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# The Istanbul Experience of Ilias Makridis, 1901–1912

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Ilias Makridis (1888–1977) was a talented and resourceful businessman from the Pontos who lived and worked through the wars, massacres, and population movements that convulsed northeastern Anatolia and the Eastern Black Sea area from 1914 to 1922, before migrating to Greece in 1923. His life was probably more than averagely eventful, even by the standards of those turbulent times, but what makes it remarkable is the extraordinary clarity of detail in which he remembered and recorded it. His “Memoirs of the Adventurous Life of Ilias Makridis,” handwritten on 1,453 A4 pages of impeccable *katharevousa* Greek, are a unique and original witness to the life and diaspora of the sultan’s Greek subjects at the end of Ottoman rule and in the transition to the Turkish Republic.<sup>1</sup> They are most valuable for their recollections of Ilias’s hometown, the small city of Ordu (Greek Kotyora) between Samsun and Trabzon. However, Ilias spent several formative and impressionable years in Istanbul, and in the sixty-one pages (pp. 10–61, 90–100) he devotes to the experience, he conveys a vivid sense of what life was like in the Greek community of Ottoman Constantinople at the height of its prosperity.

The wholesale and retail firm of Makridis Brothers, founded by Ilias’s father George and his brother John, was based in Ordu and had a branch in Constantinople. When John, who managed the Constantinople department, died in 1901, he was replaced by his elder son, Aristotelis. George and Aristotelis decided that the latter’s younger brother, Telemachos, age fourteen, along with Ilias, age thirteen, should go to high school in Constantinople. They went for a preliminary visit in the spring and early summer, at the end of which Ilias was admitted to the Zographeion Gymnasium-Lykeion after passing the entrance exam. He attended the Zographeion from September 1901 to June 1908, returning to Ordu each year for the summer holidays, which he mostly spent in the mountain village of Çambaşı. He reluctantly discontinued his education in order to help run the family business. He nevertheless managed to return to Istanbul for at least two visits in 1910 and 1912.

Ilias’s network of activities in Istanbul had three nodes, all of them in Pera-Galata: his school, his home, and the local branch of the Makridis Brothers family business. His school still exists as the Zografyon Lisesi on Turnacıbaşı Sokağı near Galatasaray. His home was rented accommodation that he shared with relatives of the Throumoulopoulos family on Simitçi Street, on what is now the “wrong” side of Tarlabası Boulevard. In 1905 his cousin Aristotelis rented a three-story house for the family on a nearby street, Harman Street, but later moved to “the houses of Keventsoglou” at Kontoskalion (Kumkapı), presumably to be close to the family of his new wife Zaphero, sister of the firm’s accountant and secretary Michel Dimitriadis, who had finished at the Kontoskalion French girls’ school. Ilias apparently returned to live on Simitçi Street, on the ground floor of the Leontidis Building. The local office of Makridis Brothers was based in two “inns,” the Camlı Han and, for a time, the Cedid Han opposite the Pera telephone exchange.

For the historian of Istanbul, Ilias’s reminiscences of the city are interesting in three main respects. First, they give information on urban topography, complementing known data and no doubt providing new data on the businesses and institutions, mainly of Beyoğlu but also to some extent of the old city, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Second, in narrating his social interactions, partly through his school but mainly through his family,

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1 Ilias Makridis was the great-uncle of the distinguished Byzantinist Dr. Ruth Macrides (d. April 27, 2019). The manuscript is in the possession of Ruth’s brother Michael, who generously provided me with a copy.

120 they give an insight into the structure of Greek society in Istanbul; above all, they illuminate the profound provincialism of the social networks within which many metropolitan Greeks operated, even at the highest economic and social level. Ilias never forgot, and was not allowed to forget, that he was the boy from the Pontos. But this slightly outsider perspective is what gives him much of his charm as a writer, and what makes him a detached as well as a sensitive and sympathetic observer of the cultural milieu into which he was plunged. It allowed him to sense and to convey the vulnerability of Constantinopolitan Hellenism in relation to the Ottoman imperial system within which it flourished. His reminiscences are thus, third and most importantly, of historical value for their narrative of personal experiences that illustrate the interface between the Rum bourgeoisie and the Ottoman authorities and ruling class at a critical moment. The narrative is valuable precisely because it is personal and anecdotal. I therefore devote the greater part of this “intervention” to reproducing, in a close translation of Ilias’s own words, the anecdotes in which he describes his encounters with the Ottoman establishment of Abdülhamid II and the Young Turks.

