatives were nearby, and we were the only Greeks we knew. This was a new world for us.

I remember it like it was yesterday. My parents, Herodotus and Marianthi, never discussed their financial problems in front of me, but I absorbed every sign of urgency in our family. My father and his older brother Thucydides tried to keep the Sweet Shoppe going by cutting expenses and working longer hours. My father took off only a few hours from the store on the weekend to spend time with us. My mother grew very anxious. She talked about jobs she needed to get outside the home and was short-tempered when I pestered Joan. When I fooled around, she would sometimes break into sobs, and I grew frightened about these disturbing episodes.

Around this time, my mother, who had stayed home before I entered school, took a job ironing clothes in a laundry. After a full day there, she came home and made elaborate evening dresses for the few women in that part of New Jersey who could still afford them. My mother, an expert seamstress, could make a fancy dress from any pattern and fabric supplied by a customer. People loved her work, and although her hours were long and the pay poor, she was able to bring in some income as my father struggled to sustain the family. Joan and I watched, trying not to upset my mother. We had jobs too. I washed the windows and swept out the store and the sidewalk in front of our business. Once a month, I polished the Sweet Shoppe's wooden tables, chairs, and booths. I actually enjoyed being around our family business and took pride in doing adult jobs.

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Family and business were intertwined, as they were for many of the families that came to America from Europe in the early years of the last century. The Vagelos family came from the village of Eressos on the island of Mytilene, the ancient Lesbos. Grandfather John Vayos Vagelos

John Vagelos, M.D. (P. Roy Vagelos's grandfather).

had died of typhoid fever in 1898 while serving as an army physician in Denizli, Turkey. His widow, Aphrodite, had then returned to Eressos with her daughter and five sons, the oldest of whom was Thucydides. The fourth son was Herodotus, my father.

Although they could farm and raise goats on the family property in Eressos, Aphrodite's sons recognized that their holdings would never support a family of seven. Thucydides was the first to leave in search of economic opportunity in America. In 1901, at age fifteen, he bought passage to the United States with help from a relative and sailed alone carrying a note to a family friend who was to meet him at the dock in New York City. But the friend never showed up. Thucydides, who spoke only Greek, wandered about the strange city for a couple of days holding a note in English that directed him first to Connecticut and then to New Jersey.

Eventually, he found his way to the home of Stratis Mitchell, another Greek immigrant, in Westfield, New Jersey. Transformed at Ellis Island from a Michaeledes to a Mitchell, Stratis had settled in New Jersey, learned how to make candies, and launched the New York Candy Kitchen in Westfield. He needed help, and Thucydides needed a job. Together, they built a successful small candy business that became the Vagelos beachhead in America.

Thucydides was determined to help his brothers leave Mytilene and to make their passages easier and safer than his had been. He met Homer and Phillalithes (who soon became Philip) at the dock in New York and helped them set up their own candy shop in nearby Woodbridge, New Jersey. Next in age and next to come was Herodotus, who was born in 1890 and named after the world's first historian, Herodotus of Halicarnassus. After finishing the sixth grade, the most advanced schooling available in Eressos, Herodotus had apprenticed to a shoemaker. Good with his hands, he enjoyed the ancient and honorable craft of making shoes to order, but when he arrived in America at age eighteen, he learned that shoemakers spent most of their time repairing worn, smelly shoes. He quickly decided to find a new calling to accompany his newly anglicized name, Roy, courtesy of the Ellis Island officials.

After apprenticing with a candy and ice cream manufacturer, he joined Thucydides at the New York Candy Kitchen on Elm Street (just around the corner from its later site on Broad Street) in Westfield to run the manufacturing wing of the tiny enterprise. The business, like most

N.Y. Candy Kitchen delivery truck. Roy Vagelos (at left) and helper.

of the Vagelos brothers, changed names, becoming the Westfield Candy Kitchen and later the Westfield Sweet Shoppe. There, Herodotus introduced a major new product line, homemade ice cream, that became popular in Westfield, then in Woodbridge, and finally as far away as Plainfield and Elizabeth, New Jersey. In Westfield, everyone seemed to know just when the freshly made ice creams were ready. The police always dropped in to sample his latest creations. Thus, this transplanted Greek – Herodotus at home, Roy to the customers – became something of a local personality by way of his high-calorie confection.

By the early 1920s, the brothers were doing very well in Westfield. Stratis Mitchell had returned to Greece permanently, leaving the shop in their hands. By 1922, all five Vagelos brothers, including the youngest, Emmanuel, were settled in America, all running small businesses producing, retailing, and to some extent wholesaling candy and ice cream. All five returned to Eressos to marry in the Greek style. For immigrant Greek men, marriage was arranged by their relatives – sometimes to

good effect, sometimes not. The bridegroom was expected to have launched a successful career, acquired some money, and established a home in America. By the early 1920s, Herodotus met all three conditions. He had built a house in Westfield, near the Candy Kitchen, and by the standards of Eressos, he was a wealthy man and a desirable thirty-five-year-old bachelor.

He returned to Eressos, met his fiancée, Eleni, and together they began the elaborate preparations for a formal wedding in the Greek Orthodox Church. These were festive affairs attended by virtually the entire population of the village, most of whom were related. In the summer of 1925, Eressos celebrated the marriage of Eleni and Herodotus, but shortly afterward, the young bride became ill and died in a matter of months. Herodotus spent the next six months in Eressos as a widower growing a long gray beard while he mourned his loss. (Vagelos men get prematurely gray hair, as I can attest.)

