GEORGIA LATHOURIS MAGERAS
Magerou, the Greek Midwife

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A native Utahn, Helen Papanikolas graduated from the University of Utah, where she had edited Pen, the literary magazine. Her publication of “Greeks in Carbon County” in the Utah Historical Quarterly in 1954 broadened the scope of Utah history and opened areas of study that many others have followed. She founded the Peoples of Utah Institute and edited and contributed several chapters to Peoples of Utah (1976). In addition to her extensive historical studies, writing, and publishing, she has served on the boards and committees of various civic organizations, including the Utah State Historical Society and the Utah Humanities Council. Her work has been recognized with the Brotherhood Award from the Utah Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, a distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Utah, an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from the University of Utah, an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Southern Utah University, and an Honorary Associate in Arts from the College of Eastern Utah. As Miriam Murphy points out in a later chapter of this book, she is one of Utah’s premier historians and a leading authority in the United States on Greek immigrants. She revised this account of the life of Magerou originally published in the Utah Historical Quarterly 38 (spring 1970) and includes it here, recognizing “the importance of the midwife to the whole community.”
In 1867, a baby girl born in a Peloponnesian village of Greece was fated, in the idiom of the Greeks, to leave her country, to come to a land called Utah, and to become a legend among its southern European immigrants.

Often from the time she was a child, the girl, Georgia Lathouris, was sent up to the mountains beyond her village to take a bundle of bread and cheese for her father and brothers pasturing goats there. As she climbed a mountain slope one day in her fourteenth year, she heard a voice calling. In the entrance to one of the many caves on the mountain, a woman stood, calling and beckoning to her. Georgia was frightened and began to run; it was a Nereid, she was sure, one of the beautiful creatures of glens and woods whom it was dangerous to follow. The voice called insistently, “Don’t leave me! Come, come!”

Cautiously the girl approached. The woman was not a Nereid but a woman from the village and in great distress. She had been gathering wheat when labor pains had started. The girl followed her into the dark cave and with the woman’s guidance, delivered the baby. From then on she was affectionately called “Mami,” the Midwife. In the following years she attended other women in her village of Apladykambos (Pear Valley), a scattering of white stone houses and a few trees set in an arid landscape much like that of Utah, where she would live for a half-century. To midwifing she added folk cures. The village was poor, and she was paid in wheat and flour.

The Mami’s family could not provide her with a dowry, the means destitute countries used to distribute their little wealth. Centuries of foreign rule, the revolution of 1821 to free themselves from Turkish despotism, and the resulting chaos when the energies of the country were unrealistically channeled into futile attempts to regain their lands lost to the Turks and other European powers had drained their resources. The little Mami, small, yet of great energy, seemed to be destined to remain unmarried and at the summons of the sick and of women who were fortunate to be wives and mothers.

But the young midwife’s fate, which in Greek folklore is decided by the Three Fates during the child’s first three days of life, was favorable. For the first time since Greece had been conquered by the Turks in 1453, a premier, Charalasi Trikoupes, came to power intent on reconstruction of the country. 1 Greece lacked people with technical skills, and foreigners came into the country to head construction crews. One of these foremen was a tall, young Austrian, Nikos Mageras. He was sent to the Mami’s village to build a bridge over a nearby river.

Nikos had been a wanderer since the age of fourteen. His mother had died, and his father had married again. Rather than accept his stepmother, the boy left his town of Gospic, Austria, and traveled through Russia, Asia Minor, and the Balkans. On his journeys he had learned several languages and the principles of mechanical construction.

Young people of the village who were not pasturing the family goats and sheep in the mountains found work on Nikos Mageras’s labor crew. The Mami was among them. The foundations of the bridge were built of stone, and the young people brought the plentiful rocks of the land to the construction site.

Soon after work was begun, the foreman went with the Mami to her parents’ house. He asked to marry her and waived his rights to the traditional dowry. After their marriage, Nikos continued building wherever there was work in the Peloponnesus. Four children were born during a time of great national instability.

