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Surprises as a bait to work harder – Four cases in the Louros Archive

Christos P. Marinis¹

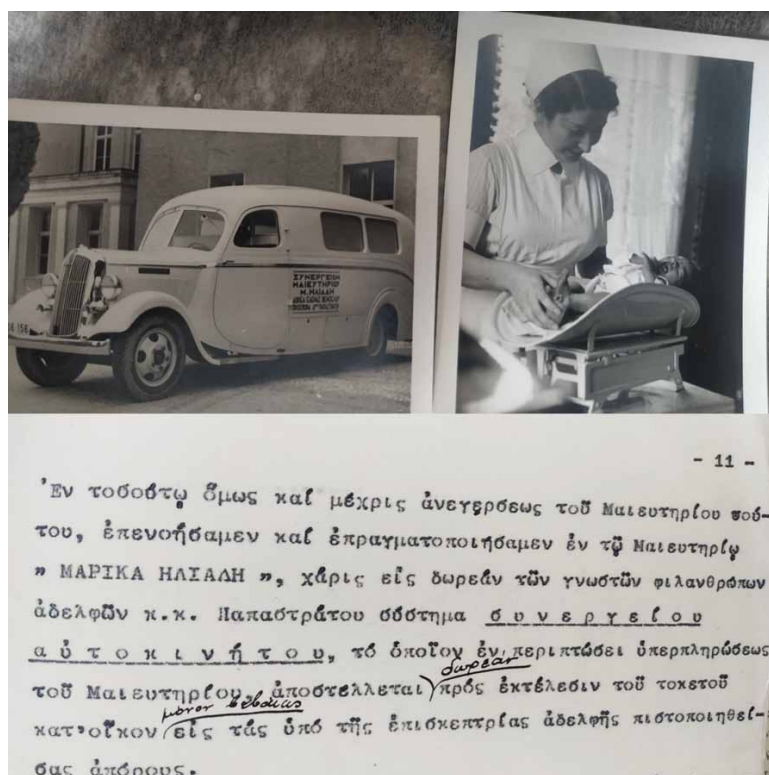


Figure 1. An idea of N. Louros that materialised in 1937: The “Marika Iliadi” clinic’s specially equipped hospital vehicle staffed with specialised personnel that was dispatched at no cost, conducting home deliveries for impoverished women.

Abstract

This brief paper discusses the author’s personal impressions from the process of recording, archiving, and categorising the N. Louros Archive during the summer of 2023, as well as the surprises that served as a motivation to continue this effort with increasing enthusiasm. Four cases of primary material with relevant photographs are indicative. Thus, the value of the Louros archive is emphasized for the history of medicine and other scientific fields, encouraging researchers to engage in a fruitful dialogue with related and unrelated sciences. Finally, a brief reference is made to the difficulties encountered during the project.

Key Words: Nikolaos K. Louros Foundation, hospital vehicle, correspondence, archivist’s difficulties

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Personal recollections

The Nikolaos Louros Archive was recently evaluated after a painstaking and time-consuming process of recording, archiving, and categorising the material, fulfilling a fundamental desire of Professor Nikolaos Louros, the owner of the archive. It constitutes a private, personal collection of a distinguished scholar, with all the implications that this has regarding its form and content¹, covering a nearly ninety-year period. I had the opportunity and pleasure to participate in this challenging task. As a philologist with a postgraduate degree in Folkloristics, I had previously been involved in collecting and processing primary material, especially related to Urban Folklore. Despite the mechanical and repetitive nature of such an effort, small treasures are often revealed, gradually transforming the nature of the work into a journey into the past, an opportunity for acquaintance and contact with people and situations that one could hardly experience directly in any other way.

