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Member of the Board of Directors of FEA

It all started, when searching through the letters of military interest I have in my collection for a stamp (every time I expand my knowledge on a subject, I re-examine my material, although I rarely find anything worthwhile!!!), my eye fell on a letter with an enclosed letter. (fig 1). The calligraphic writing, something I appreciate very much, caught my attention and led me to read the letter "diagonally", beginning, end, nothing strange. It was a letter of the 31st

October coming from Pirot in southern Serbia, where units of the Greek III Infantry Division were then located in 1918, - they remained there from 25/10 until

on December 16, 1918, when their return to Greece began - a lieutenant colonel of the 3rd Division Staff, who apparently - at least as it appeared at first - addressed his sister: **"My dear and sweet Adel Fula"** (pic 2) and at the end: **"With brotherly kisses"** (pic 3).

My "curiosity" prompted me to read the letter in more detail until I came to **"...at the end of November I will be in Athens where I will have the happiness of meeting my dear little sister Nefelin..."** (pic 4)

I thought something was up. How could he not know his sister? (!!!)

The research follows discussions with more

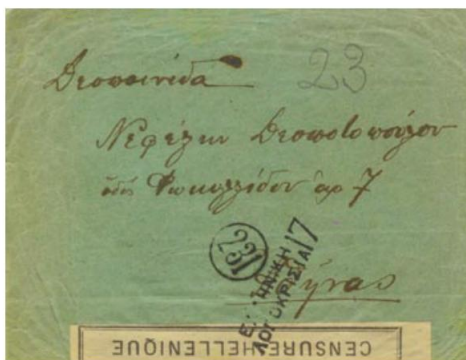


Fig. 1 Incomplete file from the Staff of the 3rd Division (2nd SS), with enclosed letter 31.10.18. Forwarded by TT915 to the Allied Post Office of Thessaloniki (French triangular ref "NO"). Opening of a letter upon its arrival in Athens 13.11.19 with tape and two-line ref "Greek Censorship 17" and censor number "231". It is sent to the home of Nepheli Despotopoulos (see page 2 of the article).

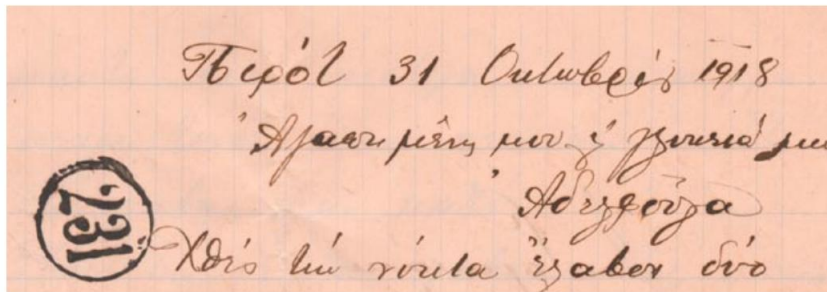


Fig. 2 Opening of the letter "My dear and sweet little sister"

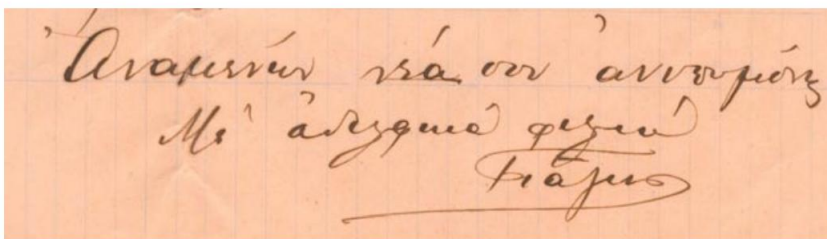


Fig. 3 Closing of the letter "With brotherly kisses"

