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### The Institution of Free School Meals in Times of Crisis in Greece (1924-1964): A Historical and Social Pedagogical Dimension

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## The Institution of Free School Meals in Times of Crisis in Greece (1924-1964): A Historical and Social Pedagogical Dimension

Labrini Th. Skoura\*, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

*The outbreak of cases of famine among pupils at school during the previous two years, preoccupied seriously the members of the educational community as well as the appropriate state agencies, and raised the awareness of the Greek society to a large extent. Motivated by the recent actions of the Ministry of Education to face these problems, memories and discussions concerning various social pedagogical actions developed in Greece during periods of crisis have emerged. One of them was the free school meals which functioned for decades in Greece, aiming at the management of malnutrition among students.*

*The aim of the present study is to highlight a) the paramount importance function of free school meals in times of crises, during which the population's malnutrition and especially that of pupils was taking life-threatening dimensions b) the efforts made for free school meals to function on a social pedagogical basis both by the state which took the necessary measures (the adoption of the necessary institutional framework, providing the relevant economic recourses, etc.) by the Church, charitable, private and other entities c) the social pedagogical awareness of Greek society and of educators themselves, aiming at the support and the expansion of school free meals and d) the strong social pedagogical reflexes displayed by Greek society on this issue and including the initiatives of students in Teacher Training Schools, who would be later called upon to teach and educate the future citizens of the country.*

**Key words:** social pedagogical actions, school free meals, child malnutrition, state and social welfare.

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## Introduction – Historical Background

Malnutrition in Greece has been one of the most important problems in times of economic crisis. On the threshold of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, Greece had to cope with the economic consequences of a war decade (1912-1922) and to assimilate the wave of 1,500,000 refugees who came to the country after the Catastrophe in Asia Minor<sup>1</sup> (Mazower, 2000, p. 3).

At that time the Greek governments took active measures to increase the agricultural production. But this was not sufficient to ensure the country's self-sufficiency in food. Instead supplementary supplies from abroad became necessary, so that the population's nutrition could be kept at satisfactory levels. During the Second World War the already poor pre-war living conditions of the population began to worsen. This was especially true for the rural population, but it also spread to urban population, a problem compounded by foreign and extremely harsh occupation. Greece was effectively divided into three occupied zones: the Bulgarians (East Macedonia, Western Thrace); the Germans (Crete, Athens, some of the Aegean islands and the rest of Macedonia); and the Italians (the Cyclades and the rest of the country) (Chionidou, 2006, p. 13). All resources were put at the disposal of these occupiers, while the population was left to be destroyed by famine (Svoronos, 1986, p. 138). This division of the country also resulted in the creation of many new and competitive authorities. And, since imports from traditional supplying markets could not be secured due to the British naval blockade, an already critical situation for the country became much worse.

The Prime Minister, Emm. Tsouderos, in an effort to secure food supplies, wrote to the Prime Minister of England Winston Churchill (14/12/1941), inter alia: *'Mr. President, it is a task not only of charity but also of political wisdom that we should not let the brave Greek people to reach desperation because of famine [...]. Have in mind that when peoples live in misery up to the point that the Greeks do at this time, they loose their power to think logically. Besides, why should the Greeks be deprived of their right to keep their mental and physical powers, so that they will be able to continue their resistance towards the enemy?'* [Tsouderos, 1946, p. 26; Tsouderos, 1948, p. 7]. So this was a time of emergency, with a real need to activate new food supply chains. It was particularly urgent, and intense, because of the problems in dealing with malnutrition among the young and school children. However, during war, this did result in free school meals, modeled on provision in other European countries, being prioritized by the Greek State, within the framework of basic social welfare.

The problem of pupil's nutrition has reemerged during the current and critical economic period. In particular, the return of the 'new free school meals'<sup>2</sup> in primary schools (Katsakos, 2013), resonates with the provision of free school meals during similar periods in the past. Thus, a historical review of neo-Hellenic education, through newspaper and other sources is worthwhile and useful. Such a review can highlight social pedagogical, health and economic dimensions. Also, useful is a review of past attempts for free meals to be provided in Teacher Training Schools. Particularly, as the majority of students came from poor families, the provision of free school meals offered them 'the greatest services'[Dimitriou, p. 24]. It is worth noting that the first time (1924) a free school meal

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<sup>1</sup> The Catastrophe in Asia Minor was the uprooting and the elimination of hundreds of thousands of Greeks from their homes on the west coast of Asia Minor, which took place in 1922 by the Turks. The Greeks who were able to flee arrived in Greece as refugees by any means of transport (see Vakalopoulos: 365-370).

<sup>2</sup> To face this problem the Minister of Education, Culture and Athletics gave a decision numbered P./14/179/31630/C1 of 6/3/2013 on the topic: 'Fruit promotion and consumption project at schools in the school year 2012-2013' and the decision P./14/136/24435/C1 of 7/3/2012 on the topic: 'Snacks distribution programme' to Zones of Educational Priority students of the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Institute of Youth and Lifetime Learning'.

was organized in an 'exemplary way' was at the Athens Marasslio Teacher Training School<sup>3</sup> and in particular that this was on the students' own initiative, as it is mentioned in great detail in the last part of the present study concerning the function of free school meals in Teacher Training Schools.

