

## Historical Article

# The 1947's Newborns Emergency Transportation in Greece, a Forethought in Baby Caring, Stepping into the Future

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### Abstract

In the second half of the 1940's, in our devastated and at the times languished from the World War II country, one of the most important moments occurs in the history of premature infants transportation in Greece, a world premiere. During 1947 "Marika Heliadi Institution Donated by Helena E. Venizelou" department of midwives, under the guidance of the former head midwife Chara Vogiatzaki and midwife Chrisoula Misirli-Vatakoglou assuming the transportation of sick or premature newborns as their higher duty towards a nation that suffer a plethora of detrimental hardships under the Nazi's occupation, started the initial attempt to "Transfer Neonates" for hospitalization. This is supposed to be the first organized transportation of newborns in the recent world history, a care model of incomparable offer. The present research suggests that Athenian midwives were among the first known pioneers who deeply cared for the babies of the common people in a listless world.

**Key Words:** newborns' transportation, Chara Vogiatzaki, Chrisoula Misirli-Vatakoglou, Marika Heliadi, Greece.

### Introduction

The phylogen, honorable Helena Eleutheriou Venizelos understood that it was an imperative need for a Maternity Hospital to be founded in Athens, worthy of its scientific and social destination, and especially able to heal and meet the needs of destitute pregnant women. She made a life purpose to establish one at her own expense.

She donated in Hellenic state the "Maternity" Hospital, which she founded with personal initiative [Figure 1]. The hospital, due to her modesty of equivalent measure to her great heart, wasn't named after her, but after her dearest

friend Marika Heliadi, mother of Lady Crosfield, who had just died.

On December 28, 1928, the Deputy Minister of Health Apostolos Doxiadis putted the foundation on a field of 10,000 square cubits in the district of Ampelokipi. So the construction began compliant to all the rules of the modern architecture. One of the greatest moments in the long and significant maternity's medical history was the proposal for an organized "Neonatal Transport", which was born as an idea by the Chief Midwife "Marika Heliadi Institution Donated by Helena E. Venizelou", Chara Vogiatzaki [Figure 2].

### The written proposal and the first transport of newborns

In 1933, the Chief Midwife of "Marika Heliadi Institution Donated by Helena E. Venizelou", Chara Vogiatzaki made a written proposal for the first time in Greece and all over the world for a model "On Evacuation of Perinatal Patients" (Neonatal Hospital "Marika Heliadi" Opening ceremony 1933). A year later, during 1934, the donation of a specially adapted vehicle in Chicago was the starting point for the creation of "The Chicago model" for neonatal transport (Oppenheimer 1996).

However, for reasons unknown the first organized neonatal evacuation was attributed ultimately to the midwives of State of New York, in 1948.

The proposal for newborns evacuation and transportation, as well as the proposal for the organization of Perinatal Care on national level was a life's work for Chara Vogiatzaki, antedating the American one. While no reasonable person was possible to decline her consummate proposal, unfortunately, only the part of the proposal relating to infants transport was materialized and only in the Attica Basin near Athens. The Hellenic State did not accept her request, thus the midwives considering the work of evacuation and transportation of Neonatal babies in their tasks, they ultimately performed it on a voluntary basis (Andrianakou 1929). The procedure, protocol, and group of transport were improved and systematized through experience following the scientific data of the era. Over the years the "model" performed by the "Marika Heliadi Foundation" took shape and by 1947 the infants transfer became true.

Midwives, having as scientific leader Vatakoglou Chrisoula Misirlou (Misirli-Votakoglou 1996) began, for the first time in the world, the organized "Neonatal Transport" from obstetrical clinics to the first structured "Unit of Premature Infants" in the Country, belonging to "Marika Heliadi Foundation". Unfortunately this operation was neither patented nor trumpeted. There were no journalistic fanfares, it was instead a simply daily modest care duty [Figure 3] (Vogiatzaki 1996). Unlike their American colleagues in New York, who began to transport newborns in 1948 and passed due the publicity into the medical history as the first who did so (M. MacDonald et al. 2005).

Let's see what testifies the former Chief Midwife of the Foundation, Chara Vogiatzaki: "In the postwar period Midwives and Doctors, went to homes of women who gave birth to the Foundation to take care of the puerperas and their babies." Furthermore, according to her testimony, the Foundation had at its disposal a 24/7 "Evacuation Team" in readiness to transport babies from private nursing Clinics of the Attica Basin to "Elena.

