The nation must learn to equate the national with the true.
(Dionysios Solomos)

The events of the Asia Minor Disaster have become a corner stone of Modern Greek historiography, while the social repercussions are neglected. This paper proposes to examine a sample of Modern Greek history textbooks regarding the information they provide on the social aspects of the settlement and assimilation of refugees in Greece post-1922. Since these textbooks have very little on this issue, possible reasons for this are offered, as is a feasible approach to teaching this topic in history textbooks. The overall aim of the paper is to open a discussion on the possibility of including this social history in Greece’s official history textbooks, through the addition of oral testimonies and fiction according to specific selective criteria.

Official teaching of history in the Greek state tends to present Greece as a homogeneous nation. In regards to the Asia Minor Disaster, we observe that the presentation is restricted to pivotal events; however, the assimilation of Asia Minor refugees into Greek society receives very little attention. Nevertheless, oral testimonies and works of fiction by refugees provide us with valuable information on their first years of settlement in Greece. Both bodies of work illustrate historical experiences of the Asia Minor Disaster’s aftermath, which are missing from the official teaching of history in the Greek state, in particular, the relationship between refugees and locals or, to be precise, the refugees’ treatment by the locals.

*Sincere thanks to Dr Alfred Vincent for his valuable observations, comments and editing, and for checking my translations from Greek. I acknowledge any errors as my own.

1 The term “Asia Minor refugees” refers to Orthodox Christians originally subjects of the Ottoman Empire who found refuge in Greece because of the Greek–Turkish war (1919–1922) or who were expelled from their homeland under the terms of the Convention for the Exchange of Populations signed in Lausanne in January 1923. From here on referred to as refugees.

2 The term “locals” refers to Greeks of the nation-state.
In regards to the arrival and settlement of the refugees in Greece, I have looked mainly at *In Modern Times* (Στα Νεότερα Χρόνια) (2002) and *Greek Civilisation 2* (Ελληνικός Πολιτισμός 2) (2002), which are used to teach history in Greek schools and those of the Greek Diaspora. The main text in both books mentions:

- the refugees’ arrival as Greece’s largest problem during the inter-war period;
- the changing demographics because of the influx of refugees;
- a general overview, almost a guesstimate of the refugees’ occupations;
- the measures the Greek state took to help the refugees, such as providing them with employment and housing;
- the role the refugees played in the economic, intellectual, and agricultural development of Greece; and
- some of the refugees’ involvement in the political life of Greece.

Despite this, there is no information on the struggle by the refugees to be accepted into Greek society and their interactions with the locals, both of which played a characteristic role in the assimilation process. That the refugees eventually adapted into Greek society is only briefly mentioned in *Greek Civilisation*: “Με τον καιρό οι πρόσφυγες προσαρμόστηκαν στη νέα ζωή” (2002:266) (In time the refugees adapted to the new life). Also noteworthy is the lack of information on the hardships of the locals who saw the refugees as taking their land, work and state money. A recent study on Greek history textbooks for senior high school students has found that they have only recently included a chapter on Greek refugees in general and information on the contribution of the Asia Minor refugees to Modern Greek society in a cultural and economic capacity (Voutira, 2003:72).

Both textbooks include a reference to the interaction between the locals and refugees only in the supplementary section. This occurs in an excerpt from Stratis Myrivilis’ novel, *The Mermaid Madonna* (Η Παναγιά η Γοργόνα) (1949), which depicts the locals’ attitude towards the refugees. After reading this excerpt in *In Modern Times* (2002) one is left with the impression that the refugees are portrayed by Myrivilis as dishonest, unpleasant, savage, spiteful, reserved, defensive and suspicious of the locals (232). In *Greek Civilisation* (2002:267) an edited version of this excerpt is included and it portrays a sympathetic view of the refugees since the section that offers the unsympathetic view of them is edited out. Neither of the above interpretations represents Myrivilis’ intentions for his novel. The former is incorrect, for Myrivilis’ novel is sympathetic towards the refugees, and the latter is also incorrect because it is not the full version of the

---

3 The reason for choosing these textbooks is because they were easily accessible and are used in the education of Greek students at a prominent Greek school, All Saints Grammar, Belmore NSW, Australia.

