



KINSHIP CIRCLE

Letter Campaigns
Literature
Action For Animals
info@kinshipcircle.org
www.KinshipCircle.org

By Brenda Shoss, 9/3/04

Marijo Anne Gillis is a bomb-throwing mad woman. At least according to certain dignitaries with "Greek" or "Hellenic" in their titles.

On August 10, Gillis raised heart rates from New York to Belgium with her Boycott Greece! protests outside Greek embassies. Government phones buzzed with the burning question: Who is this WAG woman?

Gillis, founder of the New-York based advocacy/lobby group Welfare for Animals Global, Inc., (WAG), is incensed over a sanitation matter involving some 30,000 to 50,000 homeless animals.

The stray population in Athens, recent host of the 2004 Summer Olympic Games, is among the largest of any European Union nation. Worried that packs of starving dogs might offset efforts to showcase a polished Greece, government authorities and the 2004 Athens Olympic Committee quietly sanctioned a clean-up campaign. By early August, an estimated 80% of Athens' strays had vanished.

"Ladies and Gentlemen: Welcome to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games—as Greek animals race for their lives," Gillis states in *Greece In All Her Glory*, her documentary showing cannibalized puppies and carcasses lining gutters. Produced prior to the August 13-29 Games, the provocative film aired worldwide via Reuters News Television distribution.

As athletes converged inside shiny new terrorist-proofed stadiums, journalists began to expose another side of

WITNESS TO A GREEK TRAGEDY



Greece. "Garbage collectors were told to scatter poison meatballs... They're given a bounty for each body they collect. A worker saw a dog still alive being crushed with garbage," The National Enquirer reported on August 9.

More images of emaciated animals, hangings, shootings and poisonings emerged in The BBC, Greek TV News, New York Post, Chicago Tribune, and other media outlets.

"We categorically deny these evil-minded, malicious and unfounded reports that are aimed at libeling our country," an irate Alexandros Kontos, Deputy Agriculture Minister, declared in The Athens News.

Gillis, who lived in Greece for 14 years, told Kinship Circle she was amazed to see "some elements of the press, CNN especially, regurgitating public relations rhetoric. [Greek officials] are orchestrating press tours through two government-subsidized animal shelters. Naturally, when reporters see these model facilities, they don't print anything negative."

Today, many Greek dog guardians reportedly tote an atropine injectable antidote in case their own animals ingest *folia*, the strychnine-laced meatballs tossed into the streets. Ravenous strays easily devour food mixed with rat poison, herbicides, pesticides or ground glass. Before they die, they stagger, foam at the mouth, convulse and bleed internally.

Poisoning animals has been illegal in Greece since 1981. "But it is such a traditional method of controlling the stray population that many local authorities turn a blind eye to the practice and actively engage in it themselves," The Telegraph's David Harrison wrote in *Greeks to poison up to 15,000 stray dogs before the Olympics*.

In early 2003, 18 dogs and 30 to 70 cats were poisoned in the National Gardens and Zappeion to sanitize the reception site for Greece's appointment to the EU presidency. About 50 dogs, 10 falcons, and an assortment of feral cats and wild birds succumbed to poisonings in northwest Kastoria in February of 2003.

In May, another poisoning claimed 35 dogs in the western Athens district of Perama and 30 more in the Nea Halkidona and Nea Philadelphia suburbs. The same month, nine dogs and innumerable cats ate steak bits soaked in weed killer at a schoolyard on the Aegean island of Skopelos.

Closer to the Olympics, eradication efforts around Athens increased. On August 4, 2004, 22 dead dogs were found near the Port of Piraeus and another 80 were discovered in Saronida. Target poisonings were anticipated for "the places where the cycling, football and equestrian events are being held," the Greek Animal Welfare Fund's Carol McBeth told The Telegraph.

On August 16, with the Olympics in full swing, a weeks-old kitten was pulled from a garbage dumpster covered in severe burns and so maimed she had no visible genitalia.

