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# Women, Philanthropy and Nationalism in Mandate Palestine The Greek Ladies' Union of Jerusalem, 1924-1948

Angelos Dalachanis

The point of departure for this article is an intriguing but unexploited source: the minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union covering the last ten years of the British mandate period. For that period in Jerusalem, women's voices are rare. By creating this Union along ethnic and national lines in 1924, the ladies also formed a place for philanthropy, social gatherings and the exchange of views on communal and other issues. The minutes of their gatherings bring to us unheard voices of Jerusalem and the Greek community of the city in particular. An analysis of these minutes gives us the opportunity to understand the reasons behind the creation of this association, the different strategies women developed to make their views known within their community, to examine their philanthropic activities within the charitable universe of the holy city and, most importantly, to deal with multiple political developments at different levels during a period which is sensitive regarding the future of the Middle East, the Christian communities of Jerusalem and the Greek presence in the region.

Keywords: Jerusalem, Women, Greek diaspora, Philanthropy, Nationalism.

## Introduction

On 6 August 1944, the Odigitria (the Guide)<sup>1</sup> Greek Ladies' Union of Jerusalem celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>2</sup> In their speeches at the occasion, both the Union's president and the president of the Greek *Koinotita*<sup>3</sup> of the city praised Foteini Mavromichali for her valuable work and awarded her the title of president emerita of the Union. In her address, Mavromichali shed light on the founding and the early years of the Union's existence. The emotional shock generated by the mass exodus from Asia Minor of over a million Greeks in a needy and often desperate condition after the defeat of the Greek army by the Turkish army of Kemal Atatürk in 1922 triggered the Union's creation. Whereas her initial aim was to create an association to provide aid to the refugees arriving in Greece, after discussions with other community members, she decided to focus on the destitute Greeks of Jerusalem. Even if this seems like a choice between two different options, they were both linked to the Greek effort for "national rehabilitation" (Avdela and Psarra 2005, p.70), that is the healing of the Greek population's psychological and physical wounds and the consequences on the state after what is known in Greek language as the *Mikrasiatiki katastrofi* (Asia Minor catastrophe). What did "national rehabilitation" signify in the context of Jerusalem in 1924? How was a ladies' philanthropic association related to the national cause and why? Why did a women's association develop a national character rather than a strictly religious one? How was this accomplished in the Palestine context of the British Mandate (1922-48), which included the outbreak of the Arab-Zionist conflict and the Second World War?

To address the above issues, I will mostly focus on the minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union covering the last ten years of the British mandate period. These minutes, part of the

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<sup>1</sup> This invocation refers to Virgin Mary.

<sup>2</sup> Archives of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem (AEPI), Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Greek Ladies' Union of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, 6/24 August 1944.

<sup>3</sup> The *Koinotita* (literally translated 'community') was an association of Greek nationals or of people of Greek origin established in cities or villages of the diaspora and constituted the secular political, cultural and social institutional pole of the Greek population.

Greek (Rum) Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem archives, bring to us unheard voices of Jerusalem and the Greek community whose institutional life is almost exclusively linked to the Greek (Rum) Orthodox patriarchate of the city. An analysis of these minutes allow us to examine the philanthropic activities of the Union within the Greek (Rum) Orthodox charitable universe of the so called “holy city” and, most importantly, their connexion to the different political developments during a period which is not only sensitive regarding the future of Palestine but also of the Christian communities of Jerusalem. I will examine how the Union was structured and how it was connected to the institutional and political context of Palestine and beyond. The Union’s philanthropic activities, I argue, were mainly destined to three different though overlapping geographical areas without chronological order: The Middle East, Jerusalem and Greece. The way in which the Union differentiated its activities regarding each one of these areas provide evidence for the secularization process the Union underwent through the period under scrutiny. I will start by placing the Greek presence in Jerusalem in the wider context of the Greek population of the Middle East, to whom I refer here as the “Eastern Greeks”, to show how this context affected the foundation of the Ladies’ Union. I will then examine how the association functioned while remaining anchored in Jerusalem and also, how Greece, as a real or imaginary homeland came to the fore in the 1940s as the dominant reference of the Union’s activities.

### *The Eastern Greeks after 1922*

The term “Eastern Greeks” does not necessarily, or exclusively, refer to people of Greek nationality living as a diaspora in the Middle East. The Greek presence in the region historically originated from three different population movements: the merchant diaspora communities settled around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; the mobility within the Ottoman Empire and between the Ottoman Empire and its successor states; emigration from the Greek state after its formation in 1830. Therefore, an Eastern Greek could be any Greek-speaking Orthodox, Catholic, Jew or Muslim. Additionally, a persons from the Balkans, for example from Albania, living for instance in Egypt could just as easily be considered as an “Eastern Greek,” if he felt closer to the Greek community than to the Albanian (Clayer 2002). One’s sense of belonging is not always in line with her/his nationality, whether it be Greek or the nationality of a Western European or a Middle Eastern country (Aymes 2011). In any case, determining who was Greek in Jerusalem or in other Middle Eastern settings, emerging from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, was not always easy (Ilbert 1988).