4 See Appendix.
excerpt. The information required for the correct interpretation is not provided by the textbook and the Greek history curriculum. Myrivilis’ book as a whole gives a balanced view of the refugees’ character and state of mind, as well as the locals’ reaction to them.

Efi Avdela’s study (2000:239–53) points out plausible reasons for the insufficient details in history textbooks concerning the relationship between the refugees and the locals. Firstly, Modern Greek history as taught in schools in Greece imposes upon students the version of history specified by the Ministry of Education (240). Secondly, the structure of the curriculum helps to reinforce this version of history. One stated goal is to teach students about historical method, but the syllabus leaves no opportunity for students’ own evaluation of other sources (241). The other goal of the curriculum is to teach students about past events that reinforce a notion of national identity and Greece’s homogeneity (242). This is achieved by presenting the image of continuity and supremacy of Hellenism through a national narrative, that is, Greece’s apparent survival through three thousand years of civilisation and its ability to remain unchanged through resistance against its enemies and the assimilation of “others” such as the refugees (247–48). The implication of Avdela’s argument is that the ultimate goals of the history curriculum ensure that the years of resentment and ill feeling among most of the Greek population are repressed in history textbooks. To recognise this truth would weaken the image of Greece’s continuity and homogeneity.

At this point it is important to note that ethnocentrism in history textbooks is not an issue for Greece alone. Recent studies have shown that other countries are also facing this same problem (Clark, 2005; Igartua, 2005; Cajani, 2005; Nimura, 2005). Scholars from Australia, Canada, Italy and Japan agree that if textbooks are to be used as an instrument to promote a sense of national identity, while combating ethnocentrism, other methods of teaching history need to be developed. One way is to incorporate oral testimonies and fiction from both the refugees’ and locals’ point of view to allow the students to discuss different interpretations of their nation’s past, rather than enforcing a specific national narrative.

The value of oral testimony in offering alternative views on historical experiences where social issues are just as important as wars, victories and defeats has been demonstrated by historians Renee Hirschon (1998; and Hirschon, in press) and Nicholas Doumanis (1997), amongst others. The present paper, too, suggests that Greek history textbooks could use oral testimonies in order to create a cohesive image of what happened post-1922 between the refugees and the locals. Actually, Greek history textbooks for high school already include a few oral testimonies in the form of supplementary material, but students are not taught to use and

---

5 See also Doumanis, 1997:3–4; Millas, 2001:301; and Hirschon, in press:3.

6 It is imperative to note that both historians agree that oral testimony does not discount official history.
interpret the material (Avdela, 2000:242). The issue of the relationship between the refugees and the locals is not raised in these textbooks. Moreover, oral testimonies are not featured in primary school textbooks.

In a recent study on the image in literature of the refugees of the Asia Minor Disaster, Tonia Kafetzaki (2003) has developed the idea of cross-referencing fiction with oral testimonies in order to illustrate their close proximity when representing historical experiences. Similarly, in the relationship between refugees and locals, the information provided in refugee oral testimony is reinforced by fiction. Like oral testimony, refugee fiction is a valuable source for illustrating historical experiences. While fiction is already used as source material in history textbooks, the choice of the extracts should be examined closely. At present, accompanying each excerpt from fiction is the name of the author and the title of the book from which it is derived. It is thus assumed that students know of the works of these authors as well as their background. The presentation of the piece as a “historical source” implies its authenticity (Avdela, 2000:246). Furthermore, Avdela claims that source material is used to reinforce the content of the lesson and students are unaware that “historical sources do not speak for themselves but must be explained and corroborated, and that they are open to multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations” (242).

