The decision-making processes of historical famine-induced migration movements have rarely been examined in detail. This article discusses such a movement from the Greek island of Chios and into Turkey in the early 1940s using first-hand accounts of famine survivors collected in the period 1999–2009. This article outlines the unfolding famine situation, describes the point at which individuals made the decision to leave or to stay and examines how that decision was implemented. The decision-making involved an elaborate process where pros and cons were assessed, where the wishes of individual family members were taken into consideration and where the long-term wellbeing of the family unit was the most important factor in any decision made. Difficult decisions, some of which may today appear irrational, were made. The article argues that individuals, even in crises situations, demonstrate agency and plan their actions and future, albeit within the constraints of a given situation.

Among the most pervasive historical reasons for the creation of migratory flows and refugees are famines and food crises (Hugo 1984: 23). When coupled with war and occupation, the effects are even more potent. Famines and food crises have continued to be some of the most significant reasons for migration even at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Walker 1990; Akokpari 1998: 214). While famine literature readily and invariably acknowledges the cause-and-effect link between famine and population movement, as well as the effects of such migration, there is little focused research exploring the decision-making processes involved, especially in historical populations (Hugo 1984: 22; Maharatna 2014: 280; though see Ó Gráda 2009: 81–89). The obvious exception is the Irish famine of the mid-nineteenth century (for an overview of the numerous publications on the Irish famine, see Fitzgerald and Lambkin (2008)), although, even in that case, little effort has been made to move from the specifics of that famine to wider links between famines and migration. Much of the famine literature refers to the
‘wandering’ of individuals and how this leads to the earlier death of such individuals, who also contribute to the spread of disease, thus further increasing mortality (Maharatna 2014: 277). Other works refer to selective migration, where, for example, husbands desert their families, leaving behind the most vulnerable to face heightened mortality or focus on rural-to-urban population movements (Vaughan 1987; Loevinsohn 2015: 13). The temporary nature of much famine migration is also emphasized (Hugo 1984: 22; Watkins and Menken 1985: 652; Will 1990; Pitkänen 1992; Findley 1994; Ó Gráda 1999: 104, citing Sen 1981: 98, 205). The Irish famine again constitutes an exception: a significant feature of the migration associated with it was the permanent emigration of both men and women to North America (Ó Gráda 1999: 104–121). In some cases, temporary migrations assume permanency (Hugo 1984: 25). While the extensive migration resulting from food crises is readily acknowledged and explained as a survival strategy, questions relating to why it happens in some regions but not others, and in some groups or households but not others, have not been thoroughly addressed (Arnold 1988: 92; Maharatna 2014: 282–284, discussing Hugo 1984: 27).

Why only a few works have moved beyond description of the observed patterns is easily explained by the absence of relevant sources that would allow us to understand the decision-making processes of individuals and families. In historical crises, it is rare to come across famished individuals who kept detailed diaries, especially when in transit. However, studies focusing on more recent events can use interviews to elicit explanations and understand the thinking and experiences of refugees. Such studies have revealed that the decision to migrate was not taken lightly, but rather was a ‘measure of last resort’ and was arrived at only after all possible efforts had been made to cope with the local situation (Afifi et al. 2012; Kolmannskog 2012; Xun 2013). Thus, important questions relating to famine migration that need to be addressed are: At what point do famine-affected individuals decide to migrate and/or become refugees? What are the decision-making processes for individuals and households? How are decisions made regarding who will leave and who will stay? Unsurprisingly, it is much more difficult to address the above questions for historical populations than for contemporary ones.1

This article examines one such case of famine migration: that of the Greek island of Chios in 1941–44, where there was an acute crisis in the form of a famine. This case has particular significance because this same population had already lived through the very traumatic events of 1922, when thousands of refugees arrived on the island from Turkey (Hirschon 2003). Of these 1922 refugees, 13,000 remained on Chios and rebuilt their lives from scratch there (Vios 1937: 56, utilizing the 1928 census data). In studying the early 1940s famine migration, it is the use of oral histories that provides us with an understanding of the how, why and when individuals and families decided to leave the island and become de facto refugees.2 The significance of the research presented here lies in the fact that the famine survivors interviewed by the author discussed their thinking at the time and explained the process
of making the decision to migrate or not half a century after the events—something that provided them with a degree of emotional distance.

In the remainder of this article, I will present the unfolding famine situation and examine when individuals made the decision to leave or not and how they implemented that decision. It will be argued that the decision-making process was elaborate, including an assessment of pros and cons and a consideration of the wishes of individual family members. However, the long-term wellbeing of the family unit was the most important factor in any decision. Difficult decisions, some of which may appear irrational to an objective observer, were made. The article argues that individuals, even in crises, demonstrate agency and plan their actions and future, albeit within the constraints of the situation.

