

**Valinia Svoronou**

*Interview with the Grandpa, 2022*

Sound

23 Minutes

Unique

The stories mentioned take place in Istanbul in the 50s-60s and early 70s.

**V:** What is Pera Sport Club? It's the soccer club of the Greeks (*direct translation is the Romans, as that is what the Greek minority in Istanbul call themselves*) in Istanbul right?

**H:** It's an old sports club, in a nice big building, housing a lecture hall, gyms...

**V:** So it was an old club containing sports infrastructures that included soccer. What other sports did it include?

**H:** Like we said it included soccer, basketball, and track and field

**V:** Do you remember when the club was founded? Was it in the 1920s?

**H:** In very old times

**V:** Was it only the sport club of the Romans or where other minorities included like the Armenians, the Jews etc?

**H:** Well we only had something like 3 Turks in the top tier team, and in the youth team, where you could play when you reached seventeen, we were only Roman kids.

**V:** What should one do to become part of the team? Did they pick you? Did someone spot your talent?

**H:** Well yes someone would look out, you had to have a little bit of talent. Twice a week every Tuesday and Thursday morning, we had practice. It took place in the stadium of Fenerbahce (this is another Turkish sports club) by the coast, where this big hotel is located now.

**V:** Close to Ciragan (this is probably not accurate)?

**H:** My whole life, from seventeen years old twice a week we would walk down there from Taksim

**V:** Was that a long walk?

**H:** It was something like 20- 30 minutes.

**V:** That doesn't sound so bad, so how did they find you? Does someone show up in practice and choose you to play in the top tier team?

**H:** Other teams would practice in that stadium too, but because we were practicing with the Roman kids, we would play a bit further from the other teams. So they would watch the youth team and depending on the practice they would choose the most suitable kids, and make them play in the game that would take place every Sunday. Some of the players wouldn't be able to make it to the game and would even walk out in the warm up.

**V:** Pera Club played in the top tier Turkish league right?

**H:** Yes

**V:** I remember reading that there were times when Pera Club would play in the Super League, so it even had some international games, which means that it must have been an important team?

**H:** Yes of course, it was top tier, but at the time there was only one league that included around 10 teams. **V:** What was your role?

**H:** Attacking Midfielder/Playmaker

**V:** So you were a playmaker huh?

**H:** Yes

**V:** So you had practice twice a week, did you have another occupation at the time? Were you employed by other people or were you just members of the team?

**H:** Actually, when we were young, we were team members and also had another main occupation

**V:** Is this how it was at the time? Were there any 'Professional' soccer players?

**H:** They were but they also had their jobs.

**V:** That's what I meant, like there were no athletes that would just play soccer for a living?

**H:** Usually not, so yes, every Tuesday and Friday we would go to practice from 8 in the morning til 10, and then I would take the tram and go to the Carsi where I would work. (Kapali Carsi or Grand Bazaar of Istanbul as it is known, is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world, he worked as a jewelry setter there, and later on as an antique merchant). In the evenings when we would leave the market we would go back to the sports club on foot, it was crowded most of the time with kids, soccer players and other athletes. We would all chat together or work out in the gym or play basketball, and that's how we would pass our time. We used to also hangout in the big trophy hall, and that was something like how the day would pass, Taksim was something like fifteen minutes away by foot.

**V:** Perhaps it is important to say here that the Carsi is the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul

**H:** Yes of course

**V:** Would you say that a lot of the minority population of the times would work in the Carsi ie. Romans, Jews, Armenians?

**H:** There weren't that many Jews, but there were many Armenians and a few Turks. Also some Romans. The Armenians wouldn't usually take any foreign disciples, or employees to keep their craft secret ( he is here referring to goldsmith's crafts and stone setting, from which Armenians were traditionally the expert craftsmen at the time).

**V:** Yes because they knew the secrets of setting precious stones and jewelry making

**H:** Yes they would usually keep the craft amongst themselves.

**V:** Back to soccer, so would you play properly in a stadium with an audience and all?

**H:** Yes of course, didn't you see the picture Valinia?

**V:** Ah yes, yes. I was just asking so that we can discuss playing in public at the time

**H:** When I came back from the army (At the time the army training service was compulsory for all men and would take 2 years) I ended up playing in the top tier team.

