

Maria Edelstain-Goudeli and the beginning of Montessori education in Greece

Maria Edelstain-Goudeli i l'inici de l'educació Montessori a Grècia

Elisavet Chorianopoulou

elsa.ch@montessoriani.gr

Montessori School of Athens Maria Goudeli (Greece, Grècia)

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RESUM

L'obra de Maria Montessori es va estendre arreu del món en un gran nombre de països. A Grècia, es va aplicar per primera vegada a la dècada de 1930 per Maria Goudeli (primer, Maria Edelstein), una pionera de l'educació Montessori a Grècia.¹ El present estudi pretén descriure la història d'Edelstain-Goudeli, dins de l'entorn social, polític, històric i cultural de l'època. És important que la comunitat pedagògica d'arreu del món investigui i conegui com s'estableix qualsevol sistema educatiu "alternatiu" en un país sense experiència prèvia, sobretot perquè fins avui el sistema educatiu grec ha estat molt centralitzat, tant en l'organització com en l'administració. Edelstain-Goudeli va haver de superar les tradicions intel·lectuals dominants i les institucions polítiques i educatives de Grècia, per tal de traslladar a la societat grega el

¹ Nota dels coordinadors: Existeix una traducció castellana de l'obra més important de GOUDELI, Maria, *La higiene psíquica del niño. Resultado de una experiencia montessoriana* (Barcelona: Ediciones Hispano-Griegas, 1981) amb una presentació de Maria Antònia Canals i Tolosa (1930-2022).

sistema educatiu Montessori. El procés que hem seguit se situa en el marc de la “teoria de la recepció” d’una teoria científica en un país de l’anomenada “perifèria científica”. L’estudi també intenta revelar la personalitat d’Edelstain-Goudeli i identificar estímuls i motivacions darrere dels seus esforços i decisions.

PARAULES CLAU: Maria Edelstain-Goudeli, sistema educatiu Montessori, Grècia, teoria de la recepció

ABSTRACT

Maria Montessori’s work spread throughout the world in a vast number of countries. In Greece, it was first implemented by a pioneer of Montessori education there, Maria Goudeli (formerly, Maria Edelstein) in the 1930’s. The present study aims to unfold the history of Edelstain-Goudeli, while examining the social, political, historical and cultural environment of the time. It is important for the global pedagogical community to investigate how any “alternative” education system is established in a country without any prior experience, especially since to date, the Greek education system has been highly centralised in terms of organisation and administration. Edelstain-Goudeli had to overcome the dominant intellectual traditions, and political and educational institutions in Greece, in order to infuse the Montessori education system into Greek society. The process is situated within the framework of “reception theory” for a scientific theory within a “scientifically peripheral” country. The study also attempts to reveal Edelstain-Goudeli’s personality, as well as identify stimuli and motivations underlying her efforts and decisions.

KEY WORDS: Maria Edelstain-Goudeli, Montessori education system, Greece, reception theory

RESUMEN

El trabajo de María Montessori se extendió por todo el mundo en una gran cantidad de países. En Grecia, fue aplicado por primera vez en la década de 1930 por María Goudeli (antes, María Edelstein), pionera de la educación Montessori en Grecia. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo explicar la historia de Edelstain-Goudeli, dentro del contexto social, político, histórico y cultural de la época. Es importante que la comunidad pedagógica de todo el mundo investigue y conozca cómo se establece cualquier sistema educativo «alternativo» en un país sin experiencia previa, especi-

almente porque hasta el día de hoy, el sistema educativo griego ha estado muy centralizado, en términos de organización y administración. Edelstain-Goudeli tuvo que superar las tradiciones intelectuales dominantes y las instituciones políticas y educativas de Grecia, para transfundir a la sociedad griega el sistema educativo Montessori. El proceso se sitúa en el marco de la “teoría de recepción” de una teoría científica en un país de la llamada “periferia científica”. El estudio también intenta desvelar la personalidad de Edelstain-Goudeli e identificar estímulos y motivaciones detrás de sus esfuerzos y decisiones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: María Edelstain-Goudeli, sistema educativo Montessori, Grecia, teoría de la recepción

I. MARIA EDELSTAIN-GOUDELI AND THE BEGINNING OF MONTESSORI EDUCATION IN GREECE

María Montessori’s work spread throughout the world across a vast number of countries, each with its own history of accepting and embodying this different pedagogical system. In Greece, it was first implemented in the 1930’s by María Edelstain-Goudeli, a pioneer of “alternative” education in Greece and a celebrated pedagogue.

The process is situated within the framework of “reception theory” for a scientific theory in a “scientifically peripheral” country—a valuable methodological tool for studying how scientific ideas spread from their place of production to their place of reception.² The reception of a scientific theory in a scientifically peripheral country is identified alongside the history of epistemological, social and cultural obstacles in the country, and can highlight factors and conditions that contributed to this scientific production in its country of origin. In the context of “reception studies”, a scientific theory is not simply *transferred* to the periphery but undergoes a process of *assimilation* in the new social, political and cultural environment (Skordoulis & Stefanidou, 2010).³ In this instance, María Edelstain-Goudeli

² SKORDOULIS, Constantine, D., “The persistence of the theories of physics in natural philosophy”. (G. Vlahakis, Ed.) Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 110-120.