Sources

The main sources employed here are 20 oral histories collected in 1999 by the author with the objective of gathering qualitative sources relating to the so-called ‘winter of 1941–42’ famine (see Margarites 1993; Mazower 2001; Hionidou 2006). The informants were Chians who experienced the famine and were at least 15 years old in 1941, the year the famine started. Fourteen interviews with individual informants took place (five men and nine women) while six interviews were with couples. Informants were traced through local connections developed during the two months prior to the interviews, which were spent collecting archival sources. Snowballing was used to identify informants; nevertheless, this brought together individuals from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, with diverse experiences and outcomes.

What the quantitative sources and, to a similar degree, the oral histories revealed was that the famine was not confined to 1941–42; rather, a serious food crisis was prevalent on the island throughout the occupation years 1941–44, thus contradicting both the existing historiography and the national collective memory (Hionidou 2013: 289–322). Without prompting, all the informants discussed the escape of Chians from the island and their seeking refuge in Asia Minor. Eighteen informants spoke about the movement off the island. Of the informants, half had either left the island themselves or had experienced the departure of a close relative. The fact that so many of the islanders had travelled to Asia Minor owing to the famine was evidently part of the collective local memory—at least among the elderly locals at the time. However, it was virtually unknown to the wider public outside the island until 2015, when Syrian and other refugees started arriving on the Greek islands—something that prompted the ‘remembering’ and wide discussion of this past (Mpratsos 2016).

When I asked the informants about the famine during the interviews in 1999, I was initially unaware of the movement of civilians to Asia Minor and did not bring the issue into the discussion; it was invariably the interviewees
who raised it, and they did so on their own terms. Furthermore, I did not actively encourage the informants to talk about their refugee experience. Thus, any references to the refugees originated from the informants and demonstrates their interest and investment in the topic. If anything, my presence as interviewer affected the interview in the sense that, although I did not ask the informants to talk about this experience, the very fact of my presence encouraged the informants to mention it (on inter-subjectivity, see Portelli 1991, 1997; Abrams 2010: 54–77).

There is a growing literature on the subjectivity of personal testimonies and oral histories and how this should be considered in the interpretation of collected material. Here it is imperative to emphasize the timing of these interviews. They took place in late 1999, when the years of occupation and especially the famine were rarely discussed in public, except in relation to the resistance movement. In 1999, the collective national memory of the famine had been clearly defined as representing mainly, if not exclusively, the Athenian experience, as was articulated in the late 1940s by a number of authors (Hionidou 2013, 2019). As mentioned earlier, local collective memories had been formed on Chios and elsewhere but these were rarely discussed, at least in public. In order, however, to avoid the extensive reproduction of collective memories, the informants were all selected for their first-hand experience of the famine and I consciously navigated the interviews towards the informants’ personal experiences. Whenever generic comments were made, I would make an effort to ascertain whether these reflected personal experiences or not. So, for example, one of the informants who left the island very early on and, as he confessed, had not in fact experienced the famine on Chios nonetheless made statements about the famine and its causes, essentially reproducing the then dominant national collective memory while contradicting what most of the other informants had said. These sources are thus important because they provide us with the thinking of these people, their reasoning for having done what they did and their experiences in transit and at the reception places. A potential issue is that these informants are exclusively survivors: survivors of the famine and survivors among those who became refugees. We have no first-hand information from those who died either on the island or having left it.

In addition to the oral histories collected by the author, at later dates, other scholars (Makridakis in 2001–06 and Priovolos (I assume) between 2006 and 2009) also interviewed famine survivors on Chios and subsequently published extracts of those testimonies (Makridakis 2006; Priovolos 2009). Along with these interviews, survivors’ diaries and a handful of publications referring to the island have also been used here. It is these that inform us that a total of 18,000 people left the island, of whom 3,500–4,000 came from the town of Chios, the capital of the island (the town population in 1940 was 26,617) (Argenti 1966: 225–245). Ioannes Petrakes estimated in 1945 that there were around 15,000 Chian refugees (Argenti 1966: 53). Some of the informants suggested that a third of the population left (No. 21), others
that half did (No. 17), while still others put the figure at 25,000 (i.e. 33 per cent, No. 20). Therefore, while we do not have an accurate figure of the extent of the exodus, we know that it was significant, involving anything between 20 and 50 per cent of the island population, which in 1940 was 75,833.

**The Famine: Greece and Chios**

From October 1940, Greece fought against the invading forces of Italy. In April 1941, Germany also invaded and the war ended before the end of the month. The occupied country was divided among Germany, Italy and Bulgaria, each occupying different regions (Mazower 2001: 21). Chios, and its neighbouring island of Lesbos, were occupied by Germans. The limited availability of food was evident as soon as Greece was occupied but famine—in the form of significantly increased mortality—prevailed in the towns of Chios and Vrontados from October 1941 to January 1943. During this period, mortality increased 4.6 times in relation to the non-crisis period of 1938–39 (Hionidou 2006: 159–162). While this rate represents the situation in the two towns, the rest of the island also suffered from famine, although it is difficult to quantify its effects. Food scarcity and insecurity continued until the end of the occupation in the summer of 1944. The reasons for this are complex, but include Greece’s historical dependence on food imports; once occupied, a blockade was imposed by the Allies, preventing any imports from taking place; concealment of foodstuffs by the population, who were apprehensive about the prospects of obtaining food in the future; and the imposition of draconian restrictions on the movement of food and population within both Greece as a whole and smaller administrative units. Such restrictions—along with the fear of the bombing of boats and mines—meant that communications between different islands, or between islands and the mainland, were severely curtailed. This was especially the case until late 1942, when some of the restrictions on internal population movement were somewhat relaxed. Moreover, communications within the island were also made difficult because of the confiscation of bicycles, cars and boats by the German army. Petrol was provided by the German authorities only when they believed it was necessary—for example, for fishing on Chios. This was not necessarily the case elsewhere. For example, on Italian-occupied islands, fishing was much more restricted (Hionidou 2006).

