

BUSINESS ARCHIVES IN GREECE

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Introduction

In the early 19th century the recently-born independent state of Greece was an agricultural and poorly-populated country and it was only later in the century that the industrialisation of the country was initiated, caused mainly by the growth of the food and textile industries. Several of the larger companies employed additional staff to manage their records to facilitate their day-to-day operations. However, very few of these companies cared about preserving their records as part of their cultural heritage and that of their nation. Interest in the preservation of business archives appeared much later, in the late 1970s, simultaneously with the emergence of interest in Greek business history. It was then that it became clear that any serious study of the development and the history of business was impossible in the absence of well-preserved archives easily accessible to interested researchers. The records of companies contain invaluable information about their activities which cannot be found outside their archives. Pressure from historians and researchers forced businesses to become aware of the need to save and preserve their archives. In order to persuade a company to preserve its records archivists and historians had to demonstrate that records and archives are useful to a company in many ways.

Initiatives to preserve business records have been taken in recent years by several public and private institutions, as well as by certain companies, but so far no survey of business archives has been carried out with the objective of compiling a directory of business archives in existence in Greece.

Business record repositories

The Greek State Archive, both centrally in Athens and in regions such as Syros and Lesbos, and the archive repositories of several large municipalities across the country, for example, Pireaus and Volos, have managed to collect a number of business archives. The Greek State Archive in Athens, for example, holds a large part of the archives of the Greek public electricity company; the Macedonia regional archive has acquired the archives of the brewery company Fix; and the Syros regional archive holds the records of the Ladopoulos company. However, apart from a questionnaire sent by the State Archive to large public companies inquiring about their archival holdings, there has been no centrally-organised effort to collect business archives. This is due mainly to the fact that the State Archive has a serious problem of lack of space in its repositories. According to Greek archival legislation¹ business archives are under the supervision of the State Archive and those who possess business

archives must declare them to the State Archive. If invited, the State Archive is obliged to take private and corporate archives into its custody.

Research centres and universities have also made an effort to help in the preservation of business archives. The Centre of Neohellenic Research of the National Research Centre (EIE/KNE) has a research programme on the history of business and industrial archaeology which is active in the field of collecting business archives. The EIE/KNE holds the archives of the Retsina textiles company² and the Kouppa machine manufacturers, and was actively involved in efforts to preserve, arrange and describe the archives of the public electricity company of Greece. The University of Athens is actively involved in the preservation of the business archives of the French company Laurium Mines.

In addition, a private non-profit society, the Hellenic Literary and Historical Society (ELIA), which has as its primary aim the collection and preservation of archives, holds among its 300 archive groups, several business archives and the personal archives of entrepreneurs which contain records relating to the companies with which they were involved. The ELIA collection includes archives from the banking sector, Ethniki Chrimatistiki Trapeza, (1829-1850); the tobacco industry, Carathanasis Tobacco Industry in Samos, (1900-1929); mining companies, Boudouri mines in Euboia and E Grohmann mines in Serifos, (1884-1936); chocolate making, Pavlides Chocolate company, (1821-1876); commerce, Dourouti silk trading company; and printing, Gerardos company in Constantinople, 1848-1950.³

Companies maintaining archives

Most large public and private companies employ staff to manage their current records, but very few of these employees have been specifically trained in the administration of archives. The majority of those employed in business archives are either recruited from the company itself, or are historians, but only an extremely small number of companies maintain their historical archives as a separate unit. Companies which have created historical archives include; the Lake Copais draining company, the ELAIS olive oil industry, the AGET IRAKLIS cement company, BP Petroleum Company Greece, and the AEE Parnassos Bauxite mining company. Among the Greek banks, the National Bank of Greece which, established in 1842, is the oldest operating bank in the country, is the only bank which maintains a separate historical archives department. The Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece is the oldest and best-organised archival institution in the country. A concerted effort was also made in the 1980s to preserve the archives of the large public banks; the Agricultural Bank, the Commercial Bank, and the Greek Bank for Industrial Development, following the example of the National Bank of Greece.⁴