### Trespassing at Beşiktaş (March 1902)

In his initial description of the teachers and curriculum at the Zographeion, Ilias follows the mention of his Byzantine history classes by narrating the following episode:

The pupils were taught Byzantine history orally, without textbooks, and just taking notes, since the subject was forbidden. One day on the eve of the Feast of the Forty Martyrs [March 8], the subject of the feast came up in class. It was celebrated in the chapel at Diplokionion (Beşiktaş) and Ilias decided to go along. He happened to have his Byzantine history notes in his pocket.

The church was in a two-story house. The Christian liturgy was celebrated on the ground floor, where there was also a spring (*ayazma*), while on the upper floor, with its latticed windows, lived a Turkish family. It was said that according to the privileges of the Patriarchate, it had the right to hold services there every year on the annual feast; the next day, it [i.e., the church] closed for a whole year. Many people congregated, and indeed along with the Christians were many Turkish women who were distinguishable by their veils. Ilias and his three classmates Kouirinis, Theodoratos, and Sapountzakis attended the liturgy for a while and then withdrew. They went for quite a long way up the hill, passing through fields planted with wheat and barley. Then they came to the foot of a huge high wall, where they sat talking and daydreaming. Ilias took his Byzantine history notes out of his pocket and started to read them aloud to his classmates, because the lesson was in a couple of days. Hardly a few minutes had passed when they noticed two men age 40–45 coming in their direction. Ilias was afraid and hid his notes among the crops. The men came up holding pistols and ordered them in a stern voice to get up and come down to the police station at Beşiktaş. Fortunately they did not search in the field.

In the police station they beat them one by one, and they were interrogated separately in front of the chief officer: “What was your business there, and who sent you?” After they were given another special beating by the chief, they were sent under police escort by night to the general commander at Galatasaray, where they were interrogated again and jailed. The headmaster, Alexander Zamarias, was called to the commander’s office, and the prisoners were brought into his presence. They were asked if they knew the name and profession of the man sitting there. They all answered that he was their headmaster, Alexander Zamarias. Then the commander asked the headmaster if he knew the boys, and at the answer that they were pupils at his school, he said to them, “Go home! I’m sparing you punishment for this first offence as a favor to your headmaster.”

The next day, during the break, the headmaster called them to his office. He told them that they had gotten off lightly, and that they should be careful not to go near that place again. “Why, sir?” they asked, and received the reply that that was the wall of Sultan Hamid’s Yıldız Palace, and that trespassing there was a capital crime.

### A School Parade and a Bosphorus Cruise (September 1903)

How did Rum institutions under the authoritarian regime of Abdülhamid manage to exhibit their pride in their corporate identity without arousing suspicion? Ilias illustrates the procedure adopted by the Zographeion in the school outing on the Bosphorus at the beginning of the 1903–1904 school year.

The school hired three lifeboats with paddle-wheels on either side. I remember that one ship was called *The Two Friends*. The trip was to Beykoz on the Bosphorus. There were more than eight hundred pupils, and the teachers brought their families.

Early in the morning, the procession began leaving the school with the school flag at the head of it. This was in the form of a white triangle with a deep sky-blue border and, in the middle, “Zographeion Gymnasion” in gold letters. It was followed by the school band of musical instruments, about thirty-six of them, lined up two abreast in groups of four. When the signal was given, the band, under the direction of the music teacher Bekatoros, wearing his official uniform with the Sultan’s medals (since he was also in the service of Sultan Hamid), struck up the school anthem: “Sing paeans of glory one and all in praise of sacred Zographeion.”

After the parade had progressed some distance, the police headquarters at Galatasaray appeared way ahead of them, and Bekatoros gave the signal to stop playing the school anthem. They then advanced fifty to a hundred meters in silence, and as the band drew near the police headquarters, he gave the signal to play the anthem of Sultan Hamid. As this began, an officer at the head of twenty-five to thirty men drew his sword and shouted, “Present arms” (*selam tr*)—apparently the police department had been notified in advance. They continued with the anthem as far as Tünel.