Geography had a major role to play not only in the intensity of the famine within Chios (and Greece), but also in the creation of the refugee movement to Turkey. In essence, towns were probably more affected by the famine, but rural areas also suffered. For Chios, its geographic position and proximity to Turkey—the distance between Chios and the Turkish coast being less than four miles at some points—provided a rare avenue to escape occupation, starvation and persecution. While other islands, such as Lesbos and Samos, were also close to the Turkish coast, their experience of moving across was
somewhat different since Lesbos experienced a harsher German occupation than Chios whereas Samos was occupied by Italy in the early years of occupation. The focus of this article will remain on Chios.

Why Leave? Why Not Leave?

After Germany invaded in early April 1941, Greece surrendered and those soldiers who were not taken as prisoners were left to find their way from the Greek–Albanian border to their homes. The German army entered Athens on 21 April, but Chios was not occupied until 5 May 1941. This delay and the chaotic early days of the occupation provided an essential window of opportunity for young men to escape to the Middle East via Turkey. The fact that a Greek army was assembled in the Middle East was widely known and thus it appears likely that the first wave of migrants comprised young men who sought to fight for their country and avoid the widely feared fate of being conscripted by the German army. Most men who left for this reason did so in the early months of the occupation. Those who left later tended to do so as part of a family group, although all able-bodied men who reached Turkey were immediately conscripted to the Greek Middle Eastern Army. The few who left on their own in 1942 and therefore not a part of the early wave, although still evoking patriotism, were also eager to leave hunger and famine behind (No. 8; Priovolos 2009: 236). Those who found themselves ‘noticed’ by the Germans on the island, such as those who were arrested as black-marketeers, also escaped as soon as they had the opportunity to do so (Priovolos 2009: 270).

By the autumn of 1941, families had also started to leave because of the food situation (Calvocoreses 1958: 251–254). Those who left early in this period were those particularly well placed in terms of preparing for and making such a journey:

My brother, my husband, they would go to the villages [to get food] so we managed to get by. When we did not, we got in an old caique and went to Çesme [Turkish town across from Chios]. From there we went to Cyprus ... [my family] were working in the [Chios] port and they knew the whereabouts, where to leave from. We did not see a German [soldier]; we did not see a guard or a Turk. We got in the boat as if we were going to our homes and so we arrived at Çesme; the same day they put us in a boat and we sailed to Cyprus because we had soldiers [men who would be conscripted and therefore they were prioritized] (No. 5, female, born in 1909).

The informant quoted above and her husband originated from Asia Minor, and they and their parental families had come to Chios in the early 1920s as refugees. They therefore had an excellent knowledge of their destination and, it can only be assumed, of the language too. Because her husband was a boatman, they obtained a licence from the German authorities for the boat
and therefore the journey did not cost them anything. Leaving the island so early meant that the informant did not actually experience the worst of the famine, though she did experience the food scarcity that was visible in the summer of 1941. Crossing the Aegean resolved the food issue instantly: ‘We left for the bread and we found the bread’ (No. 5).5 In the early months of 1942, others who had urgent reasons to leave did so:

My father got a cold and became very ill . . . his lungs. There were no medicines . . . . Can a man get better with herbal drinks? And so, we were forced to leave because our boys [her two brothers, who had left five to six months earlier] had told us ‘don’t let him die. If you see that [he gets worse] leave the house, don’t consider anything, leave’; and we left. Maybe we should not have left; anyway, we left (No. 22, Female).

Leaving during the winter months was rarely attempted, as the crossing was dangerous, but, in this case, the imperative of the father’s health determined their departure. Subsequent departures seem to have taken place exclusively during the spring and autumn, when the weather was most appropriate for such a journey.

