



ΜΑΡΙΑ ΧΡΟΥΣΑΚΗ  
MARIA CHROUSSACHI

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**MARIA CHROUSSAKI**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS 1917-1958**

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# MARIA CHROUSSAKI

## 1

Like explorers of a strange continent whose every step leads to new and exciting vistas, students of hitherto unregarded subjects are sometimes privileged to stumble across unexpected treasures. Among such subjects one could easily include the history of Greek photography – a subject which, if not quite in its infancy, is certainly still at a stage of precocious adolescence, promising any number of surprises.

Such a surprise was the recent rediscovery, a quarter of a century after it was donated to the National Gallery of Greece, of the photographic archive of Maria Chroussaki. The study of this archive, which consists of 35 painstakingly classified and annotated albums of black and white prints, as well as of a substantial number of colour transparencies, leads to the conclusion that this essentially unknown photographer, whose career straddled four whole decades from 1917 to 1958, has bequeathed us one of the most significant bodies of work of the so-called ‘classical’ period of Greek photography.

Maria Chroussaki’s work is not particularly radical, while its subject matter is at heart conventional; nevertheless, it manages to transcend the limitations of the somewhat retrograde pictorialism which was the dominant photographic aesthetic of her time. Furthermore, as far as depictions of Greek rural life are concerned, it would not be excessive to claim that the photographs of Maria Chroussaki are superior to the often awkwardly or melodramatically posed images of the more celebrated Elly Seraidari. Chroussaki’s long-forgotten photographs avoid rhetorical excess; on the contrary, even when depicting movement they seem imbued with a strange stillness. Dancers, fishermen hauling nets, riders in the snow, a woman about to vanish down an alleyway: all seem suspended in a perfect, preordained immobility, as though the camera had immortalised them at the most indubitably perfect moment of their trajectory.

## 2

Maria Chroussaki (or Chroussachi, in the French-influenced transliteration she sometimes used) was born in the Asia Minor city of Smyrna in December 1899, the second of Yannis Chroussakis and Kleoni Athinogeni’s three daughters. She had been preceded, a mere eleven months earlier, by her elder sister Anna, and was followed by the youngest, Stefania.<sup>1</sup> Yannis Chroussakis, an affluent *rentier*, had moved to Athens well before the catastrophe of 1922, thereby preserving the fortune which allowed his family to enjoy the comfortable lifestyle of the affluent Greek upper classes.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently Anna Alevra and Stefania Vorre.

An involvement in and appreciation of cultural activities was usually part of this lifestyle, with the artistic interests of the Chroussaki family revolving primarily around painting and music; Kleoni, who had studied painting under Konstantinos Volanakis, is said to have possessed real talent.<sup>2</sup>

Kleoni's three daughters studied singing and piano, while the two eldest (and possibly Stefania) took lessons in drawing and painting at the studio of the fashionable painter Pavlos Mathiopoulos. Mathiopoulos held the title of Court Portraitist and was a professor at, and eventually director of, the Athens School of Fine Art, but he also gave private lessons, with particular emphasis on the use of the pastels which had come to characterize his work.<sup>3</sup> Two snapshots from Maria Chroussaki's private photograph albums show her with her sister Anna and two of their friends clowning in Mathiopoulos's studio, wearing the wide smocks and straw hats in which they posed for one another.

Chroussaki's life during the first decades of the century was typical of the cosmopolitan Athenian *haute-bourgeoisie*. Every summer and autumn, as can be seen from the private albums, the family would set off on long holiday trips across Europe. In 1921 they visited England, where after a stay in London, they were the guests of Lady Gladys Swaythling at her country house near Southampton.<sup>4</sup> During the course of August and September, 1922, they explored Germany and travelled down the Rhine, taking in Wiesbaden, Frankfurt, Würms, Darmstadt, Nuremberg and Cologne. In 1923 they toured Italy, including Rome, Venice and Certosa. In 1924 they turned to Switzerland, where after visiting Chamonix they stayed for a while at the luxurious Hotel Beau Rivage in Annecy, ending up in France, at Vichy. 1926 saw their most ambitious tour yet; starting from Nice and Monte Carlo in southern France, they travelled north to Paris and the International Exposition, onward to Chartres and then to Belgium, where they visited the medieval cities of Louvain and Bruges and the Great War battlefields of Ypres.

If the Chroussaki family planned another such trip the following year, it must in all probability have been without Maria, whose interests seem to have taken an another direction at about this time. On the basis of the admittedly scanty surviving evidence, it seems likely that 1926 proved a seminal year for Chroussaki, seeing the transformation of a no doubt charming but not particularly noteworthy Athenian social butterfly into a rather soberer and more mature person. Chroussaki's nephew, Ion Vorres, ascribes this change to some disappointment in her emotional life. According to his published testimony, Maria Chroussaki was "sensitive, talented, generous, with a rare compassion for her fellow men";

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<sup>2</sup> Information regarding the Chroussaki family is based largely on the testimony of the photographer's niece, Maro Marinopoulou, during the course of several conversations with National Gallery curator Marilena Kassimati during the course of 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See entry "Mathiopoulos Pavlos" in *Lexiko Ellinon Kallitehnon* (Dictionary of Greek Artists), v.3, Melissa, Athens 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Townhill Park House, where Lord and Lady Swaythling entertained on a lavish scale in the interwar years, including such guests as Queen Mary and Princess Alice.

nevertheless, she was “a lonely woman... retiring by nature, [she] was early forced to seek strength and escape inwardly, having endured the sadness of a life-long rejection by the only man she ever loved”.<sup>5</sup>

Though there is no other evidence for this supposed rejection, it is possible that had it occurred, such a disappointment may indeed have contributed to Chroussaki’s new resolution. Nevertheless, the impression left by Vorres’s description, of a woman withdrawn from rough and tumble of everyday life and perhaps overly sensitive, is very much at odds with what we know of her subsequent career. If, at some critical moment of her life, an emotional disappointment did in fact cause her to respond in a certain way, there can be no doubt that she very quickly developed into an energetic and capable woman with every confidence in herself and her powers. What we do know is that she never married, something relatively unusual for that time.