## **Establishment and function of free school meals in European countries**

The history of the institution of the free school meals is particularly interesting on a European level. Free school meals had been introduced and implemented in most European countries by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century/ beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was for health, social and pedagogical purposes. In order to highlight why these countries were interested in free school meal provision, a summary of relevant activities is made below. This is based on data from the remarkable studies of two important figures from the School of Hygiene of Greece Dim. Stefanou and Emman. Lambadarios (Lampadarios, 1933; Stefanou, 1946). , These two figures are important because they played a leading role in the institution of free school meals in Greece.

**In Great Britain**, which has a long tradition in social philanthropy, school free meals were initially organized as 'voluntary association initiatives. This was later taken up by the State. In 1886, the Destitute Children's Dinner Society was founded in London. By 1906 free school meals were recognized in law as pedagogical, rather than a charitable institution. This included an obligation on the State to supplement the diet of the destitute students even during the holidays. From this point the number of the students who received free meals continually increased. The school year 1929-1930 saw 265.000 students receiving meals. Two years later that number had increased to 400,000 students.

The organization and the operation of school free meals in England followed certain basic principles. There was a thorough selection process of beneficiaries based on a student's health and social status. Observations were made on the effects of the meals on the students' physical and mental condition. The school health service participated in the creation and the inspection of the diets. Half of the costs of free school meals were covered by the educational institution, and the other half came from community taxes. All destitute students were exempted from any payment, while the rest paid towards the cost of the meals.

**In France** the foundation of free school meals goes back to 1868 with the establishment of the *school treasuries*. These *school treasuries* were instituted and passed into the law by V. Duruy, the Minister of the Public Education. Initially voluntary associations, their function was to distribute books, clothing and food to needy primary school children; eventually they became compulsory and state-sponsored and came to organize free school meals. In 1880 the first free school meals were provided in Paris on the basis of special school funds. Their organization combined both the private and public sector, being generously subsidized by both municipal and private donations. In 1928, 5965 school free meals were provided in France. In 1931 the municipality of Paris put 3,900,000 francs into its budget for school meals for destitute students. . Others had to pay; a special coupon system was also implemented to prevent revealing who paid and who did not. .

**In Germany** the history of school free meals is particularly interesting. In this country provision started after child labour had been banned. This in turn reduced the income of many families. These free school meals were managed either by the State or at the expense of various private charitable and religious organizations. However, when the great food shortage, at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War

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<sup>3</sup> The Marasslio was the first Teacher Training School where the teachers of the primary education were trained. It operated as a model Teacher Training School, during the period of three years 1923-1926, aiming at the cultivation of the moral virtues of love, altruism, veracity, respect, self-respect and sense of duty (Skoura 2001: 38,84).

and into the early post-war years, was compounded with increases in tuberculosis and infant mortality, Germany unified the organisation of free school meals.

Nevertheless, even after this unification of provision, it was extremely difficult to deliver the policy. This was due to a huge demand on behalf of the students who wished to participate and to the enormous number of daily requests for participation which were disproportionate to the State's existing economic circumstances. As a result, in 1921 a special convention was called on free school meals. This convention arrived at a number of practical conclusions, mainly around how to select students who needed the provision. The costs of the meals themselves were covered by the municipalities, the communities and private organizations.

**In Italy** the provision of free meals started in Milan. It was funded by private child welfare associations (1894). In 1904 the provision was systematized, by the 1930's three quarters of the school population received free meals. It is worthwhile mentioning that a notable decrease in student absence occurred in Italy, and in other countries, after free meals were introduced.

Finally, free school meals have been provided, during the above period in Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union, the U.S.A. and in Japan<sup>4</sup>.

### **Efforts for organising and functioning free school meals in Greece (1931 -1940)**

The School Health Direction of the Ministry of Education had been trying, since 1915, to spread new beliefs about health and pedagogics, based on the premise that education was powerless '*when the students are starving*'. However free school meals were not being organised until 1927, with the exception of individual cases<sup>5</sup>. Heading the efforts at protecting pupils were various associations, such as the Patriotic Foundation<sup>6</sup>, the Red Cross, the Lyceum of Greek Women, the General Union of the Protection of Childhood and Adolescence etc. (Lampadarios 1934, pp. 5-6).

Free school meals aimed to provide food to pupils who could be proven to fall short of adequate nutrition at home. This could be established when home meals were deemed to be below the quality and quantity needed for both growth and the demands of school life (Stefanou, 1946, p. 7). Free school meals were also initially introduced for 'sanitary' reasons, so that malnutrition would be avoided; by that point malnutrition had been connected with the risk of tuberculosis.