There are two ways this problem can be solved. Firstly, by including an introduction stating the author’s background and a summary of the text as well as the context in which the excerpt was originally written, a clear understanding of the excerpt’s message can be gained. This information would clarify whose perspective is being presented and in what capacity. Secondly, adding excerpts from fiction by refugee and local authors depicting the relationship between the refugees and locals post-1922 would reveal the various perceptions of the assimilation of the refugees to Greek society. For example, an excerpt that demonstrates the interaction between the refugees and locals by a refugee author could be presented alongside the Myrivilis excerpt mentioned earlier. This solution would not only teach students how to use and examine source material, but would also present a balanced view of this difficult relationship.

The final part of this paper provides an example of one of many works of fiction that could be used to present a refugee’s point of view of this relationship in both primary and secondary school textbooks. This novel, *Uprooted Generation: The Chronicle of Refugees in Thessaloniki* (Ξεριζωμένη Γενιά: Το Χρονικό της Προσφυγιάς στη Θεσσαλονίκη) (1977) was written by Ifigenia Chrysochoou, who as a refugee is well placed to portray the issues faced by the refugees upon their arrival in Greece. Chrysochoou was born in Mainemeni, Asia Minor in 1913. At the age of eight, she experienced the horrors of the Asia Minor Disaster, including life as

---

Three scholars support this claim (Lucey, 1984; Lowenthal, 1985; and Kafetzaki, 2003); however, they all agree that while fiction should not be regarded as an alternative to history, it is a valuable source of knowledge about historical experiences.
a refugee in Thessaloniki. Chrysochoou states that the issues she deals with in her novel are influenced by her direct experiences of the Asia Minor Disaster and its consequences (13–14). Moreover, the term chronicle (χρονικό) in the title suggests that she deliberately sets out to document the experiences of the refugees in Thessaloniki after their expulsion from Asia Minor. Finally, an autobiographical element exists in this novel, as an examination of the main character, Ifianassa, reveals experiences similar to Chrysochoou’s. This is also signalled in the similarity of the name Ifianassa to that of the writer.

Elements of Chrysochoou’s novel mirror oral testimony. A number of oral testimony studies characterise a difficult relationship between the refugees and the locals in post-1922 Greece. A study by Dimitris Pentzopoulos (2002) maintains that despite the commonality that existed between them, such as religion, a shared identity and national ideals, symbiosis between the two groups was difficult (201–12). Another study conducted by Renee Hirschon (2004:19) also found that there was an immediate mutual negativity, often expressed in terms of abuse such as Turkseed (τουρκόσποροι) or baptised in yoghurt (γιαουρτοβαπτισμένοι).

Many themes present this antagonistic relationship in Chrysochoou’s novel; however, in this paper I will focus on the theme of employment, examining its sub-themes of cheap labour and the exploitation of young women and children, as they highlight the difficult relationship between the refugees and the locals. As will be seen, these themes are also evident in oral testimonies and newspaper articles. Some of these themes are no doubt unsuitable for primary school students, but could be introduced later to high school students.

It is stated that a few refugees brought money with them but the majority came with nothing. When they asked for work, they were happy to negotiate for bare necessities, such as a plate of food, or food scraps. Positions for employment however were few, and as a result, many refugees found themselves competing with locals for work. Obviously, the employer preferred the cheap labour offered by the refugees and consequently the locals saw the refugees as a threat to their livelihoods.