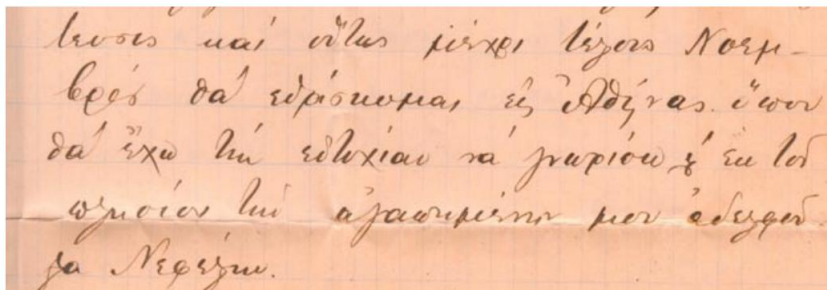


Fig. 4 My "curiosity" pushed me to read the letter in more detail until I reached "...at the end of November I will be in Athens where I will have the happiness of meeting my dear little sister Nefelin..."

specialists but also subsequently on the internet led me briefly to the following findings:

It was a letter addressed to Nefeli Despotopoulou of the association "THE SOLDIER'S SISTER" (pic 5), which was founded at the beginning of 1918 and according to its statutes, "... its purpose is to strengthen the National struggle through all means and especially through communication with the Greek warrior

of the

forehead...". The soul of the association was initially 2 of the 3 Despotopoulou sisters, **Nefeli** (1895-1982) and **Georgia** (1905-1978) and less so **Ioanna** (1905-1977), (pic 6). Smyrna by origin (they came to Athens in 1912), Venizelian, liberal in their views, who together with dozens of other girls of mainly urban origin, (usually members of patriotic associations that joined

in the Association), they corresponded at the **same time** with hundreds of officers and soldiers (of various social, educational and geographical origins with particular attention to the particularities of each), the "**national brothers**", most of whom they would never meet, during the period 1917 (before the foundation of the association) to 1922, when Greece is in the midst of developments. It is the period when we have the Greek participation in the Eastern front of the First World War, the well-known Balkan front of the years 1917-1918, the campaign in Ukraine (January – June 1919) and then the Greek military presence in Asia Minor, the which dramatically completes the cycle of the Greek-Balkan war decade (1912-1922), with the Asia Minor disaster. Communication spontaneous at first, organized afterwards, so as to give the maximum possible result. This "invented" relationship of symbolic kinship is done to boost the morale of the soldiers, to give them a

emotional point of reference and in general to give them outlets and rest mainly psychological in the stressful conditions of the front, but also to help them overcome the feeling of loneliness and premature aging created by the conditions of war, in contrast to the normality of the fronts, which is often criticized in the letters. We all understand the value of communication at that time, when the letter was - if not the only - the most important means of informing the soldiers of events not only in Athens (which were quite rich in news and developing rapidly) but also from other points of the front where. Encouraging letters to the Mahomen to show them that "behind them there is a world that cares for them", were additionally an important means of entertaining them in general. Soldiers receive gifts, girls remember their name days and birthdays, are kind to them. Lives from them, their "**sisters**", various



Fig. 5 "Statute of the association" from the album of F. LADI p. 20



Fig. 6 "The sisters of Despotopoulos" from the album of F. LADI p. 32

things they miss on the front, information about what's going on, even facilities for their transfers.

Thanks to the archive of what was saved - priceless and of unique value - (since it was reverently preserved for many decades by the Despotopoulos sisters) and was found by chance in 1988 during the demolition of the family's house in N. Smyrna, an extensive picture of everyday life is obtained, of the practices and stereotypes of an entire generation of soldiers and certainly of Greek society at the time, Greek and non-Greek. Through the experiential testimonies of the soldiers, their psyche in the happy but also unfortunate moments of the front is revealed. Being an important supplement to our historical knowledge, it perhaps even adds a new side of the Asia Minor campaign with references to places, customs, persons, political and military events from the fronts of Macedonia, Thrace and Asia Minor at that time .

