A Turning Point in the Long History of Hestia Publishers & Booksellers: The Dictatorship Years and the Aftermath

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Hestia Publishers & Booksellers is the oldest Greek publishing house in operation since 1885, without interruption. This paper covers the evolution of the enterprise focusing on the company’s publishing strategy at the turning point of the 1970s when Marina Karaitidi succeeded her father at the head of the company. She had then to face the rapid change of the Greek editorial landscape and an acute competition from a multitude of small yet dynamic and avant-garde new publishing houses with a firm leftist anti-dictatorship stance in a critical moment for Modern Greek political life. It examines Hestia’s cultural impact and critical choices that shaped its later position in Modern Greek letters that till recently labelled it as a centre-right positioned publisher that stayed aloof from modern trends and political commitments. It shall be demonstrated how Hestia succeeded in reversing this image and is now recognised as a distinguished publishing house bearing a high cultural prestige.

Hestia Publishers is a fifth-generation family business, making it the oldest publishing and book selling company in Greece and the only one to have operated continuously over the past 125 years. Originally specialising in educational textbooks which provided the business with a strong economic base, Hestia transformed its operations over time to include high-quality Modern Greek literature.1 Hestia thus evolved into a successful general publisher and became a brand symbolising excellence and intellectual distinction. Furthermore, its wise choice of publications and the strong bonds among the members of the founding family ensured the company’s longevity and prestige. This paper focuses on the company’s publishing strategy at the turning point of the 1970s when Marina Karaitidi succeeded her father, Konstantinos Sarandopoulos, at the head of the company, facing the rapid change of the Greek editorial landscape at a critical moment in Modern Greek life.

1 One could consider the transition from school textbooks to a generalist catalogue as typical of modern European publishing. By way of example, note Thomas Nelson in Scotland, founded in 1789, Hachette in France, founded in 1826, or Payot in French-speaking Switzerland, founded in 1875.
The founding years

Hestia was founded in Athens, in 1885, by Georgios Kasdonis, a teacher and a journalist from Tinos Island in the Aegean who assumed, in 1875, the direction of Hestia, a new weekly literary journal open to innovative ideas and young authors. In 1876, Kasdonis bought out the journal from its founder, Pavlos Diomidis, and encouraged the formation of a circle of well-established, up-and-coming writers around it, including Nikolaos Politis, Georgios Drosinis, Kostes Palamas, Grigorios Xenopoulos, Georgios Vizyinos, Antonios and Spyridon Miliarakis. At the same time, Kasdonis promoted the sale of old books to journal subscribers through advertisements in the Deltion [Bulletin] which accompanied each issue, and published his own collections of literary works. In 1885, Kasdonis finally established a veritable publishing house, named Vivliopoleion tis Estias [Hestia Booksellers], while maintaining the direction of his journal from which he drew his writers. He focused production on school textbooks, which accounted for more than half of his catalogue, but also published works by the regular collaborators to the journal Hestia as well as some translations (plays of Shakespeare, Don Quixote, Colomba by Prosper Mérimée or The Art of the Duel by Adolphe Tavernier).

A well established publishing house

In 1888, health reasons forced Kasdonis to resign as the journal's editor and pass the position to the poet Georgios Drosinis. Nevertheless, Kasdonis remained devoted to his book publishing business until his death in 1900. A nephew, Ioannis Kollaros, ensured the business remained firmly in the family's hands. Aged 30 at the time of his uncle's passing, Kollaros was renowned for his honesty and business acumen. He remained faithful to his predecessor's commitment to school textbooks, as these publications ensured a significant source of revenue. The market for Hestia soon expanded beyond national borders to the Greek communities living in Egypt and Asia Minor. Faced with sharp competition, Kollaros developed an advertising strategy offering special prices to customers. Hestia also began to participate in commercial expositions in Greece and overseas for which it won several awards.2

During the 1920s, several publishing houses issued journals that provided them an opportunity to promote their publications and gain greater access to new readers.3 Kollaros followed the common practice of the era and created his own journal, Nea

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2 Aside from the awards it received in Greece, Hestia took part in the 1907 Maritime Exposition in Bordeaux and was awarded the bronze medal in the XV Group: decorative arts and furniture; clothing and textiles; chemical industries and graphic arts.