As he prepared to return to the United States, several villagers, unwilling to see this energetic, well-to-do, young compatriot leave the island a bachelor, approached him about arranging another wedding with one of their daughters. Herodotus decided he should indeed marry again, but this time, he took matters into his own hands. While preparing to marry Eleni, he had visited a special dressmaking shop for wedding clothes in the port city of Mytilene and met an adroit, attractive seamstress. He had been so taken with Marianthi Lambrinides that he boldly invited her to the wedding, but she of course refused his invitation. Now a widower, he persuaded Marianthi and her family that she should marry him. On January 17, 1926, she and Herodotus John Vagelos, his mourning beard neatly cropped, were wed at the island's capital in a beautiful white church overlooking the Aegean Sea. They sailed to America a month later.

Marianthi, like her husband, had Turkish connections. She had been born in Smyrna (now Izmir), Turkey's second-largest port city, which had a large Greek population that dominated the finance and commerce of the region. In 1922, war broke out between Turkey and Greece, and the Turks of Smyrna began to loot and burn the city. The Greek population fled for the coast, Marianthi's family among them. Some of the Turkish soldiers they encountered helped them, but some robbed them; others killed Marianthi's uncle and two men from her family's party in front of their children. At the waterfront, pushing their way through terrified crowds, they boarded the last ship out of Smyrna. For the rest of her life, my mother feared and distrusted Turks.

Her family had lost all its possessions except for a few clothes, but fortunately her entire immediate family – parents, three sisters, and two brothers – survived and escaped to Mytilene. There, she worked in the dressmaking shop where, three years later, she met the man who became her husband.

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Herodotus had a sentimental streak. He remained loyal to people and even to objects long after they lost their value. He refused to move his new wife into the house he had built for Eleni. He had a second house built in Westfield, and in the meantime, he and Marianthi lived with Thucydides, his wife, and their daughters. The ice cream and candy business was prospering, and soon after moving into their new house, Herodotus and Marianthi started a family of their own.

Their first child, Joan, was born on July 23, 1928, and their second, Pindaros Roy Vagelos, on October 8, 1929 – just three weeks before the stock market crashed. My grandfather had named his sons for notable ancient Greeks: Thucydides, the great historian of the fifth century B.C.; Homer, the poet; Phillalithes, the great soldier Philip of Macedon. Another brother, who died during the typhoid epidemic of 1898, had been named for the poet Pindar. My father gave me that brother's name, Pindaros. In Greek style, Roy, the anglicized version of my father's name, Herodotus, became my middle name.

Since Pindaros – pronounced "PIN-da-ros" – was a bit long for everyday use, I became Pindo to my family and friends. That's what they call me even today. But my teachers insisted on using Pindaros even though they found it hard to pronounce. They weren't the only ones who butchered the name, and finally I asked my father what I should do. "Use your father's name," he replied. "Use Roy." I was a bit concerned because it was not a Greek name, but I became Roy and simplified my education.

At school I needed all the help I could get. I had barely survived the first grade in Westfield, receiving an E (on a scale of A–F) in spelling and a D in reading. Music, which I still love, was my only strength, and I hadn't yet mastered reading when I squeaked through the second grade. I was among the weakest students in the school and I knew it. So did my father.

I can now look back and see that while hovering on the brink of school failure, I was actually learning a great deal about life at the Westfield Sweet Shoppe and at home. From an early age I understood how

hard you had to work just to hold your own. Being part of an extended family, I also knew something about community and interdependence. We celebrated all of the Greek holidays at home, and these occasions brought together all of the aunts and uncles, cousins and spouses.

Easter is the most holy day of the Greek Orthodox Church. During Lent, our family observed the ritual of fasting and ate no meat. During Holy Week, the week between Palm Sunday and Easter, we ate mostly vegetables and a few animal products such as milk or cheese. On the Saturday before Easter Sunday, my mother prepared red Easter eggs, special Easter pita, and a special soup, *patsa*, made with tripe and other sheep organs mixed with egg and lemon (*avgolemono*) laced with garlic.

Easter eve was spent at church in Newark, at that time the only Greek Orthodox church near home. Just before midnight, the priest, accompanied by special music, would intone, "Christ is risen," and everyone in church would light a candle. The congregation then poured out of the church to break the fast. Milling around on the sidewalk, everyone cracked his or her own red easter eggs against someone else's. The winners – those whose eggs stayed intact – congratulated the losers and circulated among the crowd, cracking other eggs until their own eggs broke. The cracked eggs were then quickly devoured along with Easter breads. Then it was home to enjoy the *avgolemono* soup, or *patsa*, on this very happy and festive occasion. The next day, Easter proper, families gathered together. For us, it meant all the American Vageloses joined under one roof or another to share a feast of roast lamb with many side dishes and wonderful desserts.

Christmas was equally festive but quite different. We didn't go to church on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. However, Greek families in the United States, including mine, quickly adopted the Christmas tree, a tradition entirely unknown in Greece, along with the idea of Christmas presents and a celebratory party. In Greece, the big celebration was on New Year's Day, when people exchanged gifts, danced, and sang with their relatives and friends.

At all our family parties, everyone spoke Greek and ate Greek food: roast lamb, special homemade breads, and fresh salads with olives. Appetizers included *keftedes* (meatballs made with red wine, garlic, and oregano), pickled vegetables, and stuffed grape leaves (filled with either meat or rice and spices). The desserts – all made with honey – were baklava, *galatoboureko*, *koulourakia*, and *karethopita*. The