When they reached the waterfront at Galata, they boarded the hired boats, and each of the pupils was given a candy.

They set off, and as they sailed past the palaces of Dolmabahçe and Çırağan, they again received the signal to play the Sultan’s anthem. Then from all the windows of the palaces the ladies [of the harem] greeted them waving handkerchiefs. In all the villages of the Bosphorus to right and left, people waved sheets and handkerchiefs in greeting until they reached Beykoz.

After a long halt at Beykoz for lunch, dancing, and games, they returned by boat along the European side of the Bosphorus, passing in front of Robert College, where the students and staff turned out to wave to them.

### A Femme Fatale at Binbirdirek-Beyazıt (September 1903)

This episode follows immediately after the narrative of the school trip.

Ilias wanted to buy the score of a new Turkish song, *Bana ne oldu da ben bilmem*, and he went to the music shop in the Hatzopoulos Arcade (Hacopulo Pasajı) where he had bought his mandolin. Since they only had Greek and European music, they sent him to Binbirdirek, to Şamlı’s shop near the Sultan Beyazıt mosque. That Sunday he went there wearing a fez instead of a hat, because it was a Turkish neighborhood and the Turkish shops were open on Sunday. When IM arrived at the shop, he asked Şamlı for the aforesaid musical score. He immediately laid out on the counter in front of him about a hundred sheets as well as postcards. While looking for *Bana ne oldu da* he found some other songs and picked out about six or seven. Finally he said to Şamlı, “The one I’m looking for isn’t among them.” He answered him, saying, “We’ll find it in another batch,” and brought out about as many again. Looking through them, Ilias found other nice pieces of music, and he selected about ten more. When he complained that he still hadn’t found the one he wanted, Şamlı said, “Don’t worry, we’ll find it,” and taking away what IM had left, he brought him another equally big batch to look through. At that moment there came into the shop a veiled Turkish lady followed by a black servant girl, whom she dismissed with a nod. Lifting her veil, she came up close to Ilias and said, “Bey Efendi, what piece are you looking for? Let me help you.” Şamlı, who apparently knew the lady very well, said, “He wants *Bana ne oldu*.” But it seems that Şamlı deliberately did not bring it straightaway, so that he could sell others. The lady, picking through them, said to IM, “This is a nice song, and that one too,” and thus she assembled about twenty pieces, still without the one he wanted, but he protested again that what he was looking for was *Bana ne oldu*. Then Şamlı went up to the loft and brought down about fifteen to twenty pieces, saying, “I hope it’s in here.”

As the three of them went through the batch together, the lady said, “Here, Mr. Handsome, I’ve found it (*Güzel bey işte ben buldum*),” and handed it to IM. Şamlı then took all the pieces that were set aside to count them and work out the bill. In the meantime, the lady started a conversation with IM, saying, with a sweet smile, “I imagine you will look even more handsome when you mature. What instrument do you play? Where are you from?” and things like that. Şamlı told him the price and IM was about to pay,

when at that very moment the glass door of the shop opened and there appeared a man somewhere in his forties. As soon as the lady saw him, she lowered her veil in fright and obeyed his stern order to “Get out of here at once!” (*Çabuk çekiz git!*).

Şamlı said to Ilias, “Quick, pay me and go, he’s a secret agent (*hafiyi*).” IM in his confusion did not notice in which direction the lady had gone, but he saw which way the *hafiyi* turned, and thinking they had both gone that way, he set off in the opposite direction in order to avoid them. Turning the corner, he went about sixty to seventy steps and found himself in front of a large, two-story house in the old style with a large gateway to the side of the front door, which served as an entrance and exit for carriages. In the big gate was a small, half-open flap, and through the opening stretched a woman’s hand holding out a big, old-style key. IM in his confusion absent-mindedly took the key as he was passing. Dazed with fear, instead of throwing it away he put it in his pocket, and in fright took the street leading down to the old bridge over the Golden Horn. On the way he realized that he was passing through the area of the *tokmetzidika*, the iron foundries, and remembered that there was the foundry of Mehmet Usta, with which the Makridis family business was acquainted. He made for the workshop and went in. Mehmet Usta, seeing him all agitated, said, “What’s up with you that you’re so upset?” Instead of answering, IM gave him the key and asked him to throw it into his scrap iron. Mehmet, however, realized what it was about, and asked him how it came into his hands. He put it in the furnace, hammered it into a formless lump and threw it in the scrap iron.