3 G. Vasileiou has published Αρχείον Οικονομικών και Κοινωνικών Επιστημών since 1921 (taken up by Kollaros from 1933), Eleftheroudakis has published Νεοελληνικά Γράμματα, Govostis Publishers were more or less involved in the issuance of six different magazines, Dimitrakos issued Φωνή του Βιβλίου etc. Νέα Εστία has been published without interruption since its inception.
Hestia, in 1927. Grigorios Xenopoulos, a prominent writer of considerable success, was put in charge of the new fortnightly journal. This was “true to tradition yet modern”. Covering both contemporary literary and artistic works, Nea Hestia published Greek literature and translations (poems, short stories, serials, plays), literary, theatrical and artistic reviews, essays on philosophy, history and linguistics, as well as news from the Academy of Athens and letters from readers. Having established itself in the Greek intellectual landscape during the inter-war period, Nea Hestia became an authoritative source among a cultured and moderate bourgeoisie. The decision to take on the publication of Nea Hestia also marked the gradual shift of Hestia Booksellers’ core business from school textbooks to literature. As a general business practice, the publishing house took the work of authors appearing in the journal and published their serials in book form. The company’s literary publications were thus diversified, without however, including avant-garde works, rather preferring more conventional pieces from the inner circle of Xenopoulos and Nea Hestia. The book crisis of the 1930s, a side effect of the global financial crisis, hit severely the living and working conditions of writers. Much to its writers’ appreciation, Hestia continued to sell its publications at their normal prices, mainly thanks to the constant demand for school textbooks which assured its financial viability. In 1935, Kollaros transformed the business into a limited liability company, as per the prevailing trend at the time. The primary shareholders of the new company were members of the Kollaros family, including Ioannis and his son-in-law, Konstantinos Sarandopoulos, who had been helping manage the business since 1925. 1935 is also a key point for the company’s history since annual reports began to be published which allows current research to monitor the changes in its financial position and recognize the hold of publishers on the book market.

Shifting to literature

The real time of crisis for Hestia occurred in 1937, when the newly-established dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas (August 1936) decreed the creation of the Organisation for Publication of School Textbooks, thus monopolising a sector once so profitable for the company. Hestia was suddenly forced to review its publishing policy and its status in the marketplace. The immediate effect was a sharp drop in new titles being published and the fall in company profits. Despite the book market witnessing a rapid expansion during the Second World War, with prominent new publishing houses being established

4 Xenopoulos, 1 January 1946:3–5.
5 Xenopoulos, 1984:445–446.
6 This was the case until at least the 1960s. Since then, the minutes from the meeting of the Board of Directors make only a brief assessment of the company’s position.
7 The Organisation’s control of the sector continues today.
8 Such as Notis Karavias in 1942, Γλάρος in 1943, K. Anagnostidis in 1944 and the Φίλοι του Βιβλίου, Άλφα and especially Ίκαρος in 1943.
and rising sales hindered only by a lack of paper supplies, Hestia was forced during this period of reorganisation to scale back its operations to only a few titles, surviving purely by virtue of its trade in school textbooks. Indeed, the company’s editorial activity focused primarily on the regular publication of Nea Hestia, the only literary journal that remained published, during the Nazi Occupation, thereby emerging as a national, intellectual expression of a high, symbolic value.

By the time of Liberation, Hestia, though a profitable company as a result of its bookselling, seemed to have no future in the publishing sector. The turning point which changed the dismal forecasts of the immediate post-war period was carried out by the son-in-law of Kollaros, Konstantinos Sarandopoulos, an ex-artillery officer born in 1895. Aware of the pressing need to establish an editorial identity for Hestia beyond the school textbook sector, Sarandopoulos introduced in 1953 the “Neoelliniki Logotechnia” collection. This hard-cover series, sold at a low price in a small, uniform and numbered format of 4.7 x 6.7 inches, gathered the best writers of the era. The collection was essentially a compilation of already well-known texts. Nearly all the famed authors of the “1930s generation”, including Elias Venezis, Stratis Myrivilis, M. Karagatsis, Yorgos Theotokas, Angelos Terzakis, entrusted their works to Hestia, appreciative of the quality of the company’s publishing, financial security and satisfactory distribution of the works they offered for publication. Sarandopoulos thus brought to the market high-quality pocket-size books which began to draw a substantial readership. The series soon became a sales success with demand requiring many titles to be reprinted and the “Neoelliniki Logotechnia” volumes accounted for a quarter of the company’s total publications up until the death of Sarandopoulos in December 1972.

