

Maria Desipri Svolou (1892-1976)

(introduction)

Mirsini:

«[...] ο Αστικός Κώδικας περιέχει πολλές διακρίσεις εις βάρος της γυναίκας αναφορικά με τον γάμο, το διαζύγιο, τη θέση της γυναίκας σε σχέση με τον σύζυγο και τα παιδιά της. Στη θέση της στο ίδιο το σπίτι της. Περιέχει διατάξεις που μειώνουν την προσωπικότητά της. Θίγουν την αξιοπρέπειά της αναγνωρίζοντας την εξάρτηση της και των παιδιών της από την αντρική θέληση που κανονίζει τις οικογενειακές σχέσεις και έχει τη βαρύνουσα γνώμη για ό,τι αφορά την οικογένεια. Μια γυναίκα για να συνεχίσει την επαγγελματική καριέρα που ασκούσε πριν το γάμο, χρειάζεται τη συγκατάθεση του αντρός της.[...]»

“[...] the Civil Code contains multiple discriminations towards women in marriage, in divorce, in the role of women when it comes to her relationship with her husband. In her position, in her own home. It contains laws that demote her personality and insult her dignity by recognizing her and her children’s dependence on the will of her husband who dictates the family relationship and has the opinion with the most weight in all familial matters. For a woman to continue to practice a business profession after her marriage she needed the permission of her husband. [...]”.

Marialena:

That was the reality women experienced until 1952, when women’s right to vote and to be elected were established. Despite the fact that nowadays we believe this is something normal, women have to fight and struggle to earn that right. Of course, that doesn’t mean that women’s lives changed radically and comprehensively. They had to fight for the achievement of their equal rights as well. Maria Desipri – Svolou fought for that equality almost all her life, a woman who, amidst the difficult



conditions of the Occupation and the Civil War, didn't stop battling for women's equality, the end of the stereotypes and the rights of the oppressed, (doing speeches and research studies.)

(music)

Nikoleta:

She was born in Athens in 1892 and passed away in 1976. She finished the French Studies program of the French School of Athens and in 1919 received state approval to teach. In 1921 she began her professional career as an employee of the Ministry of National Economy, when she met her future husband, Alexandros Svolos, a socialist constitutional expert. Maria was the first woman to achieve the post of Inspector of Labor and was exposing the horrid working conditions of women of the labor classes in the 1920s.

Her reports were saying that the cheap and unskilled labor of underage girls had increased after the arrival of the refugees with a salary which as only enough to feed them.

Tonia:

"as I investigated that from 97 underage laborers under the age of 12, 85 were orphaned missing either their mother or father and even both in some cases or belonged in a family whose adults could not secure permanent employment"

Nikoleta:

Between 1932-1936 she was a member of the Committee of Experts of the International Bureau of Labor

Her public presence became noticeable in the 1920s with her participation, as a foundational member and later on as the General Secretary, of the Union for the Rights of Women. Simultaneously she made powerful contributions to the periodical of the Union *O Agonas tis Gynaikas* (The Struggle of the Woman) from its first printing in 1923 up



until 1932. Regularly, she authored not just for the periodical but for daily newspapers too, agitating for the betterment of working conditions for women, labor rights and equal rights of access for women in the professional world, female scientific and professional education, protection of motherhood, the rights of unmarried women and children born out of wedlock, controlling the prostitution of women and children, social welfare, individual liberties and equality with the driving request being that of enshrining the right to vote for women. Her actions were not contained to the theoretical basis exclusively. Thus, she particularly focused on the professional training of women and unskilled young people, through the creation of programs and the vocational school Papastrateios. With these actions, Maria cemented herself as one of the most crucial figures of the women's movement.

Maria Elena:

It appears that during this time, with the rise of fascism in Europe she too turned to the more radical leftist ideas of the Communist Party of Greece, understanding that wider social and economic changes were necessary for the victory of women's rights. Thus, she was a protagonist in the creation of the Union of Labouring Women, while she actively participated as the Secretary of the Panhellenic Organization of Women against Fascism and War.

(music)

Tonia:

On the night of August 4, 1936, when the Metaxas dictatorship was imposed, her husband was arrested and the state decided to exile him.

Maria did not hesitate to follow her husband to his place of exile, secretly boarding the boat that was transporting the exiles.

Nikoleta:

When she returned from the exile she was sent, during the Nazi Occupation of Greece, Maria joined in the soup kitchen and milk



distribution of the Greek Red Cross and the National Organization of Christian Solidarity, which distributed food to starving kids and nursing mothers. She aided in the care of injured soldiers and the disabled of the war that were hospitalized in very difficult conditions. It is characteristic that during the frigid winter of 1941-1942, Maria made sure that 414 sweaters were delivered to the injured soldiers of the 1st Military Hospital.

On top of her contribution to the starving people of Athens, Maria connected with EAM and participated in the organization of resistance groups, doing illegal meetings during the Occupation for the periodical Nea Genia (New Generation).

She recalls one of them in 1943:

Tonia:

“We went to a house where on the upper floor two Germans lived. We had the notion that it was safer and less auspicious for Greeks with the conditions that the Germans wouldn’t regularly see us there. Once we opened the door we were faced by them. They gave us the military salute and opened the door for us, we calmly returned the greeting and returned separately. Is it possible, I thought, for a person to be polite and also be an animal?”.

Nikoleta:

She went to “Free Greece” in 1943 –the portion of mountainous Greece liberated by ELAS– with her husband who became the president of the resistance government PEEA. She was elected as a National Councilor, amongst the four women who represented Athens. With the right to vote PEEA legally enshrined the equality of women (equal political and social rights) and the equality in wages with men, decisions in line with the demands made by Maria Svolou before the war.

During the Civil War that came on the heels of the Occupation Maria was arrested for her action, on the pretext that one of the calls of the



periodical *Ethniki Allilegii* that she cosigned as its representative, was published in the *Greek-American Vima*. She got Imprisoned at the Averoff women's prison in the very difficult conditions of isolation and the general crowding of the prisons, Maria did not lose the sensitivity she had for socially wronged women. She connected with other political prisoners, met women condemned to death, and moved from the life experiences of working women and young girls that had been persecuted for years and undergone many deprivations. She wrote down the stories that she heard.

In 1949 the emergency military court of Athens accused her of "ultimate treason" and then her case was taken to appeal, where she was found innocent in January of 1951.

Tonia:

In 1956 after the death of her husband, Maria Svolou joined the Unified Democratic Left (EDA), the legal party of the left in the post-civil war times. s. Simultaneously during the decade of 1956-1966 she regularly wrote for the newspaper *Avgi*, while she also had the chance to visit the countries of Eastern Europe and participate in conferences and events, like the visit of Greek women to the Soviet Union or the 5th Conference of the International Committee of Resistance in Budapest in 1966. Staunchly loyal to the women's movement Maria participated in 1964 in the foundation and leadership of the Panhellenic Union of Women (PEG), 30 a short-lived, due to the imposition of the dictatorship, progressive movement with multifaceted actions and mass appeal.

(music)

Maria Despiri Svolou passed away in 1976

Nikoleta: Maria was one of the most crucial figures of the women's movement with a socially awakened personality and progressive beliefs. She was described as a "beautiful, honest, truthful, dynamic, feisty" woman.