In the end, Maria Chroussaki’s life was devoted to two great vocations, photography and nursing. While we remain in the dark concerning the motivation behind the first of these, family tradition must surely have contributed to the second, since all three Chroussaki daughters became volunteer nurses with the Greek Red Cross, with the eldest ultimately becoming Director of the Volunteer Nursing Corps. Maria’s commitment to both these activities was whole-hearted and serious, and remained so to the end of her life. As things fell out, the practices of nursing and photography were not always mutually exclusive, and as we shall see, the combination of the two sometimes proved remarkably fertile.

It is worth noting that irrespective of the skill and dedication which she brought to them, Chroussaki retained vis-a-vis both these activities her essentially amateur status. This fact is characteristic of her time and social class; in other words, before the war, a young spinster of Chroussaki’s background could not easily lay claim to a purely professional status. Under the circumstances, her first step towards a nursing career – for that is what it ultimately became – was her graduation in 1926 from the Volunteer Nursing School of the Greek Red Cross. Before the war, the difference between professional and volunteer nurses, except of course for the fact that the latter were unpaid, was that professionals could be hired on the strength of a primary school education alone, but had to follow a four-year course; on the other hand the training of volunteers, though considerably abridged, was buttressed by regular courses at various hospitals and clinics.

Although Chroussaki always retained the status of volunteer nurse, this was never a reflection on the professionalism she brought to her duties. In a brief ‘Biographical Note’ recently compiled by the Greek Red Cross, Maria Chroussaki’s career is described as “weighty, multifarious, and invariably characterised by an eagerness to serve, diligence, conscientiousness, discipline and modesty”; the report goes on to take particular note of “the wide range of her services”.<sup>6</sup> Behind the stock phrases of this bureaucratic

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Vorres, “Vanishing Greece: Photographs by Maria Chroussaki”, in *The Saturday Book*, London 1973, p.103.

<sup>6</sup> “Curriculum Vitae of Chroussaki Maria”, two-page typewritten memorandum from the Greek Red Cross to the National Gallery, dated August 3rd, 1999.

résumé hides a more dynamic individual than the colourless and conventional virtues ascribed to her would suggest, since Chroussaki eventually achieved the rank of Inspector, having at times played a far from negligible role in the activities of the Greek Red Cross.

Confirming that this new concern was anything but a passing caprice, after her graduation Chroussaki worked in the outpatient wards of Vyronas and Kaisariani, both poor districts of Athens inhabited largely by refugees, and subsequently in the Corinth General Hospital, where she helped nurse earthquake casualties. Presumably because of this experience – the characteristic crush wounds caused by earthquakes requiring a very particular care regimen – she joined an emergency medical unit of the Red Cross which was sent to the Chalkidiki peninsula in October 1932 in the wake of the Ierissos earthquakes. Here, alongside her normal duties, she found time to record both the medical personnel and their patients with her camera.

Her subsequent training included stints at two civilian and one military hospitals in Thessaloniki, and another at Serres General Hospital. In 1939, just before the outbreak of war, she spent six months at Evangelismos General Hospital in Athens training as a theatre nurse. This proved appropriate preparation for the arduous work she was soon to undertake with the Red Cross's field surgical units on the Albanian front, notably the field hospital at Grapsa. Conditions at the front were particularly arduous, with appalling weather conditions exacerbating the usual wartime rigours.

Like many other volunteer nurses, Chroussaki must have continued working as a nurse during the Axis occupation of Athens, since she was at hand to photograph the liberation of the city in 1945. Soon after, she went on an extended tour of the war-ravaged countryside with a British Red Cross unit. Later, during the disastrous civil war, she took part in Red Cross missions evacuating refugee children from Thrace to special 'children's towns' set up by the government in Mytilene and Rhodes. In 1954, she was a member of a Red Cross deputation which travelled to Vienna in order to discuss the repatriation of civil war hostages.

During the postwar years, Chroussaki devoted herself ever more intensively to photography, and in 1955 became a member of the Greek Photographic Association (EFE), an organisation with which her artistic and social activities were to become increasingly identified. She took part in group excursions of photographers in Greece and abroad, sold some of her work to the Greek Tourist Organisation and photographed the activities of the Lykeion Ellinidon, which was dedicated to preserving aspects of traditional Greek culture. Sometimes on her own and sometimes with friends or tour groups organised by EFE or the Touring Club, she travelled the length and breadth of the country; even her trips abroad now had some link with Greece or hellenism: to Jerusalem for the Easter celebration at the Patriarchate in 1952, to St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai in 1955, and, at some point during the fifties, to Cyprus.

During her final years she suffered from Parkinson's disease, an affliction which gradually forced her to reduce her activities; according to Ion Vorres, however, she never lost heart, and continued to photograph on and off until the end. Thanks to the foresight of its then Director Marinos Calligas, she

was greatly cheered by the donation, in 1971, of her photographic archive to the National Gallery. Maria Chroussaki died in Athens during August of the following year.

### 3

As mentioned above, the most important part of the Chroussaki archive consists of 35 albums containing black and white photographs, and of the boxes which house their respective negatives. Nearly all the photographs have been taken on medium-format negatives of various kinds; most are 6x6 and 9x9 cm in size, but they include some more unusual dimensions including 8.5x11.5, 8x13, and 9x12 cm. The relatively large sizes meant that simple contact prints such as those found in the albums could be produced without the use of an enlarger and yet remain easily readable. Very few enlargements survive, including just under a dozen ranging in size from 18x17 cm to 40x30 cm which were printed as competition entries, and a uniform set of 18 smaller enlargements mounted on card which are in the collection of the Benaki Museum. Of the 35 albums, two contain family and personal photographs, not all of whose negatives survive. The other 33 include what Chroussaki must have thought of as her life's work, since notes included in the boxes of negatives show that she went through them, checking the contents, at least once after they were assembled. They represent a wide spectrum of selected images from all over Greece; the only exceptions are album 30, which is entirely devoted to Cyprus, and a few photographs from Jerusalem and Bulgaria in album 16.