³ SKORDOULIS, Constantine, D.; STEFANIDOU, Constantina, “Epistemological aspects of the historiography of science in Greece”. The paper was presented at the 4th International Conference of the European Society for the History of Science (4th ICESHS) in the Symposium: Different Historiographies of Science. Their Advantages and Short-comings, Barcelona, 18th–20th November 2010, p. 29-47.

undertook the task of introducing Montessori's theory to Greece, overcoming epistemological and/or socio-cultural obstacles in order to establish the first Montessori school there.

I worked for many years as a primary school teacher and administrator in the historic "Montessori School of Athens Maria Goudeli",⁴ the first Montessori school to open in Greece. From the beginning, the effects of the Montessori Method were obvious on the personalities of the students I worked with; the powerful influence of Maria Goudeli, the school's founder, shaped the Montessori principles that the school continues to follow. Thanks to this experience and the Master's studies I then undertook, I acquired even greater appreciation for these two great personalities—Maria Montessori and Maria Goudeli—and their accomplishments, leading me to carry out further research, given there was no prior research into the history of Montessori education in Greece. This article sets out the work I have conducted under the Master's Programme in Montessori Pedagogy AMI in Early Childhood Education (0–6) at the University of Vic, Spain.

It is important for the global pedagogical community to investigate how any *alternative* education system is established in a country without any prior experience. Especially since to date, the Greek education system has been highly centralised in terms of organisation and administration. With regard to schooling principles and practices, there has always been a national curriculum, uniform school timetables and an approved series of textbooks that are also mandatory in the private sector. Maria Edelstain-Goudeli did not simply transfer the Montessori Method of Education to Greece, but rather undertook initiatives in order to meet the specific needs of Greek families and social reality.

2. MARIA EDELSTAIN-GOUDELI: BIOGRAPHY

Maria Edelstain (later Goudeli) was born in Odesa, Russia, in 1906 or 1908, the oldest of three daughters of a Russian-Greek mother and a German-Hebrew father.⁵ Her parents divorced when the girls were young, and Maria grew up in the Greek community of Egypt, where she attended a Greek

⁴ www.montessoriani.org

⁵ Archives of the Montessori School of Athens Maria Goudeli: Edelstain's professional pedagogical indication from the Vice Chancellor the National & Kapodistrian University of Athens (2/2/1933).

school. In 1921, when she was finishing high school, the family moved to Greece.⁶ She undertook studies in nursery school teaching, physical sciences at the University of Athens, music at the Auditorium of Athens and theatre in the School of Drama at the National Theatre of Greece. She also took philosophical, medical, social and financial courses at the Free Social Welfare School. In 1933, she studied the Montessori Method by Maria Montessori in Spain, and implemented it at the Greek school where she was working as a teacher.

She met her future husband, Sotiris Goudelis, in 1936 and they married in 1942. During World War II, she was transferred to the Education Department of the National Board of Hellenic Women, to teach ladies that would staff orphanages for war victims. At the end of the war in 1945, she resigned from public education and published her signature book, *Psychic Hygiene of the Child*.⁷ Immediately following this, she established a Montessori nursery classroom environment at the Aidonopoulou private school,⁸ working there for three years. She continued her pedagogical studies at the Sorbonne and prepared to set up her own private school.⁹ Indeed, in the 1949-1950 academic year, with the help and support of her husband, Maria started her own private Montessori School for children between the ages of three and six at her own home in Athens. The following academic year, she established a primary school.¹⁰ In 1964, the school moved to new premises, which were named the “Montessori School of Athens Maria Goudeli” and are still fully operational today.

Maria Goudeli wrote several books and articles about Montessori practice and theory, creating pedagogical material based on Montessori principles and giving many lectures to parents and educators. Maria Goudeli was diagnosed with cancer in 1981 and eventually passed away in 1991. A few years before his own death (1997), her husband Sotiris left the school and the rest of their property to a newly formed non-profit entity, the “Maria & Sotiris Goudelis Foundation”. The board members are linked to the school and its philosophy,

⁶ GOUELI, Maria, *What is the school*. Athens, Greece: Montessori School of Athens.

⁷ GOUELI, Maria, *Psychic hygiene of the child - Theory*. Athens: Maria & Sotiris Goudelis Foundation, 2006. Archives: Goudeli's application to publish “Psychic Hygiene of the Child” at the Ministry of the Press (18/12/1945).

⁸ Archives: Goudeli's job application to Aidonopoulou school and acceptance (7/10, 1/11/1946).

⁹ Archives: Certificate of Goudeli's attendance of summer courses, Sorbonne (9/8/1947).

¹⁰ Archives: Ministry of Education's permission for Goudeli to establish a private nursery school (15/3/1949); permission to establish a private primary school (19/9/1950).

and have run the school until the present day, continuing Maria Goudeli's work.