The first step the state welfare took concerning the free school meals goes back to the school year 1930-1931. The then Prime Minister *George Papandreou* had shown a particular interest in the gathering of statistic and other data and generally in the organisation of free school meals; additionally, the first state credit of 2,000,000 drachmas was identified for this purpose<sup>7</sup>. This

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<sup>4</sup> For further information in relation to the history, the way of organisation and function of the free school meals in the above-mentioned countries cf. the studies of the Directors of School Hygiene of the Ministry of Education, Lampadarios, 1934:8-12 and Stefanou, 1946:9-14.

<sup>5</sup> The attempt in 1924 concerning the function of free meals in teacher training schools is of particular interest, as it will be reported in more details.

<sup>6</sup> The Patriotic Foundation was founded in 1915 by the Queen Sofia, aiming at the protection and the medical treatment of the mobilized reservists' families, for the sake of which she organized economic free meals, an employment agency department and a health department. In 1924 its action focused on the protection of childhood while in 1929 it was renamed into 'the Child Protection Patriotic Institution' subsidised by the state with the amount of 8-10 million dr. annually. In 1930 it had 38 branches in Greece. [Great Hellenic Encyclopedia, vol. 19<sup>th</sup>, 802].

<sup>7</sup> From the school year 1927-28 until the 1932-33 one, when relevant data has been gathered, the development of the pupils' number participated in free school meals had as follows: 1927-28:525, 1928-29:3500, 1929-30:4500, 1930-31:30000, 1931-32:31000 and 1932-33:36000 (Lampadarios, 1933:23 ; Stefanou, 1946:52). A steep rise in the number of participant students during the school year 1930-31 is noted here, which has to be set down to the particular interest the then new Minister of Education G. Papandreou showed in free school meals (2/1/1930-26/5/1932).

money, derived from the tobacco taxes, was distributed every year to the school Boards (Law 5341/1932, article 57). The Boards served as the core for collecting important local resources as well as the basis for the organisation of free school meals (Stefanou, 1946, p. 55).

State involvement in free school meals was to continue under Minister *Ioannis Makropoulos* (Law 6379/1934, article 17 and 68/53551/61-9-1934 Ministry Circular). But, due to underfunding during 1934-1936, the number of students receiving meals, decreased. As a result, the state, in 1936-1937, passed management of free school meals to the Patriotic Foundation. The Foundation was believed to be able to carry out this difficult task thanks to its experience and the appropriate facilities it owned in the big cities. However, the system of providing free meals to pupils and to destitute citizens jointly, proved to be problematic because of the basic principle according to which free school meals do not constitute a case of simple charity, **but are pedagogic and social institutions, associated to the school life as a whole.**

In late 1937 the Ministry of Education started to provide special free school meals to function through schools or in school groups. At first this was through primary schools in urban centers, but gradually it extended to schools in the rural areas. The Ministry made its greatest effort between 1937 to 1939; this was carried out in collaboration with the Church and wider society. Circulars from the Prime Minister (*Constantinos Georgakopoulos*: 6/12/1937) and the Minister of Education (*Ioannis Metaxas*: 17/12/1938) to Educational and School Health authorities, the Prefects, the Mayors and the Presidents of village councils, declared the necessity for '**a real crusade**'. This was a crusade for front-line preventive and effective measures in relation to sickly, undernourished and destitute pupils.

Another important presence in the struggle against students' malnutrition through free school meals provision was Athens' Archbishop Chrysostomos. In an inspired speech, he raised the point that it was '*the well-off citizens' duty to support free school meals so that they would function in all Greek villages*' (Stefanou, 1946, p. 61).

The Press also made an important contribution in promoting free school meals. The editorial in the *Kathimerini* of 27/2/1939, entitled 'The poor student', highlighted the social and pedagogical dimension of the problems of student malnutrition as well as the social need for well-off citizens to offer financial help to solve the problem. The article, referring to 'the duty of wealth', noted, inter alia 'the well-off parent should be deprived of some of his daily food for the sake of his child's schoolmates. In future, when it is the duty of the nation to defend the wealth and the prosperity of its members, the rich or the well-off student will consider the poor child, nourished not by generosity but from a sense of duty, as a capable, willing soldier [...] the poor child who will have become strong and courageous, a capable citizen and an enduring fighter...' An article in the *Athinaika Nea* was dedicated to the 'Free School Meals' (28/5/1938). It pointed to the social and health importance of free school meals. It also stated that Greek public opinion was in favour of the State making the provision permanent and extending it across the whole country. Finally, the headlines in the 'Ethnos' (25/6/1939) and the 'Elephtheron Vima' (14/6/1939) indicated the vital role of free school meals to the physical and mental well-being of children from poor families. It was also noted that free school meal provision was *proof of real solidarity* among the members of the nation and of the care the State took of the most powerless of its citizens.