By the end of the century, Greece’s financial and political problems brought the country to national bankruptcy in 1869, humiliating defeat by the Turks in 1897, and impositions of foreign financial control in 1898. All over the Peloponnesus, bankrupt peasants were uprooting their currant bushes. Currants, the principal export of Greece, had fallen in price seventy percent in the year 1893. The precarious position of the peasants in Greece was now perilous. The building of roads and bridges begun under the Trikoupes regime was halted.

The exodus of young men to escape the hunger and desolation of their mother country had always been constant, but now thousands were leaving to find work to help their families provide dowries and to pay off usurious mortgages. While Greece and other Balkan and Mediterranean countries were struggling desperately, America was just beginning to develop its immense and varied resources. Early emigrants from Southern Europe returned to their native lands as labor agents and emptied their villages and seaports of idle men and boys for work gangs in the New World. 4

In 1902 Nikos signed a contract with one of these labor agents.
He left his family and, taking forty Greeks from all parts of the country, went to Fresno, California, to lay track for the Santa Fe Railroad. His goal was to save enough money to bring his wife and children to America.

Three years later he met an Austrian he had known in Gospic who told him that Nikos’s brother and several cousins were working at the Utah Copper Mine in Bingham and at the Magna mill. Nikos, now called Nick, took time off to visit Utah to see his relatives and decided that the Midvale-Bingham-Magna area was a profitable place for a business. In that year of 1905 there were two thousand Greek men in Salt Lake County, and each day more came. There had been only three Greeks in Utah in 1900. The 1903 coal mine strike in Carbon County began the influx of large numbers of Greeks into Utah. These newest of European immigrants were unaware that an employer could be challenged as to wages, long hours, and working conditions. The Wyoming Labor Journal reported: “American and English speaking miners were driven from these camps. . . . The corporations considered Greeks better adapted to their needs than others and encouraged the employ of these by the hundreds.”

Greek labor agents advertising in Greek newspapers published in America and in Greece had an inexhaustible supply of countymen for the West. Boardinghouses were needed in every company town. Nick opened a boardinghouse in Snaketown, west of Magna, the present tailings pond of the Garfield smelter. Greeks and other nationalities lived there in makeshift houses and tents. Nick offered food, lodging, and a convenient saloon.

The boardinghouse was a success with laborers, but not with a well-known Greek labor agent and his underlings. The labor agent had become powerful; at will he could decide who would be hired by the mine, mill, and smelter; how much tribute he would take from the men’s wages; and where the laborers would trade. The boardinghouse was burned down.

Nick rented a second boardinghouse below today’s Magna firehouse. This one was also destroyed by fire. The vendetta continued. The third boardinghouse, situated across the street from the present powerhouse, was set on fire at eleven o’clock on a payday night while Nick was in Salt Lake City attending to his duties as a representative for the Salt Lake Brewery. Thirty-five hundred dollars in gold and silver hidden in a trunk was melted into a mass. The money was Nick’s savings for his family’s future in America.

At the time of the fire, the family was on their way to Utah. It was 1909, seven years after Nick had left them. Adhering to propriety, he had sent a friend to bring his family to America.

The family settled in Snaketown among three other Greek families. Two of these had German immigrant mothers who had learned to speak Greek. In the entire state there were fewer than ten Greek women, but Greek men and boys were streaming in to work on the railroad gangs, in the coal mines, the Midvale smelter, the Garfield smelter, the Magna mill, and the copper mines of Bingham.

Few of the men were married. Their families had sacrificed necessities to send them to America to fulfill the responsibility of providing dowries for their sisters. When this was accomplished and their parents helped, they could then send for picture brides.

Living in boardinghouses and shacks, the young men were extremely susceptible to disease. The influx of immigrants was overwhelming; their living conditions were not considered the concern of employers and townsmen. In tent colonies and shacks built by the workers from powder boxes and scrap lumber, water and sewage disposal were hazards.