Classification is essentially by subject. It is clear that Chroussaki would compile her albums at relatively wide intervals, whenever sufficient material had been gathered, unless a single trip produced enough images to fill an album on their own, as was the case with number 15b. The earliest albums must have been compiled well before the war, as they are the old-fashioned kind, with four window mounts cut into each page behind which the photographs could be slipped, and captions hand-written in white ink on the heavy black or dark grey card. Later albums have white or off-white pages onto which Chroussaki glued her photographs, or else secured them with home-made brown paper hinges. She invariably noted the corresponding number of the negative sleeve, so that every image can be identified by a combination of album and negative numbers. She would also add the place and often the subject of the photograph. Unfortunately, like most photographers of her generation, Chroussaki was lax about recording dates, so that they must usually be extrapolated from the context or subject matter.

According to the evidence of album 1, Chroussaki's earliest photographs are dated 1917, when she was eighteen years old. However, further investigation suggests that either the few surviving examples of this date were an exception, or else that she later decided to destroy most of her very early work, since the vast majority of the images in the first albums can be dated from 1927 onwards. They were all taken on 9x9 cm negatives,

most probably with some form of simple box Kodak. Judging by the negatives, the photographer must at various times in her life used a variety of cameras, but unfortunately none survive. What appears certain is that Chroussaki never had her own darkroom, nor did she ever develop or print her own photographs, even though she may have been taught this rather elementary skill at some point. Her archive contains envelopes and negative sleeves with the names and trademarks of many well-known Athenian processors, often annotated with instructions regarding the printing of specific images.

Thematically, Chroussaki's interests covered a wide range, without however diverging dramatically from those of her contemporaries; they focused primarily on the countryside and its traditions, including landscapes, folk customs and rituals, local dress, ancient monuments, handicrafts, popular dances and ceremonies of all kinds. Urban themes and landscapes are almost entirely absent, except when they form the background to some historical or political event such as those she photographed from the house of her uncle Stefanos Skoulouthis on Constitution Square, where the King George Hotel stands today: the state funeral of King George II in 1947, or the great public demonstration in support of Enosis of August 1954.

Wherever she travelled, she would record traditional occupations of all kinds: silk spinning in Attica, weaving in Arachova, preparing and cleaning sponges in Kalymnos, raisin milling in Argostoli, stitching furs in Kavala, fish salting in Limnos, boat-building in Skiathos and net-weaving in Corfu. She was always fascinated by traditional local dress, whose ceremonial versions in particular varied enormously from district to district; even in Ierissos, with the signs of destruction evident all around, she was to pose a young peasant woman with distaff in hand and the refugee encampment for background. The whole of Album 12 is devoted to traditional costume, with images classified by place or region: Salamis, Metsovo, Karpathos and so forth. Unfortunately, the interest of many of these photographs is reduced by the fact that the models are very obviously young Athenian matrons, presumably students of the Lykeion Ellinidon.

Sometimes Chroussaki would approach a subject or location with positively encyclopaedic intentions, as though she wanted to take away a complete and exhaustive record, above all of its inanimate elements; like Atget, she was particularly beguiled by decorative and architectural details. When, for instance, she photographed on the island of Hydra some time during the fifties, she carefully recorded fountains, courtyards, decorative doorways, carved crests and painted ceilings in the mansions of the Tombazi, Votsi, Koundourioti and Voulgari families. The same album also includes a typological series of images recording the characteristic courtyard mosaics of black and white pebbles found on the nearby island of Spetsai.

Other subjects frequently encountered in Chroussaki's photographs are children, boats and craft of all kinds, fishermen, reflections in water, monasteries and convents, windmills, pigeon houses, samples of handicraft, and – somewhat to our astonishment – contemporary memorials and public statuary of all kinds, often, it must be said, of questionable

artistic value. The identity of these last is, as always, carefully recorded; perhaps the sole exception is an image showing a forest of memorials in Messolonghi, before which even her normally inexhaustible energy flags, and she makes do with the caption “tombs of assorted heroes”. Finally, it is worth commemorating Chroussaki’s particular fondness for ducks, since she takes every opportunity of finding and immortalising these amiable waterfowl wherever she finds herself, from the springs at Kammaena Vourla to the River Ladon and Lake Doirani.

Close-up portraits are rare in Chroussaki’s work, with a few exceptions such as the two laughing boys in *Kassiopi, Kerkyra* (no. 48). This is almost certainly due to shyness, and to the fact that like many amateurs, she never acquired the knack of street photography; as a result, she often chose to photograph strangers from a middle distance, or from the back. On the other hand, when she sometimes staged photographs with more docile models, usually patient peasant women or shepherds, the results tended to look wooden. This is certainly not the case with her wonderful 1935 portrait of an old man in Thebes eating grapes (no. 15), which despite being blatantly posed – Album 7 includes a couple of unsuccessful trials – has an unexpected authority.

