

*Until I received the file,  
I felt like I was invented, not born.  
—Greek-born adoptee who wishes  
to remain anonymous*

On 29 August 2022, the Hellenic Branch of the International Social Service and Gregory Kontos of Greek Ancestry started a collaborative digitization project that must make the ISS's historic adoption files available to Greek-born adoptees of the post-WWII decades<sup>1</sup>. The ISS handled hundreds of adoption cases of Greek-born children who were adopted abroad from 1953 on, and the digitization project will cover more than one thousand files up until 1985. Thus, the project preserves an estimated 1,500 case files, which also include inquiries from prospective adoptive parents who may or may not have received a child from Greece. The digitization and access project is a unique initiative for many reasons, and it deserves the attention of researchers and archivists abroad as well as in Greece. This article will briefly explain what these historic adoption files hold and why they are important. It will also discuss how the granting of digital access to these files responds to an agenda of adoptee activism, which I have helped to articulate since 2013, when I began my research on the postwar and Cold War adoptions of Greek-born children to the USA, the Netherlands, and to other European receiving countries.

## Adoptee Archive Fever: The International Social Service, Archival Policy and Progress in 2022-23

ADOPTEEES HAVE REAL SKIN  
IN THE ARCHIVE GAME

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1. On 3 December 2022, I participated in an online panel, organized by Gregory Kontos and intended to bring awareness and support to this digitization project. The recording of this webinar, “Support Our Project: Preserving the Stories of Greek Adoptees!” may be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MK8TI6bc14g>. Meanwhile, the project has been proceeding at full speed and in compliance with the Greek and EU laws on personal data protection. It was nearing completion by late February 2023 (Kontos, personal communication, 18 February 2023, and personal visit to the Greek branch office on Derigny Street 24, 10343 Athens, on 20 February 2023).



### *The ISS in Greece*

In 1924, female social workers interested in (and challenged by) issues ranging across borders founded the International Social Service as a nongovernmental and non-sectarian refugee and family organization, which set up agency headquarters in Switzerland. The organization ex-

tended humanitarian aid and legal advice and, from the beginning, it strove to professionalize social work, conversant with burgeoning social science theory and practice. By the mid-1950s, the focus of the ISS had shifted from reuniting families across borders to creating new families through cross-border adoptions. By then, too, the organization's humanitarian commitment to child welfare

had taken on global dimensions and addressed the needs of children affected by war, “illegitimacy,” “abandonment,” and “mixed-race” origins (as in the case of adoptions from South Korea). In the early Cold War years of intercountry adoption, the ISS also advocated for interdependent legal and social safeguards to secure the “best interest” of the foreign-born child that would be sent for adoption overseas. It did pursue an assimilationist ideal for the eligible minors, who were to be adopted typically by white, middle-class, heteronormative American families<sup>2</sup>.

The ISS-USA collaborated with the ISS Hellenic Branch, which had been set up in Athens to alleviate the 1920s Asia Minor Greek refugee crisis but was suspended from late 1940 through early 1953. Through the end of 1956, the ISS Hellenic Branch operated area offices in Thessaloniki and Ioannina as well. From the fall of 1955 on, the branch began to regularly send over small groups of Greek children for adoption in the United States. The earliest flights that carried ISS-sponsored Greek adoptees overseas took off in September 1955. The Greek offices had been preparing these adoptions for months, as the individual case chronologies indicate. ISS adoptions from Greece peaked by the end of the decade. During these years, they coincided with the second wave of mass placements carried out by the AHEPA, the American Hel-

lenic Educational Progressive Association (1956–1959)<sup>3</sup>. Other parties mediated in intercountry adoptions as well, but the ISS and the AHEPA became ideological as well as practical opponents in the increasingly competitive cause of handling adoptions from Greece.

