

The Vranas' Olive Oil Industrial Museum and Archives

By Spyridoula Arathymou

History of the Olive Oil Mill

The historic “Vranas Olive Oil Press” – now called the Olive Oil Industrial Museum of the “Archipelagos” Society – is one of the first steam operated oil mills of Lesvos island in the Northeast Aegean Sea. It was built in 1887 by Vranas Nikolaou, grandfather of the great Greek poet, Odysseas Elytis, at the eastern end of Papados village, one of the most important villages of Gera region (Lesvos Island). The mill began operating from the middle of the 19th century and Papados became the financial centre of a region with a long olive oil producing tradition. The oil mill functioned continuously until the beginning of 1970's. This remarkable industrial plant is built of local marble and stone; its distinctive shape, but also its practical construction reflect both the financial strength of its owner and his desire to build a center of production that was functionally durable and at the same time, loyal to the aesthetics of its origin.

Vranas Nikolaou, who later reversed his name and surname to become Nikolaos Vranas, was an innovator and a visionary. His steam operated mill brought progress to his village, making it possible to market olive oil in the wider region of East Mediterranean, thus opening the way between Papados and the markets of Constantinople and Marmara Sea.

During the production season, the mill was a lively place where workers moved constantly from one machine to the other. It is estimated that in the production area, during the time of olive collection, ten to twelve people labored with a total number of workers of about twenty: two crushers at the mills, six at the presses (second step), one at the pumps and one to measure the oil. In addition, there were the boiler's stoker, the engineer in the engine-room, the guard, the administrator and the accountant. A number of porters moved the olives, the oil and the olive kernels from the production area to the storehouses.

Restoration and Renovation Work

The olive oil mill has been restored to become an industrial museum. This project has been the most difficult and ambitious one in the twelve year existence of the non-profit “Archipelagos” Society. Since its foundation, “Archipelagos” has contributed in many ways to the cultural, tourist and productive development of the Aegean region. The Vranas olive oil mill, which was closed down and abandoned in the mid-70s, was bought in 1999 by five members of the society, who donated it to “Archipelagos” six years later in order to preserve this historical industrial plant and

convert it into a Museum, a place of study and research of industrial history, especially in the sector of standardized modern production of organic olive oil.

Immediately following the donation, a study began for the restoration and conversion of this historical industrial monument into a museum; this was completed in 2005. The restoration itself started the following year and lasted for almost three years. (2006-2009). The recovery project was carried out fully respecting the simple architecture and form of the mill's original stone construction, built around an impressive internal yard dominated by a lofty chimney. The structure portrays the financial strength, the magnanimity, and the monumental yet rational perception of its first owners.

International restoration regulations and practices advise as much adherence to the original construction techniques as possible, while any modern additions or changes should be clearly perceived. These guidelines were followed throughout the restoration of the olive mill, avoiding any embellishment techniques.

The destroyed portions of the walls were entirely reconstructed in their original form as were the wooden tiled roofs, which were irreparably damaged. All wooden openings such as doors, windows and sky lights were also re-built according to their original shape as well as the chimney made of solid bricks. The large water reservoir and the nearby well have been preserved both inside and outside. The only spaces where some specific alterations took place, in order to serve current needs, are the guardhouse, which now serves as a coffee shop, the area of the Museum-Office where an opening was created between the basement and the first floor, and two small storehouses which have been converted into visitors' toilets.

To replace the olive press and other original mechanical equipment, constructed in Mytilini at Loukas' and Karamitsopoulos' machine shop, and either destroyed or dispersed in 1970, similar equipment from the same period was located and purchased by the society. This equipment was transferred to the Industrial Museum of Ermoupoli, Syros to be conserved. The "new" machines, constructed by the famous Isigonis Industry in Smyrna, came from the abandoned olive oil mill of Chiotellis- Eresiotis at Polyhnikos and they dated from about the same time as Vranas' equipment. Part of this new equipment is a rare diesel operating machine of the TANGYE trademark which was constructed in Birmingham, England between 1930-1935 and, according to the engineer in charge of the restoration, is one of the seven machines of this type that are preserved worldwide.

The boiler room, which used to boil olive kernels to produce steam for the operating of the machinery, was totally destroyed. Only the boiler's "mirror" was preserved which has been returned to its original place. The components of the equipment, which are perfectly functional (for the purpose of demonstrating the traditional processes of olive oil production in Lesvos), include the petrol machine, the axe with the transportation bands, the western grinding mill, one of the pumps and one press. The halls' and exhibition's descriptive signs are few but provide substantial explanation. In the area of the steam operating boiler, various art works of famous Greek painters are exhibited, inspired by the industry's architecture, as well as the sacred olive tree.

In the main entrance hall, equipped with a ramp for handicapped visitors, a special showcase exhibits various artifacts such as small clay vases, iron or bronze vessels, local companies' cans for olive oil packing, all of them made for home use.

Each hall provides photographic documentation before and after the oil mill's restoration. Audio guides in Greek and English are supplied to visitors at the entrance.

The Olive Mill Archives

In the factory area, where olives were also used to produce soap, the industry's financial archives were found, covered by rocks and mud. The archives consists of 122 items which are mostly financial registers such as payment, cashier registers, production books, ledgers, letter copy books and various indexes dated from 1894 up to 1959. So far, this archives is the most complete one in Greece for the olive oil industry. It contains valuable information about the region including local commercial and industrial practices, the change of currency from *osmanic grossi* to Greek drachma, the drama of the Greek refugees of Asia Minor and, finally, the industrial activity of Northern Greece and Asia Minor.

The archives was cleaned by the Laboratory of Paper Conservation of the Educational Foundation of the National Bank of Greece from January 2008 to March 2009 and deposited at the Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece, which also allowed the use of its equipment for digitization and microphotography of the archives, up to the moment of its transportation back to Papados.

One area of the industrial museum is dedicated to the archives, where some of its most evocative documents are exhibited. In the near future, the archives, with the use of new technologies, will become one of the museum's biggest attractions and an important educational tool for the region.