If any part of Maria Chroussaki’s work can be described as radical, it is undoubtedly her landscapes. As I have noted elsewhere, “the vast majority of pre-war Greek landscape photography consisted of formulaic variations on a strictly limited number of themes and ideas”,<sup>7</sup> and with a few exceptions, the first postwar decades brought little significant change. An essay entitled “Landscape”, published in the Greek Photographic Association’s magazine in 1973 as a guide to landscape photography for ambitious amateurs, expresses views which might just as easily have been formulated in 1930. According to the author, “one weakness of landscape photography is that it includes extensive areas which lack intrinsic interest such as the sky, the sea, etc.”; he goes on to advise that “the improvement of our photograph depends upon various tricks whose purpose is to cover up the weakness of the subject”, most effective of which is the suggestion that the subject “should be framed by various foreground objects”.<sup>8</sup>

That Chroussaki did in fact undoubtedly at first follow such prescriptions, and with some success, is apparent from compositions such as *Vouliagmeni* of 1936 (no. 36), with the branches of an umbrella pine framing the view of the bay. Later, however, she developed a much sparer and more dynamic approach to landscape, an approach which at times comes close to abstraction, as in *The Bay of Mandouthi*, 1945–46 (no. 19), while in *The Untrodden Rock* of 1946 or *Megali Langada* of 1954–59 (no. 40), she reduces the landscapes of Meteora and Mount Taigetos to simple masses of rock and expanses of sky. Elsewhere, in the *Temple of Apollo, Corinth* (no. 4), on an otherwise bare plateau, Chroussaki depicts a single cypress tree in front of a row of doric columns, wittily illustrating Vitruvius’s contention that this order was derived from primitive timber constructions.

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<sup>7</sup> John Stathatos, *The Invention of landscape: Greek Landscape and Greek Photography, 1870–1995*, Camera Obscura, Thessaloniki 1996, p.33.

<sup>8</sup> Petros Broussalis, “Landscape”, *Elliniki Fotografia* no.55, March 1973, pp. 24–26.

In the introductory section of this essay, I commented on the undoubted artistic quality of Chroussaki's depictions of the inhabitants of the Greek countryside, a quality evident in the harmony of images such as *Boat, Lake Yannena*, 1932–35, (no. 26), or the demure 1931 portrait of two young women wearing the traditional dress of Naoussa (no. 10). It is, however, this very aestheticisation which unavoidably distances Chroussaki's photographs from her subjects – something which also, of course, affects the equivalent work of her colleagues. We should not forget that Chroussaki, irrespective of her intentions, came from a different class and from what was in effect an entirely different world; whether she wanted to or not, she could only approach the peasants and country people in her camera's rangefinder as the Other, in other words as something exotic, whose depiction was inevitably governed by inherent prejudices and preconceptions.

This remark is not made in a spirit of criticism. It merely underlines the well-known power imbalance which is invariably present between photographer and subject – an imbalance as characteristic, if to a different degree, of Chroussaki's relations with Greek peasants as it would have been of a 19th-century anthropologist's response to the native population of Africa or Asia. For Nicolas Peterson, this is part of a 'romantic' ideology through which strange cultures are resolved by "transforming them into aesthetic phenomena and in so doing decontextualising and distancing them".<sup>9</sup> The dilemma becomes even more acute when it is a question of representing social relationships, a matter concerning which outsiders will by definition be still more ignorant; according to James C. Faris, "we can have little idea about, say, Navajo social relations from photographs of Navajo except those the photographer or the viewer (whose expectations are themselves constituted in part by photographs) brings".<sup>10</sup> Occasionally, however, as in *Peasant Women, Destouni*, (no. 9), Chroussaki manages to provisionally breach the barriers between herself and her subjects and depict them, not as she imagines them to be, but as they might visualise themselves and their relations.

Naturally, Chroussaki did not always act as an outsider, and when she photographed familiar spaces or situations, the results were particularly memorable. Such a terrain was, above all, that of nursing. Except for a few purely personal photographs, including the rare self-portrait of 1921 with two colleagues in the grounds of the 2nd Military Hospital, the first time she depicted this field of endeavour in any depth was during October 1932, on the Chalkidiki peninsula, where she found herself caring for the Ierissos earthquake victims. We do not know whether and to what extent Chroussaki's photographic activities had any kind of formal or informal sanction – most likely they did not –, but she must have benefited from at

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<sup>9</sup> Nicolas Peterson, "The Popular Image", in I. & T. Donaldson, *Seeing the First Australians*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1985, p.165.

<sup>10</sup> James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1996, p.14.

least the tacit sufferance of her colleagues and superiors in the Red Cross, since certain photographs, such as the *Field Surgery Interior* (no. 97) are obviously posed. Also posed, if with great skill, is the touchingly simple photograph of a nurse and a barefoot boy standing on a pile of ruins (no. 94), a photograph which, had it been published, could easily have acquired iconic value for the Red Cross.

Chroussaki exploited this unusual confluence of personal experience and historical testimony once again in the photographs she took during the course of the Greco-Italian war, when she produced some of her most valuable work.<sup>11</sup> Her photographs never lapse into mindless nationalist rhetoric, and a few preserve something of the innocent enthusiasm with which many Greeks greeted the declaration of war – that tall infantryman, for instance (could he have been a shepherd in civilian life?), posing spontaneously and with a kind of mocking pride with a kid in his arms (no. 110). Mostly, however, they commemorate a patient acquiescence, from the stoical guard in his improvised shelter, an authentic descendent of Charlie Chaplin and the Good Soldier Schweik, to the nurses in their cave shelter, hoping for a few minutes sleep between two air-raids.

Exhaustion – if not always danger – was a daily constant for the nurses as for the soldiers. One of Chroussaki's colleagues, Sophie Meria, has left a description of the conditions prevailing as winter began to bite in the mountains of Albania: "We were told this was the worst weather anybody had seen in nearly eight years. We weren't prepared for it. Our soldiers had neither the experience nor the appropriate clothing and rations to face such cold. They fought with their boots in tatters, with insufficient woollen clothes, surviving on tea, corn-bread and a salted herring. Our casualties in Albania were due first of all to frostbite and then to enemy action".<sup>12</sup> A few pages further on, Meria enumerates the almost insurmountable problems faced by Red Cross teams: "The hospital train now contained the doctors, the pharmacist, four nurses including myself and ninety-seven amputees and severely wounded or sick patients. Some of them were suffering from pneumonia, pleurisy and pulmonary oedema, and we also had four cases of typhoid fever".