In 1942 and 1943, there was an exodus of people from the island entirely because of the famine and the extreme insecurity of the food situation. Between March and mid-May 1942, 8,000–9,000 people arrived in Turkey from Chios (ICRCA, Box 9, 18 May 1942). Informant No. 17 left in April 1942, soon after Easter, after he and his family had experienced the worst of the famine but without deaths within the family unit. His wife-to-be, whom he met while in the refugee camp, was less fortunate:

Q: Whom did you leave with?
A: I left with my father. My mother had died . . . during the occupation. And my father said ‘If we are to stay here, we will all die my daughter’ . . . . My father came back from the warfront . . . and he used to go around to villages and they had some things [to eat] . . . but then he saw that it wasn’t possible anymore and he said ‘my daughter, we will leave to go to C¸ esme’ (No. 17 (wife of main informant); similar comment from Makridakis’ informants (2006: 39)).6

That the famine, rather than another factor, was the main reason for leaving was emphasized by some of the informants:

Q: When the Germans arrived, when the hunger started, people left from the town . . . .
A: Yes, of course.
Q: To go to the villages?
A: No, they went to Asia Minor, to Turkey.
Q: May I ask why?
A: There, there was food. So, I remember, the [local] bishop said [in a sermon] then, that there are two roads, one leads to the cemetery, the other to the East [Asia Minor]. The Germans tried to prosecute him for that . . .

Q: Who left? The most poor? Or was it . . .

A: The poorest. Yes, they left, and not because they felt persecuted by the Germans (No. 21).

A Red Cross representative at Çesme reported of ‘the fear of dying’ that dominated the actions of the refugees (ICRCA, Box 23, 2 May 1942). Still, leaving was not a feasible solution for all, since the dangerous and illegal trip across was extremely expensive throughout the years of occupation:

Q: Many people left. But many poor stayed here and died. What was the difference between the two? Why those poor who stayed here . . .

A: They could not leave, they did not have the means, they could not leave. Because in order to leave for the Middle East, it was not free. You had either to have golden sovereigns or to give something [valuable] to leave. They [boatmen] were taking all they [the passengers] had . . . It was not easy. You may have been able to find means to leave but it was not easy. It was not free! (No. 14, Male, born in 1914).

The large expense that was involved in making the journey was noted by all the informants (Nos 2, 10, 18, 21, 22; Makridakis 2006: 40, 52, 161), although they showed no discernible emotion when discussing it. The cost deterred some from contemplating the journey, but others resorted to blackmail: the mother of an informant who decided to leave with her seven young children offered the boatman whatever she could afford and demanded to be taken across; otherwise, she told him, she would inform the police of his illicit activities—something that convinced him not only to take them across, but also to make sure that the children were adequately fed for a number of days while they were waiting in hiding on the island for the wind to blow in the right direction (No. 7, wife of informant; see also Makridakis 2006: 31).

Aside from considerations of cost, some Chians decided not to seek refuge in Turkey because of events associated with the 1922 Asia Minor Catastrophe and the effects that they had on individuals and families (Hirschon 1998). One informant explained how her mother took the decision to leave with her young children, including the informant, but her grandmother decided not to go because

she did not want. Because she was a [1922] refugee and they [Turks] had killed her son and her husband and she was scared of the Turks. ‘I would rather stay here and die rather than go there to see again [the place where it happened]’ (No. 7, female informant).

Similarly, informant No. 20, who was himself a refugee in 1922, responded in an exasperated manner to my asking why he did not leave: ‘But daughter, we experienced two persecutions. In 1914 they kicked us out of there . . . and in
1922 again.’ When his sister and her husband considered the option of leaving because of the food situation and raised it with him, he dissuaded them by saying that ‘we were twice refugees. In 1914 and in 1922. Again? Where will we go? Have you not had enough of being refugees?’ (No. 20, born in 1911). Thus, the previous experiences of the 1922 refugees had a significant impact, while, clearly, this was not the case for the Chians who had not themselves been refugees in 1922. Despite this, it seems that the majority of the 1922 refugees did in fact leave, as, according to informant No. 6, who resided in a neighbourhood of 1922 refugees, ‘here in the neighbourhood, all left’.

Informant No. 6 and her husband (a childless couple, both 1922 refugees) decided against becoming refugees, despite the encouragement of her elderly mother for them to leave. As her mother was blind, it was understood by all that she could not make the journey. Leaving her behind on her own would have been a death sentence and therefore the couple decided against it. Moreover, the couple were earning a good living at the time on Chios. Similarly, others took the same decision in order to support mothers and grandmothers who could not make the journey and for whom a decision to leave would have a very clear outcome: that of death. Informant No. 3 had observed this happening to his elderly neighbours who were left behind by their children early on in 1941, and thus his and his wife’s decision was to stay:

Q: How come you did not leave? ....
A: I had ... my wife had her mother, she had her grandmother and our houses were adjacent. And I was telling my wife for us to go to the Middle East too. She said ‘Where [how] am I to leave my grandma, where can I leave my mother?’ .... That’s it. That’s why we stayed .... She [the wife] was saying to me ‘how can I leave? They fed me [brought me up], they did everything for me.’ She did not have a father, you see (No. 3. A similar situation is described by Priovolos (2009: 358), though here the elderly relative was a great aunt).

