

Athina Onassis is the richest girl in the world, but her father has fought to give her a normal childhood. Now that is under threat. He is locked in a battle with four Greek men named in her mother's will to protect the family fortune. Athina just wants to be a trapeze artist. But will she be left to live her own life? Her father and the Greek trustees speak out. Report by Christine Toomey



THE GIRL IN A GILDED CAGE



Above: Athina with her family at Skorpis, her own private island. Top: with her mother, Christina Onassis. Right: on holiday in Ibiza, where she has a villa. She also has retreats in Paris and St Moritz

Her bedroom is not especially large or elaborately furnished. Simple white bookshelves line the walls. On the desk is a computer surrounded by photos of her beloved pony, Arco, the family's golden labrador, Nicky, and pictures of the Spice Girls. Outside on the veranda she keeps pet rabbits. Together with her half-brother and two half-sisters, Athina Roussel, the richest girl in the world, attends a state school.

She used to take the school bus and enjoy rollerblading with her friends in the village. Now she is chauffeured everywhere in an armour-plated Mercedes, with loudspeakers built into the front panels so there is no need to lower any windows to communicate with the outside world. The car is constantly tailed by seven ex-SAS commandos, who also turn down her bed covers and check under her bed every night before she gets ready to go to sleep.

There has been talk of kidnapping and assassination attempts, which has left the 13-year-old heiress to the

Onassis fortune nervous and depressed. In photographs she is often seen to be frowning, and she clings to her father's arm when she appears with him in public. "She knows what is going on. She reads the newspapers," says Thierry Roussel.

Since the death of her mother, Christina Onassis, 10 years ago, Athina has been raised by her father, Christina's fourth husband. He says he has tried to give her a modest, down-to-earth upbringing, in spite of her tragic early life and wealthy background. The family lives in a stuccoed bungalow on the outskirts of a small Swiss village. "For Athina it is very important to have the big support of the family and parents. My children are very close, all of them, and that is the best support they can have in life," Roussel says.

But now the heiress's upbringing is the focus of intense acrimony between her father and the four other trustees of her estate. For the past four years, Roussel has been locked in a power struggle with the Greek ➤➤➤



trustees — known as the “greybeards” because of their collective longevity — over control of his daughter’s fortune. Both sides have launched a blizzard of allegations, ranging from mismanagement and defamation to blackmail and even attempted kidnapping. Caught in the crossfire of this conflict, the life of Athina Roussel threatens once again to turn into a Greek tragedy.

☆☆☆☆

Athina was just three years old when her mother was found dead at the age of 37, in the bath at a friend’s villa in Buenos Aires, in 1988. While the autopsy concluded the cause of death was acute pulmonary oedema, it was widely believed that she had suffered a heart attack due to overuse of slimming medication. Christina Onassis’s battle with her weight, earning her the epithet Thunder Thighs, was an outward sign of her inner turmoil.

As a child, she had been neglected by her mother, Athina Livanos, a beautiful socialite who was said to have been bemused at having produced such an “ugly duckling” of a daughter. Christina was shuttled between hotel suites and homes in Paris, Switzerland, New York and London, in the care of nannies, while her father, Aristotle Onassis, concentrated on empire-building and groomed her elder brother, Alexander, as his heir.

Largely to spite her father, Christina launched into the first of a series of unsuitable marriages at an early age, to an American property developer 28 years her senior. After Alexander died in a plane crash in 1973, however, Aristotle drew closer to his daughter and started giving her more responsibility in the family business. Only Onassis’s second marriage, to Jackie Kennedy, whom Christina referred to as “the black widow”, marred the relationship between father and daughter before the tycoon died in 1975.

After paying Jackie an estimated \$30m to relinquish her claim on the Onassis fortune — contrary to her father’s will, which had allocated his widow just \$150,000 a year — Christina inherited half the Onassis empire, with an estimated worth, at that time, of \$250m. This included investments in 87 companies and factories around the world, cash deposits in 217 banks, a 52-storey New York office block, homes in Athens, Paris, Acapulco and New York, and a vast art collection.

Under the terms of Onassis’s will, all profits from the scores of businesses worldwide belonging to the other half of his estate would be sunk into a Liechtenstein-based public-benefit foundation in the name of his son, Alexander S Onassis. Intent on transforming his reputation from jet-setting philanderer to dignified benefactor of international renown, Onassis wanted the foundation not only to provide sponsorship in education, the arts and many other fields, but also to fund a series of international awards that would be seen to rival the Nobel prizes in Sweden.