The above efforts resulted in the systematic organisation of the free school meals, for the first time at a central and a regional level, in accordance with the emergency law 1787/1939 and 102915/15-10-1939 Decision of the Ministry of Education. In particular, this law established a Central Committee of Free School Meals (C.C.F.S.M), the task of which was to support and develop this institution by a) informing the people on the importance of free school meals and on positive action required so that society would give moral and material support and b) the finding of funds (beyond those the State afforded) so that free meals could be established and sustained. Similar committees were established on prefectures level (Prefectural Committee of Free School Meals) and in the seat

of each Primary Education district as well. The Minister himself supervised the activities of the Central Committee, signifying the interest the State showed in the success of this effort.

By the above law, the inspection and the management of free school meals were defined and financial resources identified. It is worthwhile noting that the imposition of a compulsory contribution annually (30 drh) for every student of the Secondary and the Primary Education was defined; and this contribution was collected by headmasters in two installments, the first at the beginning of the school year and the other during the first fortnight of March. Destitute students, up to 20% of students of each class (article 5), were exempted from this contribution by the decision of the school themselves. Metaxas then stressed that the imposition of a small contribution by the students had been considered necessary, with the exception of the destitute students, as a token of solidarity of the well-off towards their destitute classmates<sup>8</sup>.

At the end of the 1939-1940 school year, the impact of the new legislation was very positive. For example, the number of participating students (997.134) had almost doubled from the previous year (522.50). This increase was due to the liberal generosity of the State, contributions of the Municipalities, Village Councils and various local resources, as well as the compulsory contribution of the students themselves<sup>9</sup>.

The publication of this increase in uptake was enthusiastically welcomed by the press. The 'Estia' (27/9/1940) characterised it by saying that *'free school meals expenses were praise-worthy'* and pointed out their importance in improving the health of Greek students. *The Kathimerini* (30/7/1940) praised society for its response to the appeal 'in favour of the reforming of the race'. It commented: *'the well-off have contributed not out of mercy but from a sense of duty; additionally, the State, the Municipalities and the Village Councils have been of help. The well-off are worthy of congratulations for their willingness to help'*. Finally, *the Proia* (30/7/1940) approved the effort of the state to organise free school meals and its liberal generosity, since out of 57 million Drachma in total, 38 million (66,6%) came from state subsidies. So, countrywide, 1 in 10 students received, beyond intellectual food, more than 11 million helpings of actual food. This resulted in free meals becoming a state institution and in blowing *'a brave wind of state culture at school'*.

In 1939-40 the General Secretary of the C.C.F.S.M. (D. Stefanou), expressed his satisfaction for the effects and outcome of free meal provision: *'thanks to the State support and to the aid of the educational community and of society in general'*. He did not fail to point out the difficulties arising, apart from the need for financial resources, so that 'the great attempt against the students' malnutrition' could be organized and succeed. He also considered the willing contribution of 'the social officials, and primarily the educational community, as necessary for success. This contribution was considered as granted, since both the Greek citizens and teachers had always been willing and tireless in relation to their beneficent and social and pedagogical action *'when they directed towards it in a proper and ethical manner'* (Stefanou, 1946, pp. 64-65).

Unfortunately, from 1940-41 the law towards free school meals did not function due to the Second World War (Ibid, p. 73) and resulted in the suspension of an important effort against student malnutrition and the release of the sickly and poor child from a misery that was leaving indelible traces in their souls.

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<sup>8</sup> 'The organization of health services of the school: Statements of the Prime Minister'. Newspaper Ethnos, 14/6/1939:8.

<sup>9</sup> In particular, in school year 1939-1940 school free meals had functioned in 2484 primary schools of the country, while 97134 students took part in those, corresponding to 19.7% of the total number of 489,949 students of these schools. The amount of unspent sum was 57,672,352 million, of which 37,975,744 were derived from the State (Stefanou, 1946:73).

## Free school meals during the German occupation and the postwar period

During the German occupation of Greece, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War<sup>10</sup>, the organization and provision of food supply was of primary importance, since the problem of malnutrition in the country was spreading to a tragic extent (cf. Skiadas 1942 ; Kavala, 2000). A number of organizations were important in attempting to address this crisis. The effort of the exiled Greek government headed by Em. I. Tsouderos (April 1941 - October 1944) was of great importance; also, those of the Red Cross which was the main food carrier and of the Church, through the National Organization of Christian Solidarity (N.O.C.S.), founded in December 1941. The latter, in cooperation with the authorities, undertook organization, focusing its interest on free meals for the children in the capital<sup>11</sup>. Great efforts were made at coordinating between popular committees, free school meals, state agencies and N.O.C.S. In particular, the Commission of Popular Free Meals undertook care of school age children ( 6-15 years ) , through a special Service of Free School meals (Chainda, 2010, pp. 50,58). However, shortage in the quantity of the food supplied, in combination with qualitative problems hampered the task of food supply services, resulting in these free meals (as well those organized by different carriers such as associations, organisations and the Red Cross), not being adequate to reverse the situation in the face of the difficulties encountered. Thus, to rescue the children of Greece in danger of death from starvation (a large number of children had already died thereof) several suggestions were made. These included installing thousands of children in Greek provinces where their safety could be assured. (Ibid, p. 60) There was also the suggestion that 3,000 children, aged 15, should go to Egypt under the supervision of doctors. The children would be selected by a special committee on the basis of certain criteria, but the plan was eventually abandoned as impracticable (Tsouderos, 1948, p. 14). Efforts were then focused on a series of actions sending milk and dairy products from Switzerland<sup>12</sup>, paid by the Greek Government, the International Red Cross, the Swiss Red Cross and other organizations which raised money from Greeks or foreigners who lived in Switzerland (Tsouderos, 1946, p. 49). The food supply mechanisms took special care of the children of the Greek islands where the problems were much greater (Chionidou, 2006, p. 13). Since November 1943 a glass of milk and vitamins from Smyrna were provided daily to all children aged until 15 on the islands (Chainda, 2010, p. 61).