Eastern Greeks, in their majority, were located in Asia Minor<sup>4</sup>, but they also lived in Palestine (Papastathis 2021, Dalachanis and Tselikas, 2018, Roussos 1994), Persia (Venetis 2011) and Egypt (Kitroeff 2019, Dalachanis 2017) during the Ottoman times but also after 1922. Even if the fall of the Ottomans did not have the same devastating effects on Greeks outside the borders of today’s Turkey as it had on those within it, the end of the Greek presence in Asia Minor denoted that the existence of Greeks in Palestine might also be at stake, for three reasons. First, because their professional, ecclesiastical and kinship networks were closely related to the Greeks of Asia Minor, since many Greeks of Palestine came from there (Mack, Dalachanis *et al.* 2017). Second, because the Greeks of Asia Minor, either as pilgrims or new migrants, regularly boosted the demographics of Palestine’s rather small Greek community.<sup>5</sup> A third reason is related to the *Megali idea* (Great Idea).<sup>6</sup> Even if it was

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<sup>4</sup> Asia Minor or Anatolia (Turkish: Anadolu) is the peninsula that today constitutes the Asian part of Turkey.

<sup>5</sup> In 1922, 1,230 persons who habitually spoke the Greek language lived in Palestine, out of whom 760 in Jerusalem. By 1931, their number in Palestine increased to 1,684 most probably because of the refugees from Asia Minor who arrived there (McCarthy 1990 pp. 82-84). According to Papastathis (2021), at the end of the

unfeasible for Greece to expand its frontiers in the Eastern Mediterranean before 1922, the existence of Greek populations in the major commercial and religious urban centres of the Middle East was bound to play a subsidiary economic and symbolic role (Kitroeff 1991). Consequently, the collapse of the Great Idea in 1922 would inevitably shrink the importance of these populations for Greece.

In addition to the aforementioned reasons external to the Palestinian milieu, other factors related to the local context could also endanger the survival of these Eastern Greeks. The singularities of Orthodoxy's structure in Jerusalem made local Greeks feel uncertain about the survival of their community. The Greek (Rum) Orthodox congregation in Jerusalem included mostly Palestinian Arabs and a small number of Greeks. However, due to historical factors, the Greek clergy was the one to control the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre and, therefore, the Greek (Rum) Orthodox patriarchate – one of the biggest private landowners in Palestine (Katz and Kark 2007). Greeks constantly referred to the Arabs as Arab-speaking Orthodox insinuating that they were not genuine Arabs, but Christian Greeks who had been alienated from their ethnic origin and Arabicized over the centuries (Papastathis 2020). Dr Nikolaos Spyridonos, a prominent member of the Greek community and the president of the Greek Colony from 1922 to 1925, summarized his views on the matter thus:

I have lived in Jerusalem for the last 58 years. As a doctor of the Greek Orthodox people and the Patriarchate over the last 40 years, I have known indigenous Arab-speaking families born in different places like Evia, Constantinople, Asia Minor and the islands, who were “discoloured” over time and they are now called “Ulad il Arab”, that is, children of the Arabs, because of the milieu to which they adapted. How was it possible for people of Arab origin, for Muslims in the centre of Muslim fanaticism, to become and remain Christians and to have Orthodox descendants today?<sup>7</sup>

So, the possible transformation of Greeks into Arabs or, according to Spyridonos, into people who did not know “to what nation they belong” was considered a constant threat to the Greek community and the Greek control over the patriarchate. According to Spyridonos, several “political and religious propagandists with aspirations to prevail over the Holy Land (Protestants, Catholics, Russians, etc.)” had purposefully and successfully cultivated this “confusion.” His views reflect the mistrust towards Arabs, Orthodox and other Christians, and were widespread within the secular and religious parts of Jerusalem's Greek population in the early 1920s. These views justified in their eyes the privileged position of the Greeks within the brotherhood, the protection of the holy places by the patriarchate and the marginalization of the Arabs within the Greek (Rum) Orthodox community.

The end of the Great War and the collapse of Russian and Ottoman empires would further alarm the Greeks about their long-term prospects in Jerusalem. First, the increasing financial difficulties the patriarchate faced after the Russian Revolution and the loss of the tsar's financial support (Papastathis 2013). Second, the sectarian policy of the British Mandate. In fact, the British wanted the Palestinian communities to be more religion- than ethnicity-oriented. Upon their arrival, they imposed their own version of the Ottoman *millet* system. The legal separation of the communities along religious lines sharpened their

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Second World War, 2,000 Greek speakers lived in Palestine, out of which 1,500 in Jerusalem. The 3,000 Jewish Greeks who migrated to Palestine are not included in this number.

<sup>6</sup> The Great Idea was an irredentist doctrine advocating the expansion of the Greek state so as to encompass all ethnic Greeks settled in the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>7</sup> Greek Foreign Ministry Archive (AYE)/Central Service (CS)/1925/B/49/3, General review regarding the creation, the cause and the activities of the Greek Association in Jerusalem, Nikolaos Spyridonos, 7 July, 1923.

differences, despite the fact that the British pretended to be an “impartial mediator” between them (Robson 2011, Haiduc-Dale 2013). Through the 1920s, the Christian Palestinian nationalist movement changed character to become a more Arab Orthodox one. Its major claim was to contest Greek supremacy over the patriarchate and its real estate portfolio (Vatikiotis 1994). This was not a novel claim; it dated back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and had already created a conflict between Christian Arabs and Greeks. This conflict persisted during the mandate period, when the British administration supported Christian Arabs against the Greek hierarchy of the patriarchate (Bertram and Young 1926, Tsimhoni 1978). For much of the mandate period, Palestinian Christians considered the Greeks to be their enemies, on the same level as the British and the Zionists. This internal conflict in the Orthodox Church only eased after the Palestinians failed to win the 1931 patriarchal election.