The historical archives of the National Bank of Greece

The National Bank of Greece is not only the oldest bank in Greece, but is today still responsible for more than 60% of the total banking operations in the

country. It began as a private discount and mortgage institution, with the monopoly of issuing bank notes. During the years following its foundation, the bank, with the assistance of the Frenchman, Luis Lemaitre, reorganised its administrative system and expanded its banking services, becoming a complex and multi-faceted institution. It combined the functions of a note-issuing bank with those of a mortgage and commercial deposit bank, it developed agrarian credit, and it assumed the right to invest capital in transport services, maritime, and real estate enterprises. Later these investments were expanded to include all sectors of the Greek economy, with interim loans and open accounts. The bank assisted public finance, covered the state budget deficits, and subscribed to the national loans. In the context of the economic reorganisation and monetary stabilisation which took place in the interwar period, the National Bank of Greece was deprived of its mortgage activities, its agrarian business credit, and its exclusive right to issue bank notes in Greece.

Although many of the assets of the National Bank vanished during the Second World War, it was able to recover and play an active role in the reconstruction of the country after the war. In the years that followed, the bank made remarkable progress in all new aspects of modern banking.⁵

For these reasons the archives of the National Bank of Greece, which cover all the essential economic events of Greece, are vital to the economic history of modern Greece. Former bank administrators were conscious of the importance of its records, and circulars and files preserved in the archives indicate that particular attention was paid to their organisation from the foundation of the bank. A repository specially designed for the records of the bank was built in the centre of Athens in 1925.

The first attempt to create a separate Archives Service in the National Bank of Greece was made in 1938 when the governor decided that the centenary of the foundation of the bank should be celebrated in 1942. A contemporary circular indicates that the bank had decided to create a museum and an historical archives service in the General Secretariat Department and to establish a committee with responsibility for the publication of the history of the bank. Between 1938 and 1942 the historical documents of the bank were transferred to the Archives Section. The Second World War suspended the celebration of the centenary and the activities of the Archives Section until 1962, when a renewed attempt was made to activate both. Simultaneously, in March 1962, the bank, for the first time in its history, issued a records retention schedule to all its departments and a circular giving guidelines on the destruction of non-valuable records. The dictatorship in 1967 suspended once again the activities of the Archives Service. Finally, from 1977 a committee composed of senior bank officials and historians has been appointed to reactivate and develop the Archives Service and to establish a programme of research on the economic history of Greece and the history of the National Bank. The existence of the committee has proved to be essential in convincing successive governors and administration boards of the bank that good archives are the foundation of a well-organised company. The fact that the Archives Service is attached to the Public Relations Department and the records

management section reports to the General Secretariat Department does not create difficulties as long as the two departments collaborate closely.

During the last 20 years the Archives Service has developed a specific acquisition strategy and is collaborating very closely with the records management department in the appraisal of the bank's records. Various departments of the bank; the records management department, the historical archives, and the legal department, are in the process of revising the records retention schedule as new series of records are being produced for which no retention provisions have been made. Another matter of concern is the problem of preserving the electronically-generated records which are expanding every day in every sector of the activities of the bank and which present one of the greatest challenges for the bank's archivists. The acquisition policy of the Archives Service gives absolute priority to the acquisition of the in-house records of the bank. Permission has to be gained from the governor and the administration board before legal custody of these records can be transferred to the Archives Service. In 1994 the National Bank of Greece decided to allow access to all records from the foundation of the bank to December 1953. In 1995, the Archives Service, in order to transfer to its facilities the records of historical value from the period 1841-1953, surveyed the main repository for the bank's records (which contains approximately 6,000 linear metres of records). This survey, which lasted three months, enabled the Archives Service to locate about 2,000 linear metres of records of historical value.

