Interview with Ms. Chrysoula Parisi

This is the box that has the worms in it. They are small and black, like ants. In the box with the worms, we put the first leaves, which we called fardia (wide leaves). These were easily eaten by the little ones. The box yielded about 70 okades of cocoons. From the day you take them out, in 8 days they will move. As they grow, we put bigger leaves on them.

They wake up (hatch) a few at a time. We put the first ones that wake up in panerias (baskets). We let the rest wake up, and the slow ones we would take by hand and put in separate panerias that were warmer so they would wake up. The Soufliot women called these “beds” or “terraces.” We made the beds with two wooden beams and placed rods between them. Then we used the beds to make floors.

Until the second sleep, we fed them with leaves. From the second bed onwards, we fed them with sprouts. We fed them at 8 in the morning, then at 11, then at 3, and finally at night. Among the leaves left in the panerias, you might find little worms, which you would throw away during the second sleep. You would put the small ones in the upper beds and the big ones in the lower beds, because the big ones want a branch, while the small ones eat leaves. So you separate the early ones and put them downstairs.

In the third bed, the sprouts must not get wet. When they were picked and tied, they often sweated. These sweaty leaves were not fit to eat while still wet. And you didn’t put hard branches in, because they were a nuisance at that stage. You put the tops, where the leaves are tender. It’s during the third sleep that they would rest for the patirdi.

In the storeroom, we painted the floor with lime. Then it was ready to be filled with the worms. We piled them not too many, not too few—not too sparse, not too close. If there were too many, we would set up scaffolding. As they grew, they became whiter.

When the worms wanted to cocoon, they would raise their heads and look for a branch. You could see the worm when it started making its cocoon, but slowly the cocoon got thicker and you couldn’t see it anymore. Eight days after they completed their cocoons, you had to roast them. If you didn’t roast them, butterflies would come out and make the seed.

Which plants do you put them on to make the cocoon? Pournaria (Quercus coccifera). We opened the room to let the pournaria breathe before putting them in. We were careful to gather the leaves before it rained. If the leaves got wet, the worms became galatades (milky ones)—that’s what we called them

in the village at the time. They turned white, fell off, and died without making a good cocoon. The good cocoons would branch out and become hard.

After eight days, you would pick them up. We used to pile them in a room, about four fingers high, so they wouldn't get too warm—because they were alive and breathed from the inside. If they were piled too thick, the inside of the cocoon would soften and decay. It would blacken on the inside and then on the outside. The trader would not accept those, and it was a waste of time.

When you were done and had collected all the cocoons, what did you do with them? The merchant would come and take them. He had big sacks, like mattresses, and put them in to roast. Because if he didn't roast them, the butterfly would come out and pierce the cocoon, and then the merchant wouldn't take it.

Interview by Kleopatra Tsali, Soufli, October 2024

Interview with Koula Tsiantouka and Pagona Paralikidou

I started this job when I was 12 years old. I was inside the Tzivre, with the Tzivre family, because my mother worked there. I entered the factory when I was 14 years old, and they placed me in the spinning section. The girls aged 14 to 18 did the preparatory work for spinning. The spinners were older—ranging from 18–20 years old up to 80—and they were the experienced ones. The younger girls prepared the cocoons for the spinners.

We began by soaking the cocoons in warm water. Then, using a brush, back and forth, we would catch the fibers with a gkivír (a kind of strainer). The girl would catch the fibers with the gkivír and hand them to the spinner, who processed them. The spinner would receive instructions from the boss about how many cocoons would correspond to each "eye" (thread). She could start with 10 or 14 fibers—or 16 for a thicker thread.

Three or four young girls would work on the preparatory tasks, learning the job at the same time. I worked in the factory until it closed in 1963. After 1968, another factory opened, a state-owned one. I worked there for another 6–7 years until that one also closed. They hired me as an experienced worker.

Although it was hard work, I loved silk. In the summer, it could be 40°C outside the factory and 60°C inside. There were many machines and a lot of humidity. We kept the windows open, both front and

back, to create a draft, and there was ventilation in the Tzivre factory. The second factory I worked in, however, had no ventilation—only the open windows.

When we finished in the evening, there was a clay jug with hydrochloric acid and water. Before leaving, we would dip our hands in it to sterilize them—because there were 12 razors in the machines, and you had to catch them all with your hands. Afterward, we would go home and bathe, because the cocoons left a strong smell.