### *United Ladies Stand*

The need to deal with all the above external and internal, real and imaginary threats to Jerusalem was reflected in the local Greeks community’s initiative to create numerous secular associations along national lines. Indeed, from 1921 to 1924, five different associations were created in the city: the Greek scouts (1921), the (male) Greek Charitable Brotherhood (1921), the Greek Club (1922), the Terpandros musical society (1923) and, finally, the Odigitria Greek Ladies’ Union (1924). The institutionalization of the Greek presence around a structure other than the patriarchate and the consolidation of the national feeling of solidarity were related to the need for a collective national identification. Thus, the Greeks sought to keep equal distance from both the Arab congregation and the Western European influence in order not to lose their “Greekness”.<sup>8</sup> Foteini Mavromichali’s and other Greek women’s initiative to create a union needs to be understood within this wider context and the increasing awareness of the Greek community that its existence was at risk. In a city, which is almost synonymous with charity, Greek women committed themselves to a mission that had been up to that moment only in the hands of religious and secular institutions, exclusively run by men.

### **FIGURE 1 HERE**

Until 1921, the Greek Orthodox patriarchate was the only charitable institution of the Greek (Rum) Orthodox population, both Arab and Greek. In that same year, the Greek Charitable Brotherhood was founded by men who shared the same patriotic commitment, and opened the path for the institutionalization of charity along national lines. The Ladies’ Union was not an auxiliary association to this male-run organization. Within the critical regional and local context, the role of women became more and more central and assumed a twofold objective: to remove some financial burden from the patriarchate, which was experiencing important economic difficulties, and to protect from imaginary threats and nurture the existing Greek population in order to ensure the preservation of its national identity. The latter was even truer for the most vulnerable members of the community, especially poor women, the sick and the destitute, who were “not few” in number.<sup>9</sup> All these persons had to remain close to their national nucleus, and not leave the city or seek for help from other Christian charity institutions. Similarly to the defeat of Greece in the 1897 war against the Ottoman Empire, “the nation, compared to a large family, was in urgent need of the motherly

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<sup>8</sup> AYE/CS/1925/B/49/3, Note. Koinotites and associations of Palestine (n.p.–n.d).

<sup>9</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies’ Union ‘Odigitria’.

nurturing of women” (Avdela and Psarra 2005, p. 70). This seems to have happened again in the Jerusalem context of the early 1920s.

Since its foundation, the Ladies’ Union became part of the city’s lively charitable scene, where the Muslim philanthropic presence, for example, was much stronger than that in other major Middle Eastern cities like Istanbul, Damascus or Cairo (Tamari 2018). Jerusalem’s other religions and faiths also hosted a great number of women charities and humanitarian Christian missions (Okkenhaug and Sanchez Summerer 2020). Palestinian women also established charitable association around 1919-1921 such as the short-lived Arab Ladies’ Club in order to serve the national Palestinian cause (Fleischmann 2003, p. 109). The Greek Ladies’ Union became also part of the wider charitable Ottoman and post-Ottoman context of Eastern Greeks. Voluntary associations and women’s philanthropy in particular were widespread in the Ottoman context from Istanbul (Exertzoglou 2018) to Cairo. From 1861 to 1922, women created 60 out of the almost 500 voluntary associations of Istanbul’s Greek Community (Mammoni and Istikopoulou 2002, p. 187). Charitable activities were often women’s only possibility to enter the public sphere, monopolized by men. A more rigorous presence of women in the public sphere was high in the claims’ list of the feminist groups of the Middle East at that time. Additionally, the number of voluntary associations increased in times of distress in order to mitigate the plight of the destitute and needy people (Maksudyan 2014). A mushrooming of such initiatives came after the Great War in Europe, but also in the post-Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean, even though many of them proved short-lived. Thus, the women’s activities may be seen as an extension of the charitable activities that initially took place in the war context. The Greek Ladies’ Union was not the first association of Greek women to be created in a previously Arab province of the Ottoman Empire. In 1917, middle and upper class women in Alexandria created the Union of Greek Women of Egypt, which five years later was renamed Union of Greek Women of Alexandria. Despite the rich associative life of the Greek Orthodox populations in the Arab areas, there is practically no or very limited scholar discussion on the question of charity partly because of the absence or of the difficulty of access to relevant archival material.

The Union’s connexions to the Greek state are confirmed by the fact that the Greek consul himself was the president emeritus of the Union from 1924 to 1938. In 1938, the Union merged with the Greek Koinotita (Papastathis 2021). This marked the beginning of the second phase in the Union’s life, which changed its name to Ladies’ Charity Department. Its name and logo marked a shift towards a more secular identity, as the name *Odigitria*, attributed to the Virgin Mary, was dropped. Until late 1938, the seat of the Union was the convent of St. Euthymius in the Old City of Jerusalem, which also held its records.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, however, board meetings were held in the house of a member of the Union’s administrative committee. However, after the merger between the Union and the Greek Koinotita of Jerusalem, its seat moved to the Koinotita building in Katamon and its institutionalization became more evident, as a comparison between its previous and new seal demonstrates: The first seal (fig.1) shows an everyday scene of a woman taking care of an old lady and a small child (probably an orphan), whereas on the second seal (fig.2) a Greek royalist coat of arms is combined with the double-headed eagle – symbol of the Orthodox Church.

After the merger, the consul became the president emeritus of the Koinotita, according to the tradition of all the former associations, that is the Greek Club, *Eupoia* (Beneficence) and the Greek Colony (Papastathis 2021). During the Second World War, the title of president emerita of the Union was attributed to the wife of the Greek consul. The absence of particular relations with the city’s Greek (Rum) Orthodox Patriarchate shows the

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<sup>10</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies’ Union ‘*Odigitria*’, Board meeting of 13/26 October 1938.

strong relations the Union's members had or wanted to create with the Greek state. The consul's and his wife presidencies added authority and status to the Union and legitimated its purposes. In addition, it symbolized the strong relations between the two associations. Besides, the consulate was the most important sponsor of the Union and the honorary president participated in the general assemblies of the Union. Only with the end of the Second World War was the role of president emeritus/a entrusted to non-consuls, such as Foteini Mavromichali.

