

A GREEK ICON FOR OUR TIMES

• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Yiannis Boutaris is wiry, slightly stooped and bow-legged, with round metal glasses, gelled, spiky gray hair and thick, dark eyebrows. He sports an earring and seven tattoos. He wears numerous jangling bracelets and bangles. His office, full of bric-a-brac, looks like that room in the house that has never been tidied. He never wears a tie, but will agree to a jacket that covers his colorful suspenders. His desk carries a likeness of a phallic symbol and a pad containing Hebrew letters. He is eccentric and charismatic but speaks quietly and gives an air of honesty and authenticity.

Meet the mayor of Thessaloniki.

This is the person who when elected mayor for the second time in 2014, decided to wear a yellow star with the word 'Jude' on it in protest the extremist Golden Dawn Party, which has gained strength in recent years. His decision was based on principle only, as there was no obvious electoral gain from this stand.

He has gone on to become one of the most famous mayors in the world and has proved to be a wonderful friend of the Jewish people. I decided to look into his career further and found a man who had overturned tables several times in his career.

BORN IN 1942 in Thessaloniki, he grew up destined to join the family winery, Greece's oldest, which was founded by his great grandfather, also named Yiannis Boutaris. He reached the position of managing director at a time when it was one of the largest and most influential wineries in the country. Characteristically, he immediately started a program of regionalization and buying vineyards (which was previously against company policy), leading a quality revolution in the company and being a forerunner of the quality revolution in the country.

Then in 1996, after disagreements with his brother, he abruptly left, giving up his birthright. He founded a small winery dedicated to making wine mainly from a single variety, from a single vineyard. As such, he led the boutique winery revolution in Greece. To show this pioneer did not just live in a bottle, he also transformed an abandoned village owned by his family into a wildlife reserve called Arcturos.

Despite being the most influential and visible figure of Greek wine, he got up one day and left his wine life behind to go into politics. In 2003, he passed the vintner baton to his son and never again interfered in the management of the winery he had built. In 2006, he ran for mayor of Thessaloniki as a pro-business social democrat. As a non-politician with no political base and infrastructure, he failed, but was not deterred. He was prepared to play the long game. As my old school motto says, fortune favors the brave. In 2010, he was elected as mayor of Greece's second-largest city.

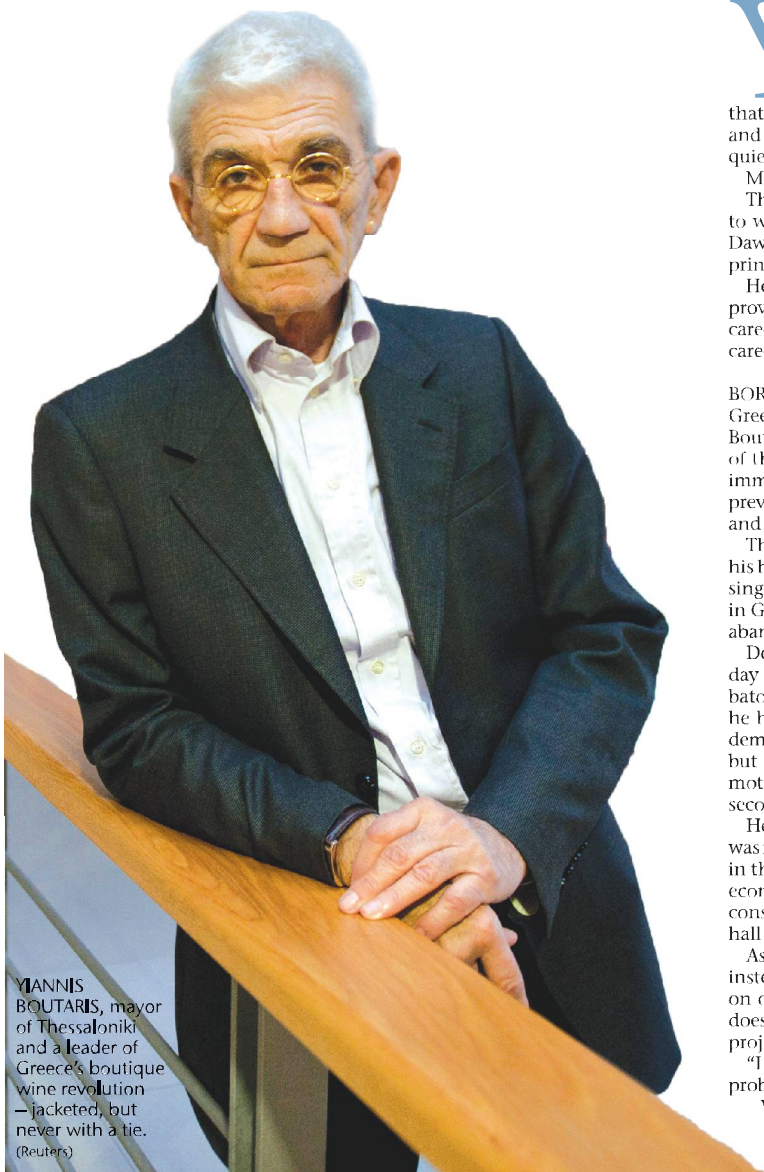
He took office at one of the worst times in modern Greek history. The economy was in ruins, the previous mayor was in prison for corruption and there was no credit in the bank or patience for failed politicians. Yet he succeeded in turning his city's economy around by good business sense, practical management and decisions by consensus. He reduced the budget deficit, significantly cut the workforce in city hall and restructured the city administration.