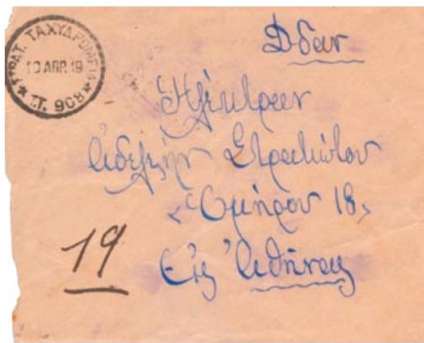
Part of this archive consisting of more than 2,000 letters to over 200 soldiers, cards, photographs and rare other

documents, came into the possession of the journalist and writer Fontas Ladis and became the subject of an album published in 1993 with the title **"Joy through the Battle"**. The author typically states that the reader **"reconstructs the lives of the 2 girls and many officers through the information contained in the letters themselves... places, persons, events, emotions, political confrontations emerge through the book"**. A soldier writes in 1920 from Xanthi: **"...It is the first spring that a soldier finds me. I feel proud because I served the country in these critical moments with sweat, with hardships, with deprivations, with limitations, with humiliations of my dreams, my essence, my close relatives, with significant and moral exhaustion, and finally I roam with my gylon the freedom in the picturesque landscapes of Thrace, our slave for centuries..."**,

while a captain from Usak, M.Asia in 1921: **"...they want to expel us from**



Fig. 7 Incomplete envelope from the 3rd Infantry Regiment (TT922), mailed on 10.8.19, to Miss "Kymata tis thalassiss", at the association's offices (Omirou 18). According to the records of the GES, the 3rd S.P. belonged to the XIII DIVISION of the 1st SS. and at that time he was in charge of the "Magnesia" Sector of Asia Minor. (The XIII DIVISION was transferred in June 1919 from Romania to Smyrna. Earlier it had taken part in the Allied effort to suppress Lenin's October Revolution in Russia). Arrival in Athens on 20.8.19.



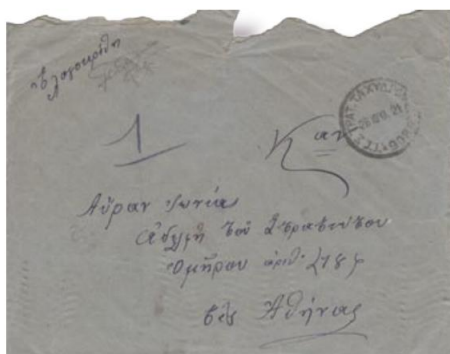
Incomplete file via TT 908 (Despatch Telegraphist 4th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion Headquarters) on 19.4.19. According to GES data, the 4th S.P. belonged to the I DIVISION of the 1st SS. On this date, he was in the area of the port of "Eleftheri" west of Kavala, to board ships in order to go to Smyrna. (The 1st DIVISION is the one that landed first in Smyrna on May 2nd, 1919 (of the so-called "Iron" DIVISION) and in the disaster, retreated to Cesme and from there to Chios on 1.9.22, the last days of the Greek occupation of Smyrna).



Incomplete envelope from the 2nd Regiment of the Serres Division, (TT 912) on 6.8.18, to Miss "The Battle of Skra", at the association's offices (Old Palace). According to GES archives, the 2nd Regiment of Serres belonged to the SERRE DIVISION of the S.S.E.A. and at that time he was in charge of the "GEGKOURA" sub-sector of Macedonia. Arrival in Athens 6.8.18.



Incomplete file through TT 901, Postal Sector of the National Defense Army (SSEA), which was based in Thessaloniki and served the units of Anat. Thrace. (Found in Asia Minor since May 1919). Mailed 9/17/18. Arrival in Athens (ref back) on 20.9.18.



Incomplete envelope via TT 908 posted on 26.7.21. From GES archives, this TT served the 1st DIVISION of the 1st SS, which from 10.7.21 was installed on the "AZIZIE KISLA" front in Asia Minor. Arrival in Athens (ref back) on 5.8.21. The letter was censored on departure with a handwritten censor indication "Censored".

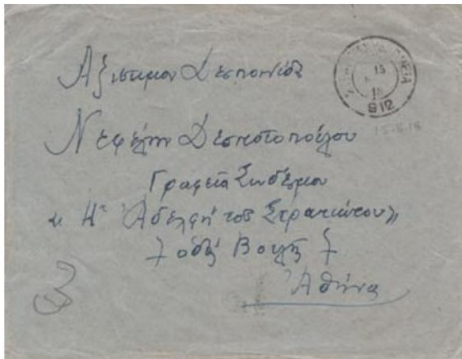


Incomplete envelope with a letter via TT 903, from "Demir Issar" (Iron Castle of Serres) 4th Company, 8th Regiment of Cretans, to Miss "Machi Gevgelis-Doirani", postmarked on 15.12.18. From the archives of the GES, the 8th Cretan Regiment belonged to the CRETE DIVISION of the S.S.E.A. Arrival in Athens (ref back) on 22.12.18.