The ISS-USA and the ISS Hellenic Branch tried to match applications coming from either end, either from prospective American parents through the ISS-USA, or from Greek institutions, organizations, or birth families that contacted the Greek offices of the ISS when they sought to place adoptable children in the United States. The ISS Greece never kept the children in question in its care for extended periods of time. Rather, all ISS-sponsored adoptees remained in their respective institutions until their adoptive families had been screened and cleared by the child welfare agencies of their home countries and states. Over the course of typically two to three years, the legal guardianship of foundlings or of children otherwise available for adoption was transferred from the president of the Greek orphanage’s board of directors, who consented to the children’s emigration, to the ISS, and then to the American parents, following the formal adoption procedure. The ISS also alerted the American parents to the need to pursue US citizenship for their adopted children, typically after they had been residing with them for about two years<sup>4</sup>.

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2. A comprehensive and up-to-date history of the ISS has yet to be written, but see Lamed (1956 and 1960) and, recently, Banu (2023). Banu follows Susan T. Pettiss, associate director of the ISS-USA, who played a lead role in the agency’s intercountry adoption praxis. For more context to these opening paragraphs, and additional bibliographical references, see Van Steen (2019: 109-115).

3. See Van Steen (2019: part 2). A first wave of AHEPA-sponsored adoptions had taken place between 1950 and 1952.

4. Through the early 1960s, the Babies’ Center Metera, which was founded and favored by the Greek Queen Frederica, kept responding to the many inquiries from hopeful American parents by urging them to arrange for home studies through the ISS American

The ISS Hellenic Branch first notified Greek institutions about the active role it wanted to play in their inter-country adoptions. The branch invested much time and energy to educate Greek institutions about its preferred protocols. It explained the risks associated with adoptions by proxy, as carried out by the AHEPA and other adoption agents. With its emphasis also on proper casework, the branch consistently set itself apart for its more professional practices<sup>5</sup>. Most Greek orphanages, however, ignored the ISS's invitation to collaborate: they preferred to handle the US-bound adoptions of their young wards themselves, with the help of lawyers of their own choosing and with less or no interference from social workers, who were the ISS's very visible public face<sup>6</sup>. The Greek state, too, acted with an uncritical trust in the AHEPA, which benefited for folding its Greek "Orphans Program" into its larger and older pursuit of diaspora settlement solutions. The AHEPA did not invest in any thorough reviews of the children's fitness for adoption and emigration; they did not prepare (older) children for the long journey, either, nor for the even longer process of adjustment to English and to the American way of life. For the birth parents or for the adoptive parents, there was no adequate information about the long-term implications or repercussions of overseas adoption. As far as the AHEPA was concerned, speed was more important than procedure, monitoring, or after-care.

It took the ISS full five years to gain clarity on the

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Branch. This explains why many of the preserved files start with letters of inquiry, to end with proof of the child's naturalization status in its US state of destination.

5. On the rise of professional social work in Greece, see Papada-

labyrinthine legal procedures that ruled adoptions from Greece. The fat folder (box 31, folder 13) of correspondence, reports, memoranda, questions, and clarifications held in the American Branch Papers attests to the agency's arduous efforts to acquire knowledge, even while its Greek adoption cases were well underway. Notably, by 1959, the branch's thick folder informally changed labels from "legal procedures" to "legal problems." At stake was the issue of whether the ISS-sponsored adoptions of Greek children, which the ISS preferred to finalize in the United States after a minimum probationary period of six to twelve months (in most states), would be considered legal by the Greek jurisdiction, which insisted on handling any adoptions of its subjects itself. Crucially, too, the ISS understood any overseas adoption to be confidential and final, abolishing all ties to the natal parents or families. In contrast, the 1946 Greek Civil Code (articles 1581 and 1583) did not divest the birth parents of their basic rights when the Greek court granted a "simple" act of adoption pertaining to their child. The Greek "simple" adoptions, as opposed to the "full," "new" or "Western" adoptions on the ISS model, augmented and strengthened rather than restricted family affiliations: they brought the adopters into the original family circle if they were not already members of the extended family. The caseworkers of the ISS planned not for closed, "stranger" adoptions per se, but for permanency for the child, displaying ample openness to kinship care or adoption placements of

ki (2021: 82-93).