Chroussaki's instinctive empathy must have been obvious, judging from the way in which the soldiers she photographed responded to her presence with a mixture of gravity and respect, a respect no doubt due partly to her nurse's uniform. Among the most moving of these photographs is one of a cavalry reconnaissance squadron pushing towards Delvino through the frozen slush (no. 109), and another of wounded officers in the improvised hospital ward at Yannena (no. 115). It is worth noting that Chroussaki's role as photographer was at least nominally acknowledged by the powers that

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<sup>11</sup> Greece entered World War II on the Allied side on October 28th, 1940, following the rejection of an Italian ultimatum. The Greek army drove the Italians back across the border, and by the end of the year, a counter-offensive had secured much of southern Albania. By mid-winter, however, the Italians managed to consolidate a defensive line, forcing a protracted stalemate. As a result, when the Germans invaded Yugoslavia and Greece in early April 1941, the bulk of the Greek army was trapped on the Albanian front.

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Meria, *Xerizomata... Apo topo se topo*, Athens 1990, p.127.

be, as witness the fact that most of the photographs she took at the time carry on their back the rubber-stamped *nihil obstat* of the General Army Staff's military censor.



On the Albanian front, 1941

Among these images is a small but intriguing selection of landscapes, which succeed in communicating something of those wild and inhospitable parts. Despite certain fleeting moments of beauty, the landscape of the front line would not normally have been an object of contemplation, but a matter of life and death. The novelist Yannis Beratis, who wrote what is probably the finest narrative account of the Albanian campaign, has described the idiosyncratic relationship which existed between man and landscape in these circumstances: "Throughout the whole period of the campaign, you would see the landscape, you would appreciate it, but you could never give yourself up to it; I mean that it never won you over. It was always something entirely outside you, which never had any connection whatever with what was happening inside you. Or rather, there was no place inside you for it. It was as if a thick, unbreakable sheet of glass was always between you and the surrounding nature, which isolated you, which didn't let you feel and absorb the specific nature of the landscape you looked at...".<sup>13</sup>

Chroussaki does not appear to have taken any photographs during the occupation, presumably because photographic materials were banned or otherwise unavailable. She must, however, have put aside at least one roll of film, or else acquired one very quickly, since she was able to record the celebrations with which Athenians greeted liberation on October 18th 1945. She adopted a high vantage point to photograph the crowds flooding Stadiou Street and Mitropoleos Square in front of Athens Cathedral, as well as a Greek flag floating above Fillelinon Street; later, however, she couldn't resist joining the happy throng at street level, which she photographed in

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<sup>13</sup> Yannis Beratis, *To Plati Potami*, Ermis, Athens 1973, p.57.

Constitution Square and in front of Athens University. A striking feature of these images is the great care with which the men, women and children of Athens have dressed in their finest clothes in order to welcome the allied forces. The next day she was to photograph young women in traditional dress greeting British aircrew at Tanagra airport, presumably for the benefit of the armed forces press service. These scenes are very obviously staged, but the high spirits of all concerned are in no doubt.



Liberation, Athens, 18 October 1944

Album 14, which begins with the liberation, is the largest, richest and most joyous of all. In spring 1945, Maria Chroussaki set off on a long tour of duty with a British Red Cross voluntary medical team, visiting Lamia, Eubea, Florina, Yannena, Thessaloniki and Langadas in the far north. The tour took nearly a year to complete (possibly with some breaks for re-supply), since the album illustrates the passing of the seasons, from the Easter celebrations of spring 1945 to the snows of winter 1946. The team's mission was primarily the medical examination and preventive inoculation of children in the countryside, many of whom would probably be seeing a doctor for the first time in their lives.

Despite being constantly on the road, sometimes on army lorries and sometimes, when visiting the remoter villages, on mule or donkey back, it is obvious that the party's spirits, those of Chroussaki among them, remained high in spite of what must have been a demanding workload. A number of photographs catch the company in moments of relaxation including amateur dramatics, sea and river bathing, picnics and snowball fights as well as more formal social occasions such as the wedding they attended in the village of Skopia (no. 16). This period may well have been the happiest of Chroussaki's life: she had survived war and occupation, was

absorbed in work of undeniable social value which also afforded her immediate satisfaction, and she was working with congenial people in an atmosphere whose obvious professionalism seems to have been free of unnecessary spit and polish. Above all, she was travelling through a Greece which though hungry and battered was at last free, and for which it was possible, however briefly, to foresee a better future. After the miseries, shortages and horrors of the occupation, she must have felt freer than ever before.

Her mood can easily be inferred from the photographs she took at almost every step, some of which are amongst her finest. To begin with, she photographed the everyday routine of her unit, producing unforgettable images of open-air surgeries in Tymfristos and the villages of Eubea. Particularly memorable is the sequence illustrating the examination and care of the children of Ayios Georgios, in which the children are progressively bathed, dried, salved and rubbed down on the rough floorboards of the one-room village school. In the sunlight pouring in from the high windows, the naked limbs of the children, the white smocks of the nurses and the sparse furnishings take on an almost renaissance transcendence. As the weeks went by, she photographed many other things: the Gorgopotamos Gorge viaduct, still in ruins after a joint anglo-greek raid in autumn 1942, the courtyard of the church of the Virgin in Politika, with light falling through the leaves like golden coins, and the children of Doirani setting off with flags to commemorate the battle of Lahana.

The same almost carefree spirit imbues her next major body of work, taken about a year later, the results of which fill album 15b. In August 1947 she left for another extended tour of Greece, this time to the islands of the Aegean with a unit of the Greek Red Cross. Beginning at Rhodes, the team visited a string of islands which few Greeks at that time would even have heard of, healing, vaccinating and distributing children's food supplements: Leros, Patmos, Lipsi, Symi, Chalki, Nisyros, Tilos, Kassos, Karpathos, Kastelorizo, Astypalea... As usual, Chroussaki kept her camera always ready to hand. On Karpathos, the medical team left the sea and took to muleback in order to visit every last village and hamlet on the island, from Pigadia to Ayios Nikolas by way of Aperi, Volatha, Otho, Menetes, Arkassa, Diafani, Olimbos and Spoa.