Chrysochoou devotes an entire chapter, The battle for bread (Στον πόλεμο για το ψωμί) (71–86), to the issue of employment in post-1922 Greece. The mere title of this chapter demonstrates the difficulty of making a living. The colloquial term for earning one’s living, bread (ψωμί) almost literally states what these people were working for. This title also alludes to the refugees’ continuing struggle, from the failed Greek expedition in Asia Minor and the subsequent struggle to survive during the war against the Turks, to the nightmare of the voyage to Greece, and finally a new struggle with the locals to survive. The following quotation from

---

8 See also Panagiotarea, 1994.
9 See also Hirschon, 1998:30–33 and Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos, 2001:395–415. Derogatory names and the refugees’ perceptions of the locals are also present in Chrysochoou’s novel.
10 For more information on employment and the refugees, see Liakos, 1993:31–96. For more information on employment issues between the refugees and locals, see Pelagidis, 2003:400–03.
the novel implies this interpretation and refers to the cheap labour offered by the refugees:

Χιλιάδες πεινασμένα στόματα. Γυναίκες, παιδιά κι όσοι άντρες ξέφυγαν απ’ τη σφαγή και την αιχμαλωσία, έξευθηκαν στον πόλεμο για το ψωμί. Όσο όσο τα εργατικά χέρια. Δεν έχει τιμή. Τζάμπα ο ανθρώπινος μόχθος (71).

Thousands of hungry mouths. Women, children and however many men escaped slaughter and captivity, rushed into the battle for bread. Labour for next to nothing. They do not have a value. Human labour was free of charge.

One character in the novel, Smaragdi, a refugee from Bergama, works as a kitchen hand in a café owned by a local in order to support her grandchildren. One day her grandson dies and she takes two days off work to mourn this loss. Within this short time another woman takes her position, demonstrating how easily the refugee is replaced. There is no compassion towards her tragic circumstances by the local employer as he says, “Η δουλειά δεν περιμένει. Ούτε θέλει να ξέρει αρρώστιες και θανάτους” (76) (“Work does not wait. Nor does it want to know about illnesses or deaths”). In this example the local is presented as a ruthless employer who is not concerned with the plight of the refugees. The offer of cheap labour is demonstrated in Smaragdi’s pay as it consisted of leftovers from customers’ plates (76–77). Another example of cheap labour is seen in the pay of the character Michalis, a refugee child, who is paid with food scraps and a place to sleep (65).

The anthropologist Kostas Katsapis (2003:104–26), in a comparative study of locals and refugees during the interwar period, states that the locals believed that the refugees were to blame for their unemployment because of their own willingness to provide cheap labour (125). One of Katsapis’ oral interviewees, a refugee, admits that cheap labour was a cause for contention between the locals and the refugees. He says,

βγαίναμε στα χωράφια να ζητήσουμε μεροκάματο. Πηγαίναμε στους επιστάτες. Μας έπαιρναν στο μεροκάματο και μας έδιναν τα μισά λεφτά από εκείνα που έδιναν στους ντόπιους. Και μετά οι ντόπιοι εργάτες μας έβριζαν και μας έδιωχναν. Αλλά αυτοί είχαν σπίτι να μείνουν, ρούχα να φορέσουν, παππούτσια για τα παιδιά τους. Έμειναν τίποτε. Όσα και να μας πλήρωναν, δεν λέγαμε όχι (121).

We would go out to the fields to ask for a day’s work. We would go to the supervisors. They would hire us for a day’s work and pay us half the amount of money given to the locals. And then the local workers would abuse us and chase us out. But they had a house to live in, clothes to wear, shoes for their children. We had nothing. No matter how little we were paid, we did not say no.

Another refugee tries to justify the reactions of both sides. On this issue he says, “Νόμιζαν ότι τους παίρναμε το ψωμί από το στόμα. Είχαν και κάποια δίκια. Ήταν φτωχοί. Έμειναν ήμασταν φτωχότεροι” (122) (“They thought we were taking the bread from their mouths. They did have some justification. They were poor. But we

11 See also Panagiotarea, 1994:165.
ANOTHER APPROACH TO SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE ASIA MINOR DISASTER

were poorer”). Similarly, the narrator in Chrysochoou’s novel depicts these same sentiments as she says: “Για ένα κομμάτι ψωμί προσφέρονταν τα προσφυγικά χέρια. Γκρινιάζανε οι ντόπιοι. Πάει βουλιάξαμε. Μας φάγανε οι πρόσφυγες” (58) (“The refugees would offer to work for a piece of bread. The locals complained. ‘That’s it, we are ruined. The refugees have ruined us’”).