In response to angry editorials in Greece, a Greek woman journalist visited Utah mining towns in 1914. It would take, she wrote, the pen of Edgar Allen Poe to describe the horrors of the Greek immigrant worker’s life. R. C. Gemmel, general manager of the Utah Copper Company, replied to her complaints and demands that proper housing and hospitals be built for the Greeks and other immigrants: “They choose their own habitations. And if we built them new quarters, they would prefer to stay where they are.”

The journalist found that the workers were afraid of the company doctors. Although a dollar a month was deducted from their wages for medical care, they felt they were coldly treated, like animals, not human beings. Amputations were hastily performed. This was the men’s great fear. Three to five hundred dollars were paid for the loss of an arm or a leg. Uneducated as the laborers were, an amputation was the end of self-reliance and the beginning of descent into penury.
The midwife, called since her marriage "Magerou," the genitive form of Mageras, was eager to help her sick countrymen. When she heard of someone's illness, she relayed advice through her husband or others who came to his saloon. She often answered a knock on her door and opened it to find a sick man or boy. Long before the Greek men brought wives to America, they knew and respected Magerou.

The small cluster of Greek families grew, and Magerou was the matriarch. She was often the matchmaker, too. As the men married, she was there, smiling, helping to lay out the wedding feast while the men clapped hands and danced to old-country songs of courage under Turkish bondage. She was there to attend at the birth of children and there to administer folk cures. She spoke as she felt and used Greek curses and proverbs liberally. "Too much Kyrie Eleison wearies even God." "Better to have a wise enemy than a foolish friend."

Not only Greek, but Italian, Austrian, and Slavic women called Magerou at all hours. They preferred her to the company doctors. As the immigrants in American labor life became an increasing influence, industry was forced to improve living conditions; a new generation of medical school graduates came to the company towns with an interest, some with sympathy, for the immigrants. Although the young husbands quickly accepted the authority of these doctors, they could not persuade their wives to be delivered by them.

Life in the new country had affected the women immediately. The traditional sign of modesty for married village women, the wife or black head scarf, was out of place in America, an invitation to gaping. Husbands forbade them. Women wore them only about their houses and yards. They wore hats to church and to town. Hats, the symbol of educated town and city women of Greece, were now theirs. The appearance of the immigrant mothers changed drastically, but not their ideas. Modesty impelled them to ask the midwife, not American men doctors, to attend them.

Magerou, then, ruled over the birth of children, the proper realm of midwives. She did not lose a mother or child in her long years of practice. If she detected an abnormal pregnancy, she insisted that a doctor be called and took the lesser role of assistant.

Cleanliness was a compulsion with her. Early each morning she performed a ritual of washing herself, combing her hair into a bun at the top of her head, and dressing in clean cottons to be ready for any call. She was continually mopping and airing her house: "Soap and water are too cheap in America to be dirty." The water pumps, at easy access even in camps like Snaketown and Ragtown, were a marvel to her. There was no longer the arduous work of bringing water from the village well, often only a thin stream.

Regularly pregnant herself, Magerou took care of her women patients with the efficiency of a contemporary obstetrician. While olive oil and baby blankets were kept warm in coal stove ovens, she boiled cloths, kept water hot, cut her fingernails, scrubbed her arms and hands well, and after observing American doctors using alcohol and rubber gloves, she added these to her accoutrements.

Women clamored for Magerou. Small though she was, her voice carried through the neighborhoods, exhorting, shouting, "Scream! Push! You've got a baby in there, not a pea in a pod!" Once the baby was born, Magerou gave her entire time to the newly delivered mother, the lebôna, and to the baby. She neither cooked nor took care of the rest of the family. From the backyard she chose the plumphest chicken, simmered broth, stood over the mother forcing her to wash and to dress in a clean housedress, combed her long hair, and twisted it into a knot. For the first time in her life, the woman knew what it was to be pampered. The autocratic young husbands were reduced to errand boys.