In that turbulent atmosphere, the struggle for free school meal at a local level was important; representatives of the church and education were leading the task. Priests, school inspectors and school principals were mobilised to enlighten the community about the highly social pedagogical nature of the measure of free school meals, and to make known the need for *'the notables'* to be of assistance, so that the measure would be continuously improved in quantity and in quality<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> During the Second World War, the Italian troops were the first to invade Greece in October 1940 but were soon defeated by the Greek army and forced to retreat to the interior of Albania. In April 1941 the invasion of the German troops followed. By the late May of 1941 the Germans had conquered the whole country of Greece, which experienced one of the most difficult periods in its history, known as 'the German occupation of Greece' (April 1941 - October 1944).

The occupation brought immense suffering to the Greek people and caused incalculable and lasting disasters, material destruction and casualties (approximately 770,000 civilians and 30,000 soldiers), removal of invaluable cultural treasures from museums, huge material destruction (burning of houses , public buildings, field lands and entire villages after total slaughter of the inhabitants, as happened in Distomo, Kalavryta, Viano, Drama, Doksato etc.), leading to a complete collapse of the Greek economy, poverty and hunger (cf. Vakalopoulos: 412 - 422 ) .

<sup>11</sup> N.O.C.S. through its 3,000 branches throughout Greece, distributed 480,834 servings of milk and food in 1942, 2,888,097 in 1943 and 3,403,964 in 1944 (1944 ([http://imkitrous.gr/Articles\\_Detail.aspx?articleId=13](http://imkitrous.gr/Articles_Detail.aspx?articleId=13), 19 / 6 / 2013).

<sup>12</sup> The transport of milk from Switzerland did not require the special permit of exclusion, since it was possible by land under the banner of the International and Swiss Red Cross (Tsouderos, 1948:13-14).

<sup>13</sup> The efforts made at the time in Agrinio were of extreme importance for free school meals supports, both in terms of the awareness of society as well as of teachers themselves ([http://agriniomemories.blogspot.get.gr/2011/10/blog-spot\\_25.html](http://agriniomemories.blogspot.get.gr/2011/10/blog-spot_25.html), access: 7/8/2013).



Additionally, each school separately made its own effort. At Maraslios Pedagogical Academy<sup>14</sup>, for example, during the school year 1943-1944 and the following two years, a free meal was 'properly' functioning for destitute students.

The Academy had managed to secure supplies from the Greek Red Cross, such as bread, legumes, pasta, canned food for destitute students, in addition to their having free school meals with the rest of the students.

A new period for free school meals began at the start of the school year 1946-1947. The storm of war and German occupation had passed. The Ministry of Education, in turn, aimed at continuing the sacred and national struggle against child malnutrition. Its objective was to re-start free school meals in-line with Law 1787/1939 (described above).

In November 1946 the new Regulation of Free School Meals Function was issued; (Decision of the Ministry of Education 99686/30-11-1946). A few days later an executive Ministerial Order on the organization and operation of both free school meals and of student camps followed (Decision of the Ministry of Education 99687/4-12-1946). But, despite the well-intentioned efforts made, there were great difficulties and financial resources were limited. In November 1947 Maraslios Academy (above) requested that the State take on the expense of establishing and managing free meals for its teaching students; this task, beyond the economic relief it would provide students, would also serve educational purposes. The students themselves could defray a part of the demanded cost (Ibid, Act 345/20-11-1947). The Academy's request was an application of the afore-mentioned law of 1939 so that free school meals would be brought back on a stable basis, since nourishing future teachers with clean and healthy food remained a major problem. It is worth noting that in a relevant UNESCO report of 1947, concerning the food supply problem of Greece, is stated, amongst other things, that 'the food for the primary education children is one of the most imperatively urgent problems nowadays' (as quoted in Leventakis & Gkarila, 2008).

