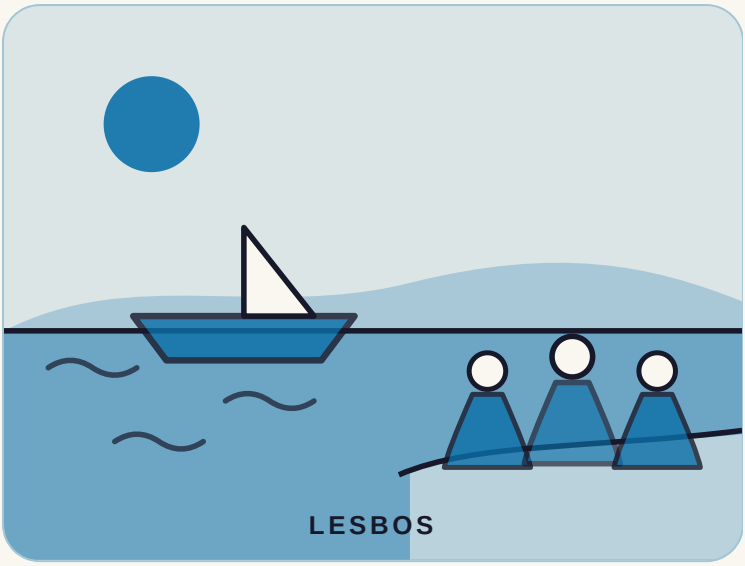

GREECE

The grandmothers who met the boats

Three very old women walked down to the shore to welcome refugees. Their own mothers had once been refugees.

WHERE	Skala Sikaminias, Lesbos
WHO	Three grandmothers of Lesbos: Efstratia Mavrapidou, Maritsa Mavrapidou and Militsa Kamvysi
WHEN	1922 to 2022

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Skala Sikaminias is a small fishing village on the Greek island of Lesbos. In 2015, boats and rafts full of refugees began to land on its shore. Refugees are people who flee their homes to stay safe. Many had fled war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Three very old women from the village went down to the shore. Efstratia Mavrapidou's eyes were clouded by cataracts. She walked with a cane. Maritsa Mavrapidou and Militsa Kamvysi came too.

Mothers who had been there

They knew what the newcomers felt. Their own mothers had come to Lesbos as refugees. In 1922, after a war, at least a million Greeks were forced out of Turkey.

Efstratia's mother, Evanthea, crossed the same sea in a crowded fishing boat. She had three small sons. The youngest was one month old. She had no time to dress him, so she tore part of her underskirt to wrap him.

The village had no home for them. The families cleaned out empty sheds, where olives had been stored, and slept there.

> **It's like our mothers were there on the beach, hugging her, too.**
>
> EFSTRATIA MAVRAPIDOU, QUOTED BY NPR

1922
year their mothers arrived as refugees

1 million
people landed on Greek shores in one year (NPR)

3
women in the famous photograph

What they did

For months, the women went to the shore. They gave out clothes from their own closets. They gave out homemade cheese pies. When a seasick newcomer stepped off a boat, they hugged them.

A local photographer took a picture of the three women. In it, Militsa holds a refugee baby, while the baby's mother smiles in dry clothes. The photo went around the world.

Greece's presidents later visited the women to thank them. Militsa was reported as a candidate for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize, a major world prize. It baffled her. "We were just behaving like human beings," she said.

Two of the three have since died: Maritsa in 2019 and Efstratia in 2022, reports say.

How it unfolded

- **1922** Their mothers arrive on Lesbos as refugees.
- **2015** Refugee boats land at the village. The photo is taken.
- **2016** Militsa is reported as a Nobel Peace Prize candidate.
- **2019** Maritsa Mavrapidou dies (reports).
- **2022** Efstratia Mavrapidou dies (reports).

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

They helped strangers because they knew, from their own mothers' stories, what it is to arrive with nothing.

They did not run a program. They used what they had: clothes, cheese pies and open arms.

OUR TAKE

Their own family's hardship became the reason to help, not a reason to look away.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Let your own past guide you

Their mothers had been refugees, so they knew what the newcomers needed.

Try this: Think of a hard time you lived through. Offer someone now the one thing that helped you then.

2 Give what you have

They gave clothes from their own closets and homemade cheese pies.

Try this: Give one useful thing you already own to someone who needs it this week.

3 Show up in person

Efstratia was frail and her sight was poor, yet she walked to the shore with a cane.

Try this: Do one small helpful thing in person this week, not only by message.

4 Start with the first small step

They hugged seasick, scared people. They did not wait for a plan.

Try this: When you see someone struggling, do the first small helpful thing.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Kindness is easiest for those who remember arriving.

Sources

NPR
For These Greek Grandmas, Helping Migrants Brings Back Their Own Past (2016)

Greek City Times
Efstratia Mavrapidou: “Yiayia of Lesvos” and Nobel Peace nominee died at the age of 96 (2022)

The Greek Herald
Efstratia Mavrapidou, one of the famous ‘Lesvos grandmas,’ passes away aged 96 (2022)

Gariwo
Emilia Kamvisi, the grandmother of Lesvos

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. The Nobel Peace Prize: NPR says Militsa Kamvysi was nominated; Greek City Times and the Greek Herald say all three women were; Gariwo says Kamvysi was a candidate together with a Lesbos fisherman, Stratos Valiamos. The Nobel Committee does not publish nominations for 50 years, so these are media reports. The story says only that Militsa was reported as a candidate. Ages and dates of death differ: NPR (2016) gives 89 for Efstratia, 85 for Maritsa and 83 for Militsa; the 2022 reports say Efstratia died aged 96 and Maritsa died in January 2019 aged 92; Gariwo gives Kamvysi’s years as 1934 to 2023, while a 2022 report called her alive. The numbers do not match, so the story gives no ages and no death date for Militsa. Spellings vary: Kamvysi, Kamvisi, Sikaminias, Sykamia. The 1922 expulsion and the “at least a million” figure are NPR’s; Gariwo says Kamvysi’s family fled Turkey in 1922. The “1 million” people who landed on Greek shores in a year is NPR’s figure for 2015 to early 2016. The quote and the underskirt detail are NPR’s, as told by Efstratia. “Greece’s presidents” refers to a 2015 visit by the then president and a 2020 visit by the current one (Greek City Times). The photographer is described only as local. The camps and the EU-Turkey deal that followed are not covered. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.