**V:** So you came back and you kept playing?

**H:** Yes, just before leaving I used to play on the second best team of the club, but eventually I made it in the top team.

**V:** Do you remember the other players? Were they your friends?

**H:** We became friends eventually

**V:** Did you all live close by, like in the same neighborhood and knew each other since childhood or...?

**H:** No, not at all, they all came from different areas, other people from Taksim, Vosporos, etc but we were a closely knit team.

**V:** And what about the other clubs? Were you guys friends with them too?

**H:** Well, I mean because we were the Roman club we would always have to deal with a certain degree of unfairness by the referees. But from the 10 top tier teams we would usually score 5th or 6th, that's how it used to go at the time.

**V:** Somewhere in the middle

**H:** Yes

**V:** What did grandma think about you, being a soccer player?

**H:** Let me tell you first about how I got in the top tier team. After I got back from the army, I was already playing for the second best team of the club, it had been two or three months. There was this last game I was in where we were losing, and the score was 3-0, but we ended up setting the score 3-3. I scored the first goal in that game from a 25m distance, and also passed the ball to my colleague to score the second goal as he had reached a point where he was very close, opposite the goalkeeper, the score went from 1-3 to 2-3. The members of the opposite team were very surprised and the members of the club watching were very

impressed.. A few days later the club's president showed up at the Carsi, in my workplace. As you can imagine my workplace was relatively messy as a jewelry setter, the shopkeepers came into my office and told me there is this gentleman waiting outside requesting to see you. I went out to meet him and I remember him being like 'Harry my boy, they want to make you a pro, would you play for the top tier team? Lets meet and talk about it whenever you can'. My mastoris (this is a term i chose not to translate, it is used to refer to the master of a craft from the point of view of a disciple. At the time one would work as an assistant setter for a while to learn the craft from a senior setter, his mastoris), a senior Armenian setter had learned about the offer of the club. And so he advised me to tell them 'My mastoris from the Carsi has introduced me to this other club and they are offering 5000' (Turkish lira). At the time that was a lot of money, there were people that would get a monthly wage of 200 lira. So I didn't show up for practice for a couple of days. After a couple of days the guy from Pera Club showed up again at the Carsi. My office was at the back so two setters and my mastoris showed as I was at work and told me the guy from the club is here are you going to see him? I went to the door of the shop to meet him and he said 'Harry my boy where have you been?' and I replied that I have been here working, but also told him what my mastoris said, that I am considering the offer of another sports club, an offer of 5000 liras, the guy immediately replied 'My boy, you are a child of our club, we would pay you an equal amount there is nothing to consider you should stay with us', so then we agreed, and arranged to sign the contract the next morning. In the meantime my mastoris had advised me not to sign if I didn't get paid in advance, but I was too ashamed, and wouldn't dare to ask for payment in advance. We met the next morning in the notary's office. They also signed this veteran player on that day, a very nice man, he was a Turk married to a Roman woman. So we all met there at 9 in the morning, we read the terms of the contract and signed. As I walked down the stairs to leave the office my mastoris advice came to mind. 'Harry, guys come back before we all leave we should pay you' the notary said, and the deal was complete. For the following year I played in two friendly matches and two league games, and then the season ended. The summer found me in the village of Ai Stefanos, and while playing there I hurt my knee.

**V:** Your knee? Meniscus?

**H:** Yes, and at those times no one would do the surgery. At some point I heard from a player of Galatasaray that also had a bad knee, that he managed to get the surgery done in Italy.

**V:** So I guess that for a while you had to stop playing?

**H:** I did the surgery, but didn't manage to play for Pera Club anymore. The following year, some of the members of the Armenian sport club showed up and offered me a position in their team. My knee felt better then, as I had gone through a lot of physio, but i guess still it wasn't the same... So I played with them for a season, scored maybe 16-17 goals with them, and then I met with your grandma. I met your grandma when we were both 19. We dated for about a month, which at the time meant going to the movies or going for dessert around Bosphorus, but at some point we lost touch. Then it was summer and we went to the island.