Two years later, at a Convention of the Educational Inspectors, the real importance of the postwar free school meals was laid out. School Inspector V. Theofanopoulos referred to the case of a young student who was saved from certain death from starvation thanks to the perseverance of the teaching staff. He pointed out that: 'free school meals, in spite of providing the children's organisms with few calories, succeeded in preventing them from exhaustion, in rescuing the new generation from tuberculosis and death, in contributing to the prevention of the degeneration of our race and in assisting the educational task' (Theofanopoulos, 1949, p. 7). Free school meals continued to function during the fifties and the sixties. This was under the English slogan 'First bread to the children and then school', the 'primum vivere' (Stephanou, 1960, p. 474 ) which was still impressing the Greek state and Greek educators, who uncomplainingly undertook additional duties so that the sacred struggle against student malnutrition would succeed.

### **Free school meals as a social pedagogical institution**

We noted above that free school meals in both Greece and other countries, had already functioned not as a charity but because they formed a social pedagogical institution. It had become clear that poor and weak pupil should not be restricted to the food that was provided to poor and poverty-stricken adults. Instead, it was realized that free school meals should serve, beyond physical growth and health purposes. Free school meals should also serve an educational and social pedagogical purpose, aiming to provide supportive conditions for holistic and continuous development, the

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<sup>14</sup> The Maraslios Pedagogical Academy was built upon the Maraslio Teacher Training School, for which reference is made above (reference 3) after having replaced the institution of the Teacher Training Schools, by the institution of Pedagogical Academies, that functioned in Greece from 1934 to 1990.

well-being and dignity of all children and adolescents. These specific aims are among the basic principles of Social Pedagogy (Mylonakou-Keke, 2013).

Thus, since 1937 free school meals have been under the competence of schools and formed, in teachers' hands, the most effective weapon for preventive medical care and a social pedagogical means of paramount importance. They aimed at: the acquisition of healthy habits and of social education, the formation of the students' morals and at the improvement and the change of an established situation - elements that relate to priorities in Social Pedagogy (Mylonakou-Keke, 2013). Besides, the non - destitute students had the possibility of participating in free meals so long as they defrayed the cost of the helpings they consumed, according to the model followed by other countries (as it was noted in the part concerning free meals in European counties and in particular in England and in France); all this aimed to promote the students' communication during school life and to cultivate respect for one another. In particular, in order that this aim might be achieved, no discrimination was allowed between students who paid, those who paid a small contribution and those who participated free, while disclosure of their names' by any means was forbidden (Regulation 1946, article 3). Thus, the participation of the destitute pupils at the school dining table, in common with their teachers and the more advantaged pupils, created emotions of cordiality, brotherly spirit, equality and solidarity in the formers. The abandonment of the destitute children to the mercy of the philanthropists at the beginning of their lives, involved the danger of creating emotions of inferiority, bitterness, envy even of hostility and leading them to antisocial behavior (Stefanou, pp. 14-23).

However, a major social issue that arose was the impossibility of serving a great number of pupils, because of a shortage in the necessary economic resources. As a consequence, participation in free meal provision was limited, in the 1946 Regulation, to between 20% and 25%. This was considered as necessary not to be in effect during the first postwar period of five years, so that malnutrition, from which all school age children had been sorely tried, might be dealt with. As a consequence, health, family and social factors took precedence over all other areas in achieving the above percentage range. But selecting a 'few hungry children from among so many hungry ones' was very difficult (Nakos, 1963, p. 11), even if social justice and impartiality were important values. So pupil behaviour was also considered when it came to allocating free meals. 'Pupils who have committed serious moral offenses and are incapable of improving are expelled from free school meals after the responsible school boards have made the justified decisions' (Regulation 1946, article 12). However, those pupils who remained in the provision and behaved well were rewarded by their teachers and masters (Skoura, 2001, p. 276). It is worth noting that in the framework of the function of free school meals, which went beyond the above-mentioned values, the eternal and noble value of voluntary service was declared. Offers of voluntary work in the preparation and serving of the meals by ladies and young ladies, selected with great care, constituted an important benefit to the public, a social pedagogical action (Regulation 1946, article 36).

Yet, the educator, the teacher, remained crucial for free school meals to function successfully. S/he experienced the tragedy of young pupils' malnutrition more intensely; after all, it was teachers who faced children coming to school having eaten only a stale piece of bread or nothing at all. So, the State addressed teachers' free will and enthusiasm in order to mobilize all the social pedagogical activists at a local level, so that they could ensure the destitute students' food, with which their natural supporters were unable to provide them (Stephanou, pp. 59, 61). The primary school teacher *Vas. Dimitriou*, although he was completely aware of the difficulties such task required, shortly before the 1940 war expressed his belief that 'it is possible that free school meals should function smoothly, provided that the teacher does not stiffly perform his duties but he considers it as a noble function'. He then stressed the necessity for school and family, for society, the church and the state to co-operate in order to aid free school meals (Dimitriou, pp. 17-18). Besides, the State expected that, beyond the state subsidies, large amounts of money from festivities, concerts, performances and various activities would be collected to supplement necessary recourses; these

amounts were exempted from any taxation (Article 5 of Law 1787/1939 and M.D. 99687 / 12/04/1946).

