

OBITUARY

DENO LEVENTIS, 1938–2002

Deno Leventis died in London on Thursday 11 July after a very private struggle against illness for nearly eighteen months. The following Wednesday a huge crowd, the largest it is said since the death of Archbishop Makarios, attended his funeral in Cyprus, where he now lies buried beneath a favourite lemon tree. Three months later, in London, he was remembered at a packed service in the Greek Orthodox cathedral of Aghia Sophia.

Deno Leventis was born in the Cypriot town of Larnaca, the son of C. P. Leventis and nephew of A. G. Leventis (1902–78), who had founded the family firm in 1936 after working for G. B. Ollivant in the then Gold Coast. The firm specialised in textiles and in produce buying (both highly competitive markets dominated by the United Africa Company, its subsidiaries and allies in the Association of West African Merchants) and, to fight against the colonial cartel, A. G. Leventis at Danquah's request from 1948 befriended the young Kwame Nkrumah in his rise to power, finally selling the main business in downtown Accra to the state in the early 1960s. Deno, straight after leaving Clare College, Cambridge (where he had read classics, specialising in ancient philosophy), in 1959 went to work with his uncle in Accra. In 1963 he moved to Lagos, where his father, C. P. Leventis, since 1942 had been running a fast expanding branch of the company. They had, for example, the Mercedes franchise for both cars and trucks, and were building up a retail business to rival Kingsway. In Nigeria C. P. Leventis was a close friend of several politicians both southern and northern (such as Ribado); he had known the Sardauna since the difficult days of 1942 Gusau. He kept open his links with Ojukwu in Biafra until the actual start of hostilities in the civil war, seeking to mediate a way out of the impending conflict. Once war started, it was to the Leventis house in Cyprus that Aminu Kano (and others) came to stay when there was government business to negotiate in Europe. And Leventis contributions helped later to fund the campaigns of political figures when civilian rule replaced the military. Many of the company's employees were to become important figures in their own right, a notable example being the current Oni of Ife. Deno was part of this commercial and political scene from 1963 to 1977, when he finally moved to London. He was never, I think, a prime player as his father had been in the circles of power—I am not sure he enjoyed it, though he was of course knowledgeable (but very discreet) about the personalities and strategies involved. He took over the direction of the company through the difficult, ever shifting conditions of oil boom, inflation and Nigeria's version of structural adjustment. The company not only bottled Coca-cola but developed its own large farms beside the Niger (initially to grow maize for corn syrup) and built its own plant for

manufacturing glass bottles, to eliminate the need for imports; in the end it was exporting bottles to the rest of ECOWAS. The firm has since developed the Coca-cola bottling business also in the Balkans and Russia, becoming apparently the world's second largest Coke bottler and distributor.

The firm's success made it possible to establish in 1979 the A. G. Leventis Foundation, which Deno ran from London. It is the Foundation that has supported, for example, since 1991 the Leventis Research Co-operation Scheme, which each year brings two Leventis Fellows to come for three months to the Centre of African Studies in SOAS to work on their own research alongside a collaborating scholar of the University of London. Deno was also ready to help, quite spontaneously, with funds for any worthwhile project: it was not a matter of elaborate paperwork. Thus he helped out with the publication of *Studies in Hausa Language and Linguistics* (edited by Graham Furniss and Philip Jaggard) and contributed substantially to the refurbishment of the Oral Documentation Archive at Ahmadu Bello University. He contributed enormously to Nigerian conservation projects (in which his brother was greatly interested); the Foundation helped to finance the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, which started in 1980, and in 1988 set up the Leventis Foundation Nigeria. Deno also contributed the funds for establishing and running five very practical 'farm schools' in Nigeria and Ghana. The one I visited was way out in an old road camp on the Birnin Gwari road, and brought in young farmers (men and women) from the Hausa countryside who had missed out on secondary schooling but were to be taught basic mechanics and farm sciences before returning home to their farms and their communities. Education, rather than politics, was the way forward for Deno in an oil-rich Nigeria in which expatriate firms like his were largely confined to manufacturing. That the company has survived where almost all other old-style firms have failed is a tribute to the Leventis commercial and diplomatic acumen.

But Deno had another life quite outside West Africa. From 1979 on, he focused much of his work on Cyprus. He was appointed Cyprus's ambassador to UNESCO, and became a formidable champion of Cypriot art and antiquities, especially of those pieces that were looted from the north of Cyprus after the Turkish invasion of 1974. He fought and won a crucial legal case in the United States that helped destroy the growing market value of looted property. But the orange groves he had lost to the Turkish occupation he could not recover; instead he used sometimes to go up into the mountains to look over to the family's land beyond the dividing line. Deno helped set up the Hellenic Centre in London, where in 1998 he oversaw a remarkable exhibition of Byzantine ikons from Athens, and another one in 2000 of Cypriot ikons; he was the driving force behind a number of permanent displays of Cypriot art in the British Museum and in the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, as well as helping with the restoration of Cypriot pieces in museums in Paris, Vienna, Oxford, Dublin, Copenhagen, New York, Toronto, Moscow and, most recently, Odessa. As an undergraduate in

Cambridge he had always been interested in art; the last twenty years of his life enabled him to turn that interest to practical use.

Throughout all this work, Deno remained largely out of the limelight. Typically he refused an entry in *Who's Who*. He was a ready listener, never pompous or overbearing in discussion, and unfailingly interested in ideas and projects (and in the students who would carry them out), whether in Nigeria or in Europe. In Nigeria, as in London, there was always a quiet dignity to Deno, never even a hint of the self-importance that his role in the country might have warranted. I never saw him act arrogantly, even though others were doing so in his presence, nor did he ever show off his own insightful intelligence when others were trying to be 'smart'. He wore his position in the Leventis system very lightly: he remained 'Deno'. Even his formidable uncle, A. G. Leventis, apparently never quarrelled with him. He kept his 'cool'; above all, he kept his integrity. Yet there was a real, personal warmth that nothing seemed to impinge upon. Deno laughed with, not against, one. It was a laugh to join in with. So, on the Nigerian stage, people respected him for his own special qualities and not just as a 'big man'. He was open to all sides; even as the country slid into civil war, he deliberately kept open avenues of communication that bridged the divide. He was a man who could be trusted when no one else might be.

He seemed to have no enemies. Such a man is much missed.

MURRAY LAST