Christina threw herself into the family businesses for a while and was appointed the first president of the Onassis Foundation. She handed over the day-to-day management of her half of her father’s fortune to Stelios Papadimitriou — a lawyer and longtime business associate of her father’s, whom he had made a life member of the foundation’s board of directors — together with other members of the board. But she remained closely involved with the running of the empire.

After two more brief marriages, to the son of a Greek shipping tycoon, and then to a Russian shipping agent with a glass eye, Christina was desperate for a child. She courted Thierry Roussel, grandson of the French pharmaceutical magnate Gaston Roussel, with whom she had become infatuated after a brief affair many years before. The couple married in Paris in 1984. The following year, Athina was born.

Cracks in the relationship appeared within months. Christina was distraught when she discovered that Roussel had fathered a baby boy, named Erik, with his long-term mistress, Marianne “Gaby” Landhage, a



Characters in an unhappy family saga: Christina Onassis, 33, and Thierry Roussel, 31, above, were married in March 1984, she for the fourth time. Their wedded bliss did not last. Right:



Stelios Papadimitriou. Since Christina’s death, he has been a trustee of her daughter Athina’s fortune. He now leads a chorus of disapproval against Roussel. Right: Roussel and Athina enjoy winter sun on the fashionable ski slopes at St Moritz



Swedish part-time model and translator, while he and Christina were married. After Gaby gave birth to a daughter, Sandrine, two years later, Christina’s marriage to Roussel foundered and the couple divorced.

Desperate for a second child herself, Christina continued to court her suave ex-husband and went to extreme lengths to make herself more attractive. She underwent painful surgery to have the fat in her thighs removed. She also befriended Gaby, so that Athina could play with her siblings. When she finally realised that there was no hope of a reconciliation with Roussel, she flew to Argentina to stay with friends.

After her death, Christina’s relatives offered to have Athina come to live with them, but the girl has remained with her father ever since. Two years after Christina’s death, Roussel married Gaby. Athina, looking slightly cross as she clutched her father’s hand, was a flower girl at the wedding.

☆☆☆☆

Christina was determined that the Onassis fortune should be preserved intact for her “beloved daughter”. Apart from an annual payment of \$1.42m to Roussel, her will stipulated that the rest of her estate be left to Athina under the management of five trustees, until she reached the age of 18. The trustees appointed were Roussel; Papadimitriou, who was now president of the

Christina was distraught when she discovered Roussel had fathered a boy with his mistress

Onassis Foundation; two former business associates of her father’s, Paul Ioannidis and Apostolos Zabelas; and a fourth Greek named Theodore Gabrielidis. Papadimitriou, Ioannidis and Zabelas were also executors of the will and received one-off bequests of \$2m.

Under the law of Switzerland, where Athina lives, the management of the estate also falls under the overall supervision of the Autorité de Tutelle, a Swiss child-welfare agency.

For a while, the five trustees broadly agreed on the management of the estate. Slowly, however, the bitterness between Roussel and Papadimitriou festered. Open hostilities began when the Greek trustees complained about Roussel’s spending habits and denied him the use of Christina’s private Learjet to fly his family home from a skiing holiday in St Moritz in 1992. They went on to demand that he account fully for the millions of dollars he received from his daughter’s trust each year to pay for her upkeep.

“I am not a charitable foundation. When you have a private fortune you do not have to publish accounts to anyone,” Roussel scoffs. The Swiss authorities initially agreed with him and ordered that Roussel be paid \$6.5m a year from Athina’s trust to maintain his daughter and all the houses and other property left by her mother, without having to explain how the money was spent. They have since ordered that a record of expenditure be kept.

Now it was Roussel’s turn to call the trustees to account. He accused them of mismanagement and called for the books of his daughter’s estate and those of the Onassis Foundation to be opened to independent scrutiny. Since then, he has been sidelined as a trustee and does not attend meetings concerning the management of Athina’s estate.

“We look upon him [Roussel] with contempt. Who is he? What has he done in his lifetime?” says ➤➤➤ 23

Papadimitriou, as he sits flicking his worry beads at the Onassis Foundation headquarters, a neoclassical building opposite Hadrian's Arch in the centre of Athens. Papadimitriou and Ioannidis dismiss Roussel, despising him both as a businessman and as a father. Papadimitriou estimates that, in the 10 years since Christina's death, the value of Athina's inheritance has more than tripled, and the value of the businesses belonging to the foundation has quadrupled in that time.

He says Roussel has threatened to move his family to France — thereby subjecting his daughter's estate to taxes estimated at \$30m a year — if the trustees do not accede to his demands for more money from his daughter's estate. "This is blackmail and against his own daughter's interests," says Papadimitriou.