A critical test

The challenge Marina Karaitidi, the daughter of Sarandopoulos, had to confront when she took control of the company, following her father’s death, was of another nature. At the time, Karaitidi was 44 years of age and prior to her appointment she had not involved herself in the publishing or commercial operations of the family business. As publishing still remained a male-dominated industry, Karaitidi faced flagrant hostility from her employees. Such hostility was primarily directed at her sex and her inexperience, exacerbated by the mismanagement that occurred at the time of transition. Unlike her predecessor, Karaitidi was more reserved in her publishing choices. She continued with the successful “Neoelliniki Logotechnia” series, reprinting previously sold-out

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9 This experience mirrored that of France during that country’s Nazi Occupation. See Assouline, 1984: 290–293; Ploritis, 1993:16.

10 About twenty books in all were printed between 1940–1945, the most surprising title of which being Partage de midi by Paul Claudel, the translation of which was undertaken by the poet Takis Papatsonis (1945).

11 64 reprints to date for one of the series’ most successful titles, Αιολική Γη by Venezis, 53 reprints for Νούμερο 31328, also by Venezis, 41 reprints for Η Ζωή εν Τίφω by Myrivilis etc.
titles and using the series to introduce new, lesser-known authors who, however, more or less repeated a conventional style without openings to modern currents and trends. Such a move, in no way adversely affected sales. In the 1970s, Hestia published what is still perhaps the most successful title in its history, *Loxandra* by Maria Iordanidou, which became an unbeatable bestseller, selling on average 6,500 copies per year until today. Nevertheless, during the years of dictatorship and the subsequent intellectual distress, Hestia was unable to build on its traditional successes. Standing behind its established authors, the majority of whom had by then become members of the Academy of Athens, Hestia lost contact with the up-and-coming generation of writers and intellectuals and took no part in the blossoming of political texts that emerged, following the country’s return to democratic rule in 1974. In 1967, most established writers entered an unspoken agreement not to publish. Some circulated manuscripts to friends, but few actually went through the degrading process of taking their work to the censor’s office for approval. Writers known to be on the Left were, for the most part, either in jail or abroad in self-imposed exile. As a result, publishers such as Philippos Vlachos of the press Keimena or Nana Kalianessi of Kedros began publishing translations (namely of Jorge Luis Borges, Berthold Brecht and Marcel Proust) or republished classic Greek works, often belonging to the period of the Greek Enlightenment that preceded the Greek War of Independence and therefore inspired by the ideals of freedom and human rights that conveyed a subversive message. In response to this absence of literary texts, in March 1969, the regime started publishing in the newspapers an “official anthology” of prose culled from the *Anthology* edited by Iraklis and Renos Apostolides (another Hestia book, first printed in 1941 and then regularly republished in enriched versions), thus giving the illusion that artistic freedom had been restored. Under international pressure, the junta lifted press censorship (1969) and abolished the book index (1970), so permitting a big increase in seditious discussions and publications. This intense editorial activity gave birth to a multitude of small yet dynamic and avant-garde publishing houses whose firm leftist anti-dictatorship stance ensured them a high symbolic capital and allowed them to collectively lay claim to a significant market share after 1974. At the same time though, a press law was passed threatening with stiff sentences any writer or publisher who might dare offend the dictators in any foreseeable way. It should be noted that none of these numerous, small publishing initiatives, most of the times improvised and amateurish, derived from the historic left parties and groups, necessarily outlawed at that time. This novel situation put forward a new type of militant non-professional “intellectual publisher”, for whom editions were mainly a means of political expression.

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12 The book recounts the story of Loxandra, the grandmother of the author (who herself was 66 years of age at the time of writing), and her family in Istanbul before the First World War.
and communication. Among the main publishers who were politically aware, there were, by order of establishment, Kedros, Kalvos, Stochastis, Keimena, Epikairotita, Neoi Stochoi, Ekdoseis 70, Epikouros and Diogenis.