A further reason why families or parts of families chose to stay on Chios was concerns over leaving their wealth, moveable and immovable, unprotected. That this was a major concern is clear in most interviews, whether with rural residents or urbanites. In all cases, those who left appointed guardians of the wealth left behind. When the guardians were not family members, invariably the return to the island brought disappointment to those who had left:

We came back to our house and we found it ... there was nothing left. We did not have time to sell anything [before we left the island]. We got a woman we knew, to stay in the house but she destroyed it. They sold everything. They sold everything and that is not excusable because we had underneath [on the ground floor] a coffee shop and they run that and they played [gambled] at night and they earned golden sovereigns and amassed money from this shop. And despite that, they sold everything (No. 22).
Even in situations where the wealth left behind was modest, similar concerns and sentiments were expressed:

I, ok, in my case, well they [cousins] did not steal from me. . . . Then I used to sell, I sold small items, reels, socks, various things [as huckster]. Even though I was a child, I used to go around, before the war. In 1941 with the war, I used to go around and sell such things . . . and I had two chests full of things. Everything. And the old woman [his stepmother] says ‘give them to your aunt whose husband is away in the sea and they might give us something [in return] when we come back’. And the end was that we came back and . . . of course my cousins survived. Well, never mind, [let’s forget it], never mind (No. 17).

While this informant is not directly articulating any grievances against his aunt and cousins regarding the goods he left behind, the way he expresses himself indicates that the cousins’ survival was linked to the goods but that, presumably, there was nothing in return for him when he returned to the island. And, although he clearly mentions the house that he left behind, he quickly adds that ‘the house was old’ and therefore there was little that could have happened to it. Thus, those leaving had serious concerns about the wealth they left behind, and indicated to me that they understood at the time that looting was the expected outcome if trusted guardians—preferably first-degree relatives—were not appointed. Some did not find such a trusted guardian and so, despite deciding ‘2–3 times to leave’, they did not do so (No. 15). Their fear that their assets would be looted or destroyed was a reasonable one. For example, during the first month of occupation and before the German army reached Athens, looting was taking place both by and of Greeks (Hionidou 2019). On Syros, during an extremely cold winter in the course of the famine, empty houses were broken into and their wooden floors were pulled out and used or sold, as no petrol or wood was available on the island. Similarly, house walls were dismantled in order to obtain the wood that had been used in their construction. Thus, whole houses were effectively destroyed for a minimal return (Nos 3, 4, 1, all from Syros).

As intimated above, the journey across the Aegean was precarious. That it posed significant dangers was known and understood by all: for example, most informants showed a clear understanding of the dangers such a journey involved for the boat-owners. Although the boatmen were able and experienced, with a good knowledge of the Turkish coast, the boats were invariably small, broken (and only temporarily fixed for the journey) and overloaded, as all the decent boats had been confiscated and either destroyed or were guarded by German soldiers. Though the distance was very short, boats remained stranded for days on end until the wind was right for sailing. The journey was made all the more dangerous because such movement out of the island was illegal; the relevant decree by the German authorities, reissued on many occasions, specified execution for those who tried to escape (ANON. 1941; Calvocoreses 1958: 247 Decree of 5 May 1941). This was
not widely implemented, although some boatmen who were arrested were executed (Makridakis 2006: 26–30, 32). Journeys invariably took place during the night and some Chians drowned (Karouses 1985: 89–91; Proodos reported the drowning of 300 women and children (ANON. 1942); Makridakis 2006: 30; Nos 15, 17, 19, 20, 21; Priovolos 2009: 376). The journey was in many ways one into the unknown: people on Chios were not able to communicate with relatives and friends who had left in order to find out the situation in Turkey and thus were unable to judge whether leaving the island was worthwhile. Their decision depended almost entirely on the gravity of the situation in the place of origin. However, the journey was one that most—at least among those older than 30 years of age—had done in the past. Until 1912, Chios was part of the Ottoman empire and its close geographical proximity to as well as its close trade links with the empire’s mainland meant that many Chians had travelled across to work as seasonal workers, servants or boatmen, or just to visit friends and relatives, and therefore were familiar with the coastline, the language and the people (Tsiripina 1999: 77; Makridakis 2006: 32, 29, 32, 59, referring to seasonal migration; Nos 3, 10, 17, 20; Priovolos 2009: 280, referring to local women working as servants in Turkey before and after 1922; informant No. 22’s parental family owned property both in Asia Minor and on Chios prior to 1922). All the first-hand accounts of Chian famine refugees refer to at least one refugee among the group travelling who had knowledge of Turkish and could communicate with the people or soldiers encountered. In many cases, the Turks encountered by the refugees after their sea journey were able to speak Greek.

Thus, the decision-making was complex and evolved over time, with personal assets having been depleted or sold usually by the end of 1941 and certainly by March 1942, and with only irregular food assistance coming from abroad through the Red Cross and via Turkey (Hionidou 2006). Assistance never became regular as it did in Athens from September 1942 onwards, thus maintaining food insecurity throughout 1943 and beyond. That this insecurity was perceived to be long-term is demonstrated by the fact that, when the first consignment of flour arrived on the island in June 1942 and was distributed by the ICRC, a significant part of the population chose to use much of their portion as payment for the journey across to Turkey (Calvocoreses 1958: 255; No. 14).