## **FIGURE 2 HERE**

### ***Women Philanthropists and Poor Jerusalemites***

Who were the founding mothers of the Union, who became its members and who were those who benefited from the Union's action? It is evident that the laywomen who created the Union and those who later became its members were close to the church, with some of them having engaged in religious life to an extent. Most of them were of Greek nationality or origin. According to the article 7 of the Union's constitution, only women of Greek nationality, wives of Greek men and women of Greek origin, even when married to foreign men, had the right to vote and stand for leadership positions.<sup>11</sup> On the members' list and that of the elected officers, the majority of names are of Greek origin. The few women with foreign surnames on the list, like Antigoni Chamberlain or Sophia Freeman, were apparently married to foreigners.

Since there was no precedent for a Greek female association in Jerusalem, it is noteworthy that the Union was not built on the organizational model of similar female associations of other ethnic or religious groups *in situ*, such as the Palestinian one, but of other Greek institutions located outside Palestine. In Greece, there were numerous charitable associations, engaged in different kinds of activities that could serve as a source of inspiration (Theodorou 1987). The neighbouring Egypt hosted, from 1922, the largest settlement of Greeks outside Greece – except for the United States – and had a very rich institutional life with a large number of charitable associations. For that reason, the Union of Greek Ladies of Alexandria, which had both an educational and a charitable mission, functioned as a model for its Jerusalem counterpart. The Jerusalem Union's statutes have not been found yet. It is possible that some archives of the Union were kept in the members' houses or that the 1948 battle resulted in some losses. Based on the example of Egypt, "Greek women" over the age of 21 residing in Jerusalem could become regular members. Men could join as auxiliary members, but did not have the right to vote or hold any positions. With regard to those who could benefit from the Union's support, the names on the recipients' lists and the way in which the aid was distributed demonstrates that they were mainly religious women of Greek origin and always Orthodox. Men's names also appear on the list, but it seems like they were widowers. It is as if the Union had to fill the gap of the female presence in a family, to fulfil the role of the missing mother or wife. In general, however, the Union mostly satisfied the needs of destitute women (elderly and incapable of looking after themselves, unemployed, sick or disabled) and widows, regardless of whether they had children.

The members – founders and/or on the board at different times – were often the spouses of men who exercised a medical profession. For instance, Foteini Mavromichali was

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<sup>11</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of 4/17 October 1938.

married to Argyrios Mavromichalis, a pharmacist in Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> Their daughter Irene was married to Eugenios Filalithi, one of the founding members of the Greek Koinotita of Jerusalem and an active member of the Union during the 1940s. The first president of the Ladies' Union was Sophia Spyridonos, while her husband Nikolaos, a doctor, was president of the Greek Colony.<sup>13</sup> Their son Spyridon was a professor of literature and languages and received for his books congratulatory letters from the patriarchate.<sup>14</sup> With his wife Gertrude, who was an active member of the Union in the late 1930s, they also had two daughters. Clio Euklidou was the godmother of the first one.<sup>15</sup> Euklidou was very active in the Union and served first as its general secretary (1938-41) and later as its treasurer. Her mother, Maria Euklidou, was also member of the Union and married to Photios Eukleidis, a prominent doctor of the Turkish Hospital in Jerusalem in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Greenberg 2005). In cities like Jerusalem that are without strong merchant communities, people with liberal professions, such as the ones mentioned above, constituted the local economic and cultural elites.

### ***FIGURE 3 HERE***

In addition to their medical work, some of these husbands actively participated in other Greek associations contributing to the establishment of connections between these associations and the Union. This kind of connections was not to be found exclusively in Jerusalem, but also in other cities, such as Istanbul and Alexandria (Faliou 2013).

The above examples unveil a microcosm weaved through kinship and other networks. It is evident that the female members of the Union had the financial resources, along with the cultural and professional capital and sensitivity, to engage in an ethnic-oriented philanthropy. What is also worth mentioning is the line of succession established in the same families within almost thirty years. In case there was no daughter in a family, a daughter-in-law was often involved with charity. The husbands' active role in the communal affairs certainly facilitated the initiative to create the Union. It is also quite clear that friendship and kinship ties bound these ladies, or at least some of them. Close ties among women of similar social background must have been a unifying force behind the organization and the possibility to meet on a social or charitable basis must have certainly nourished their enthusiasm. The links among the members included adherence to the same national/ethnic group religious denomination, or belonging to the same family. Indeed, in a number of instances, a tradition of philanthropy was established within a family.

Two membership categories existed in the Union. The ordinary members paid a regular subscription and had the right to vote and stand for office. Depending on the period, the administrative committee of the Union had seven to ten members. The number of members fluctuated during the period under examination: In 1938, 64 ordinary members were registered whereas in 1950, their number was only 32.<sup>16</sup> Even though religion was a constituent element of the Union, there were no nuns among the members. Only a nun named Glykeria, who made important donations to the Union and was considered a "great benefactor", enjoyed the benefits of a member.

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<sup>12</sup> AEPI, Baptism and wedding registers.

<sup>13</sup> AYE/CS/1925/B/49/3, Note. Koinotita and Associations of Palestine (n.p.-n.d.),

<sup>14</sup> AEPI/VIII B 76, Jerusalem, 28 April 1946. From the Secretary of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to Spyridonos.