What time did you start in the morning? Was it from dawn to sunset?

At 7 o'clock in the morning, the doura (bell) would ring, and we would enter the courtyard. By 7:20–7:25, you had to be inside and start working. From 7:30 to 11:30 we worked, then had a break until 12:30. Work resumed at 12:30 and ended at 4:30—an eight-hour shift.

In the old days, my mother's time, they worked from dawn to sunset. As soon as the sun rose, they were at the factory; when the sun set, they left. The daily wage was small, the cocoons had little value, and that's how strikes began. My mother lived through all this. The 8-hour workday was won, and neither bonuses nor holidays were cut.

When I went to the state-owned factory, wages were decent in the first years, but later they stopped paying holidays and Christmas bonuses. The staff protested. I was vice president of the union, testified in court, and we fought for our rights. When the factories closed, there was looting—both in the one I worked in and in Tzivre.

Did relationships form between the women working in the factory?

Definitely. In the morning, when we entered, it was like a celebration. Every Saturday, the employer gave an advance, and at the end of the month, we were paid.

The younger girls didn't work only for their dowries—they also bought clothes and dressed as they wished. Sometimes, in Tzivre, a mother and both her daughters worked, contributing greatly to the household.

I was with the Tzivre family from age 12. Their children and I were close in age; I even used to hold the younger one's hand when we went for walks.

Did you have friends?

I did. Most are no longer alive. I am one of the few still here.

So, in the morning, you went to work with joy, like to a celebration?

Yes—it was a celebration of sorts. We met, talked, laughed, and worked together. Even though the work was hard, there was friendship and solidarity. It wasn't just work—it was also about the relationships we built. Paydays were moments of fun and relief.

Did the environment change over time?

Yes. At first, it was like a family; later, as the factory expanded, it became more strict. The workload increased and the atmosphere wasn't the same, but the friendships stayed with me.

How did the changes affect you personally?

It was harder work, but also more rewarding—we became more skilled and could earn more. I loved silk work. At lunchtime, we ate quickly to have time for a short walk, maybe to catch a glimpse of a young man we liked.

Did you also do breeding at the factory?

No, breeding was done at home; the factory only did spinning.

Did they sell the home-produced cocoons to the factory?

Yes. Cocoon-purchasing season was another celebration—carts and wagons loaded with cocoons. Tzivre would buy what he needed and send the rest to France and Italy by train.

But then came synthetic silk, rayon, and plastic.

What did you enjoy most?

The spinning—because from a small cocoon comes a fiber, and many fibers are spun together to make a thread. It was creative work.

In Tzivre, the heater was wood-fired; in the state-owned one, it used fuel oil.

Could this work return today?

With the right principles, yes—perhaps not as before, but it could return. In the past, there were also seed producers here. They let the cocoon puncture to produce their own seed.

Pagona, do you make seed yourself now?

I wish I could! But you need special facilities. The butterflies must lay eggs on paper or fabric, not the cocoon, and the eggs must be stored in cooling for next year. Today, Italy has an excellent seed workshop. That's where we get our seed, though large orders often come from China or Turkey, and the most expensive from Japan.

How were butterfly eggs preserved in the past?

Producers kept them in small cupboards. In the past, houses were cold. The boxes had tiny holes so the eggs could breathe. When hatching time came, a fabric was placed over the box and the tiny worms climbed onto it.

In our grandmothers' time, hatching happened in the bosom—they placed the eggs inside small pillows worn close to the chest for warmth.

Did you keep silk for yourselves?

Those who bred at home did. Everyone had a loom and wove scarves and even underwear for dowries.

How was silk processed at home?

In a mpakirtzouda (small cauldron), cocoons were placed in hot water, stirred with the gkivír, and the fibers caught and reeled by hand. To weave a scarf, about 10–15 cocoons were needed.

What were homes like for breeding?

Houses had an upstairs living space and a downstairs hayati (open-air area) for leaves and feeding worms. Mulberry leaves were stored in the cellar. Everything revolved around the cocoons.

How did you prevent the butterfly from emerging?

Seven to eight days after spinning, the branches were removed so merchants could roast the cocoons before emergence.

Were there good and bad cocoons?

Yes—merchants checked by touch and weight. If not satisfied with the price, you could sell to another merchant—there were many. This bargaining was called haretsi.

How were the leaves gathered?