Chara Vogiatzaki recalls, "This team was consisted of:

1. A principal midwife always accompanied by a younger qualified midwife.
2. An "ambulance". Originally, it was a small "coach" and then a taxi [Figure 4]. There was an expert taxi driver, very careful on driving "waiting" outside the hospital.
3. "A portable incubator", that is a large basket, always paved with sterile cloths.
4. An oxygen bag, always full, which was placed inside a bag and from there oxygen was provided little by little.
5. A sterile catheter for suction of secretions.
6. The clothing of the premature infant, that is a cape with a hood and a cloth, the so called "mouli" (Greek: μούλι) to cover its genitals. When we put the baby in the tippet we should be careful not to be too tight so that the baby feels comfortable and can move its hands and legs. The basket and the clothing of the early born were always kept warm by placing on them permanently warm hot water bottles" (Vogiatzaki 1996).

During the same period in the "Public Maternity Hospital" (First Obstetrics and Gynecology Clinic of the University of Athens), only infants who were carried to the Foundation by their parents were admitted for hospitalization. It was a rather strange contradiction if we consider the "Public Maternity Hospital" was hosted by the "Maternity Hospital Marika Heliadi" inside the same building. Samaras E, doctor of the "Public Maternity Hospital", gave his testimony, "We do not perform newborns transport, but we accept infants as outpatients, newborns who arrived at the hospital in a bad condition, wrapped in rags or cotton" (Samara 1994).



**Figure 1. Inauguration Day, 16-02-1933. Personal Photo Gallery of I. Tsoukalas.**



**Figure 2. The former Chief Midwife Chara Vogiatzaki. Personal Photo Gallery of I. Tsoukalas.**



**Figure 3. Neonatal Transport. Personal Photo Gallery of I. Tsoukalas.**



**Figure 4. Neonatal Transport by taxi. Personal Photo Gallery of I. Tsoukalas.**



**Figure 5. The first portable incubator in Greece, 1950. Personal Photo Gallery of I. Tsoukalas.**

The former Chief Midwife Chara Vogiatzaki testifies that, "In 1950, we acquired our first portable incubator with battery for transfer, the very first in our country, which was always plugged in [Figure 5]. Private Obstetric Clinics used to call us in the Maternity Hospital Marika Heliadi, and our group departed immediately to receive and transport the newborn infant in danger. If the premature infant was evacuated in the first 24 hours of its life it was hospitalized in the "Unit of Premature Infants", on the other hand if it was evacuated during the second 24 hours after its birth, or even more, it was hospitalized in isolation under continuous observation in an attempt to prevent any transmission of infection to the rest of the hospitalized infants. Too many infants

arrived at the hospital accompanied by their parents, though. Their situation was most lamentable because the "responsible" Hellenic state had no interest in doing the evacuation under the appropriate conditions. They were tightly wrapped with cotton and sometimes their nostrils were glued so that they were not able to breathe normally. Generally, infants who were coming if they happened to be treated in a better way during the evacuation and if the necessary attention was paid, perhaps they had a better outcome. Many newborns arrived with great hypothermia or fever due to the too warm or hot water bottles. There was never any oxygen bag during the evacuation. Even if they came with incubator, most were frozen while others had fever. I can thus say that by

the time I left the Maternity hospital (1982), I did not see evacuations performed as they should be. The failure in this area was unfortunate... " (Vogiatzaki 1996).

Chara Vogiatzaki defied the indifferent Hellenic State, and in the business of caring, taught how important was the fact only to care. Her innovative efforts did not grant her a place in history, and her model was banished to oblivion. It remains to us to honor the people who stood and care when no one thought or tried to have done it.

### **In conclusion**

In 1996 the former Chief Midwife Chara Vogiatzaki, during her own testimony, expressed her frustration on her dream to realize an organized system of neonatal transport. At that time the informal, but structured evacuation effort of neonatal infants was discussed internationally, as evidenced by Ms. Vogiatzaki, but unfortunately it was not consolidated and supported by the official state. Therefore the first baby evacuation that took place in Greece during the 1940s, is an operation that still seeks its position in the world history of medicine. In our eyes remains the first

realization of a perfect hallmark of baby care.

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