As for personal example, he forgoes the mayoral limousine with a chauffeur, instead driving an eco-friendly Panda Fiat. He can even be seen pedaling by bicycle on occasions, signaling to everyone that this is no normal politician. In fact, he doesn't see himself as a politician, but simply as a businessman, taking on a new project.

"I come from the business world and the civil society and I always try to solve problems in a practical way."

When I remarked at how popular he was, he jokingly said, "Fifty percent of the people love me; the other 50% hate me!"

In 2012, he was chosen as the "best mayor in the world" for one particular month by the City Mayors Foundation based in London. In 2014, the



YIANNIS BOUTARIS, mayor of Thessaloniki and a leader of Greece's boutique wine revolution — jacketed, but never with a tie. (Reuters)



(TOP) A Boutari Winery label with Hebrew letters (Ladino), dating from 1906. (Photos: Courtesy)

THE JEWISH Museum in Thessaloniki: Small but comprehensive.

Huffington Post placed him at the top of the list describing their favorite mayoral figures. Later he was nominated for the World Mayor Prize. This unconventional, progressive figure was praised as a beacon of hope and a model for Greece. He is convinced he has a duty to do the best he can for the city and its inhabitants. As he explained, “Local government, not national politics, is the essence of democracy.”

THESSALONIKI’S JEWISH presence goes back to 315 BCE. The Jewish population expanded after the Inquisition, when a large Spanish Sephardi Jewish population arrived in Salonika, as it was then named, bringing with them Ladino and Jewish customs and culture. It became part of the fabric of this vibrant, cosmopolitan city, which was even known as the Jerusalem of the Balkans. During the Holocaust, this long period of successful integration and prosperity ended abruptly when some 95% of the Jewish population disappeared to Nazi camps.

The city was slow to remember its past. A monument to the 50,000 murdered Jews was placed in Thessaloniki’s Freedom Plaza in 1997. Boutaris, though, considered the Jewish part of city’s history as an integral part of the discourse, urging not only recognition of the Holocaust but also celebrating the Jewish contribution to the city. “You can’t build a future if you don’t know your past,” he noted.

Today, the 1,000-member Jewish community is full of praise for Boutaris. In 2014 the city erected a monument at Thessaloniki’s Aristotle University, which was built on the ruins of the historic Jewish cemetery. In 2013, on the 70th anniversary of the deportation, Boutaris led a public march from the Liberty Square, where Jews were rounded up, to the old railway station, where Jews were forced on to trains to the concentration camps.