The Archives Service also tries to acquire and preserve the personal archives of the governors and senior officials of the bank; the records of other banks which have merged with the National Bank; and the archives of companies which have been declared bankrupt. Thus the Historical Archives today holds all the archives of the National Bank of Greece from 1841 to 1900, with a few exceptions; some records from the period 1900-1940; and the archives of banks which have merged with the National Bank of Greece. These include the Pronomiouchos Trapeza Epirothessalias (Privileged Bank of Epirothessaly established in 1882); the Bank of Crete (1899-1919); the Trapeza Anatis (Orient Bank, 1904-1932); and the Bank of Athens (1896-1953). The bank also holds the personal archives of the first governor, G Stavros, and of other senior officials; and of some industries such as Aspioti Elka (printing industry), Karavasili (tobacco industry and bank) and Iris (paint industry).

The archival material is arranged, described and microfilmed. The archives at present amount to 1,500 linear metres, of which 80% has already been arranged and microfilmed. The Archives Service has produced a series of finding aids (registers and indexes) which users can consult at the Archives. Several finding aids, such as the General Catalogue of the Historical Archives of the National Bank of Greece (1980); the catalogue of the documents of the archival series on Public Loans (1995); the index on the National Bank loans defrayed by Deed of Bonds (1988); and the index on the 'Return of Securities' (1992), have already been published. The Archives Service also possesses an

extensive library on the economic history of Greece. More than 350 users, mainly economics, history, and sociology professors, researchers, and students writing their theses, visited in 1996.

The archival activities of the National Bank of Greece are closely related to the programme of research on the economic history of Greece in the 19th and 20th centuries, which was planned and financed by the bank. The research programme is based mainly on the exploitation of the socio-economic and political information contained in the bank's records. To date the bank has published 30 studies covering subjects concerning the history of agricultural development in Greece; the history of the development of the banking system; the history of industrial development and banking capital; economic and financial development; and the history and development of salaries.⁶ The National Bank of Greece has begun to show an interest in the application of new technology to archives, particularly in the development of a new system of automated finding aids based on the *General International Standard Archival Description [ISAD (G)]*.

Professional training

Before 1993 there was no professional archival training available at university level in Greece. The only courses offered in Archives and Library Sciences were those of the Technological Institutes. Since the academic year 1993-1994 the University of Corfu has established a School of Library and Archival Sciences which offers a four-year full-time general course for archivists and librarians. There is still no specialised training for business archivists and record managers.

In an effort to deal with the lack of professional training, the State Archives, the Greek universities, EIE/KNE, the Society of Hellenic Archives, the Archives Service of the National Bank of Greece, and the Union of Greek Banks have, during the past few years, provided training in the form of workshops, seminars, conferences and other educational events for their members. Some of these training courses were executed within the framework of the European Educational programme 'Leonardo da Vinci'. The Associazione Nazionale Archivistica Italiana and the Society of Greek Archives are organising a course on the education of educators in records management during 1997.

Professional bodies

There is no professional body in Greece devoted exclusively to business records. However the Society of Hellenic Archives created in 1990 a section for business and labour archives. The objectives of the Society are: to promote and support all actions needed to preserve archives, including the corporate archives of companies now defunct or bankrupted; to promote and develop archival science; to publish papers on these subjects; to organise educational seminars and conferences; and to maintain regular contacts with overseas sister organisations. The business and labour section of the Society is in close contact with the section for business and labour archives of the International

Council on Archives. The Society has approximately 250 members, mainly archivists, historians, and representatives from companies which create or own archives.

Notes

- 1 'Archival legislation 1981-1994 Albania-Kenya', vol. XL, pp 282-290, *Archivum*, 1995.
- 2 Christine Agriantoni, 'Frères Retsinas SA, Ascension et déchéance d'une grande entreprise textile de la Grèce', *L'Entreprise en Grèce et en Europe XIXe-XXe siècles*, p.213, 1991.
- 3 Manos Haritatos, 'Private business archives', *L'Entreprise en Grèce et en Europe XIXe-XXe siècles*, p.187, 1991.
- 4 G Notara, 'Fonds d'archives et banques grecques', *L'Entreprise en Grèce et en Europe XIXe-XXe siècles*, p.191, 1991.
- 5 'National Bank of Greece', *Handbook of the History of European Banks*, 1994.
- 6 A list of the publications of the National Bank of Greece is available from the author, National Bank of Greece, Vas. Sofias 112A, 11527 Athens.