Nothing shocks Gillis anymore. During her Greek residency, she saw poisoned and mutilated animals everyday. At work—a yacht chartering business and equestrian school co-owned with former husband Joe Gillis—she stocked subcutaneous fluids and salt-water syringes to flush out poisons and induce vomiting. "Most animals," she recalls, "died in my arms."

The animal crisis in Greece stems from political and social apathy compounded by a culture of ironies. Poisoning is acceptable, but merciful euthanasia is illegal. Unrestrained reproduction leads to surplus animals. Yet a traditionally macho mindset conflicts with the notion of sterilization. Greek parliament passed a new animal protection law with a provision for adopting strays. But Greeks generally don't adopt. They prefer pet shops and breeders.

The Greek government recently pledged 4 million euros to gather, neuter and vaccinate homeless dogs. If accomplished, a strategic problem remains: Will the dogs be released back into the streets? Or will they be packed into the country's few overcrowded shelters?

Private and civic shelters in Greece function as holding pens rather than rescue facilities. In early 2004, Greek ERT TV 3 aired an investigative piece on the privately owned Samaras Shelter in Salonika, where roughly 300 dogs live in excrement and filth, some with gangrene and maggot-infested wounds, others dying from leishmaniasis.

Gillis shot most of her documentary footage at the Samaras locale, as well as the Tsagaraki Sisters' KEPZ Shelter in Corfu, the Loutraki Shelter, and the (now closed) Thiva Shelter. Pounds are typically makeshift enclosures with cement roofs and open fence walls. The crudely wired structures are erected near garbage dumps, Gillis says, with no heat, air or lighting at night.



"Brutal treatment of companion and farmed animals is a way of life in Greece," Gillis contends. If so, it is a lifestyle established long before the 2004 Olympics. Organizations from the conservative ASCPA, Humane Society of the U.S., and World Society for the Protection of Animals to the more progressive PETA and In Defense of Animals have offered to assist Greece in humane education, nationwide low-cost spay/neuter, vaccination and microchip identification, veterinary supervision, and adoption programs.

Coalition In Defense Of Animals In Greece (CIDAG), an alliance of charities in Greece and abroad, lobbies politicians for stronger laws while working in the trenches to rescue and rehome animals.

Since June of 2003, Gillis alone has journeyed to Greece four times to negotiate with officials and coordinate television and radio exposes. This summer, she met with Minister of Agriculture Georgios Drys and Deputy Minister of Agriculture Alexandros Kontos to outline humane

reforms. While she describes most of her high-profile encounters as "diplomatic snow jobs," Gillis feels the current regime may be open to suggestions.

In the meantime, the situation remains status quo. The Hellenic Veterinary Association, a powerful lobby with undue influence over government policy, rejects spay/neuter aid from volunteer veterinarians in other countries. Athens' Deputy Mayor Tonia Kanellopoulou promised to sterilize and rehome the city's strays. Only one district appears to have implemented the law.

Gillis has a personal stake in broken promises. One morning in 1994, while living on the island of Skiathos, she could not locate her four young dogs. She finally found Princess, Spitha, Queenie and Drakoman leg-tied and arranged in a circle. Each dog had been fatally shot.

The deliberate mistreatment of animals will not go away, Gillis asserts, unless people continue to boycott Greece as a vacation spot, send letters and lobby policy makers. "We don't want to memorialize any more animals," she avows. "We want to see Greece raise her standard of animal welfare."

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- 1.) Stay current with news and action for animals in Greece and around the world: Welfare for Animals Global, www.wagny.org
- 2.) Support Welfare for Animals Global, Inc. Send donations to: Marijo Gillis/WAG; 1775 York Avenue, Apt. 7 H; New York 10128
Donate online: www.wagny.org/contact_us

All photos of animals in Greece are courtesy of:
*WAG
*Members of CIDAG, including: Argos; GAR UK; Kidizo; Marios Fournaris
www.atlantisnet.gr/cidag/index.asp

