## **Multi-National Women’s Liberation Group (MNWLG), Athens, Greece, 1977-1978**

Co-ordinating *Foreign Women in Greece,* Athens, 1978

Cecily Moreton, Sydney, Australia June 2017.

The women at the MNWLG were central to my two years living in Greece 1977 and 1978. After a wonderful year travelling Australia with Anna Amera, sociologist doing longitudinal research into Greek migrants to Australia, I was excited and optimistic about coming with her to Greece. We flew into Athens in wintry pre-dawn light in the first week of January 1977. Between that day and the day I flew out for a hot Aussie Christmas 1978, I had two remarkable years. I was twenty six years old when I landed and about a decade older when I left. It was an exciting, difficult, rich, heart-warming, challenging, happy, and inspiring time. I was naïve about being an immigrant and about cross cultural relationships but the women and projects embarked on at MNWLG made life easier and immensely worthwhile. Between us we had remarkable knowledge and skills. Together we wrote *Foreign Women in Greece: legal, practical and personal information for foreign women living in Greece*.

Already an activist in the vibrant Women’s Liberation Movement in Melbourne, I met Anna Amera at the Women’s Centre there in 1976. I seem to have known about the MNWLG in Athens from the time I arrived in 1977 via several lesbian feminists like Sue Hardesty and Georgina Sparks who knew Anna’s many Australian cousins. They introduced me to Margot Tucker and the MNWLG. Most Aussie friends lived in or near the Metz, close to the basement rented by the MNWLG.

Maggie Sadoway’s account of the history of the MNWLG reflects much of my experience. In addition to the extraordinary range of projects, seminars and fundraisers, who could forget the wonderful art exhibitions, the health education night with torch/flashlight and clear plastic specula, or the night we sang our way through a history of the union movement and its relevance for the struggle for women’s rights with Bread and Roses, Union Maid and Which Side Are You On?.

There was a seminar at the MNWLG centre when many women shared their struggles with the conundrums of life in Greece. We had a deeply personal and thoughtful discussion about personal and social needs and services. Being fairly new, I said that we need a book to help all women like us. Various people chimed in that we've already thought of that and it's too difficult. I responded that it's still a good idea. I think it was Karen Vournas or Jan Friar who called out it's a great idea and you should do it! Everyone laughed. Every project needs a champion to drive it so I agreed. Everyone laughed a lot more. Silly me - it was going to be a huge amount of work.

A wonderful group immediately coalesced around the idea: Jane Assimakopoulou, Christina Erickson, Mary Frangakis, Angela Kiossoglou, Kathy Mamali, Barbara McNichol, Sabina Fitzgerald-Melide, Becky Sakellariou, Anna Todd, Margot Tucker and myself. For over 100 pages of typing and layout, we had Melia Shell, Janet Newell and Anne Padilla. Our proof readers were Shelley Ipiotis and Maggie Sadoway. Our cover designers were Christina Erickson and Barbara McNichol. We had great support from publisher Denise Harvey who had run her business in Athens for years. And our consulting sociologist, Anna Amera, was a household name due to current affairs interviews on television. She knew everyone we needed to collaborate with.

We were a highly educated group. With so many tertiary educated women in the MNWLG who appreciated research, it was a given that we would investigate the needs first and have this data inform the book. Anna Amera helped devise the Foreign Women in Greece survey questionnaire which our small group administered to the whole membership. Ninety-two questionnaires were returned and analysed. I recall Anna commenting that most sociological research into migration was with low socio economic and education cohorts, but ours was a cohort of mostly middle class migrants. One of the confronting findings in process of the survey was that most of these English-speaking women did not see ourselves as migrants. Of course we were not just tourists: we were immigrants to Greece. But in the countries we had come from, in our minds, other people were migrants. I loved saying: “We are immigrants”, and seeing the reaction of my English-speaking friends and associates. One English woman who was married to a Greek man and had Greek children responded: “You may be an immigrant, Cecily, but I definitely am not. I am British”. This of course articulated the core underlying psychosocial family issues we were grappling with.

The findings of the research are all described in the book, and each chapter refers to the research. Burning issues were cross cultural marriage and Greek family law; citizenship law; how to access health, medical and other services; language learning; work; housing; education; cross cultural children; and how to access information. As a psychological counsellor I was keen for an introduction on identity and adjustment to change. All of us were engaged with cultural adaptation to change every day.