Ioannidis, vice-president of the Onassis Foundation, stresses, "This is not a dispute between Mr Roussel and us, the foundation. The dispute is between him and his daughter. We are caught in between and obliged to complete our mission until the last moment."

Roussel responds, "Who is Papadimitriou? It is not his money. It is the estate of Onassis. Papadimitriou became president of the foundation by accident, only because Christina died. They [the greybeards] were just part of the staff."

Roussel says his aim is to have the management of his daughter's estate put in the hands of independent financial consultants. "If I wait for her to reach 18, the Swiss authority will have no right to do anything, because she will be over 18. She will be faced with these four gentlemen, who will say, 'Ah, little Athina, you want your money? Okay. But on our conditions.'"

Infuriated by each other's accusations, Roussel and the Greek trustees are suing each other for defamation. The greybeards' complaints against Roussel are due to be heard by an Athens court on October 30, while Roussel's case against them is scheduled for January 5 next year.

The most bizarre twist in the saga came last year with the revelation that the greybeards had employed ex-Israeli secret agents to spy on Athina and Roussel. Swiss magistrates, alerted by police that the family was being spied upon, investigated the case and discovered that the Israeli team had been pretending to be tourists on a mountain-biking tour. In fact, they were monitoring Athina and her father both at their Swiss village home and while the family was skiing at St Moritz.

The greybeards admitted that the surveillance had been carried out on their orders. They said they were checking whether Athina was being adequately protected to fulfil the terms of a multi-million-dollar Lloyd's insurance policy that they, "like any prudent mother or father", had taken out on her life.

Roussel, who had not been informed about the existence of the policy, alleged that the greybeards were planning to have him killed and Athina kidnapped to consolidate their control over the Onassis fortune. After considering the evidence, however, the Swiss authorities concluded there was no question of foul play and praised the trustees for being "mindful" of Athina's security.

Swiss juvenile authorities have begun to consider whether, as Roussel has requested, an independent board of trustees should be appointed to manage Athina's estate. In April this year they issued an order freezing the main assets relating to her legacy until an independent audit can be carried out.

Meanwhile the bitter wrangling between Roussel and the trustees escalates.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

On a visit to the tiny Greek island of Skorpios in 1994, nine-year-old Athina waded out of the turquoise waters of the Ionian Sea and asked if she could buy an ice cream. As a servant ran to the kitchen to fetch one for the little girl, Athina wondered, "What sort of place is this, if you can't even buy an ice cream?" It was her first trip to Greece since her mother's death six years earlier. What



Happiness and sadness of a tycoon: Aristotle Onassis married Jackie Kennedy (above) in 1968. Christina spoke of her stepmother as 'the black widow'. Right: Christina with Onassis at the funeral of her brother, Alexander, who was killed in a plane crash in 1973. Onassis had wanted his son to succeed him, but now he and Christina drew closer



she did not understand was that nobody sells ice cream on Skorpios because it is a private island, her private island, a 500-acre speck of paradise south of Corfu, maintained by a staff of 36 — including 18 gardeners, two maids, three cooks and a number of security guards — at a cost of \$1m a year to her trust.

Skorpios was bought by her grandfather, Aristotle Onassis, in 1963 for an estimated \$100,000. In contrast to his otherwise extravagant lifestyle, he valued the island's simple life. He had an old pig barn converted into a small whitewashed hideaway on its northern shore. Here, he said, "you could forget the rest of the world existed". Often the only sound was that of classical music piped over loudspeakers to soothe the island's small herd of cows — Onassis believed it improved the quality of their milk.

Nowadays, Skorpios is circled every 15 minutes by ferryboats broadcasting a commentary on the Onassis clan to throngs of tourists, who stay on the nearby island of Lefkas. After Aristotle died, and was buried, like his son, in a small jasmine-covered family mausoleum on Skorpios, Christina built accommodation on the island for 30 guests, and a beach-side bar where disco music played late at night. After her death, Skorpios fell into the care of servants, who maintain it only for Athina.

The staff on Skorpios took to Athina: "She is a lovely girl... refined... When Athinula asks for something, she has a sweet voice, not gruff like her mother," said Anastassios Verdis, manager of the island. A return visit

'These gentlemen will say, "Ah, Athina, you want your money? Okay. On our conditions"'

by Athina to Skorpios this November, for a private ceremony to mark the 10th anniversary of her mother's death, has been overshadowed by the feud between her father and the Greek trustees. The trustees have enraged Roussel by refusing to allow his representative in Greece, Alexis Mantheakis, to visit the island to prepare for Athina's arrival.