Maria Edelstain Goudeli

3. MONTESSORI'S PEDAGOGICAL METHOD

Maria Montessori (1870-1952) designed her pedagogical method around scientific principles. Being a doctor herself, she drew her conclusions about how best to support and guide children on their developmental pathway, based on the scientific observation of children in diverse cultures and many countries.¹¹ In this sense, her findings represent universal principles of human behaviour, and are a sound foundation for education systems everywhere. She concentrated on the philosophy of education and not simply its methods, defining the goal of education as “the development of a complete

¹¹ STANDING, Edwing Mortimer, *Maria Montessori - Her Life and Work*. New York, USA: Plume, 1998.

human being, originated to the environment and adapted to his or her time, place and culture". The foundational ideas of Maria Montessori could be summarised as follows: human development does not occur in a steady, linear ascent but in a series of formative planes. That development is made complete by human beings' tendencies to certain universal actions in relation to their environment. This interaction with the environment is most productive when it is self-chosen and founded upon individual interest (Polk Lillard, 1996).¹²

Maria Montessori's observation of human development from birth to adulthood led to an educational approach that supports children's natural development, providing the skills and support to reach their full potential in life. With a strong emotional, behavioural and moral foundation, children become motivated, active and independent learners who are prepared for the world outside school. Academics and knowledge-building are key Montessori qualities, as too is the ability to think creatively and understand the needs of others. When these fundamental skills are fostered early in life, children gain the ability to problem solve, persevere and interact well with others in any situation. Unlike traditional classrooms, Montessori learning environments are designed to fit the specific needs of each child's stage of development. Learning is all about the activity and independence of the child to discover what they need at each specific moment. The Montessori teaching method aims at guiding children to learn independently and reach their unique potential. Children have the freedom to engage in their own learning experience and the Montessori teacher is there to support the child throughout this process.¹³

*Our principal concern must be to educate humanity—the human beings of all nations—in order to guide it toward seeking common goals. We must turn back and make the child our principal concern. The efforts of science must be concentrated on him, because he is the source of and the key to the riddles of humanity.*¹⁴

¹² POLK LILLARD, Paula, *Montessori today*. New York, USA: Schocken Books, 1996.

¹³ The Montessori Difference (n.d.). Retrieved February 17, 2020, from AMI Association Montessori Internationale: www.montessori-ami.org/about-montessori

¹⁴ MONTESSORI, Maria, *Peace and Education*. Adyar, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1971.

4. THEORY OF RECEPTION

Societies belonging to the scientific periphery of Europe have had to prove that they were a component of Western civilisation. Local scholars attempted to infuse the knowledge they acquired during their studies at European universities into these societies. Periphery scholars are not passive agents whose only function is to distribute the knowledge delivered to them from the centres of Europe, but rather active subjects who try to disseminate it locally.¹⁵ Maria Edelstain-Goudeli was one of these scholars. Therefore, and in line with reception studies, Maria Edelstain-Goudeli aimed to overcome dominant Greek intellectual traditions, and political and educational institutions, with a view to infusing the Montessori education system into Greek society.

If knowledge is seen as a cultural product, the emergence of any new knowledge—scientific, historical, philosophical, etc.—must be seen as more than the accumulation of empirical facts and the result of the historical, social and cultural conditions of the period where it arises. In the same way, the reception of a theory or practice by an intellectual environment, other than where they originated, depends not only on the scientific value of the theory or practices themselves, but also on the political, social, historical and cultural context in the recipient environment. And this is what we will attempt to examine here regarding the reception of the Montessori Method in Greece. Regardless, the assimilation and acceptance of new ideas are rarely unproblematic, let alone permanent.¹⁶

5. MARIA GOUDELI'S INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT REGARDING MONTESSORI, WITHIN THE SPECIFIC POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT OF HER TIME

Maria Edelstain was raised within the culturally and intellectually rich environment of the Greek communities of Cairo and Alexandria. In 1907, there were 63,000 officially recorded Greeks in Egypt, whose contribution was particularly important: the first banks of Egypt were created by Greeks,

¹⁵ STEINER-KHAMSI, Gita, "Cross-national policy borrowing: understanding reception and translation", *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 34 (2), 2014, p. 153-167.

¹⁶ SKORDOULIS, Constantine D.; STEFANIDOU, Constantina, "Epistemological aspects of the historiography of science in Greece", Op. cit., 2010.

there were many Greek theatres and newspapers, and they also thrived in agricultural and commercial activities. From a very early age, Maria showed an inclination towards pedagogy, possibly inspired by her mother who taught *foreign* languages. According to her, she came up with the idea to set up her own school when she was a primary school pupil. Her 4th year teacher was tough and very strict. One day, he hit a pupil wildly with a ruler and while attempting to escape, the boy smashed the windowpane in the classroom door and fell into the rose bushes. When he got up, he was covered in scratches and bleeding. Watching this child, little Maria decided that when she grew up, she would build a school where children would not be beaten, one where they would be happy.¹⁷ Maria spoke several languages from a very young age: English, French, Italian, German, Russian and Arabic.