<sup>15</sup> AEPI, Baptism and wedding registers.

<sup>16</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meetings of March 1938 and 29 September 1950.



Most of the members of the Union's board were very active. For these middle- or upper class ladies, philanthropy became the main if largely unpaid occupation within the context of the Jerusalem Greek population. Engaging in charity was an acceptable way for women to integrate into social events as it reproduced elements attributed to the role of the mother that every woman should be: "the ability to empathize, the innate tendency to care, the ability to have close interpersonal relationships, pedagogical charisma, a penchant for practical, methodical solutions" (Vassiliadou 2010). Women's philanthropic activities were then easy to accept because they were somehow the extension of their domestic role. The regular members were expected to pay their subscription, which varied according to their means, to assist in preparing various ceremonies and events and to participate in the elections. Some committee members organized regular campaigns to recruit new members. This task was usually assigned to the most influential women within the Greek community. From 1924 to 1938, all members of the Union were women. Even after the merger with the Koinotita, the board members of the Union were exclusively female. After the Second World War, a small number of men, mostly belonging to the clergy, appear as regular members of the Union.

According to the assemblies' minutes, Foteini Mavromichali and her fellow women involved with the Union never went as far as to question the social structure and the concept of equality. Like in the case of other similar institutions, "their motivation came from a belief in employment as a means of improving the temporal condition of the poor" (Luddy 1995). Motivated by their national duty, Christian morals and humanitarian principles, these women organized voluntarily to enter the public domain and become socially useful. The healing of the wounds of the Greek defeat in Anatolia, the sustainability of the Greek character of their community, and the name of Virgin Mary as ideal mother provided the necessary ideological and symbolic basis for their activities.

The ladies of the Union faced a major question. Who was to benefit from their aid and work? The beneficiaries' list leads to some answers. In 1938, the Union employed 13 workers, who designed or made embroideries with remuneration. Two of them were nuns, one was a widow, and two were married with families, while the status of the rest of them is not clear. All of them seem to have been living in houses inside the Greek Orthodox convents owned by the patriarchate and run by the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre. All these women also appear in the lists of regular or occasional beneficiaries of the Union. During the Union's early period, almost all regular beneficiaries were women and received monthly aid. In 1938, the list included 32 women – widows, sick, old or unemployed – and 3 men.<sup>17</sup> The beneficiaries could have been laywomen or men and nuns but never monks. The destitute Orthodox Christians of the city, either Arabs or Greeks, could live at the Patriarchate's small houses in the convents, located in the Old City of Jerusalem for no money. On religious holidays, especially Christmas, Easter and the celebration of Virgin Mary's birth in September more beneficiaries were added on the lists.

The only details we know about the beneficiaries are their names (often without a surname), their place of residence and their monastic status, if any. The poor who deserved aid were mostly women. The men who received aid are presented as willing to work but unable to do so either because of illness, age or lack of opportunity. In almost all cases, the aid was given to people of Greek origin, as suggested by their names, with the exception of a Russian woman mentioned in the 1938 minutes. Names of possible Arab origin seem to be absent from the list. The limited resources and the need to channel humanitarian relief led the ladies to crosscheck information with other charitable organizations of the Koinotita, especially the Greek Charitable Brotherhood, to make sure that the beneficiaries did not have

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<sup>17</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of March 1938.

more than one source of revenue. Especially when applications for financial aid increased during critical times, it was difficult for the Union to provide assistance. Thus, evidences suggest, that those who benefited from more than one organizations saw their aid either cut or reduced.

### *Collecting, Managing and Distributing*

The Union's activities were threefold: collecting money, maintaining logistic standards which were necessary to the smooth running of the Union, and distributing money and different kind of philanthropies to people in need. The revenues mainly derived from three sources: regular subscribers' contributions, donations and purchases from members or individuals close to the Union. For instance, the Union's balance sheet for October 1938–June 1939 shows that of the total revenue of 9,729 pounds, 40% came from the organization of tea mornings and the Christmas charity bazaar (3924.50 pounds).<sup>18</sup> If we add the income from the sales of manual labour throughout the year (1,014 pounds) and from various lotteries (900 pounds) the amount would reach the 60% of the annual income. More than a third (33.5%) of the total revenue came from the annual subscriptions of the sixty-two members of the Union (3,045 pounds) as well as from various individual donations (220 pounds) of men and women, secular or religious people (both monks and clergy) or from extra contributions during religious celebrations (312 pounds).

The Union also benefited from donations from state institutions, such as the Greek consulate (313.30 pounds in 1938). When the Second World War broke out, the British Mandate in Palestine replaced the Greek government's financial assistance. After the merger of the Union with the Greek Koinotita in 1938 and its transformation into a charity section of the Koinotita, the Union also benefited from an annual grand from the Koinotita. To the above one must add the donations of goods, for instance, cookies, sweets, tea and other drinks during the tea ceremonies. Undoubtedly, Orthodox laywomen, other than those mentioned in the minutes, offered their time and financial support. Not all of them were from Jerusalem. Undoubtedly, the fact that the Union was located in the Holy Land was reason enough to attract donations from women and men from the Greek communities all over the Middle East. Such was the case with a lady of Greek origin living in Teheran, Ifigeneia Al Khoutaf, who gave 5 pounds at Christmas 1947 for the destitute orphans who had been taken care off by the Union or a man named Kouanis from Egypt, probably from the Suez region, who donated 5 pounds to the destitute people of Jerusalem, an act of goodwill on the occasion of his daughter's wedding. Two sons of the Union's president Pagona Varletzis sent 5 pounds from Amman and Tanganyika, their respective living places in 1950.<sup>19</sup>