This conflict has already marred a trip by Athina to Athens earlier this year, in which she had her first taste of the adoration her grandfather received from his countrymen. "Koukla, koukla [Doll, doll]! May you live as long as the mountains," the crowds shouted as she walked up the rocky incline of the Acropolis. One young girl handed her an olive branch, whispering "Yia na thymase tin Athina" — "Remember Athens." Athina carried the branch for the rest of her visit.

As photographers tried to catch images of her against the spectacular backdrop, one old man gave her a framed photograph of Aristotle Onassis, explaining that he had been the shipping magnate's personal photographer 30 years before. Athina smiled but understood only a few of the words until a translator intervened. On the same trip, she called on Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, to receive his blessing.

But the 24 days Athina has spent in Greece since her mother's death have failed to impress the greybeards, who accuse Roussel of isolating her from her country. Papadimitriou says the Athens visit was a publicity stunt engineered by Roussel in advance of the Greek trustees' defamation hearing against him. "He believes that, if she is photographed one afternoon on the Acropolis, she becomes Greek. If she goes and kisses the hand of Archbishop Christodoulos, she becomes Greek Orthodox... If she comes here 25 days in 10 years, she has a connection with Greece. All she can say is 'Kalimera [Good morning]' and 'Ti kanis [How are you]?' snorts Papadimitriou.

The greybeards say they signed an agreement after the death of Christina to give Roussel \$2.3m a year specifically for Athina's education, for her to be raised in ➤ 25

the Greek Orthodox faith and maintain regular contact with her Greek relatives.

This is part of a wider dispute that goes beyond the money wrangles. A highly emotional battle is being waged by the greybeards to sway Greek public opinion about the way Athina is being brought up by her father. The crucial question for them is whether she will one day take over from Papadimitriou as president of the Onassis Foundation, which is now estimated to be worth around \$1 billion.

There is a provision in the statutes of the foundation, stating that its president should be an Onassis descendant, eligible on reaching the age of 21, but Papadimitriou insists he and fellow board members were given discretion, under the terms of Aristotle Onassis's will, to interpret this statute: "The foundation is a public-benefit foundation. It is not a child's toy. We are not going to give the foundation to someone to play with. We would like Athina to become president if she is fit to do it. But from what we see now, she is not prepared... not, repeat not."

The greybeards are unhappy that Athina is attending a state school in Switzerland rather than being educated privately: "How is she going to become president?... The granddaughter of Onassis goes to a parochial school where the villagers are learning to count cows," says Papadimitriou. He does not accept the argument that, in Switzerland, as in many European countries, private schools are often considered preferable only for foreign students or children with learning difficulties. "I feel she is a hostage living in good surroundings but completely isolated," he says.

Roussel believes the greybeards are just looking for excuses to stop his daughter from becoming president of the foundation. He thinks they are concerned about her having access to the records of its business dealings and possibly finding evidence of mismanagement, which he alleges they are guilty of: "One day they will have to account to Athina," he says. He does not apologise for keeping her close to home and limiting the time she spends in Greece. He wants her to have a normal life for as long as possible. "It is very difficult to be the child of a very famous person... They very often finish very badly. They take drugs because they don't have their own personality. What I want is that Athina feels her own personality, and for that the pressure must not be too strong, otherwise she will be crushed."

Roussel's wife, Gaby, has been criticised because of the anguish the couple's affair caused Christina. Some contend that dark-haired Athina sometimes looks awkward and out of place beside her blond siblings. But family friends insist that Gaby makes no distinction between her stepdaughter and her own children. They say that her relatively humble background — her mother was a seamstress and her father a printer — has enabled her to give Athina more down-to-earth values than Athina's own mother could have done.

Christina used to indulge her daughter. As a toddler, Athina had a \$10,000 miniature Ferrari Testarossa, in which she could tear around the living room. She also had her own flock of sheep, complete with yodelling Swiss shepherd, after she showed a liking for the nursery rhyme Baa Baa Black Sheep. Roussel has a different approach. "I think all my children know that the best fortune is the heart, and that is the most valuable fortune they can have — to be happy and to know that money is not everything. It is not a gold statue that you must venerate," he says.

He is talking at one of the family's holiday homes — a palatial villa in Ibiza with eight cascading swimming pools and spectacular views over the Mediterranean. Other holiday retreats include a sumptuous apartment stuffed with paintings by Cézanne and Matisse in the avenue Foch in Paris, and a chalet in St Moritz.