I will not hide the fact that I knew little about Nikolaos Louros beyond the description of a lexicographical entry: “Distinguished Greek gynaecologist and academician”. Yet, it did not take much time for me to get to know a person born 125 years ago, who passed away in 1986, the year I was born. Having the privilege of being among the first people in direct contact with the material of Louros’ archive, I wish to share my perspective as someone unrelated to the medical field, thus acting as an external observer. At the same time, I adopt the perspective of a “mouse”, as the Vice President of the Louros Foundation, Professor Athanasios Diamandopoulos, jokingly referred to me in a personal conversation. A mouse that, in a narrow room filled with cardboard boxes, came into contact with countless dusty and yellowed pages and documents, with the aim of helping them emerge from obscurity and be rescued. Certainly, where there are mice, there must necessarily be tempting “cheese” to attract them...

Through my contact with the material, the first thing that impressed me was N. Louros’ habit of discarding almost nothing. This habit isn’t very rare. As Giannakopoulos and Boudouri had commented “*The social activity and communication of individuals with other people and organizations create archival records such as: certificates (birth, education, marriage, death), passports, resumes, bills, receipts, payroll statements, tax clearances, contracts, wills, bank statements, letters, diaries, photos, family videotapes, invitations, etc. These documents record every expression of human social*

life, facilitate various relationships and activities, and document his rights. They capture the history of his life and immortalize his experiences, supporting the function of memory”². Receipts and ledgers documenting income and expenses, offers for the supply of medical equipment from the hospitals where N. Louros left his mark, documents related to legal disputes, newspaper clippings and magazines, tickets, advertising brochures, and tourist guides from his trips abroad, theatre programs, a multitude of photographs, letters from the cream of the political and cultural life of the 20th century, down to spontaneous, misspelt letters from ordinary people asking something from N. Louros or expressing their gratitude and admiration—these are just a few examples of the archival documents I came across. At this point, I would like to share a tiny fraction of what impressed me and motivated me to continue the sorting process with increasing enthusiasm, emphasising the value that the archive of the Nikolaos K. Louros Foundation holds for the history of medicine and other scientific fields, and encouraging any researcher to engage in a fruitful dialogue with relatives and non-relatives alike, across various disciplines.

Let’s start with one of the initial elements of the archive that caught my interest and is clearly related to the History of Medicine, particularly the History of Public Health in modern Greece. It reflects the efforts of N.K. Louros for the organisation of Public Health in Greece, dating back to the interwar period. It involves photographic material and documents from 1937 (Fig. 1) concerning the mobile team of the obstetrics clinic “Marika Iliadi,” a pioneering concept for the time. This initiative was implemented through the donation of the Papastratou Brothers’ tobacco factories. In instances of overcrowding at the “Marika Iliadi” clinic, a specially equipped hospital vehicle staffed with specialized personnel was dispatched at no cost, conducting home deliveries for impoverished women. We can easily grasp the significance of such an effort in an era with an almost non-existent transportation network and a low standard of living for a significant portion of the Greek population.

Continuing, it would be impossible not to mention the extensive correspondence of Nikolaos Louros, who, due to his multifaceted personality, maintained with figures from the medical field and beyond, including science, politics and arts, as well as ordinary citizens. The latter, whether patients and relatives of patients expressing their gratitude with a few words of appreciation and usually a token gift, or admirers seeking his advice or opinion on their endeavours, usually

received a response from Nikolaos Louros and held a place in the archive. Often, due to his position and influence, he also received requests to intervene in the professional establishment of newcomers, even from high-ranking individuals.