"Bring plenty of butter. The lebôna needs butter for strength! Send a ton of coal. The lebôna mustn't catch cold! Go to J. C. Penney and buy a robe. The lebôna must be warm!" A legion of immigrant mothers wore J. C. Penney robes made of blankets stamped with Indian designs.

When the mother and baby were taken to church, the mother to be "cleansed" of the Biblical forty days' uncleanness, the baby to be blessed as Christ was, Magerou's duties were fulfilled.

The early twenties were the days of her greatest activity. Still new in America, the immigrants depended on folk cures. Some of these had a physiological basis; others were unexplainable, and the victims or their relatives' faith in them produced psychological healing. The Evil Eye was a common complaint. A child would suddenly fall into lassitude. Unexplained fevers brought on convulsions; or the child whined, cried,
and was sleepless. Someone with the Evil Eye had looked on the child with envy. Magerou used several prescriptions: three pinches of livani (powdered resin, an incense burned on Saturdays to purify houses for the Sabbath) in water, or three drops of holy water, or three symbolic spittings—all accompanied by the Lord’s Prayer. Three, the holy number representing the Trinity, was of prime importance.

Her red wine and powdered cloves, tea and whiskey, mustard plasters on the chest, back, and soles of the feet cured pneumonia and bronchial infections. Olive oil softened burned skin. For softra (rickets) Magerou burned a bay leaf with a blessed candle leaving only the stem. On three different moonless nights, she touched each joint with the stem.

Bleeding was a favorite remedy of the midwife’s and she used it for almost every ailment, especially infections. In America there was no need to search in ponds for leeches; drugstores sold them. For respiratory infections, Magerou applied vendotzis. She heated the inside of water glasses with a tuft of burning cotton and placed them on the patient’s back. The heat and pressure inside the glass drew up the flesh. If the patient were very ill, Magerou cut across the swelled flesh to drain off the “bad” blood. To cure jaundice she made a small cut with a razor blade in the thin string of flesh connecting the inside of the upper lip with the tissue above the teeth. For abdominal pain attributed to a spleen that had grown and “travelled,” Magerou nicked the skin on the abdomen drawing black blood and forcing the spleen to “go backwards.”

To stop bleeding Magerou used a small amount of soap or the scrapings of the inside of a leather belt on the wound, then applied pressure and a bandage. One of her most successful cures was called pakia for backache presumably from pressure on the kidneys. The patient lay face down. Magerou clutched the flesh at the small of the back and deftly lifted. A small crack was heard, and the backache was gone.

For colds and inuenzas the midwife used visikanti, a powdered Spanish fly that produced blisters on the skin. With a quick twist of her fingers, Magerou broke the blisters and the “uncleanliness” in the body broke out.

The midwife was noted for setting bones. She mixed powdered resin and egg white with clean sheared wool and bound this over the set bones with cloth. Her son, Tony, was once thrown off a horse in front of the Magna post office. While six people held him, his mother set the broken arm and applied her cast. Magerou used no anesthetics except whiskey. Whatever whiskey was left over, she poured on her hair to make it strong and to take away headaches.

Two men owed their legs to her. A Greek baker in Garfield had mashed his knee; the surgeon decided to amputate. The baker left the doctor’s office and went to Magerou. She used her remedies and “in a week the baker was walking about.” A justice of the peace had crushed his leg at Mercur and sought the midwife’s help rather than submit to an amputation. Again she was able to save a leg.

In the second and third decade of the century, Greek brides came in increasing numbers. Magerou’s name was known by all. Babies were brought to her from distances after doctors had despaired of them. Sometimes she traveled to families; she spent four months with one Nevada family whose mother had died. During these years the Mageras family moved several times, to Murray, Tooele, and again to Magna. Wherever she went, patients followed.