Maria Chroussaki's last documentary sequence is of particular interest, since it casts light upon an episode of the civil war concerning which we have little first-hand testimony and less photographic documentation.<sup>14</sup> In

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<sup>14</sup> The Greek civil war between the conservative national government and a communist-led insurgency raged, often with considerable brutality, from December 1944 to October 1949. According to a British historian, "The year 1948 was one of almost unrelieved gloom. [...] in October 1948 there was general proclamation of martial law. The Communist guerrillas now held an even larger extent of Greece than the resistance had held at its peak during the occupation, including much of the Peloponnese and even Attica. Coalition governments came and went, making little difference to the course of events. But in 1949 the tide began to turn." (C.M. Woodhouse, *Modern Greece: A Short History*, Faber & Faber, London 1977, p. 259.)

spring 1948, the Greek Red Cross collected together a number of children from the northern regions of Macedonia and Thrace. Referred to by the national government as *andartoplikta*, or ‘victims of banditry’, they were quickly evacuated by sea to children’s towns in the south under the supervision of the Ministry of Welfare. Given the historical significance of these sometimes contentious events, and also because of the opportunity offered for a thorough analysis of the relevant photographs, it seems appropriate to consider the issues in greater detail, beginning with Chroussaki’s role in the affair, continuing with the factual background, and ending with whatever additional information can be gleaned from the images.

Her involvement began in March 1948, when she arrived in the northern port of Alexandroupolis with a Red Cross unit which proceeded to take charge of a number of children from Thrace.<sup>15</sup> The children were taken on board the Royal Hellenic Navy troop-ship *Aliakmon*, and sailed for Piraeus escorted by the destroyer *Pindos*. According to the newspaper *Kathimerini*, the children arrived on April 2nd, the second such group to reach the capital. A few months later, in June 1948, Chroussaki accompanied other parties of children on at least two journeys from Piraeus to Mytilene on board the troop-ships *Samos* and *Alfios*. She also took photographs of children’s towns at Mytilene and Kaisariani, as well as snapshots of the visit by count Folke Bernadotte of the International Red Cross to the children’s town at Kalathos in Rhodes.<sup>16</sup>

Who exactly were these ‘bandit-stricken’ children? According to the historian Angeliki Laiou, “Greek government sources, as well as right-wing newspapers, used the terms ‘*andartoplikti*’ or ‘*simmorioplikti*’, translated into English as ‘bandit-stricken refugees’. The ideological/propaganda purpose of this nomenclature was to suggest, both for internal and for foreign consumption, that these people were forced out of their villages by the [Democratic Army], or that they sought refuge from [its] aggression”.<sup>17</sup> The imputation is not particularly convincing, in view of the well-known military axiom that insurgent forces usually have little to gain from evicting the local population on which they depend for supplies, information and

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations Special Commission on the Balkans (UNSCOB) report A/754 (1948) states that according to the Greek government, approximately 5,000 children [aged 3–14] had been collected from Thrace, of which some 2,300 were evacuated via Alexandroupolis”. It is unlikely that all of the latter accompanied Chroussaki’s party.

<sup>16</sup> Bernadotte, who had just accepted the onerous post of UN Mediator for Palestine, moved his headquarters to Rhodes on July 10th 1948. He must have visited Kalathos fairly shortly thereafter, since he was murdered in Jerusalem a few weeks later. He had visited mainland Greece for the first time in April, laying the foundation stone of a Swedish-financed children’s home in Patras. (Ralph Hewins, *Count Folke Bernadotte*, Hutchinson, London 1950).

<sup>17</sup> Angeliki Laiou, “Population Movements in the Greek Countryside During the Civil War”, in Lars Bærentzen, John Iatrides and Ole Smith, *Studies in the History of the Greek Civil War, 1945–49*, Museum Tusulanum, Copenhagen 1987, pp. 60–61. The terms *Democratic Army* (DS) or *Democratic Army of Greece* (DSE) was adopted by the insurgent armed forces in December 1946.

recruitment; conversely, the creation of free–fire zones in disputed areas is standard procedure in counter–insurgency campaigns.

The inspiration for the operation appears to have been primarily Queen Frederica's. In her memoirs, she describes how she founded the Royal Welfare Foundation: "The main project, at the beginning, was to save our children in the northern provinces from being carried across the border and being educated as enemies of the country".<sup>18</sup> On the eve of the *Aliakmon's* arrival in Piraeus, according to *Kathimerini*, the Queen was even more forthright: "The Queen briefed Messrs. Tsaldaris and Griswold about the efforts made to date regarding the concentration, transport and welfare of the children in the northern provinces who are at risk of kidnapping by the communist bandits".<sup>19</sup>

The object, clearly, was to counteract and preempt what became known as the *paidomazoma* or 'child–gathering' – in other words, the removal behind the iron curtain by the Democratic Army of children from areas under its control. For their part, the communists claimed this removal constituted "a correct, praiseworthy and humanitarian action on the part of the Democratic Army", whose purpose was to save the children "from incarceration in Queen Frederica's reformatories".<sup>20</sup> Based on the testimony of a Democratic Army officer, the interpretation given by Ioannis Koliopoulos is rather more convincing: "The KKE [Communist Party of Greece] and DES leadership hoped that by means of this 'evacuation' they would resolve the pressing problem of the DSE's combat reserves, since the transportation of children would relieve their parents of responsibility and facilitate their recruitment into the ranks of the Democratic Army".<sup>21</sup>

Given that we lack an adequate number of first–hand accounts by those directly affected, it is difficult if not impossible to adjudicate between these conflicting viewpoints. Perhaps the only reasonable conclusion, however unsatisfactory, is that reached by the Danish historian Lars Bærentzen, according to whom "although there is no doubt about the central fact that both sides, during 1948, moved a large number of children from the war zone into secure areas, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about such questions as how, when and why the decision to do this was made by either side, and also about the extent to which parents were left free to decide if their children should go".<sup>22</sup> Koliopoulos comes to more or less the same conclusion: "There is no doubt that one of the principal motivations for the transportation of children [by the KKE] was concern for their safety; there is also no doubt that a basic reason behind the government's removal of

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<sup>18</sup> Queen Frederica of the Hellenes, *A Measure of Understanding*, Macmillan, London 1971, p. 134.