Some of these cases, perhaps not the most notable but certainly indicative of the spirit of the writers, are presented in the following photograph (Fig. 2) of four letters and a telegram (Fig. 3). The first one on the top left, dated November 4, 1965, is a thank-you letter from a hunting goods merchant, Marinus Kourinakis from Kavala, who, as he wrote, sends Professor N. Louros “a hare and three partridges” as a sign of gratitude for the care of his wife. Numerous such letters from ordinary people can be found in the archive, with references to the sending or receiving of goods as a sign of gratitude,

such as chestnuts, cigarettes, oil, meat, fish, nuts, etc. Of course, most of them include an always gracious thank-you response from N. Louros. In the same photograph, at the bottom right, dated December 9, 1959, we observe a thank-you letter of this kind from N.K. Louros to T. Papastratos, possibly a nephew of the tobacco industrialist Evangelos Papastratos, for the shipment of cigarettes. Next, on the top right, there is a letter dated September 20, 1976, from N. Louros to the then Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications, Athanasios Tsaldaris, where Louros, jokingly stating that he has become a “bribery agency,” intervenes by requesting employment for a graduate in Economics and Political Sciences. Finally, in stark contrast to the previous letter, is the negative response dated March 13, 1965, from Louros to the

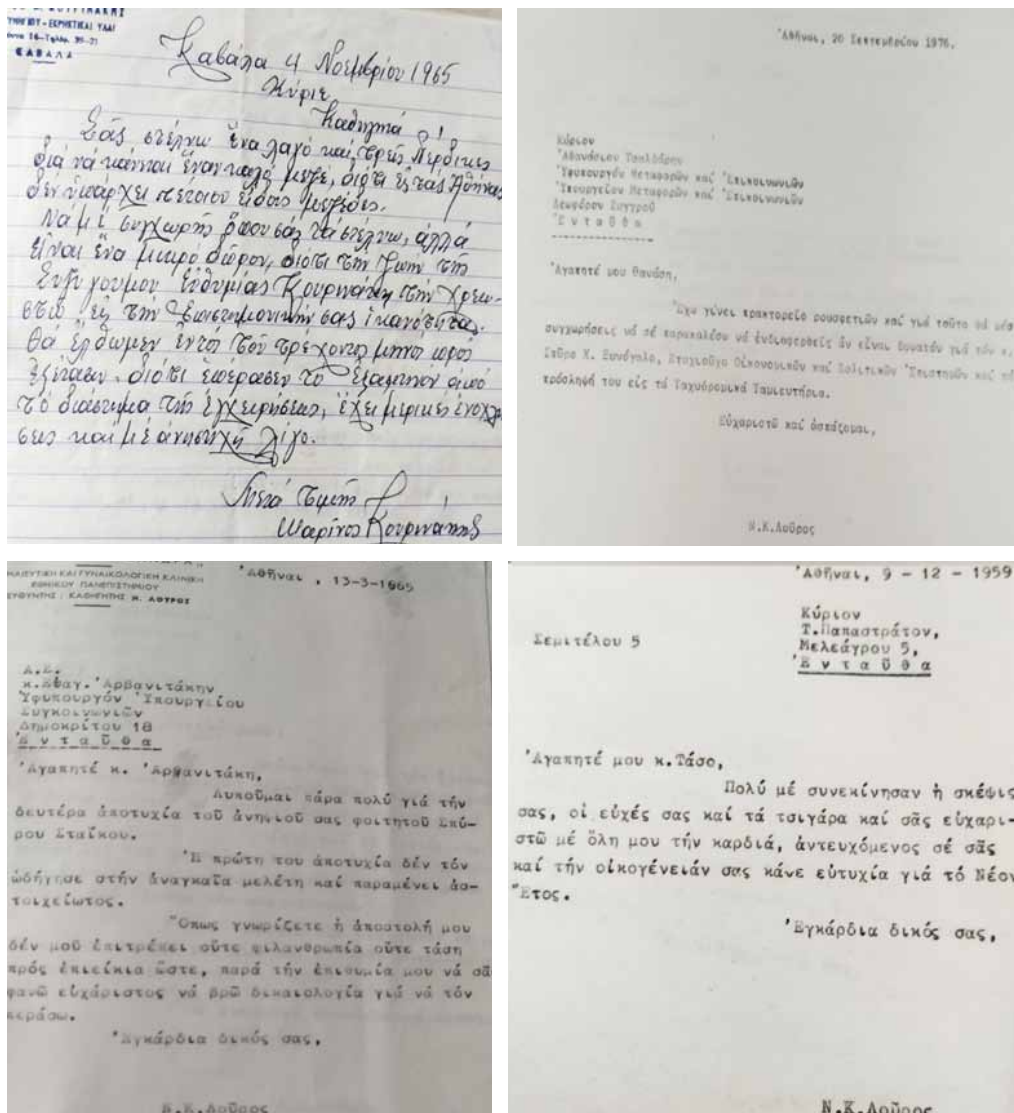


Figure 2. Letters exchanged between N.K. Louros and politicians and laymen concerning favoritism and gifts - offerings.

then Deputy Minister of Communications, Evangelos Arvanitakis, who apparently asked him to intervene so that his nephew Spyros Staikos could pass a course at the Medical School (bottom left). N. Louros' categorically negative response, besides indicating his strict and just character, is of particular interest as it refers to a relative of a deputy minister. Lastly, the thank-you telegram dated January 5, 1970, which is quoted (Fig. 3), is sent by two parents of Medical School students in Thessaloniki, expressing their thanks to N. Louros for the assistance he provided through his signature for the amnesty of their children, who were imprisoned as political detainees. Particularly, this telegram - but also other documents in the archive not discussed here - tangibly demonstrates Louros' strong anti-dictatorial sentiments during the Dictatorship of the Colonels.

