A Partial History of the Multi-National Women’s Liberation Group,

Athens, Greece, 1975-1980

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My first glimpse of Greece was from the open deck of a ferry, as I made the trip from Istanbul to Athens in late 1965; I was 23 years old. After 9 months of graduate studies in Germany, I had seized the chance to travel frugally for a year (read “hitchhiking” and “youth hostels”) in countries new to me: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Sierra Leone, Brazil. But it was Greece I fell in love with, different in so many ways to my native New England (USA). It was also where I met a fellow American, in a Greek class, who became my husband, and where our son was born many years later.

Then, on a June day in 1980, now 37 years ago as I write, we crammed the 3 of us plus mounds of luggage into a taxi bound for the Athens airport. The pre-dawn darkness hid my tears: after 13 years in Greece (1967-1980), we had decided to return with our year-old baby to new adventures and nearby family in Massachusetts. I was excited but also regretful for what we were leaving behind, especially the Multi-National Women’s Liberation Group (MNWLG), where I had learned so much and made so many good friends.

For five years, almost from its beginning in 1975, I was an active member of the MNWLG. I participated in the early Consciousness Raising groups, served on the rotating steering committee, helped make policy decisions, wrote for and edited the monthly newsletter, proofread many of our publications, organized fundraising art exhibits and rummage sales, and sometimes acted as an informal liaison between groups with divergent views.

The diversity of the group added to the enthusiasm and energy so many of us felt: we were from Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and many other places. We were single, in long-term partnerships, or married (very often to Greeks); we had children or didn't; we were visiting Greece for a year or two or settling into a lifetime there; we spoke Greek well, or, more likely, struggled with it daily.

In other ways we were quite a homogeneous group. Most of us were among the estimated (and somewhat surprising) 20,000 native-English-speaking women living in Greece. Nearly all of us were white, in our twenties or thirties, relatively well educated, living in the Athens urban area, and dependent on public transportation. Many of us had already traveled or lived in other countries.

An important and hard-working core of our membership and leadership identified as lesbian or bi-sexual but a majority of members were heterosexual. I would guess that all but a few of us had been raised in some version of Christianity. We almost certainly shared an adventuresome spirit and a passion to change women’s lives for the better.

Our struggles as a group were many; our achievements greater. Unseen biases erupted, tempers flared, members left, new ones came. After hours or even months of frequently heated discussion, we made hard decisions, such as our policy of welcoming men by special invitation only, knowing we were excluding some women whose partners did not approve of their attendance. When some courageous women joined us in spite of possible trouble at home, we agreed never to use their surnames in print - but only after acknowledging that history has too often failed to identify women and their achievements.

Our solution to the huge and prickly issue of leadership, faced by so many groups, was to have a volunteer steering committee that changed every four months.  We decided not to call our group “international," but rather the more accurate "multi-national," in spite of objections to its corporate connotation. Knowing it was a risky move, especially so soon after seven years of a dictatorship (1967-1974) when our group would have been impossible, we boldly included the words “women’s liberation” in our name. We gleefully named our newsletter “OUT," a then-popular one-word feminist answer to a woman being asked where she was going - and published it monthly for ten years.  We grappled with the special difficulties our group presented to single mothers, non-English speakers, wheelchair users. We had to decide who could be a key-holder in our rented space or borrow books from our feminist library.

Racism, classism, homophobia, - these are so prevalent in cultures worldwide that, like pollution, they begin to seep into our very pores almost as soon as we are born. So it’s not surprising that even as we organized to combat sexism, lesbians in the MNWLG were sometimes in the crosshairs of bias. Much of it was unintended and even unnoticed by straight women but some was loud and vocal; all of it was hurtful. Fortunately, goodwill and smart thinking prevailed as we worked our way through these tensions - a few women did leave the group but in general we became stronger, better informed, and more united.

Once we were able to rent a small space of our own, it became easier to take on all kinds of projects. Here are just a few of the workshops, presentations and seminars we offered: a study group on pregnancy and childbirth in Greece, foreign women raising their children bilingually and biculturally, sexism in children’s literature, women’s health including self-exams by speculum, helping each other find English teaching jobs that many of us relied on for income, the politics of wages for housewives, girls who grew up with brothers, basic car maintenance, making candles and other crafts for profit, high school workshops on women’s rights, the study of ourselves as migrants from developed countries to a less well-developed economy and more traditional society. Some MNWLG women, often those with women’s liberation experience in other countries, joined forces with the feisty and well-informed Greek feminists who were engaged in a long and ultimately successful campaign for a much-improved family law, which until then had heavily favored husbands and fathers.

MNWLG members wrote, illustrated, published and marketed the first non-sexist, bilingual (Greek-English) children’s picture book, *I Want to Fly*, about a little mouse who persists in learning to be a pilot in spite of nearly everyone telling her girls can’t do that.

A truly enormous project was our 100-page booklet *Foreign Women in Greece*: *legal, practical and personal information for foreign women living in Greece*. First published in 1978, it was reprinted several times, with revised editions published in 1979 and 1984. Many women in Greece and beyond found us through the book; we became aware of organizations working on similar issues. An embassy in another country, recognizing how uniquely useful it was, created a similar booklet for foreign women in that country, using our format.

In February 2017, realizing that my complete set of 105 newsletters deserved a permanent home in a feminist archive, I approached Becky Sakellariou (former MNWLG member and long-time American resident of Greece) to see if she knew where they could go.  She didn’t - but asked her local librarian in New Hampshire (USA) for ideas and also reached out to a few former members of the MNWLG.

That really got the ball rolling: within 3 months, more than 25 of us were talking by email, (many for the first time in decades), meeting in person when possible, searching through basements and attics in far-flung corners of the world for fading records and nearly forgotten papers. As one woman after another found bits and pieces of our history, even after moves across oceans and over decades, we realized that the very fact that so many of us saved virtually all our printed papers (and knew where to find them!) simply confirmed how important the MNWLG was to us.

It’s a tendency, perhaps especially among women, to undervalue our own work, to move on and forget what a difference we made to so many. With that in mind, this collection of newsletters, books, pamphlets and essays is gratefully and enthusiastically donated to the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library at Harvard/Radcliffe in Cambridge, Massachusetts: a reminder that a small group of us, in one corner of the world, for a few years, did valuable work that benefited ourselves and thousands of others.

Afterword:  Searching for a permanent home for MNWLG materials

While sorting through my late husband’s things in 2014, I realized it was high time to make some decisions about my own possessions. First on my list was a thick, dust-covered 3-ring binder holding five years of MNWLG newsletters. I certainly couldn’t throw them out - could I just ship them back to Greece and be done with them?

When I shyly and a bit desperately showed them to Susan Johnson Mumford, an American friend visiting from her long-time home in London, her enthusiastic reaction took me by surprise: "These are of such historical value, we must find a good home for them,” she said excitedly. Here was someone who had never heard of our group but, like so many MNWLG members decades earlier, was in her 30s, a middle-class feminist immigrant to another country, building a bi-cultural life and marriage. In other words, exactly the kind of person I hoped would find our work valuable.

Her words were the confirmation I needed that younger scholars and researchers might find these archives interesting; more confirmation came when Susan attended the 2017 Women of the World Festival in London and found the Feminist Library, a group that also expressed interest. By then, I had turned the search over to Becky, as related above.

It does seem ironic that it was the death of a *man* (Jack Sadoway, always a staunch supporter of women’s work and accomplishments) that set this project in motion – without that spark, these papers might never have been gathered together and these essays might never have been written.