In 2018, President Reuven Rivlin visited the city to lay a foundation stone for a Holocaust museum to be built by the rail tracks. The museum will be a memorial to the Jews who were murdered, but will also be devoted to the culture and Sephardic story. The mayor says, “The memorial will symbolize our shame... for what happened, for what we did, and mostly for what we could not or did not wish to do, during and after the war.”

Boutaris does not hide responsibility in his shared contrition, but is also eager to celebrate the Jewish Salonika because it gave so much to the city. When asked why, he simply says it is the right thing to do and reminisces that many of his family’s friends were Jewish. They were also customers of his winery.

I saw a label of Boutaris wine dated 1906 with Hebrew written on it. Upon closer inspection, I noted it was in fact Ladino, with Hebrew letters. That was quite a moving reminder of the strength of the Jewish community in those days.

Boutaris is not just righting wrongs with the Jewish community, he has also shown goodwill to their Turkish neighbors. Athens and Istanbul have a very complicated, fraught history, yet Boutaris always sees the cup half-full. He described Turks and Greeks as brothers, who eat the same food, have entwined memories. Kemal Atatürk’s birthplace was in Salonika. So Boutaris visited Istanbul with arms outstretched. Now more than 100,000 Turkish tourists visit each year.

Another major issue for contemporary Greece is the migrant crisis. They have had Syrian refugees foisted on them despite the economic problems in Greece. Boutaris says, “It is a European problem and Europe needs to start taking responsibility, but the Greek state must also take action to accommodate and integrate them properly.”

Nothing gets Greeks more riled up these days than if you speak about the Republic of Macedonia. Many Greeks believe this is their heritage. Yet Boutaris, the conciliator, recognizes they also have rights to the name, much to the fury of many Greeks. When he said they should change the name of Thessaloniki airport from Macedonia as a goodwill gesture, he said it with a mischievous twinkle in his eye of someone who could say what he wanted because his only loyalty was to his own principles and truth.

I REALIZED his unusual honesty, because when I asked about two personal issues that cut close to the bone – his private life and alcoholism – he answered

immediately without the smokescreens or waffling that politicians specialize in. He was lovingly married to Athina Michael, but they divorced as they could not live together.

However, real love is not skin-deep. When he later said he could not live without her, she dropped everything to return to him immediately. Unfortunately, she died at a relatively young age in 2007. Apparently, one of his tattoos was done as a memorial to the love of his life. Later, another tattoo was done to remind him it was time to get over his grief and get on with his life.

He also spoke frankly about his alcoholism. In 1991, he recognized he had a problem, went into rehab and has remained dry ever since. He described it as a problem that he dealt with that is now part of his past. I was relieved this has not stopped him from tasting his beloved wine, but he never returned to spirits. He was not so strong-willed with cigarettes, cradling one during our meeting, then asking permission to smoke. Everyone smokes everywhere in Greece! As the meeting went on, he stepped out to get another one.

The 75-year-old Boutaris was recently attacked and knocked to the ground by right-wing thugs who despise his stand against Golden Dawn. The rise of the right wing in Greece is frightening and a warning bell for all in Europe. Yet Boutaris is a man of principle and he practices the antithesis of populist politics that is dominant in world politics today. He is a symbol of the good guy, who stands up for his beliefs regardless of popularity and safety. A rare breed, indeed. He should be preserved like an etrog and applauded. He is a positive symbol for the Western world, a Greek icon for our times.

What does the future hold for the two-time mayor?

He says, “I believe in a maximum of two terms. Power wears one down and also corrupts.”

Ouch! Anyone in Balfour Street listening? Here is an impressive iconic figure who has created change in whatever he has done and seems to thrive when dealing with conflict and insurmountable problems. Maybe when he finishes his term we can bring him out here!

The writer has advanced Israeli wines for over 30 years, and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com