The next day, Mehmet Usta went down to the office of the Makridis Brothers business in Camlı Han. In IM’s presence, he explained to Aristotelis Makridis that many fine young men had perished on account of that lady. She was about twenty-five to twenty-eight years old and a Pasha’s daughter who had married an army officer from an important family, and had been widowed when he was killed in an expedition to the Hejaz. He told Aristotelis to advise Ilias not to go into those neighborhoods.

### Tour Guides in Ayasofya (Late 1907?)

IM tried many times that year to get into Hagia Sophia, but he was always turned away by the imams. Later, he learned from his classmates that they allowed foreign visitors in. Then he observed them to get an idea of how they dressed, and learned a few words of English. He dressed as an Englishman, hung his camera around his neck, and waited until he saw a group of tourists coming. Latching on to them, he managed to get in. Then he saw that their guide was his teacher Ioakeim Valavanis,<sup>2</sup> whom he had not noticed at first, since he was a short man. But as soon as the teacher saw Ilias, he invited him to join them. Ilias followed as he explained everything in detail to the foreigners. Pointing out a hollow in one of the columns, he said that once, several centuries ago, architects had come from Europe and, obtaining permission from the sultan at the time, had chiseled off fragments from the columns in order to determine what material they were made of. After that, they all went up together to the women’s gallery, and proceeding along to the east side, they could glimpse the mosaic icons behind the big circular boards on which were inscribed Koranic texts in Arabic letters. When they came down, Ilias separated from the foreigners and went over to a group of Turks who were listening to a *hoca* (imam) whose pronunciation gave him away as a native of the Pontic village of Of (Lazistan). Ilias addressed him in his mother tongue, and asked him to repeat what he had said to the group so that he could hear it. Then he said to Ilias, “Since you’re one of our own, let me tell you too.”<sup>3</sup> Pointing to the hollow in the column, he said, “When Sultan Mehmet II the Conqueror took the City and rode on horseback into Hagia Sophia, his horse rose on its hind legs and with its front legs knocked a hole in the column. And water started to flow from the hole. And for many years the Muslims came and put their fingers in the water and rubbed it on their eyes to heal them.” And more stuff like that.<sup>4</sup>

2 Ioakeim Valavanis (1858–1921), from Cappadocia, had a distinguished intellectual career as a teacher at several schools in Constantinople and Athens and as a published ethnographer and philologist. At the time of this episode, he was teaching at the Great School of the Nation in Fener.

3 “Ν’ έπε αρ άφοϋ είσαι ας έμετέρ’ ς άς λέγα τὸ κ’έσέν.”

4 “Όταν ὁ φετιχ Σουλτάν Μωαμέτ έπήρεν τήν Πόλ καβάλα στο άλογο ατ έσκόθεν σα δύο και με τὸ έμπρόσθινον τὸ πουδάρ και έντοκεν και έτρύπεσεν τὸ στουλάρ. Και άμάν από τρύπιν έτρεξεν νερόν. Και έπί πολλά χρόνια οί μουσλιμ έρχονταν και έβαλναν τὸ δάκτυλον ατουν και έλοιφαν τ’ομματέ τουν και ενονταν καλά.”

A year later, that is, in 1908, the revolution of Enver and Talat and company took place. The [Ottoman] autocracy was abolished and the Constitution was proclaimed. The following song became popular among the Turks: *Şimdi hürriyet oldu / Urum İslam bir oldu*, that is, “Now there is a constitution, Greeks and Turks are one.” On hearing this song, a Turkish woman, whose neighbor was a young Greek man called Theodoros, with whom, unknown to him, she was in love, waited for him to come out of his house and ran up and embraced him, saying, “Don’t be afraid, don’t be frightened! Haven’t you heard what the song says? Now we are free to marry. I love you, and I’m going to have you.” Theodoros was terrified and had difficulty extricating himself from her clutches. The incident became widely known among the Turks, who banded together in groups and seized the unfortunate Theodoros. They tied him up and, attaching a rope to his feet, dragged him, right under the noses of the police, through the streets of Stavrodromi (Pera or Beyoğlu in Turkish) and tore him to pieces. IM happened to witness all of this as he was passing.

