

# Child Victims of a Savage Civil War: True Survivor Stories

## The Abducted Greek Children of the Communists: Paidomazoma

By Niki Karavasilis

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By Aphrodite Matsakis

Special to The National Herald

If courage is required to live through a war, yet another kind of courage is required to write or speak about its many horrors, thus making them visible to others. Since, in general, we humans often wish to deny or minimize the darker side of life, those who bring the reality of human cruelty and irrationality to light take the risk of being accused of distorting the facts or "overreacting." In her book, "The Abducted Greek Children of the Communists: Paidomazoma," which concerns the over 28,000 Greek children who were taken from Greece and sent behind the Iron Curtain during the Greek Civil War, Dr. Niki Karavasilis has taken that risk. As for her critics, she says, "I ignore them and continue with my research."

Her book is especially courageous given that the Paidomazoma and subsequent issues of the repatriation of these Greek children are heavily entangled in a host of heated controversies surrounding the Greek Civil War and the role of various Greek officials and of U.S., England and other foreign powers in the shaping of modern Greece. Such issues cause tempers to flare even today in that they continue to affect current international relations and the ongoing emotionally charged debates regarding ethnic identity in Macedonia and the Balkans. Hence even though the Paidomazoma took place some 60 years ago, this book is a timely one.

Karavasilis' book is based on documents in the Greek Parliament and in the Library of the University of Athens; on news reports and official documents from the U.S., Italy and other countries; and on extensive interviews, both in Greece and abroad, with people who remember, witnessed or were part of the Paidomazoma. Through the real life story of Dora, a 12-year-old girl who is forcibly taken from her village by Communist soldiers, the author exposes the loneliness, terror, starvation and the emotional, physical and

sexual abuse reported by the survivors, as well as the as the anguish of the families they were forced to leave behind.

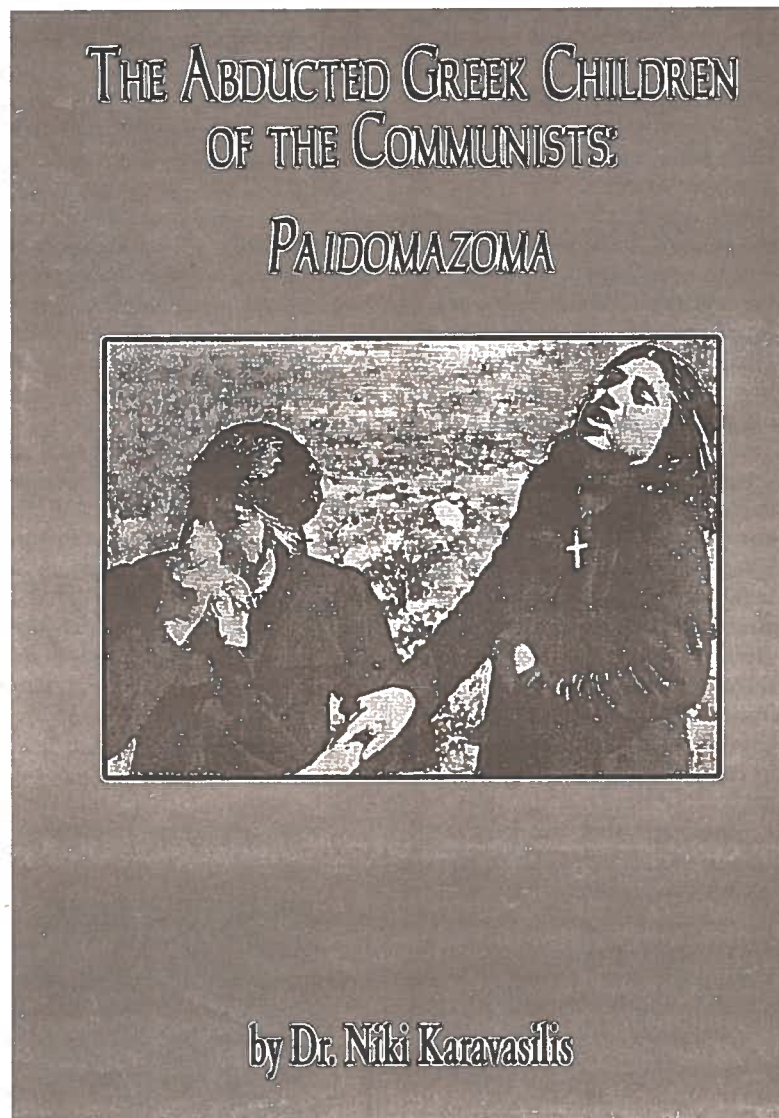
The structure of the book is similar to that of Nicholas Gage's well-known book, "Eleni." Each chapter begins with a short historical synopsis, sometimes accompanied by newspaper reports, photographs and other documents from various countries. The narrative which follows shows how the flow of events outlined in the synopsis impact Dora, her devastated mother, and others whose lives were disrupted by the Paidomazoma.