**V:** Do you mean Imbros? (an island now officially called Gökçeada since 29 July 1970. The island where my grandma was born and raised.)

**H:** No, not in Imbros we went to Prinkipo (this island is officially called Büyükada, it is located in the Sea of Marmara, at the time it was a summer vacation destination, a very popular choice for the Romans living in Istanbul) and then lost touch. I then had to join the army and came back after two years, we didn't have any communication. I thought that perhaps she could have married someone else or might have migrated to Australia like a lot of Romans did at the time.

**V:** So what did grandma think about soccer and you being part of a pro team?

**H:** When we properly got together I stopped playing professionally

**V:** You only played for fun?

**H:** I only played in the summers, we had a summer team, with top tier players, every Sunday we would play

in some village and get paid for these matches. Slowly after two years I gave up on the sport.

**V:** I guess at the time in order to play on that level you should probably also be super young?

**H:** Yes I played professionally from when I was 16-17 until I was 25, and then I only played in friendly games. But back to how I met your grandma, it was nothing like today being a soccer player or dating, she was the only girl that I have ever truly loved, and I think she must have had strong feelings for me too but we lost touch. I knew this other setter from Taksim who was working in the neighboring shop of your great grand dad Andrew (he was a goldsmith and owned a jewelry shop in the Carsi), at the time It had been a year since I had left my mastoris shop, since I had learned the craft, and started working at my dads as a setter. So this guy invited me to go to this Roman wedding as a guest on a Sunday. I usually refused to go to things like that because I would usually play football on Sundays. So I ' m not quite sure why but I agreed to go. As I arrived that Sunday, around 4-5 at Pera where the wedding took place, I entered the church, and suddenly saw your grandma!

**V:** Wow!

**H:** So I approached and asked her about it and it turned out that the bride was her cousin.

**V:** Was it auntie Eleni?

**H:** No, it wasn't her, but this guy, my friend, the setter, was the best man.

**V:** And so after that reunion? You decided to start seeing each other again?

**H:** Well, I mean we decided to meet somewhere the following Sunday, but as I played soccer in the morning, I was injured and couldn't show in the rendez vous.

**V:** It must have been difficult, as there were no cell phones then either, so you wouldn't really call and cancel etc.

**H:** No, that would have been impossible. But the following week she came to the Carsi to see if I am alright, and why I didn't show. After that, we got engaged and found a place to stay within the same year. We got married, without having any resources, but slowly and steadily and with the help of God we managed to thrive together, within two years we had bought our own flat and two shops in the Carsi market. But at some point it felt like the time had come for us to emigrate back and leave everything for the sake of our children. And that's how our lives passed.

**V:** Come on, they have not passed yet! I have one last question for you, which is about your return to Istanbul in 2008 on the occasion of the Pera Club reunion, do you remember?

**H:** Yes of course!

**V:** Was everyone there do you remember?

**H:** Yes a lot of my friends were.

**V:** Is it strange to go back to a place that used to be so familiar and now isn't?

**H:** They invited us, and you know how they treated us? Like brothers, we played soccer, we stayed near Bosphorus, and they took us to this lovely restaurant, we were about 12-13 people.

**V:** It must have been really moving.

**H:** We were about 12-13 members of the old teams, we also went to another place next to the Patriarchate (The headquarters of the Greek Orthodox clergy), and the press showed, pictures were taken etc. A year after we invited them here, in Greece.

**V:** And where did you take them?

**H:** We invited them to stay around here, in a hotel South, and we took them to one of these restaurants in these estates in the mountains.

**V:** Were they all the veteran players of Pera Club?

**H:** A couple of them had played for other teams too, but we all knew each other, they treated us like brothers, they cried for the past, the fact that we were forced to leave Turkey and our lives behind. Then the bus came and took them to the airport. They stayed 3-4 days.

**V:** Thank you granddad.

**H:** That was it, my child.