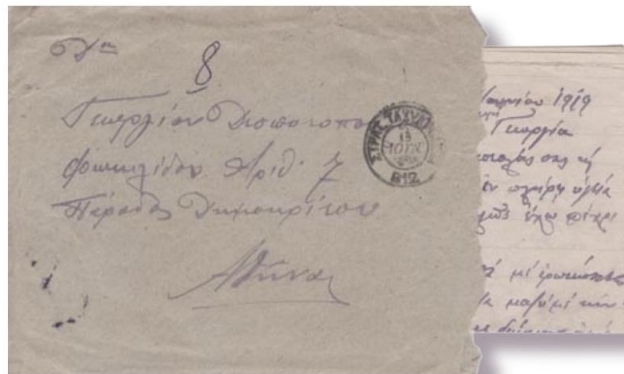
Incomplete envelope mailed on 3.6.19 by a Sergeant of the 4th Infantry Regiment of TT 908 (back sender), to Miss "P.P.", via TT902, (ref front) which had been given to the SMYRNIS STRATEGY. TT 908 served the 1st DIVISION (4th, 5th S.P.) of the 1st SS. and was, according to GES data, in "Aidinio" in M.Asia from 30.5 to 16.6.19. Opening of the letter upon its arrival in Athens on 5.8.19, tape and two-line ref "Greek Censorship 33" and 2 censor numbers "23" on the front and "12" on the back (apparently due to the passage of the letter through 2 TT). It is sent to the offices of the association.

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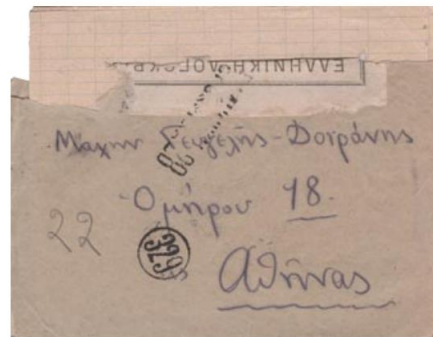
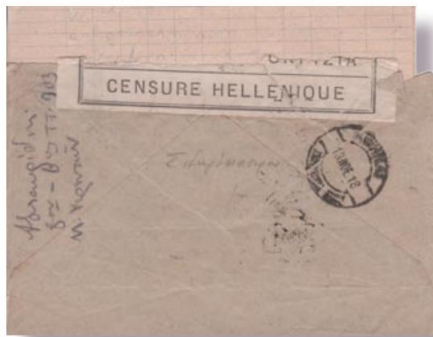


Incomplete envelope via TT 912, Postal Sector of the Serres Division (1st 2nd or 3rd Serres Regiment of the SERRES DIVISION of the S.S.E.A.), according to GES records), posted on 15.8.18. The ref. arrival in Athens is indiscernible.

Incomplete envelope with letter mailed on 13.6.19 via TT 912, from 2nd Serres Regiment, 3rd Company (back sender). In fact, according to data from the GES, this particular TT served the 3 (1st, 2nd and 3rd) Regiments of the Serron Division of the S.S.E.A. and was located in "Dovitsa Serron". The Constitution in question kept Thrace, it did not go to Asia Minor. The arrival date in Athens is indiscernible. He is sent to the girls' home.



Incomplete envelope mailed 12/3/19 via TT 907, from 34th Infantry Regiment, 1st Company (back sender). From the archives of the GES to the 34th S.P. belonged to the 2nd DIVISION of the 1st SS. (From January 1919, the 2nd MERAR XIA was in Russia for the suppression of the October Revolution and from there it was transported by sea to Smyrna (May 1919). From 8.11.19 it participated in the capture of the "KAIMAKTISI" heights.) It is sent to Didan "Iulia Dimitria dou" (also a pseudonym of Geor, Despotopoulos). Arrival in Athens on 10.12.19 at the offices of the consortium (Omira



Incomplete envelope from the 8th Cretan Regiment (TT 903), with an enclosed letter dated 8-11-18 (no postmark). According to GES data, the 8th Cretan Regiment belonged to the CRETE DIVISION of the S.S.E.A., (participated in the Battle of Doirani) and was stationed at Sidirokastro of Serres. Arrival in Athens 11-13-18 and opening of letter upon arrival for censorship, film and two-line ref "Greek Censorship 28" and censor number "329".