6. It should not surprise us, then, that by late 1962 two Greek adoption scandals had broken out. See Van Steen (2016 and 2021).

Greek-born children with their Greek-American blood relatives.

The ISS carried the brunt of the mid-1950s Greek resistance to changing adoption terms, all still within the purview of Greek and US legislation. The traces of its careful negotiation of Greek as well as American, private as well as public law can be found in the preserved files<sup>7</sup>. The reader sees caseworkers probe legal processes and information policies that would ideally be uniform across national systems but are not. Also, for criticizing the proxy adoptions of the AHEPA, in particular, the ISS had placed itself in a position of “outsider” isolation, which only complicated matters in Greece. By April 1959, however, a total of 344 Greek children had taken the ISS route abroad, though not all of them went to the United States. The number is given, not without marked resentment, in an official report compiled by A. Athinogenis and F. Papatathanasiou of the Greek Ministry of Social Welfare<sup>8</sup>. Both inspectors wanted PIKPA, the Greek Patriotic Institution for Social Welfare and Awareness (Πατριωτικό Ίδρυμα Κοινωνικής Προνοίας και Αντίληψης), to play a greater role in the US-bound adoptions, which would also entail that more adoptions would favor Greeks of the diaspora and would be finalized by the Greek courts.

To this day, however, PIKPA’s archival and access policies have been inconsistent and insensitive. Adoptees recount stories of ever so reluctantly being allowed to see

their files from across an “authoritarian” desk. They are being told by PIKPA social workers that “there is nothing of importance in the files” and they are being denied copies<sup>9</sup>. PIKPA is not the only organization to gather adoption records to then present them as the institution’s private property at best, and as a tool in asymmetric knowledge and power relations at worst. PIKPA still conceives of the adoptees’ access to their files, not as a right, but as a request that can be restricted or denied<sup>10</sup>. However, the adoptee’s right to access has long been enshrined in Article 1559 of Decree no. 2447, published in the 30 December 1996 issue of the Government Gazette of the Greek Republic<sup>11</sup>. Under this article of the law, adopted children can request full information from their adoptive parents and from the proper authorities after they have come of age at eighteen years old: “Το θετό τέκνο έχει, μετά την ενηλικίωσή του, το δικαίωμα να πληροφορείται πλήρως από τους θετούς γονείς και από κάθε αρμόδια αρχή τα στοιχεία των φυσικών γονέων του,” “Upon coming of age, the child given out for adoption has the right to be fully informed by its adoptive parents and by every appropriate authority of the data on its biological parents.”

PIKPA seems to fear, not that it will disappoint former foundlings for having very little information about their origins, but rather that some adoptees will be overwhelmed by too much or too raw data (as when pertaining to “illegitimacy,” rape, or incest). This institutional

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7. On the precarious balance between private and state actors in the domain of Greek welfare work, see recently Avdela (2022).

8. Athinogenis and Papatathanasiou (1959: 27).

9. Testimonies of M. C., D. P., and C. M. V, as recent as June and October 2022. See also Mary Cardaras, “Our Stories and Our Records

Belong to Us,” *Kathimerini*, 25 January 2023.

10. See further Condit-Shrestha (2021: 162).

11. *Efimeris tis Kyverniseos tis Ellinikis Dimokratias* N/2447/96. The cavalier treatment that this law receives is deplorable.

fear and reluctance leave the adoptee with ample room to imagine all that was not shared, with surplus suspicions of deliberate secrecy and illegality. This result is altogether nefarious for those desperately trying to obtain the truth about their self and past. It also adversely affects any attempt to build trust in governmental cooperation or agent credibility. Non-adopted persons hardly realize to what extent adoptees dissect statements and autopsy words for any crumb of information, truth or not. But more importantly, this institutional attitude infantilizes the adoptees all over again, while indirectly acknowledging that, for adoption handlers of the past, overseas adoption has moved from being a solution to being an ongoing problem. Crucially also, studies have shown that birth mothers tend to be more eager to reconnect with their relinquished children than what is usually assumed. Unmarried mothers did not ask necessarily for records to be closed or to be closed forever<sup>12</sup>. In fact, many birth mothers have left the tokens of *anagnorisis* (letters, cards, pictures, small objects) in the ISS files, intended to make a future reunification possible and certain. Even more openness prevails among biological siblings or half-siblings, who are, however, not supported by any Greek law in their quests for missing family members. Up through