<sup>19</sup> *Kathimerini*, 1.4.1958. Panagiotis Tsaldaris was Deputy Prime Minister; Dwight Griswold headed the American Mission for Aid to Greece (AMAG).

<sup>20</sup> Vassilis Bartziotas, *O Agonas tou Dimokratikou Stratou Elladas*, Athens 1981, p. 128; quoted by Irini Lagani, *To "paidomazoma" ke i Ellino–Yugoslavikes schesis*, Sideris, Athens 1996, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Ioannis Koliopoulos, *Leilasia fronimaton: to Makedoniko zitima stin periodo tou emfiliou polemou*, Vania, Thessaloniki 1995, vol. 2, p. 215.

<sup>22</sup> Lars Bærentzen, "The 'Paidomazoma' and the Queen's Camps", in Bærentzen, Iatrides & Smith, op. cit., p.128.

many children [...] was also a concern for their safety and for their retention within the country. This concern, however, did not exclude recourse to means such as force and fraud..."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, what additional information can be deduced from a careful study of Chroussaki's photographs? If we examine her shots of the boarding procedure at Alexandroupolis (nos 148 and 152), we note that all the children have a label or tag pinned to their collar or hanging round their neck. Unfortunately, even enlarging and sharpening does not yield up the information written on them, but it becomes clear that these were official dockets, rubber-stamped in the bottom left corner, which would presumably be filled in with details such as name, surname and place of origin when the children were first picked up.

The reception committee waiting at the troop-ship is almost parodically characteristic, consisting as it does of a doctor, three nurses, a bishop, a priest, three navy officers, two men in dark suits and a uniformed policeman. Viewers today will be struck by the signs which three of the children are holding up in a very conspicuous manner; with their careful hand-lettering, they have obviously been prepared beforehand and passed out for the benefit of the press. Two of them display an identical message: "We beg You Jesus to protect us, to make us good Christians to bring Peace to our Nation and make us Worthy to return once again to our Beloved parents". Whilst these are not of themselves unworthy sentiments, we are conscious of the simple-minded nature of the attempted propaganda.

The children's ages vary from five to around fourteen or fifteen; no babies or very young children can be seen. Based on the group photographs, boys appear to outnumber girls by a factor of about three to one; on the other hand, the girls seem on average to be older than the boys. Keeping in mind that these are children from remote rural communities who may have lived through four years of occupation and another three of civil war, they all seem in reasonably good physical condition – certainly there are no signs of recent under-nourishment. They are almost all wearing leather shoes and some kind of coat or jacket, while the two girls and three boys who were singled out by Chroussaki (nos 151 and 153) may have been chosen precisely because they were particularly ragged or exotic looking. We also note the fact that as was common at the time, all the boys have had their head shaven, but none of the girls – lice, it must be presumed, being sex-specific in their preferences. Finally, a small number of Chroussaki's photographs, particularly those of poorly or traditionally dressed children, who tend to look more worried or afraid, may lead us to suspect that they come from slavophone areas of Thrace. Both Bærentzen and Koliopoulos agree that a for number of reasons, this minority tended to support the communists, and it is not impossible that slavophone children may have been singled out; at this point, however, we come up against the limits of photographic testimony.

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<sup>23</sup> Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

With the end of the civil war in 1949, the more adventurous phase of Maria Chroussaki's life also came to an end. According to her Red Cross CV, she undertook active field duty one more time, in August 1953, when she went to Patras and Cephalonia to look after earthquake casualties. Essentially, however, the fifties and sixties were devoted to a whole-hearted exploration of Greece by way of photography. Her membership of the Greek Photographic Association (EFE), founded in 1952, was an important milestone in this process.



Hospital Ward, 1941

According to Kostas Balafas, a founding member of the association, Chroussaki became close friends with the distinguished photographer Voula Papaioannou, and the two women would often set off on photographic journeys together.<sup>24</sup> This account has been given further confirmation by the art historian Fani Konstantinou, who noticed the extraordinary similarity between a photograph of two small children taken by Chroussaki in Lefkada (Lefkas) in 1954 and another by Papaioannou currently in the Benaki Museum collection; a comparison of the two prints shows that they must have been taken within a few seconds of each.

The discovery of a close artistic relationship between Chroussaki and a Greek photographer of such importance is of particular interest, since it implies that it may have been Chroussaki who introduced Papaioannou to the medium. According to Fani Konstantinou, Papaioannou first became involved with photography “at the ripe old age of forty”, in other words in

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<sup>24</sup> Kostas Balafas in conversation with Nikos Panayotopoulos in Athens, July 1999.

1938;<sup>25</sup> Chroussaki, as we have seen, had twenty years advance on her. Could these two Athenian ladies, who were of roughly the same age and shared many interests, have met prior to 1950? Unfortunately, the almost total absence of documentation in the form of letters, journals and so forth from both archives, that of Chroussaki in the National Gallery and that of Papaioannou in the Benaki Museum, make it impossible to answer this question. In any case, however, it can probably be taken for granted that the two photographers exercised at least some influence on each other.