The family moved to Athens, Greece in 1921, during the Greco-Turkish war (1919-1922). Also known as the Asia Minor Campaign, this was the peak of a series of armed conflicts that the country had experienced over the past few decades: the Balkan wars (1912, 1913), two prior armed conflicts with the neighbouring Turkish state (1897, 1912) and World War I (1914), managing in the meantime to double its territory. The political situation in Greece in the late 19th and early 20th century was characterised by several constitutional changes, political crises and wars. The 19th century was not only a period of slow modernisation in the country (infrastructure and institutions), as it was also suffocated by the “Megali Idea”: the irredentist dream of the enlargement of the Greek state to include all lands under Ottoman rule inhabited by large Greek-speaking populations. A large part of the Megali Idea was accomplished in the early 20th century, although the triumphs ended with a devastating catastrophe in 1922.¹⁸ Therefore, during the first years that Maria and her family settled in Athens, society faced the aftermath of the devastation of the hopes and dreams of the Megali Idea, while having to deal with the huge refugee crisis that followed the 1922 Asia Minor disaster.

The early decades of 20th century saw a vast swathe of education reforms in Greece, affected by the political instability of the time. In 1913, after the Balkan wars, Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos—a Greek statesman and prominent leader of the Greek national liberation movement, noted for his

¹⁷ KATSIΟΥ-ZAFRAΝΑ, Μαρία, *The Montessori Method in Greece - The case of Maria Goudeli*. Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Bros. Publishers, 1995.

¹⁸ HATZIS, Aristides N., A political history of modern Greece, 1821-2018. In A. Marciano, & G. B. Ramello (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics*. New York, NY, USA: Springer, 2019, p. 1-12.

contribution in the expansion of Greece and promotion of liberal-democratic policies—¹⁹took on education reform: primary education became compulsory and lasted six years, followed by six years at high school, and included the education of Greek women, etc. From 1914 to 1929, a law regulating the establishment and operation of primary schools under the Ministry of Education was implemented in Greece. The starting age for schooling was set at four.²⁰ In 1917, Venizelos moved on to language education reform, in the spirit of the era of bourgeois-democratic change. In both 1913 and 1917, he was influenced by three important figures in the field of education in Greece, A. Delmouzos, D. Glinos and M. Triantafyllidis, with the first two playing an important role in Goudeli's educational development and life. Unfortunately, Venizelos' loss in the 1920 election put an end to this reform.²¹ Despite the difficulties of the period, some positive steps were made: the founding of Marasleio Didaskaleio, a three-year public teacher training school in 1923, with Delmouzos as head,²² the establishment of the Pedagogical Academy in 1924, with Glinos as head,²³ and the foundation of the University of Thessaloniki in 1924.²⁴ In the field of Montessori Education, a first attempt

¹⁹ POURNARAS, D. (n.d.). *Eleutherios Venizelos*. Retrieved 17th February 2020, from Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eleutherios-Venizelos>

²⁰ XENIDIS, I. *Historical evolution of Kindergarten*, (10th October 2007). Retrieved 28th December 2019, from the Greek Portal of Education: <http://www.eduportal.gr/istoria-nhp/>

²¹ GOULI, C., & KAFKOULA, E., *Education during the Eleftherios Venizelos era*. Patra, Greece, 2011.

²² Alexandros Delmouzos (1880-1956) was a liberal educationalist, one of the founding executives of the Educational Group (1910-1927), whose purpose was to support the reforms to Greek education and the establishment of a model primary school. He played a crucial role in the Greek Language Question (Γλωσσικό Ζήτημα) that dominated the intellectual environment in the early 20th century. This concerned a dispute as to whether the spoken language of the Greek people, "Demotic", or a cultivated imitation of ancient Greek, "Katharevousa", should be the official language of the Greek nation. The conflict, which, apart from educational was also socio-political, ended in 1976 when, by government order, Demotic became the official language of the state (MACKRIDGE, P., *Language, and national identity in Greece, 1766-1976*. Oxford University Press, 2010). In 1908, Delmouzos, influenced by liberal European ideas on education, introduced the use of Demotic as the language of instruction in the newly founded Municipal High School for Girls in Volos and, thereby, achieved considerable improvement in test scores and pupil satisfaction (DELMOUZOS, A., *Three years teacher. Deltio tou Ekpaideftikou Omilou* (part 1), 3, 1913, p. 1-27). Unfortunately, this educational experiment received strong reactions and criticism that led to Delmouzos' resignation, the closure of the school and a trial.

²³ Dimitris Glinos (1882-1943) was an important figure in the field of education in Greece during the first half of the 20th century. He was an educator, writer and politician, a pioneer of the language renaissance in Greek education, and a co-founder of the Educational Group.

²⁴ It is worth mentioning that the University of Athens was founded in 1837 and was the only university in Greece until 1922. Therefore, the number of people able to approach modern theories was highly limited. DIMARAS, Alexis, *The reform that didn't happen*. Athens, Greece: Estia, 2007.

at Montessori training courses was initiated in Athens in 1921—a mere eight years after the first Maria Montessori Training Course—by Professor Stylianopoulos, under the auspices of Queen Mother Sofia. Thirty young ladies attended the course, but it is still unknown whether it was completed or interrupted by the Asia Minor disaster.²⁵ No records or reports have thus far been found about what happened to the ladies who attended the course.