Jerusalemite Greeks made contributions on several occasions: Christmas or Easter celebrations, charity bazaars often accompanied with tea, lotteries or fundraising. Board members were heavily involved in the organization of the ceremonies, in the collection of the necessary items, in the reception of the guests and in the preparation of the lotteries, which sometimes offered special gifts such as "a caged parrot", a gift of the Union's general secretary, Irene Filalithi at Christmas 1944.<sup>20</sup> In this particular year – still during wartime – pupils of the Greek girls' school in Jerusalem presented short plays inspired by Christmas and national traditional dances. The events were advertised on posters all over the city's Greek stores. After the event, the Union members sent letters to thank people for their donations and participations in the Union's activities. This kind of ritual activity consolidated

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<sup>18</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Balance sheet of the Greek Ladies' Union from 1 October 1938 to 15 June 1939.

<sup>19</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria'

<sup>20</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of 17 November 1944.

the relations between the Union and the community. The members of the Union had to sign a paper testifying that they were informed about the event.

The Union's character was not solely financial in the sense of collecting money and distributing aid. From the outset, it had a strong educational character, since one of its principal objectives was to teach destitute young women and orphans how to embroider. For this reason, the Union hired an instructor. The primary objective was to offer a job to the needy women in the small-scale production of domestic embroideries, to be sold afterwards in the Union's charity bazaars. Selling in the charity bazaars of Jerusalem was exceptional, given that it was considered shameful for women to trade their own creations. As Talia Schaffer (2011, p. 11) aptly puts it, "the products of the handicraft craze were not supposed to be sold. Since they represented a woman's selfhood, putting a price on handicrafts felt rather like selling the woman herself. They were, instead, traded in charity bazaars. The bazaar, then, functioned as a kind of reservoir in which earlier modes of economic behaviour were preserved, and it attracted those nostalgic for something like the method of selling before modern standardization and efficiency". Employing women was an attempt to make them responsible for their own lives in order not to be completely dependent on financial aid.

The manufacture of embroideries had significant advantages. The bibliography on the double significance of embroidery in women's lives as a means of providing women with an active role and as a means of undermining men's power or authority, is extensive (Parker 1984, Edwards 2006, Schaffer 2011, Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra 2014). In the case of Jerusalem, handicraft was a concrete and relatively easy domestic practice for many women, who could thus decorate their houses or prepare dowry for the female members of the family. The materials were affordable and working on handicrafts did not require huge investments in equipment. Embroidery had even more advantages, as Rozsika Parker (1984, p. 164) puts it: "it was expected to be the place where women manifested supposedly natural feminine characteristics: piety, feeling, taste, and domestic devotion". Handicrafts allowed cross-class relations, since poor women created items of value, which would be later sold in the bazaars to individuals, especially women of the middle and the upper class. Such was the case of Greece's consul general Solon Kontoumas and his spouse, who admired the handicrafts at the Union's bazaar in 1938 and bought "a nice nap for tea with six doilies" for one pound each.<sup>21</sup> For many years, creating embroideries was the primary activity of the Union, but gradually other ones were added. After the merger with the Koinotita in 1938, the Union offered: Classes in sewing, knitting and embroidery; financial aid of approximately 20 pounds per month to destitute Greek families and old people, women and men; extra allowances to other deserving people; help to sick people; access to education to several orphans of the Greek community and daily breakfast to fifty "poor and weak" children of the community's elementary school; needlework to widows and destitute ladies. In addition to embroideries and vocational training, the Union got also involved with other teaching activities, such as the offering of Arabic language classes in 1944 for poor students, which became feasible thanks to the scholarship from the Tokatlidis family from Pontus (Papastathis 2020, Mack 2020).

The Union also provided relatively limited nursing facilities to elderly people. A small nursing home was inaugurated in March 1943 during wartime "to nurse the elderly destitute of the Greek community of Jerusalem".<sup>22</sup> Despite the pressing situation created by the war, the capacity of the nursing home remained limited according to the very small number of cases mentioned in the minutes. During the first six months of the service, the nursing home received two old women previously residing in houses within the Old City's monasteries. Both had received monthly allowances during Christmas and Easter time for

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<sup>21</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Meeting of 11/24 November 1938.

<sup>22</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', 26 March 1943.

years before they entered the nursing home. After the death of one of them in September 1943, the other one, a blind lady, was sent to a private nursing room in Bethlehem, and the Koinotita closed the nursing facilities. The fact that very few ladies were received in the nursing home may be attributed to the fact that close neighbouring relations between the monasteries and the community itself created a safety net for elderly people. Those who were hosted there were the ones who used to receive aid from the Union on regular basis for decades before they end up in the nursing home.

After 1943, the blind woman and all other cases were sent to the private Beit Jala nursing home, owned by Katerina (or Katigko) Siksik, a name that frequently appears in the Union's minutes. Katerina Siksik, the vice-president of the Arab Orthodox Ladies' Charitable Union was apparently a respected figure in the charity circles of Jerusalem and the outskirts. The close relations between Siksik and the members of the Union are also proved by the fact that in February 1945, the ladies of the Union accepted Siksik's invitation to visit the then renovated nursing home.<sup>23</sup> However, this relationship also had its limits. For instance, in August 1944, Siksik rejected the enduring demands of the Union president to receive at the home an old Greek woman, who had already received money from the Union and was then found wandering in the streets of Jerusalem. She needed to be taken care off because she represented, according to the Union, a "disgrace to the Greek community".<sup>24</sup> This quote is indicative of another use of the charity activities within the community: hiding misery from the public space in order to preserve national pride.