Although during the seven-year regime Hestia's bookstore had always disposed of the semi-illegal publications of the underground opposition and had some of its own books banned, namely Charalambos Theodorides' *Introduction to Philosophy* and the *History of Greek Philosophy* by Eduard Zeller (on the ground that it had been translated by the same Theodorides), Hestia inherited from that period a persistent reputation as a conservative publishing house, a stronghold of tradition, old-fashioned and definitely out-of-date. Besides its older titles, Hestia kept to the publication of books by the right wing political leader Evangelos Averoff-Tositsas, as well as books by Academy writers such as Tasos Athanasiades, Petros Charis (the director of *Nea Hestia*) or Galateia Saranti (who became the first female writer to be elected at the Academy of Athens in 1997). These were meritorious authors, undoubtedly, but by no means path-breaking ones. Its authors had not been persecuted or forced to silence, as was the case for the authors published by Kedros, for instance. Even though its catalogue included some unorthodox spirits, such as Vassili Vassilikos, Renos Apostolides, Antonis Samarakis or Alexis Parnis, the overarching impression was one of a centre-right positioned publisher that stayed aloof from modern trends and political commitments. Such a stance was considered a major fault in those times of extreme and passionate politicisation.

Neither conservative repute nor Greece's economic stagnation from 1978, actually affected the company's business operations. During the rapid economic development of the decade, 1963–1973, Hestia had achieved excellent results, with only one year of temporary decline in its profits, in 1968–1969, attributed by its Board to the dictatorship's decision to distribute gratis school textbooks to the pupils. Hestia had also been protected from the subsequent recession owing to the phenomenal sales of *Loxandra* that kept the business thriving, despite the general stagnation.

In 1977, Hestia was forced to move as its offices on Stadiou Avenue were marked for demolition. Karaitidi chose a new office space on Solonos Road which was under construction. The new site, though close to the old bookstore and the Law Faculty, was nevertheless relatively distant from the traditional centre of the book market on Stadiou Avenue. Despite criticism from those around her, this bold and insightful decision opened the bookstore's doors to a new class of customers, namely, the students from the adjacent University. Moreover, it paved the way for the whole book market to move from its traditional home to the area surrounding the new headquarters of Hestia.

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16 Ch. Theodorides (1883–1958) was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Thessaloniki who adopted the theory of dialectic and historical materialism. He worked for the Resistance during the Nazi Occupation and was consequently expelled from the University at that time.
18 This section owes a lot to Marina Karaitidi, always willing to respond to my queries. Concerning the
Hestia however felt the sharp competition of new, dynamic and avant-garde publishing houses and realised the need to renew its bonds with the younger generation of both writers and readers. Faced with this challenge, Hestia entrusted Giorgos Thalassis, a young executive from outside the family, with the company’s editorial choices from 1980. Thalassis oriented the publishing house towards uncovering new talents through a new, low-cost special series in which he could take risks. This strategy enabled Hestia to reconnect with the young authors who would later become mainstays of the company’s catalogue. The second cardinal decision which changed the company’s profile occurred in 1985, on the occasion of its centenary, when Hestia launched a foreign literature series of similar cover styles and carefully produced translations. This series was, and still is, characterised by a marked preponderance of Francophone titles which account for nearly half of the series. This preference came as no surprise given the French education and intellectual upbringing of the publishers. Finally, from 1986 Hestia organised its series in a more systematic way, thus allowing readers to more easily navigate through publications and managers to better follow the processing of their titles.

As a result of these innovations, Hestia was placed in the eighth position among Greek publishing houses in 1992, putting into circulation approximately 50 new titles per year. Undergoing a period of strong development, Hestia expanded its operations by establishing a new bookstore in Nicosia (Cyprus), in 1993. The company, which had up until that point combined its publishing and bookselling activities under the same logo and roof, chose in 1998, to divide its operations into two branches, thus separating the publishing operations from the bookselling business.

The fifth generation

Eva Karaitidi today represents the fifth generation of the Kollaros family at the head of the publishing company. At the beginning of the 21st century, Hestia is a mid-sized company with a steady output of approximately 50 new titles per year, not accounting for the much higher number of reprints to which one must add the eleven issues of

dictatorship years interviews have also been taken from Loukas Axelos, Philippos Drakontaedidis, Menis Koumantareas, Popi Gkana, Giorgos Thalassis, Dionysis Kapsalis and the late Galateia Saranti.