“My first studies, as I always wanted to do, were teacher studies”.²⁶ Maria Edelstain was one of the first students of the newly formed Marasleio Didaskaleio, which qualified her to teach in primary schools.²⁷ Immediately after receiving her degree from Marasleio Didaskaleio in June 1924,²⁸ director Delmouzos assigned Maria Edelstain as a teacher in the Marasleio Model Primary School. A little more than a year later, both Delmouzos and Glinos were removed from their positions, since their teaching was considered “nationally harmful” by the authorities. According to personal testimonies,²⁹ Maria worked enthusiastically with the young children and tried several methodological approaches in her teaching. Unsatisfied, she decided to broaden her knowledge and education, attending lessons in the School for Physical Sciences at the University of Athens. She also studied music—piano—in the Auditorium of Athens and completed her studies in the School of Drama at the National Theatre of Greece (1927-1930).³⁰ As mentioned in her autobiographical note, she attended lessons in the School of Drama in order to gain experience and knowledge in school performances, good reading and recitation. All this knowledge proved extremely helpful in making her teaching work more successful.³¹

The decade between 1930 and 1940 was a crucial time for Maria Edelstain-Goudeli, as well as the country, due to political instability and the

²⁵ FAFALIOU, E., “Scientist or saint? The training of Montessori education guides”, CHASAPIS, D. (Ed.) *The Montessori education system, today and tomorrow: reflections and perspectives*, 2013, December 20, p. 44-63.

²⁶ GOUELI, Maria, *What is the school*, Op. cit.

²⁷ Marasleio Didaskaleio (2017). Retrieved 18th February 2020, from National and Kapodistrian University of Athens: <http://marasleio.uoa.gr/istoria.html>

²⁸ Archives: Edelstain's Bachelor of Teaching, Marasleios (16/6/1924)

²⁹ KALISPERI, I. (29th August 2021). Interview about Maria Goudeli. (E. Chorionopoulou, Interviewer) Athens, Greece.

³⁰ KATSIΟΥ-ZAFRANA, Maria, *The Montessori Method in Greece - The case of Maria Goudeli*, Op. cit., 1995.

³¹ GOUELI, Maria, *What is the school*, Op. cit.

establishment of a dictatorial regime. The crisis that struck Europe was bound to impact developments in Greece too. Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos' attempts to enact drastic reforms in the country (1928-1932, 1933) was blocked by the severe anomalies created by the global economic crisis.³² His domestic position was weakened by the impact of the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Nevertheless, Pedagogical Academies were founded in Greece in the field of education in 1933, replacing Marasleio Didaskaleio in training teachers for primary and nursery schools. Maria Edelstain immediately registered at the University of Athens and on 2nd February 1933, she was awarded a professional pedagogical degree with a mark of "Very Good".

Maria Edelstain-Goudeli constantly tried to keep up to date with events in Europe and around the world with regard to fields relevant to education. This is how she came across the training courses run by Maria Montessori in Spain and decided to study this pedagogical approach.³³ Indeed, on 24th January 1933 she applied to the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs for permission to participate in the International Montessori Education Courses set to take place in Barcelona, under the guidance of Maria Montessori herself. Her application was approved for the period between February and June 1933,³⁴ with the obligation to submit proof of her participation at the local Greek consulate. Maria Edelstain described her studies with Maria Montessori as one of the best things to ever happen in her professional life: "There, with Maria Montessori's wise lessons, practical training, and Montessori school attendance, my orientation in the implementation of my work changed completely".³⁵ She completed her studies under Maria Montessori and acquired the diploma from the International Montessori Course on 30th June 1933.³⁶ This diploma qualified her to teach children from age four to 12 in the Montessori Method.

³² KOLIOPOULOS, I. et al., *History of the newer and the modern world*. Athens, Greece: ITYE-Diofantos, 2019.

³³ KALISPERI, I. (29th August 2021). Interview about Maria Goudeli. (E. Chorianopoulou, Interviewer) Athens, Greece.

³⁴ Archives: Ministry of Education's approval of Edelstain to participate in international Montessori courses (27th January 1933)

³⁵ GOUDELI, Maria, *Psychic hygiene of the child - Theory*. Athens: Maria & Sotiris Goudelis Foundation, 2006.

³⁶ Archives: Edelstain's Diploma of Montessori Studies in Barcelona (30th June 1933).



*The Montessori Conference, Barcelona, Spain (1933).
(M. Goudeli, 3rd from left at the 3rd row)*

On 5th March 1933, Eleftherios Venizelos lost the election. By 1935, three military movements and one attempted assassination of Venizelos clearly underscored political polarisation. It was in this turbulent climate that the regime of ruling democracy was constitutionally restored. Immediately after the failed elections of January 1936, at a time of general crisis in parliamentary politics, the country was led to establish—with the King’s approval—a dictatorship under Ioannis Metaxas,³⁷ which lasted until the beginning of World War II and Metaxas’ death.³⁸ In these disturbing times, Maria Edelstain managed to travel frequently for educational and professional purposes. It is unclear how this was possible while the country was ruled by a junta, as well

³⁷ Ioannis Metaxas (1871-1941), a Greek military officer and politician, governed constitutionally as Prime Minister of Greece from 1936. After the first four months of his tenure, he forced a totalitarian regime (junta) on the Kingdom of Greece, with the support of King George II, from 4th August 1936 to the subjugation of Greece by Nazi forces in 1941.