The above letters and the telegram are indicative of the customs and practices of Greek society as well as the political developments of the respective periods, whether they concern reciprocation for a kind act towards a fellow citizen or favouritism and its role in contemporary Greek society. Undoubtedly, these, as well as numerous others, can serve as valuable sources of information for researchers in Sociology, Folklore, Political Science, and other disciplines.

Continuing within the correspondence of N.K. Louros, which, as mentioned, covers a substantial part of the archive, his significant interest in the arts, particularly in theatre and cinema, is also documented. A noteworthy segment of the correspondence involves his communication with personalities from the acting profession, such as Alexis Minotis, Katina Paxinou, Anna Kalouta, Dimitris Myrat, Jenny Karezi, Kostas Kazakos, etc., to whom he addresses his critiques of theatrical plays or movies in which they starred. Three letters are provided below (Fig. 4).

In the first letter dated March 29, 1972, N.K. Louros compliments actress Jenny Karezi and her husband, actor Kostas Kazakos, for their performances in the film "Erotic Agreement". He expresses his congratulations while also providing his critique of the screenplay, direction, and cinematography of the movie. The second letter, dated October 31, 1966, is addressed to actress Anna Kalouta, congratulating her on her performance in a contemporary revue and offering his critique on the rest of the theatrical cast and singer Sofia Vembo. In the third letter, dated November 6, 1971, N.K. Louros addresses actress Aliko Vougiouklaki, expressing his congratulations on her performance in the theatrical play "Queen Amalia" by G. Roussos. However, he also voices his objections to historical inaccuracies related