At this point, it is worth mentioning the initiative taken by the Teachers'-Kindergarten Teachers' Association in the 4<sup>th</sup> Educational District of Thessaloniki in 1962 to organise a love and compassion festivity for the poor and undernourished primary school children in their region. The primary school inspector Pan. *Nakos*, in his inspired speech, considered as momentous the article of the declaration of the rights of child, the Declaration of Geneva as it is called, which took place in 1923 and was revised in 1948, according to which '*the child that is famished must be nourished*' (Nakos, 1963, p. 10). However, this simple phrase, this self-evident need, was not easy to implement even during the 1960s, despite the various state manifestations of love and sympathy for the poor children. As a consequence, the school inspector's idea for 'free meals', his request for finding families willing to take a child to have lunch with them every day, a child coming as the God's blessing to the table of the hospitable family, was welcomed and met with response by the society of Thessaloniki. Similarly, his idea for the 'Friends of the Child Association' to be founded, was received with enthusiasm; this aimed at children stopping going hungry, a situation he considered as 'a disgrace to our civilization' (Ibid, pp. 13-14). Two years later, when *George Papandreou* was the Prime Minister and *Lucis Akritas* the Deputy Education Minister, pupil malnutrition was radically solved. The Minister, who had supplied the first state aid in 1931 to organise free school meals, proceeded then to undertake their 'free supply without discrimination, to almost the half of pupil population' (Leventakos et. al., 2008). Then the provision of children's breakfast was initiated<sup>15</sup> and at the same time lunch, as the ex-speaker of the House in Greece (the ex-President of the Greek Parliament) *Apostolos Kaklamanis* recalls (Free school meals are back at schools).

### **Function of free school meals in Teacher Training Schools: social pedagogical dimensions**

The Teacher Training Schools were the first places where social pedagogical responses for poor and destitute students functioned. From the late decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the way of living, accommodation and healthy nutrition of future teachers, who came mainly from the provinces, had repeatedly occupied the State. During the nineteen twenties at the Athens Maraslio Teacher Training School, the first educational institution in that field, the value of altruism and solidarity in similar topics was cultivated intensely, in the framework of the function of the School Community. The establishment of the 'honor loans' from Professors to the destitute future teachers, loans that the students would return after they had been appointed, giving their word of honour as a contract, (Delmouzos, 1929, pp. 167-168) conveyed the magnitude of the above reflexes.

At the same period free school meal provision was functioned at the Maraslio Teacher Training School on the students' own initiative. The students made the suggestion to organize the free meal initially to the assistant principal; after the principal had approved they went on to its organization under the supervision of a committee consisting of two Professors. The cost was relatively small, as the whole task was being conducted by the students themselves, from the food supply to the serving.

The task needed only the help of a cook; the students themselves managed to find him. Moreover, after all necessary steps had been taken by the teaching staff, the Maraslio Teacher Training School

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<sup>15</sup> Free school meals inclusive of breakfast and lunch had operated in the past (Marasslio Teacher Training School 1924, Marasslios Pedagogical Academy 1939, Regulation 1946, article 13 to 14) but 'fell quickly into oblivion', as it was stated by the School inspector P. Nakos in 1962, because the lunch preparation was not an easy task.

was allowed by the Ministry of War to be provided with foodstuffs and bread from the army depots at the same price charged to the Army. Each student paid only 6 drh for the food provided which was 'abundant and nutritious' and consisted of breakfast and lunch. It took a few days for '*beneficial effects*' to appear as reported by the Principal of the College. '*The pale and tired faces began to brighten up and the students' physical and mental performance was getting better and better*'[...]. *Free school meal was converted into a life centre, a communal life*' (Delmouzos, 1929, p. 153). The social pedagogical effect on the students was so much that the latter, at their school feast, chose to stage a comedy, written by the students themselves, dealing with the daily routine in the free meals. Besides, the free meals served educational and practical purposes, according to the relevant Regulation of the Maraslio Teacher Training School. They aimed not only at strengthening the students physically with abundant, clean and healthy food but also at developing profuse social pedagogical skills; also, at making practical life known to the students, and giving experience; also, their practice in various skills (Skoura, 2001, p. 333), ensuring thus the connection of theory and practice, which is a basic principle of Social Pedagogy.

The initiative of the Principal of the Maraslio Teacher Training School G. Zabanakis was commendable; the above-mentioned Principal in 1930, continuing the school tradition, managed to organize a free meal for his students in a completely exemplary way (Stefanou, 1946, p. 53). Research revealed that the 80% of the students came to the training school in the morning with '*little stale bread*', that 10-15% had had '*a rather nutritious breakfast*' and that 5% came to school without having eaten anything. Because the Maraslio Teacher Training School considered that the future teachers would not be able to 'guarantee that they would be in the physical and mental position to achieve their great task', if they were deprived of proper food, it managed to influence the State to respond to its request for the students' daily lunch (ibid, p. 54).