³⁸ KOLIOPOULOS, I. et al., *History of the newer and the modern world*. Athens, Greece: ITYE-Diofantos, 2019.

as how she funded her trips, given she was not from a wealthy family. Around this time, she met her future husband—Sotiris Goudelis—³⁹ who supported all her educational efforts from the beginning of their relationship.⁴⁰ When Maria Montessori moved the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) headquarters to Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1935,⁴¹ there is evidence that Maria Edelstain travelled there.⁴²

All further attempts at education reform were put on hold under the Metaxas junta. In one of his messages to the Greek people, the dictator invoked the communist danger that “was preparing social revolution”.⁴³ Almost no progress was made during the junta, the Second World War and the Civil War that ensued. Despite the gloomy political situation, Article 9 in Mandatory Law 810/1937 established that primary and nursery teachers who could prove they had attended Montessori courses in the West could be appointed, by way of exemption from the present order of appointment, to fill teaching positions (signed by King George II, I. Metaxas, K. Kotzias, etc).⁴⁴ There are some still unanswered questions arising from this: *how popular was the Montessori system in Greece and how many Greek Montessori teachers were there for such a law to be passed? Was this law only made for Maria Goudeli to be able to work as a primary teacher and establish a Montessori school?*

Maria Edelstain-Goudeli had a comprehensive approach to education that was reflected in her ongoing studies in related fields. In 1937, she attended courses in the newly formed Free School of Social Welfare⁴⁵ on philosophy, medicine, society and finance⁴⁶. At this time, Maria came into contact with

³⁹ Sotiris Goudelis (1910-1997) was a noted mathematician, educator and close collaborator of Maria Edelstain-Goudeli. He was an intellectual and political militant from his youth who envisioned a fairer human society. Later in his life, he became a member of a Greek Trotskyist group.

⁴⁰ KALISPERI, I. (29th August 2021). Interview about Maria Goudeli. (E. Chorianopoulou, Interviewer) Athens, Greece.

⁴¹ Association Montessori Internationale. (4th August 2019). Retrieved 28th December 2019, from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Association_Montessori_Internationale.

⁴² Archives: Ministry of Education's approval of Edelstain's trip to the Netherlands (20th April 1937).

⁴³ DIMARAS, Alexis, *The reform that didn't happen*. Athens, Greece: Estia, 2007.

⁴⁴ Archives: Copy of Mandatory Law 810/1937 (12th August 1937).

⁴⁵ The Free School of Social Welfare, a non-profit foundation, was established on 19th April 1937. The purpose of this school was to a) create and guide the interest of a wider circle for the problems and needs of social welfare, and b) provide the people who work or wish to work in charitable institutions in the country with the required theoretical and partly practical training (MASTROGIANNIS, I., “The Free School of Social Welfare”. *Social Research Inspection “Social Work”*, 2015, p. 118).

⁴⁶ Archives: Edelstain's Certificate from the Free School of Social Welfare (1937).

Dimitris Glinos, who requested to see her notes from the Montessori lessons she had attended in Spain. He was impressed and stated the need to become acquainted with the Montessori Method in Greece.⁴⁷

Maria Edelstain was a primary teacher specialised in the Montessori Method for children between the ages of four and twelve. In order to set a solid foundation for the method in Greece, she needed to start from nursery school (kindergarten). At her request, on 21st December 1937⁴⁸ she was placed in the nursery school of the Marasleio Pedagogical Academy. One year later, she set up a Montessori classroom environment within the Marasleio School, with the help of Dimitris Glinos. It was the first Montessori School established in Greece. Furthermore, it was not private: it was part of the Greek public education system. The head of the school supported her in acquiring a full set of Montessori classroom material from the Netherlands, which was immediately used by her students.⁴⁹ Letters were exchanged, with Maria Edelstain being particularly persistent, in order to overcome obstacles in the process of transporting the material across Greek borders. She also created Montessori material regarding Greek language, culture and history.⁵⁰ In September 1939, Maria Edelstain became a member of the Montessori Link, for which the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs had to establish a special file, with approval from the Sub-ministry of Security.⁵¹

⁴⁷ KATSIΟΥ-ZAFRANA, Maria, *The Montessori Method in Greece - The case of Maria Goudeli*, Op. cit., 1995.

⁴⁸ Archives: Ministry of National Education's placement of Edelstain from Nursery to the Primary School of Marasleio (21st December 1937).

⁴⁹ Archives: Marasleio's request to Piraeus Customs to accept the Montessori materials ordered from abroad (19th December 1938).