Finally, after Mavromichali's intervention, Siksik agreed to receive the old lady. According to their agreement, the old woman would have to pay 6 pounds per month for her stay: her brother covered a part of this amount and the rest was paid by the Union. After the Second World War, the increasing need for philanthropic activities within the community led the ladies to ask the Koinotita to allow the use of the Union-owned building in Katamon to run an orphanage and a nursing home.<sup>25</sup> It is thus clear that the Union's members also filled an intermediary role between the poor people of the community and the different charity structures of the city. This was not only true for the nursing home. The Union intervened in many other cases: for instance, Clio Eukleidi and Irene Filalithi tried to place a baby born to an unmarried destitute woman in the infant centre of the American Colony, an "infant welfare center and a community playground" for local children in East Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, in cases of women with mental health problems, some of whom were orphans, Union members intervened with the Catholic Daughters of Charity, who ran a hospital and a nursery in Jerusalem since 1884, or other sanitary institutions.

### *Philanthropy in Jerusalem as Greece's Matter*

As I have shown at the beginning of the article, one important factor for the creation of the Union was the need to ensure the continuation of the Greek secular presence in the Middle East. The other two factors were also ubiquitous during the years under examination. Apart from the financial and other aid that the Union provided to the destitute Greeks of the city under normal circumstances, the political and geopolitical context in Jerusalem gave plenty of reasons for the Union to give a helping hand to Greek people when needed. Such an instance was the Arab Revolt (1936-39) against the British army—, when Jerusalem became the scene of violent actions— followed by widespread unemployment. For most of the period,

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<sup>23</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of 9 February 1945.

<sup>24</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of 8 August 1944.

<sup>25</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of 29/12/1945.

<sup>26</sup> It was established in the 1920s and it is still active under the name "The Spafford Children Center." It is located between Damascus and Herod's Gates. See (Shatz 2018)

the liberal professions faced difficulties and scientists and technicians often remained without a job for short or long periods (Tleel 2007, pp. 12–14). When things got even worse, the Union provided financial aid to unemployed people and quickly organized fundraisers for specific purposes. For instance, because of the eight days' lockdown of the Old City by the Arabs in October 1938, 1579.5 pounds were collected. Out of that sum, 1,400 pounds was distributed to 30 laywomen, to 10 nuns, 2 men, and 10 Old City families. Palestinian women also took action at that moment; among other initiatives, they collected funds and distributed them to Palestinians in need (Fleischmann 2003, pp. 125-133).

The Second World War was an even more bewildering period for the community. The war signified for Palestine the suspension of conflicts between Arabs, Jews and British and launched a period of prosperity, for the arrival of thousands of soldiers of the Allied troops propelled economic activities, as happened at the same time in Egypt (Dalachanis 2017 pp. 85-92). A side effect of the economic boom was the general rise of prices, which increased poverty and made wage earners even more vulnerable to the greater cost of living. The war was, however, a very difficult period for Greece and the Union found itself heavily involved with its effects from the very beginning. A few days after 28 October 1940, when the Greek-Italian War broke out, the ladies' Union invited all Greek women of the city to constitute a local committee for the "Soldiers' Charity" to produce clothing for frontline soldiers.<sup>27</sup> Actually, the *Fanela* initiative started in Athens in 1939 by women to help the soldiers of Greece's northern frontiers.

With the beginning of the Second World War, this initiative was placed under the auspices of Greece's Princess Frederica. Women all over Greece and diaspora settings were mobilized to prepare clothing for the poorly equipped soldiers, who were fighting the Italian army on the mountainous north-western front in Epirus in particularly harsh conditions during the winter of 1940-41. Overall, hundreds of thousands of parcels were sent to the front from October 1940 to April 1941, when the Germans invaded Greece from the north. A local association of the diaspora thus integrated a wider philanthropic scope related to the homeland. Soon enough, the board of the Union decided to suspend all activities and to focus on the *Fanela* initiative. In practice, this meant that the workers of the Union would then be paid for their needlework either by "ladies who cannot work" or "by the treasury" of the Union.<sup>28</sup> The national cause transcended community boundaries and more people, even non-members, were integrated in the activities – for whatever reason. Thus, women became part of the imagined "national body" (Avdela and Psarra 2005), which was not only struggling for the nation's survival in the Middle East but also in homeland.

This was not the only time the Union got involved in the affairs of the motherland. Indeed, thousands of people of Greek nationality or origin moved from mainland Greece, but especially from the islands, to the Middle East and Africa to escape from the Axis occupation of the country. This movement did not only concern the people but also the king and the Greek government which, after the German invasion, went into exile to Cape Town and then to Cairo, where they remained until the end of the war (Clogg 1979). According to the Greek state's estimations, in 1944, 23,406 men, women and children, who had left their place of origin in Greece were residing in refugee camps in Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria but also Ethiopia, the Belgian Congo and other African countries. A total of 1,082 were hosted in Jerusalem (Michailidis 2018). The living conditions were acceptable in some camps but problems arose in others. For instance, women reported harassment in Jerusalem settings for refugees.<sup>29</sup> A mixed committee of officers and civilians was responsible for these camps

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<sup>27</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria' 7 November 1940.

<sup>28</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria' 9/11/1940.

<sup>29</sup> Israeli State Archives, M 116/13, Government of Palestine, Complaints by Greek refugees. I thank Maria Chiara Rioli for this reference and for putting at my disposal this document.

