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Report from Athens

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Report from Athens

Last Month, Mrs. Bernice Brown of the Statistics Laboratory visited this Greek family and found them glowing in clothing sent from Ames. Alexis, the father, attended a London conference in an army uniform sent by Alvin Coons of the Department of Economics and Sociology.

"We are alive, well and free. Every day brings new joy with the realization that we are really without fear," read Miss Elisabeth A. Curtis, of the Department of Economics and Sociology, in a recent letter from Helene, a former college classmate now living near Athens, Greece.

"Since November," Helene wrote last year in another letter, "I have been wanting to send an S.O.S. message to you for clothing—clothes, shoes and underwear, accounts to be settled later. We haven't bought a stitch for the last five years. Sheets have been turned into pajamas, pillows into handkerchiefs, curtains into dresses and blankets into coats with the result that homes today and the people in them are in the same condition of raggedness. We all thought that with the first breath of liberty everything would in some magic way come out right. However, we now realize that the wounds in Greece are so deep and the needed reconstruction of such scope that it will be a long time before we can attend to our 'individual reconstructions.'

You know that all our business the last few years has been transacted on the barter system. I taught English in exchange for oil or beans; my shoes were mended in exchange for the beans I had received from my lesson and so on. At the present time our difficulty is that everything is so expensive. I keep pricing things but can't buy them. I paid $66 for an indispensable pair of shoes! A pair of panties for Nike cost $2.50. You can imagine what the problems are when you know that my monthly salary is less than the price of my shoes..."

ALEXIS, Helene's husband, wrote Miss Curtiss, "This may give you an idea of the importance ordinary commodities have assumed in our lives: as I was walking in the streets in Athens one day, I noticed in a drugstore window a cake of Lifeboy soap. It was the real thing, the kind you buy in America for five cents. I could not resist the temptation of stopping to ask the price. It was staggering. It corresponded to my school earnings of a period of two weeks. But I knew what pleasure it would give Helene to use such soap so I managed to buy it some weeks later; and I remember how proudly I brought it home one evening. It was an event. Life had taught us that a five cent cake of soap is not to be taken for granted.

"War to a small country like Greece, whose natural resources have always been limited, has been an exhausting sacrifice. The country is in ruins, both physically and morally. People no longer die from starvation, the way they did during the first part of the occupation, but their health has been irreparably undermined. Conditions in the provinces are appalling. In many districts there are no children to be seen; they have all died. In many other districts, 85 percent of the population suffer from malaria. According to a report of the International Red Cross, 75 percent of all children of school age are infected with tuberculosis or are in the so-called pre-tubercular state. Ordinary colds now often lead to death, especially among children and old people. One hears continually of young people who suddenly lose their teeth or who go blind with displaced retinas or who develop all kinds of other peculiar ailments due to vitamin deficiencies and prolonged malnutrition.

"My recollection of the occupation is a confused picture of misery and horror. As soon as the Nazis came, they made it their business to crush resistance by devitalizing the country. They did this in a systematic way, looting by various methods all the food produced in Greece.

"I remember how hungry we were during that first part of the occupation—until relief came and the International Red Cross began to distribute some bread regularly. I remember, after a one-meal-a-day soup kitchen started functioning in the college, how some of the professors who stood in the queue used to quarrel among themselves as to who was to have the water left in the pot after the portions of beans were equally distributed. I remember teachers dropping from sheer exhaustion as they were trying to teach. I remember children of our school shivering and crying because they felt so cold. I remember other little children with skinny limbs and pale, haggard faces rummaging in the rubbish heaps for something to chew.

"Salaried individuals were the worst victims of inflation. For how could one support a family when an oke of beans cost one million drachmas in the morning and by noon cost two million? The month before our liberation my official salary, which amounted to many trillion drachmas and occupied a large package, bought exactly two cigarettes at the time I collected it. The situation was as mad as a cat chasing its tail."

Hungry Greek children open gift boxes of food