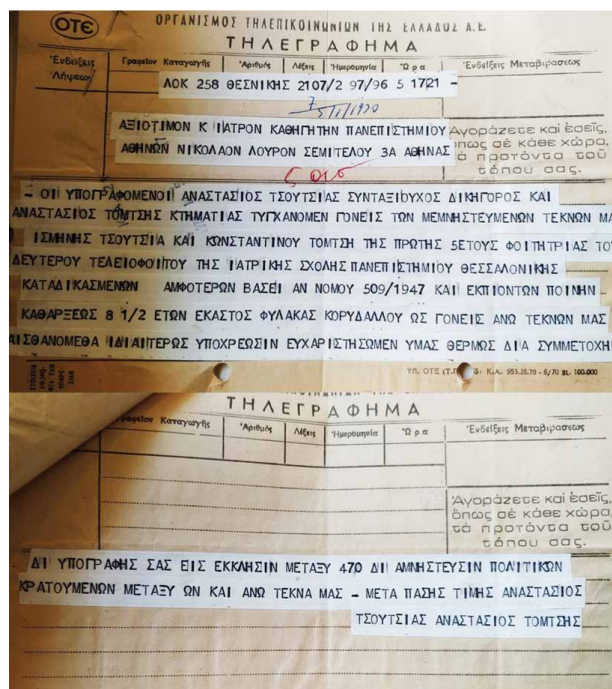


Figure 3. A telegram of gratitude to N. Louros by the parents of two imprisoned, for political reasons, medical students. Due to his interference they were released from prison.

to the issue of the childlessness of Otto and Amalia. He even refers her to his book, "Retrospectives", a copy of which he sends according to the letter. It is characteristic that this issue of the childlessness of Otto and Amalia particularly preoccupied Nikolaos Louros and his father, Konstantinos. Documents related to this issue occupy a prominent position in the archive, such as unpublished documents and manuscripts, excerpts from the newspaper 'Ta Nea' (20/3/1954) with an article referring to N. Louros under the title 'No doctor could discover Amalia's sensual secret,' concerning Nikolaos Louros, and others.

The aforementioned examples represent a small sample of N.K. Louros' engagement with artistic subjects, and the corresponding portion of the correspondence could serve as a valuable tool for researchers exploring topics related to the History of Theatre and Cinema, Urban folklore, and more.

In light of this mention of Louros' correspondence with figures from the art world, I will conclude with a somewhat unexpected letter from the prominent painter Nikos Hatzikyriakos-Gikas to Nikolaos Louros, in response to a previous letter or inquiry from Louros, which unfortunately has not been found. Nevertheless, we can easily grasp the subject matter of the letter from the painter's response. In this letter (Fig. 5), Nikos Hatzikyriakos-Gikas states that "...wall painters should