Men gathered them by cart, donkey, or ox. Leaves were covered with wet rugs to keep them fresh. The breeding cycle was 28 days; well-fed worms could start spinning earlier.

What did you do for your hands, which were suffering so much?

Whatever we could do ourselves at home. Back then, there weren't the ready-made creams we have today. Our hands were sore, torn, cut. In the beginning, my hands were so cracked I couldn't even hold anything. By the end, even my nails had started to crack and peel. But what saved me was the beeswax salve. I used it every night. How did women endure, with their hands in boiling water? In the old days, they used clay—pilochoma, the red earth. My mother-in-law used clay. They would put the clay in water to soften it, and then rub it on the painful areas. They even treated babies' diaper rashes with it.

In 2017, Anna came and found us. We first tried raising silkworms in someone else's sericulture farm, but the owner sprayed his nearby vineyards, and our cocoons died. The next year came, and Anna suggested we try again. She had previously discussed it with the company Hermes. And indeed, they provided the funding, and we set up the sericulture farm exactly as we had requested. Anna provided all the money. She renovated the roof, the floors, the plastering, the windows, the walls, and the beds for the breeding. Altogether, it cost €60,000. She had also brought two machines from Japan that feed the worms automatically. But the first batch was lost again, because they had sprayed mosquito repellent and didn't inform us. The next year, my husband Ilias told them: "Before you spray, you coordinate with me."

But now you have your own mulberry trees. One field next to us and one in the plain. Now we even give to others. We keep the very young ones (silkworms) here, and when they grow bigger, we take them to the field. When the reeling machine arrived, I met Mrs. Koula. It was 2018—she came and showed me how it's done at first, and after that, I did it on my own. The first year I did the breeding alone, I produced 30–40 kilos of cocoons. The next year, Paschalis started as well. The year after that, the company was established in Paschalis's name. I hope others are inspired to start too. In the past, people made a good living from sericulture.

Interview with Kleopatra Tsali at Soufli on October 2024

Interview with Parchalis Christodoulou

Which is your experience with silk?

Mine was, first and foremost, experiential. My father raised silkworms until 1978. He worked in construction, but every afternoon, after finishing work, he would come home, eat, and then leave again to gather mulberry leaves. Every May, we were like refugees inside our own house. All the rooms would be emptied—the family consisted of four people—and we would all gather in one room. That room served as the kitchen, dining room, and bedroom.

The other two rooms, which were bedrooms, were used for raising the silkworms during their first three stages. Later, they were transferred to a large cellar at the back of the house. That's where the beds were made using wood and burlap, and the worms were moved there.

But there was preparation beforehand—furniture had to be emptied out, moved to safe places, and space cleared. During the early stages, the leaves were chopped. For the bigger worms, they would strip the leaves off the branches—klarizan they called it. You can understand the spaces were cramped. Still, back in those days, people cared about making a good production so they could earn some money. There were no subsidies back then—none at all. Whatever money they got came from the production itself.

At that time, the silkworm eggs—also kept in boxes just like now—were exactly twice the quantity they are today. If I'm not mistaken, it must have been 24–25 grams. Now it's 12 grams per box. They would take the silkworm eggs after they had been incubated by the Department of Agricultural Development.

So you didn't get the eggs yourselves? – No, as soon as they hatched, they started distributing them. They would make an announcement, and whoever was interested would go there. Each person had already stated from the previous year how many boxes they wanted to receive. Back then, incubation was done by the Department of Agricultural Development, whereas now silkworm farmers do it themselves. They buy the eggs and carry out the incubation on their own. As soon as the eggs hatched, distribution began, and from the very first day, the rearing would begin at home.

Was there a specific reason why it was done that way? – Because the silkworm needs special temperature and humidity conditions. I don't know if you've ever seen what the incubator looked like back in those days. It was a small wooden cabinet, a little cupboard with legs—underneath it had a

hole, and in the base they would place a gas lamp. The glass part of the lamp would reach up to the hole in the cabinet. The heat from the flame created the proper temperature.

Inside, it was set up as follows: it had aluminum walls all around, like pipes, let's say. The entire wall was made of aluminum that held water, which was heated by the lamp to provide humidity. They placed the boxes in little drawers, and that's where incubation happened. This setup was difficult for everyone to manage individually, so it was done centrally by the Department of Agriculture to ensure that everyone started and finished rearing at the same time.