The chapter The young refugee boy (Το Προσφυγάκι) (63–70) makes a strong point of refugee children's exploitation by the locals. Michalis, a refugee boy around the age of ten without any family members, makes his way through the city and comes across a café owned by a local, Mr Anastasis. A customer, who is a refugee, sees Michalis and understanding his plight urges Anastasis to employ him as a waiter. Anastasis is portrayed as a ruthless and merciless employer in two ways. Firstly, Anastasis constantly verbally and physically abuses Michalis for petty reasons, such as spilling a coffee or dropping a mug. Secondly, when a horse and cart trample Michalis during a delivery Anastasis’ reply to bystanders asking who was trampled is cruel and heartless, “Α, τίποτα. Ένα προσφυγάκι” (“Ah, it was nothing. Just a young refugee boy”). Also, turning away from the bystanders, he mutters under his breath, “Να πάρει ο διάολος, τώρα βρήκε να σκοτωθεί. Τώρα που είχε μάθει τόσο καλά τη δουλειά...” (70) (“Damn it to hell, he had to go and die now. Now that he had learnt the job so well...”).

Exploitation of young women refugees by local men was also an issue in post-1922 Greece and we see this in relation to the theme of employment in the novel. Due to the forced labour battalions in Turkey enlisting Greek men between the ages of 18 and 45, there were very few men of working age among the refugees. Since employers were reluctant to hire children and old people, it was left to women refugees to find work and provide for their families. The particular problem of refugee women at work was their vulnerability due to their poverty and lack of male protectors.

The character Mr Sachinis is a local who owns a real estate agency and employs women under the age of eighteen who are without male family members. Firstly, he hires Antigone, a refugee, because she is beautiful and has no male protectors. He bribes her with food and wine so that she will stay with him. She refuses his food as she comes to the realisation that he wants to employ her for something else. For while sitting at the table he tells her to stand and inappropriately lifts her dress to see her legs, telling her that he could send her to Beirut to become a “dancer” (79). His debauchery is uncovered when another character, Mima, to whom he inappropriately makes advances, defends herself and the police are called in (102).

Another example is evident in the interaction between Mr Papamoschou, a local employer, and Maritsa, a young refugee girl. When Maritsa’s mother takes a day off work, Maritsa fills in. Despite her inexperience for her mother’s job in this embroidery shop Papamoschou employs her anyway. The way in which he treats Maritsa suggests that he has a hidden agenda for hiring her. For example, he claims that the job he has in mind for her will not involve her hands, and he makes her the manager of the shop despite her lack of experience; he inappropriately touches
her hands and shoulders; he suggests he take the role of a male protector in her life after confirming that she has no male relatives; and he bribes her into returning to take on this position by paying her more than is necessary in advance (72–73). Despite his actions, Maritsa is strong enough to decline his offer, as Antigone and Mima decline Sachiniš.

The dangers of refugee women’s employment outside of the family home are echoed in oral testimony and the media. In her study of a refugee colony in Kokkinia, Hirschon (1998) reveals that many women who did have male protectors, such as fathers, brothers and uncles protecting their virtue, were forbidden to work for strangers in case their chastity was compromised. She states:

Since marriage was the aim and female chastity was a primary concern for most families, employment outside of the home with the dangers of a girl’s exposure to the outside world posed problems for parents. [...] Many parents preferred to arrange a job somewhere in the locality where surveillance was easier (99).

However, like Antigone, Maritsa and Mima in the novel, there were many poor refugee women who had no choice but to work outside of the home, making themselves easy targets for exploitation by locals.