(Michailidis 2018, p. 116). Other national and international organizations were also involved in the refugee relief, along with the Greek (Rum) Orthodox Patriarchate itself. For that reason, the Union did not intervene except for urgent or exceptional cases. This is the case of a pregnant woman, Zinovia Zervaki, who received special aid along with other refugee women.<sup>30</sup>

The arrival of refugees from Greece to Jerusalem provided many opportunities for the Union to interact with them. An interesting case provides the baptismal ceremony of a little refugee girl, Irene-Evangelia, by the ladies of the Union on 15 May 1942 at the monastery of St. Euthymios. The name Evangelia was chosen by her parents because she was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, which is for the Gregorian calendar of the Orthodox Church of Greece (not the Julian one followed by the Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem) the day of *Evangelismos* (Annunciation). The habit of naming a child after the saint on whose feast day was born was rather common and it was thought to protect the child from dangers, given the high mortality rates among infants. The child's godmother, however, was Irina Ovtchinnikova, the Russian-born wife of Prince Peter of Greece, a controversial figure who tried to create connections with charity associations of the Greek diaspora. For the refugees, the connexion to a member of the royal family symbolized the bond with the motherland and epitomized the spiritual relationship of the Greek ladies with Greece outside the country's frontiers. The Union fully supported this kind of relationships and offered the mother four meters of textile, a cloth nappy and a towel for the young girl.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The last date mentioned in the Union's minutes is 8 October 1950. However, according to the website of the patriarchate,<sup>32</sup> the "Hodegetria Charitable Women's Association" is one of the few Greek charity associations still active in Jerusalem. Is this the same association with the one established in 1924 and described in this article? This is very likely, even if it is not clear when the association reverted to its initial name. The second name switch testifies to the absence of a strong secular institution today, but this was the case since 1949, when the patriarchate remained the main institutional pole around which the community could gather. Under the British Mandate, the available sources allow us to trace the path of women's charity activities during a crucial period for Palestine.

This is an important contribution to the discussion on charity in the countries that emerged from the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, because women's philanthropic activities remain largely unknown mainly due to the lack of sources. The study of the Ladies' Union of Jerusalem offers the opportunity to approach this topic since the Union was not an isolated phenomenon. It was part of a vivid movement of women belonging to different congregations in Palestine since the 1910s. Women participated as active agents in the life of their respective communities. This movement was present in charity associations but also, with regard to Palestinian women, in protests against the British Mandate and Jewish immigration.

The action of charitable associations was entangled with the emergence and consolidation of nation-states in the Eastern Mediterranean after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Great Idea in 1922. Even if the British promoted sectarianism across religious lines, the example of the Greek community and the Ladies' Union clearly shows that this policy could have the reverse effect. Given their fear of losing control over religious institutions and of being absorbed by the bigger Arabic community, the Greeks created

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<sup>30</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria' Board meeting of 13 June 1941.

<sup>31</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria' 27 May 1942.

<sup>32</sup> <https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/>

several associations along national lines, the Union being one. Hardly any non-Greeks benefited from the association and almost all the Union's collaborations were with other Greek institutions and people, not only in Jerusalem, but also in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ismailia, Alexandria, Amman, Teheran and Athens. This perimeter of action concerned secular institutions and compatriots in the homeland and in diaspora settings around the Middle East and beyond. The nationalization of the Union was paired with its gradual secularization throughout the Mandate period, as the evidence shows. This was palpable in the status, name and seal of the Union, but it was also related to its location: from the Old City and the St. Euthymius monastery, the Union's seat moved to the area of the Greek Colony in Katamon. In other words, from the Old City, which constituted the religious centre, the Union moved to a place that became, during the same period, the secular core of Jerusalemite Greeks until the Palestine War, when time seems to have stopped. Between 30 November 1947 and 31 July 1949, there are no minutes of any Union activities, which apparently has to do with the fights in the Katamon district of Jerusalem during the war. After this silence, new elements appear within the new geopolitical order. The Greek community split between Transjordan and Israel and this also concerned the Union's members. From that point onwards, the Union carried on its activities in the Old City.

Removed from the Katamon facilities, in the new geography of Palestine, bazaars and celebrations of the Union were now organized in the rented hall of the Citadel Hotel (now the New Imperial Hotel), close to Jaffa Gate (Chapman 2019), the facilities of the Frères des écoles chrétiennes or in Amman – where some key persons of the Union as Foteini Mavromichali established herself after the war – and the existing Greek community was demographically boosted with Greeks from Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> At a 1950 meeting, the Union's board acknowledged that fact that it was in a difficult situation. Clio Efkleidi, the last treasurer of the Union before the war, remained in the Israeli-controlled part of the city and had not managed to send the money of the Union's treasury before the end of 1949. Other proof of the Union's limited financial means was that in 1950 it comprised 32 ordinary members, compared to the 64 of 12 years earlier. One of the last decisions was to reduce the financial aid to beneficiaries.<sup>34</sup> In order to survive in this new era for the region, the Union had no option but to appropriate again its religious character and to remain close to the Greek (Rum) Orthodox patriarchate.

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<sup>33</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', Board meeting of 15 September 1949.

<sup>34</sup> AEPI, Minutes of the Greek Ladies' Union 'Odigitria', 4 August 1950.

8066) in Paris.

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## FIGURES



Figure 1. Seal of the Greek Ladies' Union of Jerusalem



**Figure 2. Seal of the Charity Section of the Greek Community of Jerusalem**



**Figure 3. Visiting cards of Photios and Maria Euklides<sup>35</sup>**

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<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Maria Chiara Rioli for these images, taken from an album containing around 1,500 visiting cards printed by the Franciscan Printing Press. See (Rioli 2018)