2022, however, PIKPA has enshrined the practice of closed-records adoptions, but not that of non-records adoptions, which also existed in Greece of the 1950s. The argument that PIKPA's antiquated archival protocols might be acceptable for reflecting a praxis from "back then" is a non-starter: this rationale does not hold when the contemporaneously composed ISS files clearly show that more enlightened practices had already been introduced and disseminated. Also, "back then" is not the past for the adoptees; it is, rather, a state in which the adoptees and their own children continue to live, if we recognize that layers of "adoptedness" are transmitted across generations.

#### *What Does an ISS Adoption File Hold?*

The trained social workers who handled ISS intercountry adoption cases introduced the concept of the case file: they went about compiling adoption files in a very meticulous manner and saved every related document and piece of correspondence<sup>13</sup>. They typed up their handwritten notes and kept the original pages as well. They translated documents from Greek to English and vice versa. They gathered social history data on all parties involved,

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12. See Milotte (2012: 227), who covers the adoptions from Ireland and who discusses these observations at greater length.

13. The reader is reminded of just how exceptional this practice was by the journalist Ioannis Kairofylas. In an article dated 12 January 1959 published in the paper *Ethnos*, Kairofylas decried the "elasticity" of the Greek adoption system that favored child exports to the United States. He denounced the common omission or dismissal of social histories and home studies that had to vouch for better adoptions abroad.

He also called for legal reforms that would make the Greek adoption system conform with international standards and held up the ISS as a model. Lastly, he recorded that 526 Greek children traveled to the States for adoption during the peak months of 1 September 1957 and 1 December 1958. Of those US-bound adoptions, 90 were based on private arrangements, which meant that they evaded any type of screening altogether. A brief mention of this 1950s phenomenon made it into Kairofylas's popular history of 1993 (250).



as well as observation reports, recommendation letters, adjustment assessments, copies of legal documents, and so on. They also kept all pictures, Christmas cards, and children's notes and drawings that were sent back to their office once the children had arrived in the United States. A typical ISS adoption file holds between 50 and 70 pages, but some files contain as many as 200 pages. These files represent an archive of the adoption praxis but also an archive of the emotions. They preserve all that was found and felt in the experience of adoption. Even more crucially, and reaching well beyond the history of the ISS Hellenic Branch, they hold the key to the social history archive *par excellence* of mid-twentieth-century Greece. Given the 1989 deliberate destruction of the Greek anticommunist surveillance files, there is no richer social and family history archive beyond the ISS's of the most vulnerable groups of Greek citizens—the destitute widows, the young unwed mothers, and the “illegitimate” children. Thus the ISS adoption files disclose the nascent moment and rationale of scientific casework and also deliver a poignant diagnosis of economic disparities, punitive social taboos, and culturally and legally defined “illegitimacy.”

Practical and ethical questions immediately arise. Can the digitized files reveal all names, or must they blot out third-party names, even when those parties are no longer alive? How keen are the adoptees themselves on anonymity? Most of them actually feel empowered to be known as members of a historic adoption movement and of the current wave of adoptee activism. The adoptees' own wish to break the silence inverts the tight modes of anonymity and secrecy that reigned before. Many want to see also their Greek names restored, especially those who

feel strongly that their original name and identity were overwritten. Most of the Greek natal parents are no longer alive. The few birth mothers whom I have met in person had grown old with only one wish left: to know what had become of their child. Most of the siblings or half-siblings would rather be confronted with the hard truth than with persistent rumors or kind lies. So who, in the end, would be protected by protocols of anonymity? And protected from what? I have raised the idea of hosting an exhibition of the records of ISS-sponsored adoptees who have passed away, and to prepare it by 2024, the agency's centenary year. But rather than resorting to blotted-out names or pseudonyms, I want the names to be visible, as a lasting tribute to the deceased adoptees. I hope to remain an advocate also for those who can no longer speak for themselves due to old age or ill health.