Like Dora, about 11,600 of the 28,000 children removed from Greece between 1946-1949 went to Yugoslavia; the rest, to Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Russia. Considerable controversy exists as to how many of these children were taken by force and how many were sent away voluntarily in hopes of saving them from the starvation and savagery of the ongoing war and as to how many were better off behind the Iron Curtain and how many were brutalized instead.

In Karavasilis' book it is the Communists who subject the children to almost unspeakable cruelties. However, the fundamental purpose of her book is not political. In this reviewer's opinion, had the author's research revealed that it was Greek Nationalists or some other group who mistreated the children, the text of her book would probably be the same, save for changes in the names of the offending parties. "As a person, I always had a deep feeling for children, perhaps because of my profession," states Karavasilis, an internationally recognized educator.

Karavasilis received her B.A. and M.A. from the University of New Hampshire and her Ph.D. at Columbia Pacific University in foreign languages. She is fluent in several foreign languages, including German, Spanish, Greek and English. For over 35 years she has lectured at numerous universities and colleges and has founded several foreign language programs, both in the U.S. and abroad. The awards she's received are too numerous to mention.

Karavasilis does not deny that some families, both Communist and non-Communist alike, viewed the Paidomazoma as a rescue operation, similar to the evacuation of English children to the countryside during the Nazi aerial bombings of London. Some of the Greek parents in her book relocate to Communist lands, either for political reasons or in an



COURTESY OF NIKI KARAVASILIS

Dr. Niki Karavasilis, a professor of foreign languages, was born in Greece and educated in the United States. Fluent in many languages, she taught for 35 years at high school and college levels in Athens, Greece and at several universities in New England. She has written seven language texts and four books on the Greek experience, including "The Abducted Greek Children of the Communists: Paidomazoma." This book concerns the over 28,000 Greek children who were taken from Greece and sent behind the Iron Curtain during the Greek Civil War. She is currently working on "The Whispering Voices of Smyrna."

effort to keep the family together. For example, once the widow Olga, a non-communist, realizes that she is powerless to prevent her children being taken, she begs the soldiers to be allowed to go with them. "There was no reason for her to stay behind. Without her children, life had no meaning." (24) Later, however, Olga is ordered to go the mountains to fight Greek nationalists and her children are sent elsewhere. The Communists, she learned, held that allegiance to the party preceded family ties.

While it is and may forever be impossible to determine how many children were sent away willingly and what "willingly" meant under the dire circumstances of the Greek Civil War, Karavasilis does not attempt to settle such issues. Instead she chronicles the experiences of those children who were taken at gunpoint or who were lured into the trucks of Communist soldiers with promises of white bread and marmalade. According to Karavasilis, such promises of good food and safety usually proved false.

Karavasilis was born in the village of Trikorfon in northern Greece, an area particularly affected by the Paidomazoma. "My siblings and I could have been part of Paidomazoma if it wasn't for my parents' fast decision to take us to the town of Grevena, protected by the Greek National Army. In Grevena, we lived as refugees for four years, among the thousands of other homeless people from the surrounding villages," (xi) explains the author. She further notes that "eight hundred thousand refugees, nearly 10% of the population of Greece fled from the villages for big cities, trying to escape recruitment ... and the ... Paidomazoma," (28) and that families who resisted the Paidomazoma were often "seen as traitors" and "slaughtered like lambs." (20)

Decades after leaving Greece for the U.S., Karavasilis returned to her native village. There she was greeted warmly by an old woman, Dora, the main character of the book, who subsequently shared her life story with the author. "The majority of the characters of my book are real and in some cases I injected the stories I heard from the survivors," the author explains. However, because the Paidomazoma remains "a very sensitive topic among the Greeks," she needed to alter the names and other identifying information of the survivors in order to protect their anonymity.

In January 2009, Karavasilis lectured at the University of Missouri in



my hometown of St. Louis. In the audience were Greek Americans I had grown up with, some of whom had experienced the Paidomazoma first hand. As a child, I recall that among the post-Greek Civil War immigrants to St. Louis, some panicked when they learned about U.S. mandatory education laws. They came running to my father, seeking assurances that if they sent their children (especially their daughters) to school, that their children wouldn't suddenly disappear. These parents recognized that their fears were ungrounded and sincerely wanted their children to become educated. Yet the very word "education" terrified them to the core.

In Greece, these parents had seen young girls, like young boys, wrenched from their parents and sent to Communist countries ostensibly for purposes of "education." Since most of the schools in Greece had been destroyed during WWII or the Civil War, one of these parents had voluntarily sent his daughters behind the Iron Curtain in hopes that they would receive the education they could never obtain otherwise. He never saw or heard from them again. In Karavasilis book, the only education the abducted children receive is indoctrination in Communist ideology, accompanied by systematic attempts to strip them of their Greek identity.