Katsapis (2003) maintains that sexual exploitation of the refugees by locals was a result of the assumption that refugees lack morals, and presents evidence demonstrating the exploitation of women refugees who ventured outside of the home (117–19). The vulnerability of refugee women’s situation due to the absence of male authorities made them easy targets for some exploitative locals, as the following quotation from the 18 January 1925 edition of the newspaper Παμπροσφυγική (Pamprosfigi) suggests:

[Οι πρόσφυγες] γίνονταν συχνά αντικείμενο εκμετάλλευσης από σωματέμπορους, βιαστές ή άλλους επιτήδειους, που προσπαθούσαν να αλιεύσουν “απροστατεύτους νεανίδας μεταξύ του δυστυχούς προσφυγικού κόσμου” (118).

[The refugees] often became objects of exploitation by pimps, rapists and other unsavoury characters, who attempted to catch “unprotected young women in the desperate world of the refugees”.

In conclusion, while the relationship between the refugees and locals after 1922 is largely ignored in the official teaching of Modern Greek history, oral testimony and fiction can illustrate this social issue. Their inclusion may alter the image of homogeneity and a three thousand year uninterrupted Hellenism, but it will expose the suffering on a social level by both refugees and locals at this time. It will also introduce students to some of the realities of life and provide material for serious discussion.

Appendix

The section in In Modern Times (2002) missing from Greek Civilisation (2002) is:

Μέσα στο μαυράδι των άγριων ματιών τους έκαιγε το πείσμα κι η επιφύλαξη. Κοίταζαν με λοξή ματιά, έσκυβαν το κεφάλι και μιλούσαν σιγά. Τους ρωτούσες και φυλάγονταν
να σου δώσουν πίσω το λόγο. Σε μετρούσαν από την κορφή ως τα νύχια και δεν απαντούσαν ή λέγανε ψέματα χοντροκομμένα, με μιαν παιδιάστικην ασυνειδησία (232).

In the blackness of their wild eyes, spite and reservation was burning. They watched with a sideways glance, they would bow their heads and talk softly. You asked them something and they were reluctant to give an answer. They gauged you from your head to your toes and did not answer or they would tell you crude lies, with a childish lack of self-consciousness.

Bibliography

Avdela, 2000  

Cajani, 2005  
Luigi Cajani, “Between Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism: History teaching in Germany, Italy and France 19th–20th Century”.  
http://www.cishsydney2005.org/images/LuigiCajaniST14v2.rtf

Chrysochoou, 1977  

Clark, 2005  
Anna Clark, “Whose History? The politics of syllabus development”.  

Doumanis, 1997  

*Greek Civilisation* 2, 2002  

Hirschon, 1998  

Hirschon, 2004  

Hirschon, in press  

Igartua, 2005  


In Modern Times, 2002
Στα Νεότερα Χρόνια, Ιστορία ΣΤ’ Δημοτικού. Athens: Οργανισμός Εκδόσεως Διδακτικών Βιβλίων.

Kafetzaki, 2003

Katsapis, 2003

Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos, 2001

Liakos, 1993
Αντώνης Λιάκος, Εργασία και Πολιτική στην Ελλάδα του Μεσοπολέμου. Athens: Ίδρυμα Έρευνας και Παιδείας της Εμπορικής Τράπεζας της Ελλάδος.

Lowenthal, 1985

Lucey, 1984

Millas, 2001
Ηρακλής Μήλλας, Εικόνες Ελλήνων και Τούρκων. Athens: Αλεξάνδρεια.

Myrivilis, 1949
Στρατής Μυριβήλης, Η Παναγιά η Γοργόνα. Athens: Βιβλιοπωλείον της Εστίας.

Nimura, 2005

Panagiotarea, 1994
Άννα Παναγιωταρέα, Όταν οι Αστοί Έγιναν Πρόσφυγες: Κυδωνιάτες Αστοί και Πρόσφυγες. Θεσσαλονίκη: Παρατηρητής.

Pelagidis, 2003

Pentzopoulos, 2002

Starr, 1984

Voutira, 2003