### *What Do We Read between the Recorded Lines?*

The ISS archives allow us to study how postwar adoptions, which began as humanitarian, emergency provisions, were institutionalized and simultaneously archived, but also how and why some files were reopened at a later date. The files let even the most casual observer notice that a far-reaching administrative turn was at work in the ISS's adoption praxis. The Greek records implement and consolidate the administrative approach to the American casework tradition, which was grounded also in Greece's postwar reconstruction with the assistance of US aid. The ISS records bespeak documentation, evaluation, measurability, standardization, working quotas, evidence-based practices, and a concern for transparency. Before 2019, the number of intercountry adoption cases from Greece

had not been properly quantified. Thus the ISS's digitization project opens avenues to numerical and statistical analysis as well as to qualitative sociological studies. The ISS not only committed to, but also trained its social workers in more systematic and more structured working methods, at the risk of becoming overly bureaucratic, as when multiple letters go back and forth about rather tangential topics. More than a few files contain the traces of the ISS's interview and report-writing instructions to its caseworkers, who are seen to reiterate but also to occasionally challenge commonly held assumptions about the making of postwar adoption.

Many concerns that are only indirectly related to intercountry adoption cross the pages of the ISS files. Hints of botched abortions exist, as do mentions of adoptions by relatives as emergency rescue operations, to "save the child" from "shame" and "illegitimacy." The files refer to cases of birth mothers' postpartum depression and/or suicidal ideation, as in the case of the young unwed mother of A.M., whose caseworker waited for the young woman to make her decision while fully expecting, however, that an overseas adoption would be the outcome. The gravity of psychological, somatic, and/or financial distress affected the birth mother's decision-making process and even legal position. Yet the message was still that the adult thing to do was for the far-from-settled birth mother to give her child a better life by way of a US-bound adoption. The vulnerability of young unmarried or widowed birth mothers seeps through the writing of many of the ISS files. But was there also a sense of widowed fathers being predestined to give their children away? Those cases were few and far between, but they certainly exist. We also read the letters written by adoptees and members of

birth families looking for one another. We read their grief when they learn of a death that will make any reunion impossible—and the despair of those who cannot accept the death of the child they relinquished and who demand to see a death certificate as proof.

On a more practical and logistical level, the ISS records speak to advancements in medicine, hygiene, and sanitation, about educational opportunities, and about labor practices, oppressive or otherwise. On a more expansive level, the ISS records delve into domestic and foreign policy and diplomacy concerns, migration trends and related legislations, legal history and the interstices of private and public law in different countries, and so on. They also offer up invaluable material about humanitarian aid efforts and human rights concerns, while shedding light on postwar gender and class relations. They even touch on the difficult conundrum of caseworkers being asked to help validate de facto adoptions that were based on monetary arrangements (baby-selling initiated by the birth families). Again, it is no understatement to call the ISS adoption archive the gold vein of social and family history of the twentieth century, complete with the traces of fine-grained political, ideological, ethnic-territorial, and socioeconomic dividing lines.

### *What Remains to Be Done?*

Ideally former adoption mediators become active creators of a continuum of care, which must address the lasting needs of individuals and families affected by past adoption practices. They may call on the assistance of an advisory board of adoptee spokespersons and of archival and academic stakeholders who have studied good practice



principles that have successfully been implemented elsewhere. Vangelis Karamanolakis, for instance, has made comparisons between the diverging approaches to the files of Greek communist and leftist oppression, destroyed in 1989, and the East German Stasi files<sup>14</sup>. The restored Stasi records do reveal names, places, facts; archivists working on these files believe that truth brings reconciliation. Archive study, restitution, and access provisions can thus begin to offer redress after decades of ambiguous loss: the adoptees lost a family, identity, community, and culture before they gained new ones, but not without hardship and pain. The adoptees have every right to due process, not only for the healthy identity outcomes that access to their early childhood files will bring, but also for the dignity and agency that this access will restore to all parties involved. Adult adoptees have wills and ways of their own. Their complex identity concerns are to be appreciated and legitimated. Until now, ownership of the archives, and thus of the adoptee's life story, has typically resided with the adoption mediator. Access to digitized files will at last democratize archival knowledge and power. The adoptees can be in the forefront of decolonizing the archive—and of decolonizing the methods by which to unlock the archive.