Smyrna and Thrace with which we connected our best life, through which we fed our youth and our life, my Georgia. Which we end up painting with blood. But no, the work of Venizelos will not be destroyed. We will all die... Burnt Hellas, I wish you to be older, more beautiful, more jealous and let me die. The Turks and Bulgarians are threatening us today, while until yesterday they were shaking us. another again, also a

captain: **"...You're not telling me that no other newspapers are published in Athens, or maybe you want to turn my ideas around. We are the children of Kotsos, our King, and whoever messes with our King will also be our enemy..."** or even:

"...Georgia, after the battle two words, we are doing great, in a little while we will be in Kyutachia, I wanted to write to you every day but I can't get there, the cannon is still firing..."

In this "give-and-give" of the letters of the time, soldiers with the flame of youthful enthusiasm, took courage and felt that someone was waiting for them at home.

Finding this initiative of the Despotopoulos girls as moving and at the same time romantic but primarily interesting, I was led to search for other such letters (in addition to the ones I had), some of which I would like to share with you. We should mention that Nefeli, but more so Georgia, also use various nicknames when communicating with the combatants, many of which refer to victorious battles of the Greek Army, such as

"Battle of Skra" (May 16/May 29, 1918 against the Bulgarian army, which took place in today's area of the same name in Kilikis Prefecture), **"Battle of Doirani"** in September 1918 which led to the surrender of Bulgaria, **"Avra Ionias"**, but also many others, some of which appear in the appended letters (from the writer's collection).

They sort by serial number all the letters they receive and keep lists. The number appearing on the letter (usually in pencil) is its serial number with the particular officer or soldier who sent it. Thus the letter with the number "88" (fig. 8), signi-



Fig. 8 Incomplete envelope with a 4-page poetic letter to Georgia, mailed on 21.6.19 from the 1st Division (TT 908) which according to the GES belonged to the 1st SS. and from June 1919 he was in "Aidinion" in Asia Minor). Due to its particular content (the analysis of which in itself requires a separate article) it is sent to the Poste Restante, in order to avoid the censorship of the link and its relatives.

shows that there have been 87 previous letters with this person and apparently there have been several more, so one can understand the volume of mail that was circulated in this light! Georgia's correspondence with Captain Nikos Nikolopoulos numbered more than 185 letters until then!

Especially Georgia, which shows the greatest activity, repeats itself to many, accepts their compliments, leaves emotional hints. She hides her thoughts. He often writes something that is not true to see counter actions. She is a "Venizelician" - but like her sister - she also corresponds with "Konstantinikis" and they exchange jokes with each other. It inspires some confessions and love poems. One such letter is the one in fig. 8, which refers to a four-page poem to Georgia of unparalleled literary value. Posted by " **1st Division Poet ...**"

Letters from the archive often appear at auctions and have a special

value for philatelists, not only because of the texts they contain but also because of the amazing quantity and variety of Greek buoys used in the period 1918-23.

Somewhere here ends the enchanting journey on this brilliant page of our history. The history of the Despotopoulos archive (as well as others) is known to philatelic collectors of Military Postal History and of course to Military scholars. Personally, I confess that I did not know her as not belonging to either category. I found a greatness of soul in those girls who lived alone and died without having a family and I wanted to make common those who also did not know them, preserving with respect the historical memory. In particular, it should become known and inspire the young children, as in our times, which dominate or decline values, the concept of their homeland is difficult to understand and sometimes discredited. <

I thank Mr. Sokratis Bozovich who helped me in gathering material and interpreting the Military Postal Fields. A related article of his regarding the presentation of the album "Rejoice through battle" is in the magazine "FILOTOLIA" issue No. 565/1994.