After this criminal lynching, there circulated a song, half Greek, half Turkish, which went, “For Theodoros’s suffering my heart cries out.” The song enjoyed great popularity for many years, with gramophone records being made of it, until it eventually faded. But one day when Ilias was walking along Kiourektzidika Street [Küreçiler Kapısı Sokak] in Galata, he saw the two men walking in front of him suddenly stop and listen attentively. One of them was an officer, and the officer said, “What’s with these Greeks (*Urumlar*)! Years ago,<sup>5</sup> a stupid mistake occurred, a Greek got killed, and still now they’re playing it on the gramophone!”<sup>6</sup> The other man, who happened to be a Jew, said to him, “You expect them to forget it? Every year they still hit us on the head and remind us.” The officer asked, “What’s this?” The other said, “Well, 1,910 years ago,<sup>7</sup> we killed this person who wasn’t even a Rum but a Jew. They don’t forget it but shout it from the rooftops year after year.” The Turkish officer asked again, “But who did you kill?” The Jew answered, “You know, the guy they call Jesus Christ (*Hazreti İsa*).” To which the officer replied, “May God make you pay for this!”<sup>8</sup>

#### A Pleasure Pansyon in Şişli-Harbiye (1912)

In 1912, four years after leaving school, Ilias returned to Istanbul on a business trip. One day he visited a skating rink in the company of Hephaistos Makris, who had been his neighbor on Simitçi Street. Hephaistos introduced him to three Turkish friends, one of whom, Cavit, was the nephew of the newly appointed finance minister, from whom he had taken over the family business, which was a major supplier of Makridis Brothers. Cavit said, “Let’s go and have a beer,” and that was the signal for them all to depart, in three carriages, which took them past Taksim, turned left after Notre Dame de Sion, and dropped them fifty to a hundred meters down the road at the door of a luxurious two-story house. A woman with a foreign accent greeted them and led them up to the first floor, where Cavit’s wife was in the process of making a scene, having come there “to catch that scoundrel in the act.” He drew his pistol, but Ilias and Hephaistos restrained him, and eventually, by the mediation of his two Turkish friends, the couple were reconciled on the condition that he would never again set foot in the German lady’s establishment. However, they were both very keen that Ilias should return there—Cavit because he felt he owed it to a valued customer, and his wife because she felt she owed it to her friends, who would now be deprived of her husband’s company. So a reluctant Ilias was brought back and delivered, highly recommended, into the German lady’s hands. He spent the night locked in a luxurious bedroom with a Turkish lady who succeeded in overcoming his inhibitions ...

5 This indicates that Ilias must have heard the conversation on his return visit to Istanbul in 1912.

6 “Ulan, nedir bu Urumlar? Bundan çok sene aval bir yanlışlık oldu da, bir Urum öldürdiler, ve henüz gramofonda çaldırıyorlar.”

7 The chronology suggests a confusion between the years of Jesus’s Nativity and Crucifixion.

8 “Ulan Allah belasın versin!”

When he woke up in the morning, he found himself alone in the bed. The lady had gone.

He got up and dressed, and, wanting to leave, he realized that the door was still locked, and so he rang the electric bell.

The German lady arrived, wished him “Guten Morgen,” and asked if he had enjoyed himself. “I imagine you did.” At that moment, as IM reached for his fez, he saw on top of it a gold Turkish lira. He said to the German lady, “She must have forgotten it.” In answer she said, “No, she didn’t forget it, but left it as a baksheesh for your enjoyable company. It’s a way of saying that she likes you and when, all being well, you return to us, she will be yours.” With that, he wished her goodbye and left.

A few days later, Hephaistos asked IM if he had had a good time, because Cavit had told him that he had taken him with the highest recommendation to the German lady. Then IM asked him, “How did all of this come about?”

Hephaistos explained as follows:

“These girls are the daughters of great families, and princesses. And since their husbands always stay up all night having fun with other women, when they come home at dawn, they go to bed exhausted and fall asleep without even looking at their wives in the face.

“So the wives for their part found this German woman who advised all of them who were interested to get together and help her financially to organize a fine *pansyon* where they too could have a good time.”