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It is good that the ISS cared to compile and preserve the historic adoption files. Most of the other Greek adoption mediators did not commit to proper record-keeping and some actively destroyed their files. They need to be reminded of the archival and ethical obligations they

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14. See Karamanolakis (2019).

have, which are grounded in the adoptees' identity rights as human rights. Most adoptees have achieved some hard-won certainties about their early life and adoption, after tenacious searches in a country and culture about which they may not have much information. To deny them proper access would mean to commit an epistemic injustice, in the words of Miranda Fricker (2007): it would leave them without the knowledge they are owed; it would disenfranchise them from the knowledge that comes from lived experience. Knowledge and acknowledgement are paramount: *gnosi, anagnosi, anagnorisi*. If reparations are due, one type of symbolic reparations could be the restoration of the archive, that is, an archival reparation, through restoring the adoptees' access to and ownership of their records<sup>15</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

The rich ISS archive reveals how the organization shaped social work into an instrument that facilitated adoption overseas. But it also recognizes that the adoptees and their families, on both sides of the Atlantic, are so much more than files, numbers, or "data points." Opening these files is not just about amassing sources and evidence. The files enter into lives, and the living adoptees want answers. Personhood rights are at stake here. Any access prohibitions constitute forms of legal, social, and civil disrespect

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15. On this kind of archival restitution/reparation, which must redress asymmetries of colonial power, see further Slyomovics (2021). Gott (2022) has restated the argument of epistemic injustice in strong activist and legal terms related to access to the records of the punitive Irish Magdalene Laundries. Gott speaks of "epistemic exclusion"

of the adoptees. The ISS's systematic digitization of the records must reverse that outdated process. It also sets an example of what more can be done with the adoption files held by other agencies and institutions. As scholars, we have a moral responsibility vis-à-vis precarious lives, beyond integrating the Greek adoptees as a distinct sociopolitical category in the framework of critical adoption studies and of cultural and transnational history at large. We must bring critical thinking to adoption histories, to then use this history as a tool to scrutinize other social and political phenomena. We also have a scholarly obligation to start incorporating the forgotten history of Greece's overseas adoption movement into a more clear-eyed historiography of twentieth-century and especially Cold War Greece.

A nation that sends hundreds of its children away has some explaining to do. A search, any search and attempt at reunion should be seen not simply as an issue for individuals but as a challenge for the state. Therefore, the Greek state needs to commission formal research about past adoption practices and experiences, with subpoena orders extending to all relevant files and records. A comprehensive study of Greece's historic postwar adoptions cannot exist until all state institutions and private archives allow researchers full access to their records. I realize that, with this statement, I somehow undercut the value of my own previous study, which I only ever saw as the

(2022: 23-24). In that light, the collective volume edited by Mary Cardaras (2023), to which 14 Greek-born adoptee essayists have contributed their stories, has created a "community of epistemic resistance" and established "epistemic democracy" (Gott 2022: 197). Public voice has finally begun to replace private silence.

starting point of a broader dialogue. The past can, after all, still be corrected for its most vulnerable subjects—and citizens—of prior decades<sup>16</sup>. Leaving the adoptees to solve the mystery of their own disappearance from their home country is unacceptable. The Greek state further needs to take seriously the adoptees' demand to have their citizenship restored (as a second citizenship). Finally, the adoptees' state of being left in darkness for so long creates an opening to discuss the limitations of the existing historiographical literature. It presses the question: what else have we been missing?

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Gonda Van Steen