

Our breath of life

*Loula Vlahoutsikou-
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In Athens in 1998, a conference was organised to present 'the historical, ethical and legal aspects of German war obligations to Greece'. Some years later, in 2012, the conference findings were incorporated in a new bilingual edition (Greek and English) of The Black Book of Occupation, which recounts the 'Martyrology' of Greece at the hands of the Nazis. Manolis Glezos MEP, a hero of the Greek Resistance and one of Syriza's best known representatives, prepared the new text and presented a signed copy to The Spokesman in 2013, during a visit to the Hellenic Parliament of a delegation from the Greece Solidarity Campaign.

Loula Vlahoutsikou-Giannakopoulou, prisoner 42320, was in hospital at the time of the 1998 conference, and so she sent this written testimony. She had been a prisoner in the camps of Ravensbruck and Buchenwald, and was one of the 16 Greek women prisoners in the latter camp who survived.

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[...] I was standing with everyone else by the power lathe, at which we were forced to work by Nazis for 12 hours daily, grinding lethal cases for bullets. At some point, I was distracted and the roar of the lathe became the roar of the train, taking me back to my home, the isle of Evripos [Evia]. My imagination brought me back to my place, Limni, and my home. I was standing in the kitchen, by the window, looking at the pine needles coming in through the sieve and breathing the sweet smell of the pine. In the rhythm of the lathe I was hearing my mother's loom and her voice: 'Girls! Bring

the coffee and the sour-cherry to your father!'

It was a summer afternoon. In this very place our father would sit down after his siesta to smell the pine fragrance, while sipping his coffee. The faces of my family passed before my eyes. I kept them in my mind as a talisman, and brought them out at the most critical moments. I thought of their hands, wondering on which hand my father wore his stone ring, which a few years ago I was twiddling in my finger, playing ...

My mother, I remember, wore her wedding ring on her middle finger. Would I ever wear a wedding ring?

Suddenly, a case flew by my ear, thrown with hate by the Nazi supervisor. It seems that she felt number 42320 had escaped hell for a few minutes and had committed the crime of becoming a human being again, a dreaming girl. No! For her I had to remain number 42320 until death. Nothing else ...

I exchanged glances with my compatriots. We talked with our eyes. We were in pain, hungry, freezing cold, in the fire of fever, but we kept working. We used only our eyes to talk to each other.

Without making clumsy gestures, to keep the supervisor from suspecting anything, I bent down over the box where the cartridge cases fell, and started mixing them up; you see, we used to put a small piece of iron in the lathe which produced a cut in the cases, making them defective for their deadly purpose. This organised sabotage from all of us prisoners was our revenge, our breath of life, our pride. The supervisor moved away while I continued mixing the defective cases. I felt our youth resistance song welling from deep inside me.

Even from this wretched rampart, we kept on the fight of our people, the fight of our generation.

Insubordinate! Human beings! Not numbers ...