Truth or Orientalist fantasy? The author’s constant reference to his own embarrassment, and his complete lack of judgmental commentary, in this as in all his anecdotes, give his discourse the ring of credibility, and incline one to believe that it offers us an authentic, objective window on forgotten facets of the lost world of late Ottoman Istanbul. He lets his stories speak for themselves. They leave no doubt that he and all his family regarded the Muslims with whom they co-existed as the Other, and that the perception was mutual. At the same time, they felt less alien in Ottoman society than in Athens, which Ilias’s parents visited with a group of friends from Ordu on the occasion of the Olympic Games in 1906. The men wore the fez, and this elicited incredulous reactions from the locals that Ilias considered worth recording. How could they, as Greeks, be subjects of a non-Christian king? How could they say that they lived “well and in peace” when they had to endure gross insults to their religion? Ilias’s father effectively provided the answer when he declined to buy a large three-story marble house at a bargain price, on the grounds that “Athens doesn’t have a thriving import-export trade.” Of course, he could not foresee the events that would, in less than twenty years, force his children and grandchildren to make Athens their permanent home.

Figure 1: An excerpt from Makridis's manuscript (Memoirs of the Adventurous Life of Ilias Makridis, 60).

60  
γεν νερόν. και άσπύρα χρώμα οι μουσική έρχονται και  
εφαγαν το δαυλιόνα τους και έδωσαν τομάτα τους και  
εροντα καια. Δηλαδή. Όταν ο ναυαυτής Μωαμέδ ο Β.  
ναλγαβή τον καρπόμιν, έσπινδεν έξι ώρες ως 9μ Απας  
εσπιαν, ως ανασημωδός δ' έσπιν τον ως 6α δυο ενδυομαι  
δια τον έμποροδίου ποδός ως 9μ πινωμαι 9μ ως 9μ και  
άσπιν δ' άσπιν ηρχισα να ηρχισα νερό. έσπιν χρώμα  
οι ποδοί ηρχισα ως εφραολιφοτες τον δαυλιόνα ως 6α νερό  
ιδραωμαι ποροσμοιβατες τους οφθαλμούς τους, ως 6α ταύτα  
Μετα εσπινωμαι έλαος ήλοι ήω χημια ενκαυοσσία ο-  
υλώ (1908) δι' ώναναοσσίας τον εμπειρ ως ταμαα ως  
ετα νατηρξιδι ή ανλωρατορία ως εμπειρξιδι ή συν-  
ταμμα, και διαμαξιδι άνα 9μ τουρμαρ ή φρα-  
ουδι. Σημει χουριστ οδον // ούρουμ ισχαμ ωρ οδον  
ήτοι, τωρα ήρε συνταμμα Ρωμνος ως τουρμος έφισωδισα  
Ανοσισα ή φραουδι τουτο μια τούρμισσα, γελο-  
σασ νεραου ήρος, ούρμαλι Θεόδωρον, τον έσπιον αν  
ή άγροια τον άραωσισα, παραμονήσασ, μέγας έφρι-  
δεν ο Θεόδωρος ήμ άμιας τον, αρσφριζασα τον έμπε-  
σιον διαγασα ήν φοβασα ήν φρομαξας διν άμιας  
ή φραουδι ή φριζα; ήρα ως 6α ημεδα έφισωδισα  
εγασα να αναπρωδόμε και θα σε ώρω. ο Θεόδωρος με-  
τα δυοσσιας διαγορ τον χυρην ήμ ναλαφραμαξισα.  
τόρμαρος τουτο ηνωτικ ως διαδοικ ανθ τους τουρ-  
μους, εσπινωμαι οριζοις ως ναλα ήμαδες συνταφορ  
οδοντες, συνταφορ τον δυοδουχί Θεόδωρον και άσπιν τον  
έδωσαν τον εφισωσασ ναλα ημς ως αρσφισοατες  
τους αίδα, τον δια οχαμιν τον διαγορ, ήσπιν έμ-  
μαλα ημς άλογορπια, ως τους έφισωσασ τον ελαφο-  
δρομιν (πέραρ ως τουρμαοή Μοσιν εφω) ως τον διαγορ  
λας οάμας. ταύτα ταύτα ηχαιος διαρχομαι ενδουττι