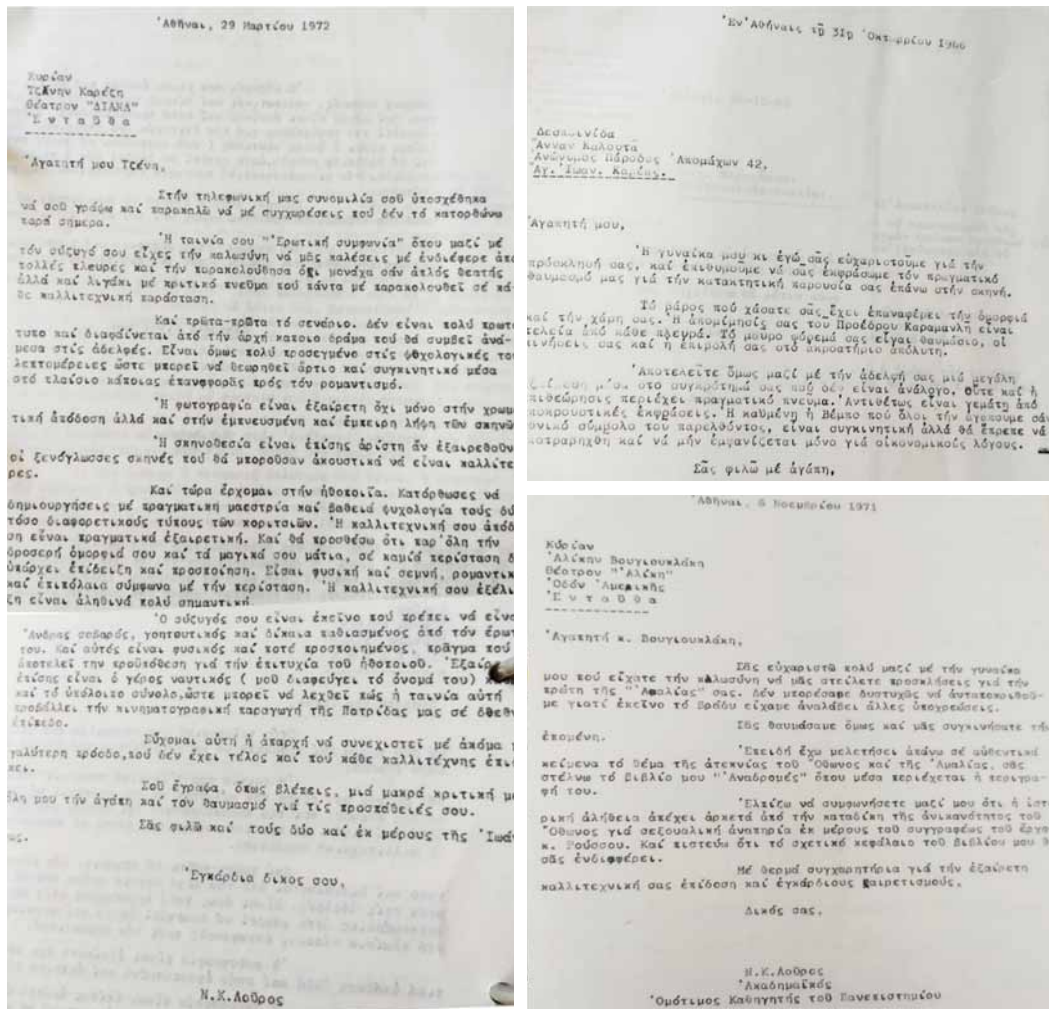


Figure 4. Four pages from the correspondence of N. Louros with theatrical actresses.

not use Ajax for cleaning the stucco lustro* - painted walls, but simply Marseille soap and rinse with plenty of water because Ajax contains caustic substances”. It is evident that N. Louros sought advice from the painter regarding some wall painting works, and Nikos Hatzikyriakos-Gikas willingly provided his guidance.

The above examples, as mentioned earlier, constitute only a small part of the volume and significance of Louros’ archive. However, they vividly demonstrate how what may initially seem like a mechanical task, such as recording and archiving, can transform into an interesting journey into the past and become a motivation for increasingly intensive work. The small or large surprises that the archival material offered became the “bait” to encourage more enthusiastic and zealous archival work. It was the “cheese” that the

* Stucco lustro is a technique applied by oil painters on walls. It is a form of marble imitation (sometimes called stucco lucido) where a thin layer of lime or gypsum plaster was applied over a scored support of lime, with pigments scattered on surface of the wet plaster.

“mouse” needed to want to visit the Louros Foundation more frequently and search through dusty boxes.

Now that the content of the archive is more widely known, this “bait” will undoubtedly attract many more individuals to creatively utilize it in a wide variety of research endeavours.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly address the challenges that occupied us during the process of recording and classifying the material, which were not few. The enormous amount of documents in a relatively limited time and space, the often poor condition of the material requiring delicate handling to prevent damage, the difficult-to-read handwriting of N. Louros and others, the stacking and mixing of heterogeneous material in a way that made recording and classification incredibly challenging, and the sweltering conditions during the summer of 2023 in an unbearably hot space, all made the work not easy. Moreover, there were many dilemmas regarding classification. For example, many times a letter was found outside the correspondence

