

# The first announcement about the 1918 “Spanish flu” pandemic in Greece through the writings of the pioneer newspaper “Thessalia” almost a century ago

*La pandemia di “influenza spagnola” nel 1918 in Grecia: le prime notizie diffuse attraverso gli articoli del quotidiano “Thessalia”*

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

The local pioneer newspaper “Thessalia”, was firstly released on May 25, 1898, the very same morning, when the Turkish troops have completed their withdrawal from the Mediterranean-Aegean port city of Volos. Since then, circulates continuously, becoming the oldest provincial newspaper in Greece. Almost two eons ago, “Thessalia” became one of the most important newspapers of the Hellenic region, having many correspondents all over Greece and abroad. During the year 1914, the prominent journalist Takis Oikonomakis (Figure 1), a great sympathiser of the common people and pioneer-leader of the labour movement, became the director of “Thessalia” (Figure 2), giving the newspaper a more liberal orientation. Every major affliction concerning the Pan-Hellenic, or local citizens of Volos, had then been a main issue for the newspaper [1, 2].

It was the year 1918, when the influenza pandemic had been widespread from the American continent to all over Europe. Yet, the first wave



Figure 1 - The journalist Takis Oikonomakis during 1918. Zimeri’s archive.

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Figure 2 - "Thessalia's" premises from 1898 since the mid 20th century. Zimeri's archive.

of the flu had largely gone unnoticed during the spring and summer of 1918. The spring wave did not even receive a mention in the index of 1918 volume of the journal of "The American Medical Association". The disease, at the beginning had been mild, the mortality was not unusually high, and the world had been preoccupied with the fifth year of the 1st World War. However influenza was brewing quietly, with localized outbreaks inside the U.S.A. military camps in early 1918. By April of the same year, the disease had been spread to France, most probably being carried there by the American troops. At the end of April, influenza reached neutral Spain where the disease was widely publicized, "*A strange form of disease of epidemic character has appeared in Madrid*". Influenza then, acquired its name, "The Spanish Flu". Britain, Germany, Switzerland, and Poland were the next countries for the flu to be spread. By May 1818, "Spanish flu" had reached Greece [3]. The newspaper "Thessalia" was the first to announce its arrival, watching closely its dissemination [4].

*"Thessalia's" newspaper articles about the Spanish flu during 1918*

On July 19th of the year 1918, in an article entitled "Spanish flu" (Figure 3), we have the first recorded reference for the appearance of the influenza pandemic in Greece. It was at the Peloponnesian town of Patra, where a few days earlier, a flu outbreak had shown its malignant character. Physicians of the era had recognized the flu's similarity



Figure 3 - "Thessalia's" first announcement for the "Spanish Flu. July 19th, 1918, Thessalia: archive.

to that which had been occurred in Spain [5-6]. About 25 days earlier inside a tobacco factory five boxes arrived from Salonika. From the next day of the opening of the boxes, factory's Director, had felt ill from the disease, and four days later died. The following day a worker had died, while most workers of the factory, if not all, became ill by the flu [5].

The second deadly autumn wave of the Spanish flu, probably caused by a mutated strain of the virus, had lasted six weeks. The mortality rates were extremely high and the variety of symptoms excluded no organ.

Nasal haemorrhage, pneumonia, encephalitis, temperature as high as 40 degrees, miscarriage, early labour, pulmonary oedema, ruptured muscles of the rectum, swollen ankles, mimic nephritis, blood-streaked urine, and coma were among some serious defects forming some deadly clusters of symptomatology [3]. Finally the world took notice and "Thessalia" newspaper, was once more the shrine of information for the people to

protect themselves. The first two deaths of the second wave, were reported at the beginning of October in the area of “Trikala”, and “Thessalia” immediately noted the physicians assembly in the town [7].

The next day, October the 6th, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, had taken under serious consideration the worldwide spread of the “Spanish flu” pandemic and issued an informative telegram. Although the city of Volos was alarmed by the fact of the two dead citizens, and measures were taken, “Thessalia” published the whole telegram, *“The disease germs enter the body through the mouth, and generally from the respiratory system. Frequent gargles, mainly with an oxygenated water and antiseptic cream, may have some preventive action. The disease spreads by coughs and transmitted by air. Therefore it is recommended the avoidance of mentally stress and overwork, as well as concentrations of each kind. All schools must be close, and meticulous maintenance of cleanliness of lingerie and hands is proposed. In particular, it is highly recommended to avoid close contact with every person who displays flu symptoms”* [8]. Two days later “Thessalia” had announced the precautionary measures that had been taken all over the cities of Volos and Larisa [9].