The Magna Greek Town became established on the western side of the town. All of the houses had gardens, and the mothers delighted in the plentiful irrigation water that ran down the alleys of the back yards. Magerou spent her spare time tending her garden. The canning of fruit and vegetables, unknown in Greece and only now being introduced there because of the prohibitive expense of bottles and cans, was another joy to her. Magerou prepared well for her large family. When making hilopites, thin egg noodles cut in small squares, she began by breaking thirty dozen eggs.

As the immigrants lived longer in America, they began to call in the local doctors. Also Magerou found that what she had been doing was called “practicing medicine without a license.” She began assisting doctors in deliveries, more often than being in charge herself. At times babies were born before the doctor arrived, and he had only to sign the birth certificate. Several doctors delivered the babies and left Magerou to cut the cord and to finish the process. Among the doctors she worked for were Drs. Russell Owens, George McBride, T. C. Weggeland, Stephen Netolicky, Dean A. Moffat, Phillips M. Chase, Burton Musser,
and, much later, Owen Reese. They called her "Mamma" or "Grandma" and understood her ungrammatical, malapropian version English.

The large number of births among the immigrant people coincided with an increasing prejudice against these "unassimilable aliens" as newspapers called them. The anti-immigrant propaganda of the World War I years and the early twenties' campaigns against the South European immigrants by newspapers, the American Legion, and the Ku Klux Klan completely turned the isolate Greeks inward.

Hostility exploded into night raids through Magna's Greek Town, crosses burning on the foothills of the Oquirrh Mountains, and Klan marches from the hilltop graveyard down through Main Street. The immigrant mothers became afraid to call in American doctors. Whisperings became hysterical fears: the doctors could be Klan members themselves. Many women returned to Magerou. For those who remained faithful to their doctors, Magerou, instinctively protective of them, minimized the importance of the Klan, even after a group of young Greeks followed the marchers to the town park and tore off their robes. "Leading citizens" were exposed.

The Klan's influence waned as their excesses grew. Slowly relationships were restored. Children of Klan members and those of immigrants formed lasting friendships during the Depression years. For the majority of Greek mothers, however, the pattern set by their Greek Town enclave and the events of those years was never altered; their husbands, children, and Magerou were their only tenuous link with non-Greek life.

Magerou's life, in contrast, was not diminished by the prejudice she found in America. She had faith in time's solution to problems. The many pictures of her show a smiling, serene woman appearing much younger than she was. The Midwestern abd and hand-wringing against fate had barely brushed her nature. She was stoic over the deaths of her own infants and family tragedies. She endured without knowing that she did. The liturgical feast days of her church gave her life order and happiness.

The Mageras family celebrated each holiday twice. Magerou was Greek Orthodox, her husband Roman Catholic. The children born in Greece were baptized in the Greek Orthodox church. The children born in America were baptized in the Catholic church. The Greek Orthodox Church in Salt Lake City was consecrated in 1905, but the eighteen miles of travel were a hardship. The household observed both the Julian Calendar of the Eastern Orthodox and the Gregorian Calendar of the Roman Catholics.

The traditional lamb of the Greeks was followed by the roasted pig of Austrian Christmases and Easters. A few weeks before New Year's, the family planted wheat in a coffee can. According to Austrian folklore, if the wheat was up by New Year's Day, a good year would follow. Candles were lighted around the can of green shoots and placed on the dinner table.

On Greek Easter, Nick Mageras butchered lambs at his daughter's farm for many Greek families. The lambs were put on spits and barbecued in a long row. The feast of Agape (Christian Love) was celebrated at the Klekas farm for several decades.

Soon the generation Magerou brought to life was beginning to marry. Another world war began. Many of her grandsons were soldiers and sailors. In 1946 her husband died at the age of eighty-three. Magerou continued going wherever she was called. She was actively working until her late seventies.

She died in 1950 at the age of eighty-three. Her progeny includes seven children and enough grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren to form, it has been said, a village. At all gatherings of the remnants of the first two Greek generations in America, anecdotes about Magerou are told. She was the most important member of Utah's Greek immigrant community and a symbol of the color and uniqueness of Greek immigrant life.