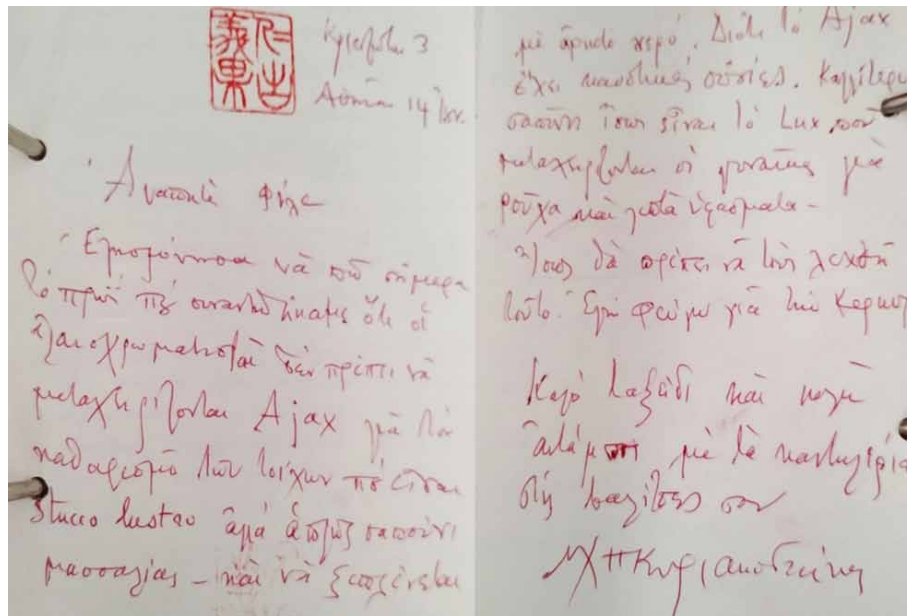


Figure 5. Hand-written message by the renown painter Hatzikyriakos- Gikas to N. Louros advising him on technical matters.

file, attached to a newspaper clipping along with a conference program. Should it be entered impersonally as another entry in the correspondence boxes and be detached from its context, or should it remain with related documents and be included based on the content in a specific thematic section? What if there is no section corresponding to its content, or worse, if it could fit into more than one thematic section?

Many of these difficulties were overcome, and some were not. Clearly, there were and still are reflections, mistakes, and omissions, and there are certainly areas for improvement in the recording and classification, especially in the correspondence section, which has a large volume and greater dispersion that needs clarifi-

cation. However, the result gives a taste of the content and variety of the archive even to those unsuspecting, as well as projecting the dedication and good-natured disposition with which we worked throughout the process. The excellent collaboration and enthusiasm we demonstrated with the Board of Directors of the Foundation and especially with Vice President Professor Athanasios Diamandopoulos, who, with his youthful enthusiasm, proved to be a valuable guide during a challenging period in his life, has undeniably yielded dual fruits. Firstly, after many years, Nikolaos Louros' desire for the preservation of his archive was fulfilled, and secondly, another valuable tool was provided to the scientific community.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Οι εκπλήξεις ως «δόλωμα» για εντατικότερη εργασία - Τέσσερις περιπτώσεις από το Αρχείο Λούρου

Χρήστος Π. Μαρίνης

Αυτή η σύντομη εργασία αναφέρεται στις προσωπικές εντυπώσεις του γράφοντος από τη διαδικασία καταγραφής, αρχειοθέτησης και ταξινόμησης του Αρχείου Ν. Λούρου, το καλοκαίρι του 2023, καθώς και στις εκπλήξεις που λειτούργησαν ως κίνητρο για να συνεχιστεί με όλο και μεγαλύτερο ζήλο αυτή η προσπάθεια. Αναφέρονται ενδεικτικά τέσσερις περιπτώσεις πρωτογενούς υλικού με σχετικές φωτογραφίες. Υπογραμμίζεται έτσι η αξία που παρουσιάζει το αρχείο του Ιδρύματος Ν. Κ. Λούρου τόσο για την Ιστορία της Ιατρικής όσο και για άλλα επιστημονικά πεδία, ωθώντας τον εκάστοτε ερευνητή σε έναν γόνιμο διάλογο με συγγενείς και μη, επιστήμες. Τέλος, γίνεται σύντομη αναφορά στις δυσκολίες που αντιμετωπίστηκαν κατά τη διάρκεια του έργου.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά: *Ίδρυμα Ν. Λούρου, νοσοκομειακό όχημα, αλληλογραφία, τέχνες*

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