⁵⁰ KALISPERI, I. (29th August 2021). Interview about Maria Goudeli. (E. Chorianopoulou, Interviewer) Athens, Greece.

⁵¹ Archives: Ministry of National Education's order for a file for Edelstain's registration at the Montessori Link (30th September 1939).



Montessori environment in Marasleio Primary School (1938)

The good cooperation and atmosphere between her and the head of Marasleio Pedagogical Academy would not last long. In 1940, right before the beginning of the war for Greece, several official letters were exchanged containing complaints and accusations on both sides. Maria Edelstain was denied an honorary distinction and higher salary that she was due, and the Head of the Academy, G. Paleologos, accused her of displaying insolent behaviour and feigning illness, alongside undertaking initiatives without his approval.⁵² The beginning of World War II halted all school activities. During the war, Maria Edelstain worked at the Central Food Service,⁵³ helping children and families in need. She also voluntarily offered her services in organising day care centres for children,⁵⁴ and coordinated lessons for the Education Department at the first boarding school for war victims,⁵⁵ part of the National Board of Hellenic Women.

⁵² Archives: Seven letters between Edelstain and G. Paleologos (6th March 1940).

⁵³ Archives: Minister of Health's appointment of Edelstain to the Central Food Service (7th March 1941).

⁵⁴ Archives: Invitation to Day Care Centres for children (31st July 1943).

⁵⁵ Archives: General director's order to place Edelstain at the Education Department of the National



Maria and Sotiris Goudelis

In 1942, she married Sotiris Goudelis and his nonconformist Marxist ideas influenced her thinking and work. In 1943, she was transferred to the Education Department of the National Board of Hellenic Women. There, she began teaching “ladies who wish to get acquainted with the new trends in pedagogical and psychological science”. She undertook an initiative to teach the Montessori Method for two years. In a reference to the Inspector of Primary Education, she explains the progress of the lessons in detail: “in accordance with the spirit of the school and with my own pedagogical beliefs which I formed after my experience and my studies, the Montessori System, as it has been shaped in recent years, is the most creative work and in line with the latest advances in science in all relevant auxiliary fields of pedagogy. That is why I taught pedagogy with this system and spirit in the above school. Twelve female students showed that they clearly understood the basics and spirit of the Montessori system. In addition to the theoretical courses, there were also practical workshops and teaching in the primary school, which we

Board of Hellenic women (10th and 16th December, and 8th January 1943).

founded two years ago, at the 2nd Orphanage for War Victims of the National Council of Hellenic Women”.⁵⁶

Only a week after the aforementioned reference, Maria Goudeli requested permission to establish a Montessori Primary School within the Marasleio, stressing that the Montessori system should be seen as a continuity and in order to be complete, should not stop at nursery education: “In all educationally advanced countries, the Montessori System is prominent among the new education systems. This system is not only, as many mistakenly think, a method of nursery school, but a complete system of education, which treats the child in his own spirit from birth to adulthood. It is not just a preparation for school or preschool education like other kindergarten school systems, but the first step of a child’s systematic spiritual education. The brilliant results of the work of this school all over the world, as well as at the Montessori Primary School established here a few years ago, clearly prove the correctness of the system. Unfortunately, the effort here stops at nursery school and the graduating children lose the advantages and benefits from the system over the years, meaning all the previous effort sees no continuity. That is why I think it is a good idea to establish an independent Montessori School, including a nursery and a full primary school. This school, in addition to its pedagogical offer for students, would have a wider post-educational value for nursery and primary teachers”.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, it was not as easy as starting a nursery school. The director of the Marasleio, Nikolaos Karachristos, chair of the Ministry’s Education Board, did not allow her to proceed, stating that “there will be a split in the (Greek) education system”.⁵⁸ Taking into consideration that the Greek education system has always been centrally controlled by the government in every aspect, the director’s refusal to allow the establishment of an *alternative* school did not come as a surprise.

Right after the end of the war, following a series of angry formal letters⁵⁹ to the Minister of Education regarding Goudeli’s relationship with the head of Marasleio Academy, she decided to resign from public education in

⁵⁶ Archives: Edelstain’s reference to the Inspector of Primary Education (15th June 1944).

⁵⁷ Archives: Edelstain’s reference to the Inspector of Primary Education (24th June 1944); Ministry of Education’s request for the Education Council’s opinion on the establishment of a Model Montessori Primary School (18th July 1944).

⁵⁸ KATSIU-ZAFRANA, Maria, *The Montessori Method in Greece - The case of Maria Goudeli*, Op. cit., 1995.

⁵⁹ Archives: Edelstain-Goudeli’s reference to the Ministry of Religious Affairs & National Education (10th January 1945).

1945.⁶⁰ The path to resignation was not smooth. She was officially accused of maintaining a private Primary School and using Montessori material that belonged to the Marasleio Academy.⁶¹ Her final resignation was submitted in September 1945.⁶²

By the end of 1945, she was ready to publish her foundational work, *Psychic Hygiene of the Child*. Maria Goudeli was on friendly terms with Mina Aidonopoulou,⁶³ an open-minded school owner who allowed Maria to organise and supervise a Montessori nursery environment in her private school in 1946. This Montessori school ran for three years. In 1947, Maria and Sotiris Goudelis left for France, where Maria would attend summer courses on pedagogy at the Sorbonne. They also visited several schools and gathered material for the school Goudeli was planning to start.