**Decision-making in a Famine Situation**

What is rather unexpected in the case of Chios—in relation both to World War II literature and to that of famine and, in more recent decades, of climate migration—is the extent to which families left. The literature predominantly identifies individuals, mostly males, as migrants and only rarely do families appear to migrate (Warner et al. 2012: 3–4, where, out of the eight case studies, only in India was nuclear family migration reported; Vaughan 1987). While the Irish famine emigration was family-oriented, it excluded the
very young and the very old (Ó Gráda 1999: 108, 121). Among the Chian refugees, families represented many more incidents of migration than did solitary men. Those men who left on their own were mostly single and migrated during the very early months of the occupation for reasons not associated with the famine. Occasionally, married men also left on their own because of the famine but, in such cases, a discussion took place among household members and a decision was taken as result. For example, when a young married man decided that he could no longer tolerate the food situation, he asked his young wife to prepare a bundle for them to leave. When her father realized, he intervened, arguing that this would not be an appropriate journey for his daughter and posing the question: ‘what has she done to you to take her with you?’ As the father was well-off, he was confident that he could provide for his daughter on the island—something that he would not necessarily do for his son-in-law. The husband’s response was that it was her choice; she chose to stay, while her husband left (No. 8; a similar situation was described by No. 7 (female informant, referring to her parents)). Only rarely were those who left as a result of the famine not family groups. However, when referring to family groups, further explanation is required. These were not necessarily the pre-famine co-residing family groups. Rather, families were reorganized in whatever way seemed best suited to the situation and to the wishes of individuals to either leave or stay. It should be emphasized that some reorganization of households occurred soon after the occupation started, as this was perceived as, and was, a time of crisis: for example, the recently married sister of informant No. 16, whose sailing husband was absent, lived in her independent household along with a ‘young girl’, employed as a servant (or for company, as the informant emphasized). When the occupation started and it was clear that the husband would remain away while the war was ongoing, the young servant was sent home and the recently married woman moved back to her parental home (No. 16).

Significant and extraordinary rearrangements of residence occurred on a large scale in preparation for leaving the island. So, for example, informant No. 5 normally lived with her husband and young son in what used to be her husband’s parents’ house in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the town of Chios. After the couple married in the late 1930s, her parents-in-law resided on the ground floor of the house, while she and her family lived on the first floor, although she emphasized that they ate together. At a very early point of the occupation, her father-in-law died, presumably of starvation. This was probably the trigger for her husband and his brother to decide to leave the island with their families. However, as the informant said:

we left my mother-in-law to her daughter … my sister-in-law came and stayed [with her mother] … when we came back [after the end of the war], she left and went to her house.
While the informant was off the island, her sister-in-law lost her own son to the famine. In another case, the death of a family member seems, again, to have been the trigger for the decision to depart. The female informant of interview No. 17, a resident of the town of Vrontado, left with her father and brother in 1942 following the death of her mother in 1941 from starvation. Having heard rumours that life was easier in Çesme, the father took the decision to leave when he could no longer find food in the villages on the island. The family of three departed on foot to reach the place where they expected to find a boat. However, once there, the informant’s adolescent brother decided to stay, and went to live with his uncle and grandmother in their village, where he worked on the land and tended their animals (No. 17). Another teenage man declined his mother’s suggestion to leave and declared that they would cope on the island (Priovolos 2009: 324).

Farmers left as well as urbanites. Thus, a farmer who lived in Vrontado left with two sons and a daughter, while his wife and their other three children stayed behind. The eldest daughter decided to stay because her fiancé, to whom she had recently become engaged, was also staying on the island (No. 18). The arrangements made by rural residents were usually more complicated because they had more tangible wealth to leave behind, in the form of their land and growing crops. One informant described how, in the process of negotiating to whom her father would leave his land and produce, she got married to the person with whom her father was negotiating. Her father, mother and two young siblings left the island, while she and her newly acquired husband were instructed by her father:

[T]hat while we [the couple] remained in the village [we would] have/manage the land, houses, everything. If we were to leave, [we should] pass on, my father’s land to my sister who was married and lived in the town; all the land he had given to me [as dowry], if I wanted, to give it [while away] to my sister or if my husband wanted, to give it [temporarily] to his father (Zaharenia, female, born in 1922, Priovolos 2009: 283).

Such decisions and movements of individuals from one household to another (as also discussed above) presuppose that extensive discussions took place before agreements were made and the group left. These discussions took place among all the adults and included the young adolescents who wished to decide their own destiny. Furthermore, on many occasions, they had to involve individuals outside the co-resident group, as when a house or land was left with relatives or neighbours (such arrangements were also referred to by No. 3; and Makridakis 2006: 40).

The detail of the planning subsequent to the discussions and decisions was impressive. Central was the unwavering expectation that these refugees-to-be would be returning at some point in time, hence the elaborate arrangements made to protect the property that was left behind, including land, houses and
the goods these contained. In return for taking care of their assets, those who stayed behind were compensated by the ration cards of the urban refugees-to-be and the crops and land of the rural refugees-to-be, which could be utilized by the land’s temporary custodians (No. 14). Nevertheless, the very nature of the crisis meant that it was not always easy to look after other people’s assets:

[Those who stayed behind] were breaking into the houses, would take the furniture and would sell them in the villages; and they would take the china, took [everything]. Because Vrontados [was inhabited by] sailors and they had [goods] that they had brought from earlier times [from abroad] (No. 17).