Yet, as the experience of world renowned nuclear physicist, Dr. Thanasis Economou illustrates, some children of the Paidomazoma did receive a solid education which, in Economou's case, led to advanced degrees and prominent career. As described in George Chiagouris'



THE PHOTOS ARE FROM "ABDUCTED GREEK CHILDREN OF THE COMMUNISTS" BY NIKI KARAVASILIS. SHE THANKS THE GREEK PARLIAMENT AND THE UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS FOR ASSISTING HER IN GATHERING THE PHOTOS AND INFORMATION FOR THE BOOK.

Although this photo depicts only Greek boys, Greek children of both sexes who were taken behind the Iron Curtain, either by force or with the consent of their parents, were often trained to become child soldiers and fight the Greek National Army. (p 84)

2008 article in The National Herald, "Economou Explores the Solar System," leaders from Economou's native village of Ziakas and the surrounding area purposely decided to send some 200 of their children to Albania to insure their safety and well being. The schooling Economou received in Czechoslovakia is credited with having provided him with educational opportunities unavailable to him in Greece at the time.

According to Karavasilis, however, many of the abducted children never even made it to their Communist destinations. Some died after

being herded into crowded vehicles that lacked adequate ventilation, food, water or sanitary facilities; others perished during long marches in the cold or during their stays in cold cramped filthy quarters similar to those of Nazi concentration camps. Indeed, in some instances children were housed in former concentration camps.

Some of the children we meet in the book are raped; some purposely disobey their captors, thus inviting torture and certain death; while others confess to "crimes" they didn't commit, such as defying a teacher or a soldier, in order to spare the lives of other children. Still others are used as human shields or serve as child soldiers and die on the front lines fighting other Greeks.

One of the most compelling aspects of this book are descriptions the various forms of mental illness developed by some of the children due to being separated from their parents and the violence surrounding that event. Others had mental breakdowns as a result of being required to disavow their origins by Communists chanting slogans which contradicted the values taught to them by their parents or which vilified Greek leaders and institutions they had been raised to admire. Some children handled this disconnect between their past and their present by wholeheartedly embracing Communist thinking. Others became severely depressed, committed suicide or developed various forms of psychoses.

Although Karavasilis is not a psychologist, her descriptions of the psychological impact of the Paidomazoma, as related to her by the interviewed survivors, are consistent with psychological research on chil-

dren who are separated from their families at a young age; who witness violence, such as assaults on family members; or who are made captives and then subjected to brainwashing. In particular, the author's portrayal of the post-traumatic reactions of Greek girls, like Dora, who were raped, matches perfectly with current knowledge about rape survivors.

The narrative follows Dora through her 35-year struggle to return to Greece. During these decades she, along with other Greeks behind the Iron Curtain, including Greek Communists who voluntarily relocated there, finds herself treated as a second-class citizen, if not worse. As one reads about Dora's many aborted attempts to return to her village and her mother's equally persistent but futile efforts to find her daughter, one wonders if the ever shifting international and national political dynamics of times

will ever permit these ill-fated people their deepest wish, to be reunited. You will need to read this emotionally riveting and historically significant book to find out.

Karavasilis has authored a total of 11 books, seven in language instruction and three on the Greek experience. Her book "Scattered Leaves" concerns the utter devastation experienced by rural families during the Italian and German invasions of Greece and the subsequent Civil War. Like the book on the Paidomazoma, "Scattered Leaves" is based on true stories and each chapter begins with a short historical summary. "Reaching America" (to be released in July 2009) is the true story of a courageous Greek woman who is able to relocate her family to the US illegally.

Karavasilis currently lives with her husband in New Hampshire and is working hard on her next book, "The Whispering Voices of Smyrna," to be released in 2010. Just as she was willing to spend her retirement years pouring over dusty documents and interviewing survivors to find out more about the Paidomazoma, she has now focused her considerable intellectual and emotional energies into learning all she can about yet another neglected chapter of Greek history, the catastrophe of Smyrna. Her other passions are reading and writing, especially about Greece. "The closer I get to my last years of my life, the more I want to know about my roots and try to instill this into the lives of my children and grandchildren," she states.


Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D., counseling psychologist, is the author of "Back From the Front: Combat Trauma, Love and The Family" ([www.backfromthefront.org](http://www.backfromthefront.org)), as well as 13 books on a variety of psychological topics and "Growing Up Greek in St. Louis" (Arcadia Publishing, 1998). Visit [www.matsakis.com](http://www.matsakis.com) for further information.



Parents who resisted the Paidomazoma by hiding their children or sending them to areas protected by the Greek National Army were often tortured or killed. This photo depicts a "Greek soldier carrying a child that he found hidden in the forest by the mother who was slain." (p 118)

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