Indeed, in the 1949-1950 academic year she established her own private Montessori nursery school for children between the ages of three and six at her house in Athens. In the next academic year—1950-1951—she also founded a Montessori Primary School for pupils from her own kindergarten.



Private Montessori Primary School in Goudelis' house (1950)

⁶⁰ Archives: Edelstain-Goudeli's resignation (31st January 1945).

⁶¹ Archives: Director's accusation of running a private nursery school and using Marasleio's Montessori materials (21st April 1945); Edelstain-Goudeli's two letters to the General Director of Marasleio (30th April and 3rd May 1945).

⁶² Archives: Edelstain-Goudeli's final resignation (13th September 1945).

⁶³ Mina Aidonopoulou (1885-1958) was a gymnast teacher and, from 1927, the owner of a private school that covered kindergarten, primary and high school for girls. The school was famous for its liberal and democratic procedures. Several noted people of the time sent their children there, including Dimitris Glinos (MPELLA, M. *Mina Aidonopoulou (1885-1958): The unforgettable school-owner. Critical pedagogy*, 2017, 11th October).

Maria Goudeli did not wish to be involved in private education. Her solid socialist beliefs and left-wing philosophy meant she strongly favoured public education. In this sense, she felt forced to move into private education as she had been left with no alternative. Even though they started a private school, both Sotiris and Maria Goudeli wanted to set up a progressive school based on the Montessori philosophy, and thus enabling greater freedom and flexibility. They attempted to maintain a democratic and liberal atmosphere among teachers, students and parents at their school, in line with their vision on schooling in general, whether public or private, typical or alternative. Additionally, they would support families that were not from a wealthy background by reducing school fees or providing scholarships. They did not want the school to become a profit-driven commercial organisation that would not respect and honour the founders' philosophy and thus, a few years before Maria's death, they attempted to gift the school to the National University of Athens. Unfortunately, the plan failed and so, after Maria's death, Sotiris decided to create the non-profit of Maria & Sotiris Goudeli Foundation, which has run the school since his death in 1997.⁶⁴



Participation of Montessori School of Athens Maria Goudeli at a conference in Paris

⁶⁴ KALISPERI, I. (29th August 2021). Interview about Maria Goudeli. (E. Chorianopoulou, Interviewer) Athens, Greece.

The school has been in continuous operation ever since. In 1964, it was transferred to new larger premises, designed from the start as a Montessori “Casa dei Bambini”—children’s house—by the famous pioneering architect Konstantinos Doxiadis, under the strict and careful supervision of Maria Goudeli. She made sure all architectural and pedagogical principles of a Montessori environment would be included in order to meet and fully support the developmental needs of children from the ages of three to twelve.⁶⁵ She kept in close contact with Mario Montessori, explaining why she was invited to Maria Montessori’s funeral ceremony.⁶⁶



Montessori School of Athens Maria Goudeli

Maria Goudeli dedicated her life to this school and the Montessori Method. She followed scientific achievements, attended conferences in Europe, read widely, and visited schools and institutions. She wrote several books and articles about Montessori practice and theory, and gave many lectures to parents and professionals in the field of education. In order to meet the needs of children in a Greek schooling environment, she created all the

⁶⁵ KATSIΟΥ-ZAFΡΑΝΑ, Maria, *The Montessori Method in Greece - The case of Maria Goudeli*, Op. cit., 1995.

⁶⁶ Archives: Thank-you letter for Goudeli’s condolences to Mario Montessori.

material that local Greek society required on history, language, geography and religious subjects. She had a particular talent for designing comprehensible pedagogical material on obscure scientific subjects, especially suitable for children in nursery schools (Katsiou-Zafrana, 1995). The material she created contributed, in many instances, to improving existing Montessori material. In the field of mathematics, she had exceptional support from her husband Sotiris—a noted mathematician—in teaching mathematics to the youngest children.⁶⁷



Montessori material made by Goudeli, Mathematics - Sets
Montessori material made by Goudeli, Timeline of world's civilizations and countries

According to the testimonies of those who knew her in life, Maria Goudeli was fully aware of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that the Montessori system may undergo in its implementation. The main misinterpretation is it being understood simply as a technique; Montessori herself said that the greatest disappointments came from schools that used her name but did not follow her philosophy. This is why Maria Goudeli organised and constantly supported a psycho-educational environment in her school, as evidenced by the titles of her two foundational books, *Psychic Hygiene of the Child I & II*, which emphasised first and foremost children's mental health. Everything else follows.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ KALISPERI, I. (29th August 2021). Interview about Maria Goudeli. (E. Chorianopoulou, Interviewer) Athens, Greece.

⁶⁸ GOUDELI, Maria, *Psychic hygiene of the child - Theory*. Athens: Maria & Sotiris Goudelis Foundation, 2006.