19 The first book of the series was The Tin Drum by Günter Grass.

20 The 2008 national average of French titles translated into Greek was 11.2% of all translations. In 1994, Marina Karaitidi was awarded the Medal of the Order of Merit of the French Republic for her contribution to the dissemination of French literature abroad.

21 Among the most popular series were “Βιβλιοθήκη του Φιλολόγου”, “Ελληνική Ποίηση”, “Trivium”, “Σύγχρονη Ελληνική Πεζογραφία” and “Νέα Ελληνική Βιβλιοθήκη”, created by Professor Alkis Angelou to bring together the founding texts of Neo-Hellenic intellectual tradition since 1453.

22 This bookstore, which brought information in the market for Greek texts in Cyprus and enjoyed widespread success, was forced into liquidation following the death of its majority shareholder, Yannis Kranidiotis, then Alternate Foreign Minister of Greece, in a plane accident in 1999.

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
Nea Hestia, a journal that, since 1998, has undergone a thorough restructuring and revitalisation under the direction of Stavros Zoumboulakis. Nowadays the company’s production is divided in equal parts between literature and social sciences, covering areas from history and politics to philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Today, Greece is home to nearly 900 publishing houses, collectively issuing more than 9,700 new titles per annum.23 The majority of these businesses are traditional, family-run operations, a pattern perhaps outdated for the publishing standards in the United States and Western Europe, but still pertinent to the Greek domestic landscape. According to economic studies, medium-sized companies such as Hestia, which account for 43% of the industry, are more susceptible to market pressures. Despite maintaining a steady production, Hestia is no longer considered a major publishing house in Greece, having been overtaken by its key competitors since the turn of this century. Such competitors currently publish hundreds of titles per annum and are thus capable of dominating the market.24 But even though Hestia has ceded its position as market leader, its intellectual presence and influence remains. It is a publisher of quality in whose range of titles its loyal customers show confidence and its catalogue is an irreplaceable repository of Greece’s literary history and heritage. Though this perhaps provides Hestia with some level of financial reassurance during this period of acute competition, it is not enough to support a vibrant publishing house hoping to be a mainstay on the modern Greek cultural landscape. Hestia has long-since withdrawn from the school textbook market, leaving such activities to specialised publishing houses. This is also the case for children’s books. Following its search for an identity in the 1970s and the 1980s, Hestia now seems to position itself in the human sciences rather than in the literary sector. Has Hestia therefore transitioned from a generalist publishing house to one with a specialisation? It certainly has never hunted for best-sellers, instead opting to invest in the continued authority of its titles. Further, it enjoys a great appreciation, amongst those in the industry, for the cogency of its business dealings and for never having interfered with the writers of other publishers. Finally, the widespread esteem of Hestia stems also from the fact that since its inception, it has provided the publishing world with a fine set of executives whose talents have been honed during their time with the company.25 As the eighth oldest business — and only publishing house26 — in continuous operation since the 19th century in Greece, Hestia celebrated, in 2010, its 125 years of business. Hestia

23 EKEBI, 2009:2.
25 Among today’s publishers who started as Hestia employees, whether it be in its publishing or bookselling divisions, are Stratis Philippotis (Philippotis Publishing), Evangelos Lazos (Dodoni Publishing, No. 20 literature publisher in 2008), Dionysis Kapsalis (Director of the publishing house for the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece) and Popi Gkana (Melani Publishers, No. 20 in relation to literature publications in 2008).
today epitomizes the dilemmas of an old publishing house that has to give proof of its ability for adaptation and anticipation. The economic crisis, the decline in leisure reading, the emergence of the e-book and the giant, multinational firms have gravely upset traditional publishing and bookselling. Even though the Greek book market is relatively isolated from these global trends by the small range of its language, the rapidly changing world of the book poses new challenges. Hestia, like many other medium-to-small Greek publishers, is now, once more, going through a transitional phase and the stakes would now be no less than those required for the survival of the publisher as an indispensable component of the author-reader relationship.

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