Voula Papaioannou was an active member of EFE, and her name often appears in the association's magazine *Elliniki Fotografia*, usually in connection with some group exhibition or other. In her own rather more low-key way, Chroussaki was also becoming better known in the small world of Greek photography. She first published one of her photographs in the fourth issue of the magazine, in July 1955, and on four subsequent occasions. Other references to her date from the sixties, when she became increasingly absorbed by colour transparency photography; towards the end of 1961, we learn, EFE devoted an evening to a projection of her recent work from Messolonghi.<sup>26</sup>

Two years later, she took part with another twenty-three members in a competition organised by EFE's parent organisation, the Fédération Internationale de l'Art Photographique (FIAP). Such competitions, as well as the essentially amateur exhibitions and salons organised on a regular basis by FIAP, were obviously of interest to Chroussaki at that time, and it is to this interest that we owe the few vintage enlargements of her work to survive. When, in 1968, she was awarded an honorary distinction by FIAP, *Elliniki Fotografia* published a brief biographical note which recapitulated her successes in this area: "Maria Chroussaki possesses an extensive collection of black and white and colour photographs of Greece. She has often been honoured with prizes in photographic art competitions, and has shown her work at the Touring Club. Her photographs have been exhibited abroad, at the Seventh International Salon of Japan, in 1934, and at the Second International Exhibition of Photographic Art of Cairo in 1947."<sup>27</sup> Apart from the Touring Club shows, which must have been intended for a limited audience, Chroussaki's only solo exhibition appears to have been held at EFE during the first two weeks of February 1967, but unfortunately, no details survive of the work shown.

While it is clear that she enjoyed the company of her fellow members, as well as the various group activities organised by the association, we cannot judge to what extent they influenced her photography. On the one hand, the quality of the average member's work was relatively undistinguished,

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<sup>25</sup> Fani Konstantinou, *Voula Papaioannou*, Fotografos Editions, Athens 1990.

<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, the Chroussaki archive includes a substantial number of 35 mm colour transparencies taken throughout the sixties; they depict, in often exhaustive detail, many Greek places and monuments. Having examined a selection of these, it is the author's belief that they are of primarily comparative and documentary interest; they could, however, conceivably become the object of a future study.

<sup>27</sup> *Elliniki Fotografia* no. 41, August 1968. The first date mentioned is presumably erroneous.

but on the other, it remains a fact that the membership included such talented photographers as Papaioannou, Spyros Meletzis, Kostas Balafas and Dimitris Charisiadis. It is however significant that the five photographs by Chroussaki which were at various times reproduced in *Elliniki Fotografia*, and which we must assume had been specially selected, do not seem particularly outstanding; on the contrary, they appear to us rather flat and conventional, and scarcely representative of the richness of Chroussaki's work. Obviously, one of the many things we remain ignorant of is the extent to which these images would have represented the tastes of the photographer or those of the magazine's editorial board.

One would like to know more about Chroussaki's views of the photographic medium, its role and status. The question of status has practical as well as theoretical implications: in what light, for instance, did she regard her involvement with photography, that of an amateur or a that of a professional? Although photography was not a means of livelihood for her, it is abundantly clear that she approached it with considerable professionalism. The most convincing support for this view of course lies in the work itself, but some additional scraps of information also seem relevant. As early as the thirties, Chroussaki had in her possession two rubber stamps with which she safeguarded her intellectual rights: the first read, in two lines and in French, "REPRODUCTION INTERDITE, / M. CRUSACHI, ATHENES 1930" and the second, more simply and in Greek, "M. CHROUSSAKI – ATHENS 1930". Impressions of both these stamps can be found on the backs of many subsequent photographs.

It is also certain, according to both Vorres and the aforementioned biographical note in *Elliniki Fotografia*, that Chroussaki sold an unspecified number of photographs (probably colour slides) to the Greek National Tourist Organisation (EOT) for publicity purposes. This was not unusual for the period, when many photographers provided EOT with advertising imagery in exchange for usually derisory payment. Research in this area is however complicated by the fact that according to the conditions of purchase published by the organisation in 1959, photographers automatically lost their copyright and all subsidiary rights to EOT, which was thereafter free to make whatever use of the material it saw fit. As a result, the majority of the photographs they published remain anonymous.

We also have the evidence of a fragmentary letter found in the Chroussaki archive which confirms that her photographic activities were known at an official level. Dated 24.1.1967, it is a request from the Greek consul in Würzburg, West Germany, for the dispatch of up to sixty colour slides to be used in an illustrated lecture on Greece. A detailed list of the subjects required was appended, including Kerkyra, the Castalian Spring and various archaeological sites; there is however no mention in the surviving fragments of the letter of copyright or fees, nor do we know what the photographer's response was.

There can be no doubt of the very real value of Maria Chroussaki's so happily rediscovered work. First of all because of its intrinsic quality, a quality which guarantees Chroussaki a secure place in the chronicles of Greek photographic history. Second, because it conforms to the tradition whereby many of the best photographers of her generation and its immediate successor combined artistic objectives with photographic testimony – Chroussaki in Albania and with the Red Cross, Papaioannou during the occupation and the post-war reconstruction, and Balafas and Meletzis with the resistance. Third, and to my mind equally significant, because the Chroussaki archive provides an exemplary demonstration of photography's multifarious nature, thanks to which we can reconstruct the outline of a rich and idiosyncratically creative career through the accumulated photographs of an entire lifetime.

If this work has survived and can at last become more widely known, we owe it to the diligence of a handful of people. First of all, of course, to the photographer herself, whose confidence in the value of her work ensured that it was left in an organised and accessible shape. Perhaps the most important role in its survival was played by Marinos Calligas, who arranged for its acquisition by the National Gallery at a time when it had not yet occurred to anybody that Greek photography might repay consideration. The boldness of this decision can be gauged by the fact that it occurred in 1971, two years before the establishment of the Benaki Museum's photographic archive and an entire decade before the publication of Alkis Xanthakis' *History of Greek Photography*. Finally, over twenty years later, there followed the renewed interest of the National Gallery and the concern of the photographer's niece, Maro Marinopoulou. It is to such happy coincidences that we owe the pages which follow.

**JOHN STATHATOS**

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