Deciding to leave was not easy: the fact that only a handful of families left in the second half of 1941, when famine mortality was increasing rapidly month after month, is clear evidence of this. While young men did leave in significant numbers in that first year, families only left following the famine peak in March 1942, with 280 deaths in that month compared with ‘normal’ months of fewer than 50 deaths (Hionidou 2006: 160). Their reluctance to leave was at least in part a result of apprehension about the situation that awaited them in Turkey: ‘[People] were leaving to the unknown. No one knew where they were going’ (No. 22; also Makridakis 2006: 31; No. 8). Compounding this, in April 1942, boats full of refugees that had reached the Turkish coast were forced to return to Chios, only to be sent away again by the German authorities, who refused to allow them back to the island (Argenti 1966: 55; Makridakis 2006: 32–38, 68–69). All informants emphasized the complete lack of communication between the island and the refugees who had already left throughout the occupation years. The only possible communication was oral, and refugees might hear news of their relatives on the island only when people from their villages arrived in the Middle East as refugees themselves.

As noted above, leaving the island was an illegal action. But, while the German army guarded some of the departure spots, their force on the island was far too small to be able to guard them all. Very rarely, the German force actually engaged with the issue of the illegal departure of the population beyond ensuring the confiscation, destruction or guarding of the existing boats soon after their arrival on the island. However, such actions, while effective for the first year of their presence on the island, had little effect in 1942 and thereafter, when famine was presenting a much more significant threat to the lives of the islanders than were the German measures to prevent escape. However, the German measures, combined with the illegality of the move, did contribute to the extreme cost of the passage mentioned above. Most passengers had to pay in kind or with gold—especially from 1942 onwards—while those who left in 1941 managed to cross by paying with—soon to be worthless—currency (Makridakis 2006: 48, 161, 30; No. 14). The timing of the departure was primarily determined by the weather but also by the ability to pay for the passage. For example, many chose to leave when their
crops were growing and it was thus clear what would be available to them—
essentially exchanging those in-the-ground crops for transport across the 
Aegean. In another instance, the arrival of relief in the form of a significant
load of flour distributed to the islanders was used by many to gain passage
across the sea. This calculated and ingenious move ultimately saved the lives
of the poorest sections of the population, those who otherwise would not
have been able to seek refuge across the Aegean, in the summer of 1942.

Discussion and Conclusions

The population of Chios were aware that there was a food deficiency on the
island by the summer of 1941—a serious food crisis by September 1941 and a
deadly famine by October of the same year. Only a handful of inhabitants left
as a result of the crisis before March 1942, following six months of deadly
famine. During that winter, individuals did all they could to survive: they ate
unusual foods, engaged in unusual transactions, bought and sold goods at
very high prices, exchanged goods rather than buying and selling for cash,
begged, took on unfamiliar work and cultivated even the ‘uncultivable’
land. In short, they did all they could to get by. Only after that, having
disposed of much of their moveable and some of their immoveable wealth
and observed hundreds of deaths of fellow islanders, did some decide to
illegally cross the sea to Asia Minor/Turkey and become refugees. They did
so when the weather was appropriate, in the knowledge that many young
men had escaped in earlier months and no dead bodies had consequently
been found in the sea, and having a familiarity with and an intimate know-
ledge of—at least in the cases of those aged 40 and over—the landscape,
culture and language of the people across the sea. They continued to leave
in subsequent months and years because the situation on the island continued
to be insecure in terms of food provisioning and despite the arrival of food-
stuffs via the International Red Cross from time to time. Extensive discus-
sions took place among family and household members regarding the
decision to migrate and who would leave, with individual wishes being re-
spected, even those of teenagers—a rather unusual occurrence in normal
times. The discussions also settled who would be left behind to look after
the house, land, assets and crops. The pre-1940 composition of households
does not seem to have had a discernible effect in this regard, as relatives from
other households were deployed when necessary. This latter decision was
linked to the understanding that refugees would ultimately return when con-
ditions permitted. Indeed, they all did, bar the few young women who got
married in Cyprus and remained there, the young men who were killed in
battle and those who drowned. Thus, those who left Chios did so only when
the food situation failed to become more secure; even though the food situ-
ation did improve markedly after the summer of 1942, by then, the popula-
tion was strikingly worse off than they had been a year earlier, having
disposed of much of their wealth. Thus, the decision to become refugees
was one that was not even considered at the early stages, but was taken when insecurity continued for an unusual length of time.\(^8\) The timing of the decision to migrate was dependent on the specifics of the early 1942 situation and the sustained food insecurity, the illegality of the movement, but also it would have been linked to the past experiences of this population in relation to famines and food crises; thus, the food crisis/famine that resulted from the blockade imposed by Britain and France in 1916 was one remembered and mentioned by some of the oldest informants (Nos 8, 13). This experience must have informed people’s thinking, understanding and assessment of the situation in 1941–43, determining to a degree their responses to the ever-changing situation (see Gatrell 2017: 170, putting forward the argument of the benefit of working historically; also Engler et al. 2013: Figure 1). Equally important would have been the population’s knowledge and familiarity of the land, people, language and culture across the Aegean.