Back then, the cocoon market—we called it the charétsi—operated only during a specific period. This meant silkworm breeders in Soufli had to start and finish together in order to sell their cocoons. The cocoon buyers didn't stay all summer—just about ten days to collect everything.

So it was for practical reasons, then?

Yes, yes.

Mrs. Koula told us that in the old days, women used to place them in their bosoms (to incubate them).

That happened too, but a very long time ago. Back then, there was also a seed production facility. There's another old building, donated to the municipality, the Brikas one—that's where they produced the silkworm eggs. Brikas would keep them all year and then distribute them. That was even earlier.

As for rearing, everything went well. At that time, something worked very well that has disappeared today: solidarity and mutual help. Even during the patirdi—that peak time when the silkworms were in their fifth stage and had to be fed three times a day with a lot of leaves—neighbors would help someone who didn't have enough people. And during the stripping of branches afterward, they would help too, so the cocoons could be delivered quickly before the butterfly emerged.

So the whole village helped? – Everyone helped. These were the first earnings the family ever made. It was a cycle of about 50 days. The problem came afterward—with the cocoons, the droppings, and everything else left behind. While it was very good fertilizer for gardens and fields, it had a strong odor inside the house and produced a lot of dust. I remember my father saying those were some of the worst days for him, during the cleaning that followed.

Right after, we would load the burlap sacks onto the cart and take them to a tributary of the Evros River near Soufli. There, they would wash, dry, and fold them so they would be ready for the next year. Then, they would whitewash the rooms—not disinfect them—and put up blue sheets on the windows to create shade, almost total darkness. They could only see with the lamp's light when feeding the worms; no outside light was allowed.

All the people of Soufli were involved in production. Soufli had a large output, as did nearby villages like Mandra and Lavara. Back then, the old mulberry trees each produced a lot of leaves.

Did they prune them in a specific way?

Essentially, when they cut the branches, that was a form of pruning. But the important part was that right after they finished with the cocoons and handed them to the merchant, they would trim the trees thoroughly. If anything was left behind, it had to be cut right down to the base so the tree could regrow properly. Otherwise, the next year it might not produce the broad leaves needed, and the quality of leaves would decline. If not pruned properly, the tree might produce mulberries instead—something silkworm farmers didn't want.

Why not?

They didn't need the berries and would have to clean them off the branches, which was time-consuming. The mulberry fruit itself is very good, of course.

These are my memories of household silkworm farming during the 1960s and 70s. By then, silk had already started to decline. Plastics, rayon, and synthetic fibers imitating silk had appeared on the market. Prices were no longer attractive. Life also changed—homes needed renovation, proper bathrooms, better kitchens—and there was no space for farming. Older houses had small windows, but later windows became bigger, and cellars for breeding disappeared in houses built from the 1970s onward. This meant breeding could no longer continue in the same way.

In the early 1990s, when some people began production again, it moved out of homes and into large warehouses or newly built spaces. The breeding process itself also changed. Mulberry trees were now varieties from China and Italy.

What varieties did you have back then?

The old local ones.

Is that the Alba, the white one?

Yes, but that one has mostly been cleared now. Many mulberries were removed from the plain because of land consolidation. Land was converted into large-scale crops like sugar beets, corn, and sunflowers. This reduced the availability of leaves, limiting the activity to certain people—most of whom weren't full-time breeders. They also worked as self-employed professionals, civil servants, military personnel, or police officers, raising silkworms on the side for extra income.

After 2000, subsidies were introduced because silk was becoming a disappearing product. It was recognized as essential not only for textiles but also for things like parachutes. To reduce European dependence on China, they began funding production here—with very good subsidy rates per box.

This attracted many people—not only for production but also for the subsidies, allowing them to both produce and receive financial support. But the box size is now 12 grams, and yields are much smaller. Even a good breeder could no longer reach the 60–70 kilos of the past; now, 30 kilos was considered very good.

Silkworm farming and viticulture were once key activities that gave Soufli strong economic presence in the region. For many years, there was full employment—no unemployment, no need for migration—since everyone had work. Economic development went hand in hand with cultural activity.

But household silkworm farming no longer exists.

Nowhere, nowhere.

D**o you think it could happen again?**

I don't think so. There are no spaces, and the area has emptied of people. You can see what has happened in the villages. And modern jobs don't allow the time for it anymore.