An influenza-phobia was spread among the common people. Before a chaotic situation to appear, the prefect of Magnesia, the prefecture in which Volos belongs, had announced strict regulations to be followed. It was October the 18th when “Thessalia” published the announcement, *“All schools, public and private are to be closed for 15 days. Instructions against the flu are to be provided to pupils. Prohibition of pedestrian traffic between 17.00 hours and 05.00 hours in the morning. Prohibition of any assembly, punished with immediate arrest”* [10]. Some days later a more medical announcement had reached “Thessalia’s” headquarters, in an attempt to minimize the flies’ role as an epidemic vector, *“To fight the flies, a mixture of 300 drams (1 dram is almost equal to 3 grams) of water, 180 drams of milk and 60 drams of lyzopharm (cosmetic of the era) must be placed within basins inside halls and rooms”* [11].

It was November the 10th, when “Thessalia” had announced a painful summary, *“In Magnesia 179 cases of “Spanish flu had been recorded, 86 of them were fatal. At the village of Cannalia Magnesias, 41 patients died after receiving no medical care due to the expulsion of their physician. The flu outbreak at Trikala*

*caused more than 50 deaths”* [12]. The fear to catch the flu was so great, that every death had to be demystified. During December the 14th, “Thessalia” wrote, *“Three new cases of Spanish flu were announced. Four deaths occurred yesterday at the city of Volos, none because of the flu”* [13].

“Thessalia”, as a liberal newspaper had also dealt with the social and economical impacts of the flu to the local society. Many articles had been written stressing out the consequences, *“It is not only unjustified the destruction of the small coffee shops, nor of the 300 artists of the theatre that are doomed to endure daily. Shaken is the economic life of the entire city. First of all those who are at risk of becoming victims of influenza-phobia, the employees of the coffee shops. Follow the working classes, who are doomed to suffer the consequences of panic. Why, according to the logic of the police regulations, the tobacco warehouses, factories and in general all the factories, where the labourer earns his bread, are hotbeds of death. The Backgammon checkers and card players of koltsina (local Greek card game), they are all dangerous. How to start to work on the tobacco warehouses, winter, with the Damocles sword (Greek expression for high stress) of unjustified panic? Therefore why to condemn thousands of labourers, out of nothing in distress? And the economic malaise is not the best helper against the disease”* [14].

## ■ CONCLUSION

“Spanish flu”, was widespread inside Thessaly’s District (Magnesia-Volos, Larisa, Trikala) since the first wave of the pandemic during the 1918. The liberal and pioneer newspaper of Thessaly, “Thessalia”, was the very first to announce the appearance of the flu in Greece. A plethora of articles were written, not only clarifying the epidemic, but additionally giving general instructions to the common people, as well as underlining the social and economical aspects of the flu’s consequences. Furthermore, the editorial board, had tried to awaken the citizens of Volos, in order not to fear the influenza. “Thessalia” had left its stigma, not only by fathom in the flu, but also by criticizing the strict orders given by the helpless and fearful Greek state.

*Keywords:* Spanish Flu, Thessaly district, Thessalia, Volos, Oikonomakis.

## SUMMARY

A local pioneer newspaper, "Thessalia", was the first to announce the arrival of "Spanish Flu" in Greece. It was July 19th 1918 when an epidemic outbreak occurred in the city of Patras. Until then, "Thessalia"

had dealt in depth with the flu pandemic in the Greek district of Thessaly, informing the readers of the measures taken, as well as the social and economic aspects of the flu.

## RIASSUNTO

*Il quotidiano locale Thessalia fu il primo a diffondere la notizia dell'arrivo dell'"influenza spagnola" in Grecia. Era il 19 luglio 1918 quando un outbreak epidemico si verificò nella città di Patras.*

*Fino ad allora, Thessalia si era occupato approfonditamente della pandemia influenzale in Tessaglia, informando i lettori delle misure adottate nonché degli aspetti sociali ed economici dell'influenza.*

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