One of the first schools where a free meal functioned was the Teacher Training School of Kastoria, on the school's own initiative. It is worthwhile noting that the caretaker of the school did duties for a cook, having the 'servant girl' as his assistant. For their additional cooking duties the latter did not make a claim for a particular payment but they were content with the fact that 'the boarders provided them with food' (Michalopoulos, 1925, pp. 66-67). Free school meals functioned, in an exemplary and effective manner, in many other Teacher Training Schools, as in Lamia, on the Principal's *M. Papamavros* (1930) own initiative, who had serviced as an experienced assistant Principal at the Marasslio Teacher Training School. Besides, he considered the institution (of free meals) important not only in terms of economics but in terms of pedagogics, too. The students' participation in buying the foodstuffs, in the preparation and the serving of the meals helped them, according to Papamavros, in their administrative and moral education (Charitos et al., 2002, pp. 170-172).

Free school meals functioned in almost all teacher Training Schools of the country (in Ioannina, in Piraeus, in Alexanthroupoli, in Tripoli etc.) which were financially supported, apart from the Ministry of Education, by various associations and charitable local organizations. The honorary presence of His Royal Highness the heir to the Greek throne, Paul, in the free meal of the Marasslio Pedagogical Academy in 1936, who '*tasted the meal*' and afforded his time to the teaching staff and the students, could be considered as indicative of the particular attention paid to the above institution (Palaiologos, 1939, pp. 735,741). Besides, the duties undertaken by the students themselves, in the framework of school life and self-administration of the above Academies, aided effectively the function of these meals, which served, beyond nourishing the students with nutritious and clean food, recreational and mostly social pedagogical purposes. The diet was prepared after the school doctor had acted in concert with the then Director of School Hygienics on a weekly basis; it was simple but abundant and nutritious. Furthermore, 'an entertainment programme' was made out by the Music teacher, as the meal was enriched by music, jokes,

recitations, dances and other activities important to '*the morals formation*' (ibid, pp. 736,737; Skoura, 2001, p. 274) and eventually to the formation of '*social pedagogical ethos*<sup>16</sup>'.

From the above it is obvious that free school meals in Teacher Training Schools were established as an institution, not only educational but mostly social pedagogical, as a '*seat of family gathering*', since, beyond the above-mentioned, the daily presence of the teaching staff among the participant in the meals students and the organized entertainment that followed, offered a brilliant opportunity for the students and the teachers to come closer emotionally and to develop a spirit of mutual understanding (Palaiologos, 1939, p. 733). Besides, through this institution, basic social pedagogical principles and values were being developed, such as the undertaking of personal responsibility and order, of solidarity and respecting one another, of social justice, the spirit of participation and co-operation, sociability, ennoblement, cordiality, propriety and the development of skills concerning interpersonal communication. Finally, the students conducting the whole process of organizing the free meals were practicing self-education and acquiring very useful skills in accomplishing their noble mission successfully.

From the aforementioned, it is highlighted the significant social pedagogical values that were inspiring, guiding and dealing with a serious issue. That was attained by utilising mainly social pedagogical practices such as the organised collective and collaborative actions of those who were involved in this issue (Mylonakou-Keke, 2013).

## Conclusion

The establishment and the function of free school meals in periods of crisis in Greece formed a national necessity so that a vulnerable group of children, the hope for the future of every well-governed state, could survive. It was for that purpose that, the special attention of the state, social welfare and Greek society in general became focused as a result of the steps taken by activists and by private initiatives. In particular, the state welfare was preceded by private initiative. The eternal, innate and fundamental social pedagogical values of altruism, love, solidarity, voluntary service, supporting each other, collectivity and cooperation, for which Greek people are distinguished, functioned both in an interventionist and preventive manner, saving generations from incurable diseases (like tuberculosis), even from death, and aiming at personal and social development of the whole population, especially of those at a disadvantage. Besides, the contribution of the teachers, who experienced directly and daily the effects of malnutrition on the faces of their little pupils, was important. And what was their reward? The pale and tired faces, which brightened up and smiled every day; their greater and greater physical and mental performance aiming, within the bounds of possibility, at their personal and social well-being, which is a fundamental principle in Social Pedagogy. Free school meals formed an important social pedagogical weapon in the teachers' hands and a magnificent means of communication among the same the students and among the students and the teachers as well.

Nowadays in Greece, the Church, society, and citizens respond with a remarkable sensitivity to various social pedagogical actions organized to support those at a disadvantage.

Moreover, teachers face similar social pedagogical problems among their students with much love, performing their duty and bringing a hopeful message for the future. This message will continue to be hopeful, provided that objective difficulties do not exceed good intentions and efforts and '*the brave Greek people is not abandoned to despair from famine, losing the power to think logically, losing its mental and physical strength in order to be able to resist*'. These words, addressed to the Prime

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<sup>16</sup> About '*social pedagogical ethos*', see analytically Mylonakou-Keke, 2013.

Minister of Great Britain Winston Churchill by the Prime Minister of Greece Em. Tsouderos in a letter of his to the former, are regarded to be particularly timely and of paramount importance to Greece nowadays.

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