Migration was contemplated when there was neither improvement of the situation nor a discernible prospect of such an improvement. While, for the refugees, migration acted as a safety valve, it did so also for those who stayed behind. This was clearly understood by all: those who left passed on their growing crops, ration cards and other goods to relatives and friends, enabling the finite food supply to feed those who were left behind (Priovolos 2009: 324; No. 17; No. 20). Thus, migration was a safety valve for all Chians, not only those who left (Ó Gráda and O’Rourke 1997: 4, 23). At the same time, it formed a coping mechanism—one put in place after most others, only because, for the Chian population, this was the most ‘costly’ coping mechanism of all (on coping mechanisms and adaptability, see Engler et al. (2013)).

Households, and the individuals within them, appraised the situation continually, shaping their actions, adapting and changing, exploring possibilities, reacting to problems, discussing and making life-shaping decisions. Such acts demonstrate agency, employed in conjunction with historical memories of analogous events—related to both food crises and refugee status—and the lessons learned from such events. These people could not be called either famine ‘victims’ or impotent refugees (Gatrell 2017: 175).

Migration has been seen as the ‘most widespread and significant of contemporary adjustments to famine’ (Hugo 1984: 23, cited in Maharatna 2014: 290). I would argue that this was the case in the past too, as the Irish famine and other cases demonstrate (Engler et al. 2013). Migration was in all probability extremely important in most historical famines: it is the difficulty in observing, measuring and understanding such past movements that makes them invisible. Nevertheless, migration, for most, indicated that an advanced stage of a famine had been reached, not just the beginning of a food crisis. Though, as Ó Gráda has argued, it can be called a safety valve, it can neither be equated with food relief nor be a substitute for it. Moreover, its timing depends upon the specific population’s experience of past famines or food crises: it is this experience that guides different populations to resort to migration at different stages of the famine. Overall, the migration movement
out of Chios was meaningful, organized, well planned and rational for both those who left and those who stayed. The decision was rooted in the individual’s physical capabilities and cultural, historical and personal understanding of the situation they encountered. As the externally controlled parameters of the food situation changed along with their individual circumstances, they appraised and reappraised their actions. Deciding to leave was only one of the decisions they had to make and, although it may not have always looked so to outsiders, the decision to leave was rational and rationalized by those who made it in 1942 and 1943 Chios.

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1. It should be pointed out that not all famine migrants are refugees: temporary migrations can be movements associated with the availability of jobs, while permanent emigration may be linked to employment in the receiving country. Nevertheless, a significant fraction of famine migrations involve refugees or internally displaced persons.

2. I will refer to those who left the island during the occupation years as refugees. This is the term the Chians, the local government and the central government used to describe this group (ANON. 1944a, 1944b). Because, in 1922, large numbers of refugees arrived, many remaining on the island, the term ‘refugee’ was part of the islanders’ everyday language. This daily and widespread use of the term ‘refugee’ applies to the whole of post-1922 Greece, since a fifth of its population were 1922 refugees. The term became a ‘badge of honour’ in later years (Hirschon 1998), but this was not the case in the 1940s. Nevertheless, as all islanders who left in the early 1940s did so for fear of persecution or because their life was in danger—because of the famine—they were indeed refugees, according to the UN definition. For an interesting discussion of the label of ‘refugee’, see Zetter (1991: 39–62).

3. For further information on the informants, see Hionidou (2006: 29–31). For reasons of anonymity, all interviews conducted by the author are noted with a number.

4. The local collective memories of the famine on Syros and Chios are discussed in Hionidou (2013).

5. See also a similar comment in relation to the Great Leap Forward famine (Xun 2013: 160).

6. Q: denotes the question posed by the interviewer.

7. Gatrell refers to the ‘path dependency’ of such refugee movements (Gatrell 2017: 183).

8. Similarly, in Ireland, migration was more common after Black ‘47 rather than during the worst of the famine (Ó Gráda and O’Rourke 1997: 18).
Violetta Hionidou


ANON. (1944a) ‘Το πρόγραμμα της ΟΥΝΡΑ στην Ελλάδα [UNRRA’s Programme in Greece]’. Newspaper Nea Epohe (issue 1), 10 November 1944.

ANON. (1944b) ‘Η Ελεύθερη Χίος χαμηλτίξει τον αντιπρόσωπο της Κυβέρνησης Εθνικής Ενότητας [Free Chios Welcomes the Representative of the Government of National Unity]’. Newspaper Protoporos (issue 19), 29 September 1944.


ICRCA ARCHIVE, BOX 23 (2 May 1942) Secours/Grece 1940–46, Rapports d'activité, Situation Générale, Rapport MacDonald American Red Cross.