The group met regularly to decide the project details, to undertake tasks at each step, to distribute and collect the questionnaires, to collate and analyse findings, to sort the big topic headings, and then research information to provide answers to those things in the book. Then it all had to be written up. And amongst all that, these wonderful women had families and jobs and many other challenges to cope with. All the women were marvellous. We shared our personal stories, we supported each other personally as well as in our writing, there were tears and laughter, frustrations and breakthroughs. It was tough and yet it all took shape.

We grappled with the reality that we needed to give legal education without giving legal advice. We had to find ways that delivered good information without crossing any legal lines on family law and citizenship law in particular. It was tricky and we argued a lot. We put in a disclaimer on every page of the Marriage and Family Law chapter even though it took up a third of the page.

Women less directly involved with the MNWLG were called on to support us. Publisher Denise Harvey guided every step of the book. The day came when Denise kindly reminded us we would need to pay for printing and other publication costs. Somebody suggested we pre-sell the book to the various consular agencies and this would cover the production costs. I remember getting Anna to introduce me to many key people in Athens who could help us progress the book. One such contact was Nancy Stern from International Social Service who introduced me to all the English-speaking clergy and gave us a crucial link to a consul in the US embassy. One of our own members, Anna Todd, was senior consul at the New Zealand consulate and she too gave us entrée to her American peers.

I was nominated to pitch the pre-publication sale of the book to an American consul. We prepared carefully. We wrote scripts and rehearsed. Most of us were living simply, and for reasons of both economy and feminist ideology, had stopped complying with the gendered expectations of middle class beauty regimes. Certainly that was true of me: no personal exfoliation for years. However, as the day approached for me to meet the American consul, I got cold feet. We needed the embassy to pre-purchase 500 books so we could pursue the publication. Ever the pragmatist, ideology went out the window and the need for cash for our book won the day. With full scale grooming and a new outfit I set off looking as straight, smart and professional as possible.

American embassies are no doubt designed to look like massive fortresses, and the security with dozens of heavily armed men was intimidating. Several security processes had to be negotiated, and then it was wait, be taken somewhere else, then wait again. Finally there was a very charming man who was receptive and interested, who could see that the book could be a resource to save consular staff time and help thousands of people, and who agreed to fund the book by advance purchase of some 500 copies. I was astonished and thrilled. In hindsight he would already have spoken with Nancy Stern and others associated with the project like Anna Todd, and no doubt already had his decision made.

That last month was the hardest: getting all the material together, written, and then typed up. There are always hiccups and people unable to meet commitments. There was employment, sick kids, unsupportive partners and all the normal stuff women deal with. Still we pressed ahead and covered for each other. Thankfully Margot, Sabina and others moderated my driven dogged approach. Many women put in a heroic effort to get everything done so the publishing deadline could work. We had a commitment to complete as promised to the embassy, and we wanted to launch the book and celebrate before key people in our group were away from Athens.

The day Denise Harvey knocked on our door and produced the first proofs – metres of shiny printed paper with page mark-ups – was one of the most exciting ever. Those pages suddenly looked like a real book. It was not long then until we were all gathered again for a huge party to launch the book – that arrived from the printer in cartons minutes before guest speakers, including Nancy Stern, were to speak.

We were all utterly exhausted and hugely proud to have contributed to an exceptionally useful little book that would help thousands of women and be reprinted many times. Every woman involved worked incredibly hard to meet the deadlines and deliver high quality content. Creating this book in Greece allowed a certain freedom – we had nothing to lose and a lot to gain and we did just that.

There was, I think, a substantial maturation of the MNWLG in the making of this book. We discussed and debated every chapter because each paragraph mattered to us and we wanted it to be the best help we could create. In fact the process of the research into our group, then research into how best to meet our needs, writing that information up clearly and sharing everything back at our monthly meetings, created a valuable discourse, a feminist praxis. I think perhaps it became clear to all of us that the best way to cope with the tensions and divisions we experienced individually, in our families and in our own MNWLG, was to validate all our strengths. The way forward was to affirm our commonality and the best of everything we each brought to the table. We needed to affirm that we are citizens of the world, that we are all inter-national and united in our humanity. Our children were bilingual literally and socially and politically and we as their parents, carers and educators needed to match them. We all spoke international English, both to keep our children safe on the streets (we all said sidewalk), and to connect across our countries and continents. Returning to Australia I found parochial partisanship utterly limiting and could only think of myself as a citizen of the world. We were multi-cultured and multi-national and many were multi-lingual. Personally the experience was transformational and shaped my life and work forever.

*Foreign Women in Greece* was a little book with a big heart that reached out to thousands of women. Many called it their bible. This little book made a difference. We were there. As we sang 39 years ago in that MNWLG meeting room: “We raised our voices loud, it makes me proud. We were there!”

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