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## It's Greek (and Jewish) to me

By Aaron Howard

Authors don't usually write the story of their lives until old age. In contrast, Houston author George Molho began writing his memoir three years ago at age 30. It was during the time, Molho says, that he began to gain wisdom. A memoir, after all, is supposed to impart knowledge or special information.

The recently published "Greek Coffee" (IUniverse) is the first volume of a projected series detailing the lives of Molho and his Greek-Jewish family. "I started writing during the eve of a separation from my wife," Molho says, "when I had to get a grasp where I was in my life so I could understand where I was going. "I believe most people do the same thing that I do. We simply continue to go from one moment to another."

Writing became Molho's vehicle, a mirror that he used to reflect on his life. Not a professionally educated writer, Molho started with "a bunch of ramblings."

"Whatever emotional illusions I had in my brain couldn't sustain itself on paper," he says. "Writing, for me, (became a process) to strip down all illusions, to bare bone reality.

"The moment that I thought I wanted to publish my writings, I realized that I had to be brutally honest. As a reader (of my own writing), I would recognize when something smelled funny. I'm not a good writer. I think the only thing I've done is to be brutally honest."

Molho is honest. His memoir tops out at a whopping 505 pages. He could have used a stern editor. He has not yet sharpened his writing craft. But, he's a good storyteller. This memoir reads something like one of those old European novels, peopled with marvelously virile characters like Molho's *yiayia* (pronounced ya-ya). That's Greek for grandma.

The family matriarch, *yiayia*, reads coffee grounds, the patterns made by the dried residue at the bottom of a demitasse cup of Greek coffee. Cup reading is an ancient Greek method of seeing the future, imparting wisdom and uncovering the patterns in one's life.

"She believes in it completely," Molho says. "The stories from the camps and the coffee cups are her wisdom, the way she imparts her wisdom. It's a vehicle that allows her to transform her experience to someone else."

“The camps” refer to a Gestapo prison in Salonika and the Ravensbruck labor camp. A 17-year-old volunteer with a local partisan group, she was captured and tortured to reveal the names of her comrades. She did not speak.

In “Greek Coffee,” *yiayia* first appears as a narrator. She gradually morphs into the role of mirror and teacher. She has such a strong personality that she actually seems to battle the writer and take over at points in the book.

And there’s *papou*, the author’s grandfather, a Greek Jew whose family migrated from Portugal to Salonika in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Rounded up by the Nazis in the Salonika ghetto, *papou* and one brother were the only family members to survive the Holocaust.

“He was the strongest man I knew,” Molho says. “He said true strength is derived from *Hashem* and from having a completely open heart. Iron can melt. A rock a break. Steel can bend. But, an open heart is like an ocean; it can take anything.”

Molho’s grandparents met after the liberation and came to Houston. Their cultural synthesis is symbolized at the entrance to their house, which was protected by a mezuzah, an iron horseshoe and a blue ceramic eye.

There are other family characters including Menos, the stepfather who kidnapped Molho, taking him from his mother in Houston to live in Greece. Growing up in the Molho family was like living in a demolition derby. In literary terms, it’s a story with loads of basic dramatic complications. Story resolution comes via Molho’s progress through analysis.

Analysis is like losing weight, the author says, “If you don’t do the exercises, you’re going to lose five pounds and gain it back. So you’re always going to be in a crisis mode. It’s the same way in therapy. First, you have to find the right therapist or emotional tool. It’s like finding the right diet.”

But, what one learns at the therapist’s office (or with a good friend or spiritual advisor) is not the work. The real work is self-evaluation, Molho says. “We don’t put enough value on emotional self-analysis and what impact our emotions have on our choices,” he notes.

“Most people, when they’re searching for an answer during an emotional upheaval, are so anxious that they stick to the first person who actually listens to them. That’s a mistake. Half the brain shuts off when (you) start therapy.”

“The work is actually applying what you learn in a real-life setting. The hardest part is not the intellectual application. It’s the emotional. If you have no emotional wisdom, you create constant barriers that you have to overcome. That’s the point where you become your own worst enemy.”

It’s unlearning the automatic emotional responses when someone presses your buttons. Let’s say one of your buttons is trust — or more precisely, a fear of betrayal. You’re in a

business situation, and you hear a comment that triggers that instinctual fear. “My betrayal button would start at 10,” Molho laughs. “So, I need to stop and say to myself: Is this event real? Is this a betrayal? Or, is this my misunderstanding? Are my perceptions being completely overshadowed by my own personal history?”

“That is the real work.” For Molho, the beginning of wisdom came when he began to mature emotionally.

“Greek Coffee” is as much a confessional as it is a memoir. Maybe that’s why women relate to this book so strongly. It’s chick-lit written by a guy — plus the fact there are so many strong female characters. “I adore the fact that women love the book,” Molho says. “I was raised with very strong female figures. I was on the inside with a lot of strong women. I think I got part of my voice from the fact that emotionally, the women were the storytellers in the family.”

“Greek Coffee” is a “talky” book. The structure is rich in well-written (or extremely accurately written) dialogue. Guys, be forewarned — don’t expect a lot of action. On the other hand, there’s a lot of psychological movement — and good talk. “Communications is what gives zest to life,” says the author. “It’s the sharing of information, the shared excitement that breaks the monotony of life.

“I’ve discovered (three) things. What gives the greatest pleasure is to share caring and compassion.

“(Second), the divine spark exists in shared compassion. What you share with another person breathes new life. For me, I try to consider the situation from the other person’s perspective.

“Last lesson: Through self-awareness, you can attain self-ownership. That’s where you are in complete ownership of your self. And, that’s true freedom.”

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*Molho is at work on a second volume that details his family history through his grandmother’s story. “Greek Coffee” is available at Houston-area bookstores or online by going to [www.georgemolho.com](http://www.georgemolho.com).*