However, Roussel stresses that the family's principal residence in Switzerland, a bungalow on the outskirts of



In Athens a man handed Athina a picture of Onassis; he had been his photographer. But she could not understand his Greek

a village, is relatively modest, in contrast to the 18-room mansion with a sunken swimming pool in the living room, where Athina once lived with her mother, only half an hour's drive away.

But Roussel's own appetite for money does seem to have caused conflict during the course of his four-year marriage to Christina. After paying her new husband \$30m in compensation for leaving France and moving with her to live in Switzerland (for tax reasons), Christina is said to have been exasperated by his demands for money. Roussel sank a small fortune into ill-fated business ventures in Algeria and Equatorial Guinea, West Africa.

Concerned that her fortune was slowly haemorrhaging into her husband's pockets, Christina eventually placed her estate in trust and appointed Stelios Papadimitriou and other members of the board of the Onassis Foundation as trustees.

At one particularly low point near the end of their marriage, Christina wrote a heart-rending letter to Papadimitriou, in which she said she was being pressed by her husband to fire him. Roussel apparently believed the lawyer had too much influence over his wife. Papadimitriou did resign briefly but was reinstated after Christina and Roussel divorced. In the same letter, Christina clearly expresses her concern about her fortune: "I built a house made in cement, with a door to open the house. In this house, I pull [sic] all my capital, and the door was closed, and the job of the protectors is to keep the door closed."

The greybeards have widely publicised this letter over the years, as part of their battle to sway public opinion in

'May you live as long as the mountains,' crowds shouted as Athina walked up the Acropolis

their favour. Papadimitriou says that Athina has been kept unnecessarily isolated by Roussel and Gaby, in order to keep her "subdued and completely subject to [her father's] influence... Her father is robbing her of her Greek identity. How can she possibly assume the reins of her great legacy? We, of course, want Onassis's granddaughter to take over the foundation, but we will never accept a Trojan horse in our midst".

☆☆☆☆☆

Until now, the greybeards have been winning the publicity war in Greece. "They attack Thierry, and he is an easy target," says Pandelis Kapsis, assistant editor of Ta Nea, one of Greece's top-selling tabloids. "But if they start to attack Athina directly, it will be much more difficult to retain the sympathy of the public."

Papadimitriou does not seem to understand this. "The Greek people have great expectations of the foundation. They have none of Athina," he says dismissively.

Kapsis disagrees. "The Greeks, being proud of Onassis, just want to see Athina come back to Greece to continue the legacy of her grandfather and her mother... They would like to see her running the family business, residing in Greece and being a Greek tycoon," he says.

"Onassis was our Ulysses of the 20th century," says Eleni Bistica, a columnist with the broadsheet Kathimerini, whose father was a classmate of Aristotle Onassis. "Athina is the link with this myth. We know this is a great burden. But there is a great love wherever she appears."

Some question whether the achievements of the greybeards are living up to the Onassis legend. Over the past 20 years the foundation has donated \$185m for public benefit works, both in Greece and abroad, according to its board of directors. It has funded the construction of a state-of-the-art heart hospital in Athens, given more than 2000 research grants and scholarships to Greek and foreign students, and funded a series of international prizes in the fields of "international understanding", culture and the environment.

Past awards have gone, for instance, to Ted Turner of CNN, Elizabeth Taylor, Jimmy Carter, Harold Macmillan, Jacques Delors and Vaclav Havel. Some dismiss these awards as little more than a public-relations stunt, bearing little of the international kudos their founder envisioned.

Then there is the question of nepotism. There are 14 members of the foundation's board of directors, which rules by majority vote. Three of them, including Papadimitriou and Ioannidis, have appointed their own sons to replace older members who have resigned, retired or died. The trustees are indignant at any suggestion of preferential treatment for their families. "Our sons were unanimously elected on the basis of their loyalty and qualifications," Ioannidis insists.

"We do not look for any material interest in all this bloody business... We have given our promises to Christina. We accepted the mission to protect the child, and we shall carry out our mission without profit, without money," says Papadimitriou.

According to Onassis's will, the life members of the foundation board are entitled to 2% of the net surpluses. Papadimitriou estimates this means they each receive around \$40,000 a year before tax. As trustees of Athina's estate, they are also each entitled to claim a further \$100,000 a year for their services.

As for Athina, so far she shows little interest in the Onassis heritage. She is more interested in riding and wants to be a trapeze artist. In a rare public comment, the teenager said of her grandfather only that "He was rich. He was loved. I don't know much about him."

Perhaps Roussel has indeed raised the level-headed child he hoped for. But Athina will need an Olympian strength of character to avoid the unhappiness the family wealth brought to the previous two generations ■