LUNACY HAS TAKEN OVER THE ASYLUM

PEOPLE TIED TO BEDS. COCKROACHES. NEGLECT. THESE AREN'T THE BAD OLD DAYS OF PSYCHIATRIC CARE: IT'S HAPPENING NOW, ON AN IDYLLIC GREEK ISLAND, A FEW HOURS FROM GATWICK. CHRISTINE TOOMEY REPORTS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY RIP HOPKINS

From a distance, the sanatorium appears to be a peaceful retreat. Set back from a remote mountain road in the heart of the Greek island of Lesbos, in the north Aegean, this institution for the chronically sick is surrounded by a thick forest of pine and chestnut trees. At the height of summer, colourful bunting marking a Greek Orthodox festival is woven into the vines that frame its wrought-iron entrance. The green and yellow flags are printed with biblical mottos such as "Honour thy father and thy mother" and "Love thy neighbour as thyself".

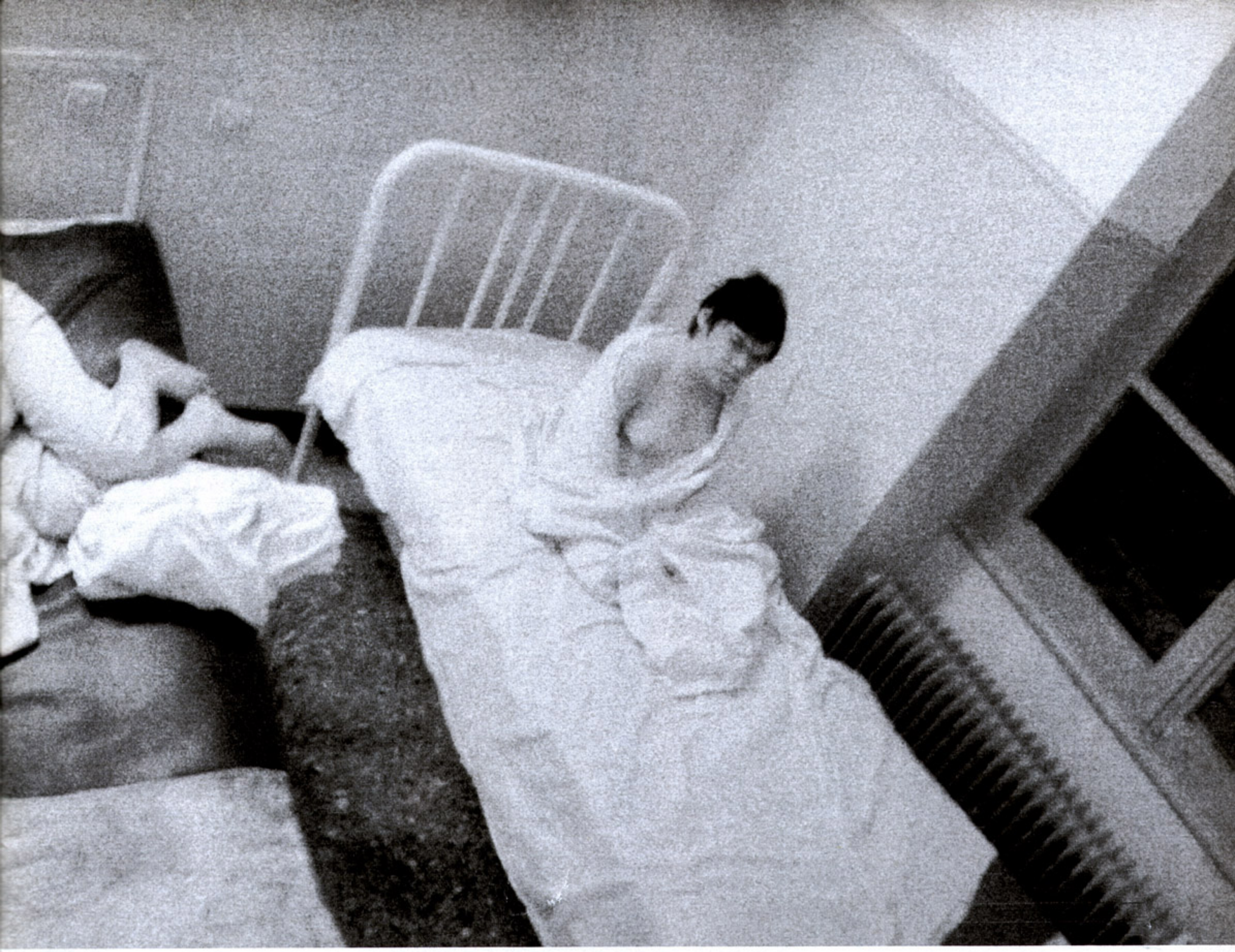
The institution's name, I Theomitor, means Mother of God, but few islanders show any compassion towards the inmates. To walk through the glass and steel doors of this secluded building is to enter an ungodly, forgotten world of despair and degradation.

At night the stench is overpowering. Patients lie naked or semi-clad, curled in foetal positions, moaning. Some lie unmoving in their own excrement. A flick of the light switch causes a strange rustling sound, unidentifiable until a glance at the walls reveals a crawling black mass of cockroaches. The floors are littered with faeces, scraps of food and pools of urine. One woman is strapped to her iron bed with rags "to stop her harming herself". A man lies chewing on his own faeces. Another lets out a constant anguished scream. "He has problems with his gums," says a member of staff.

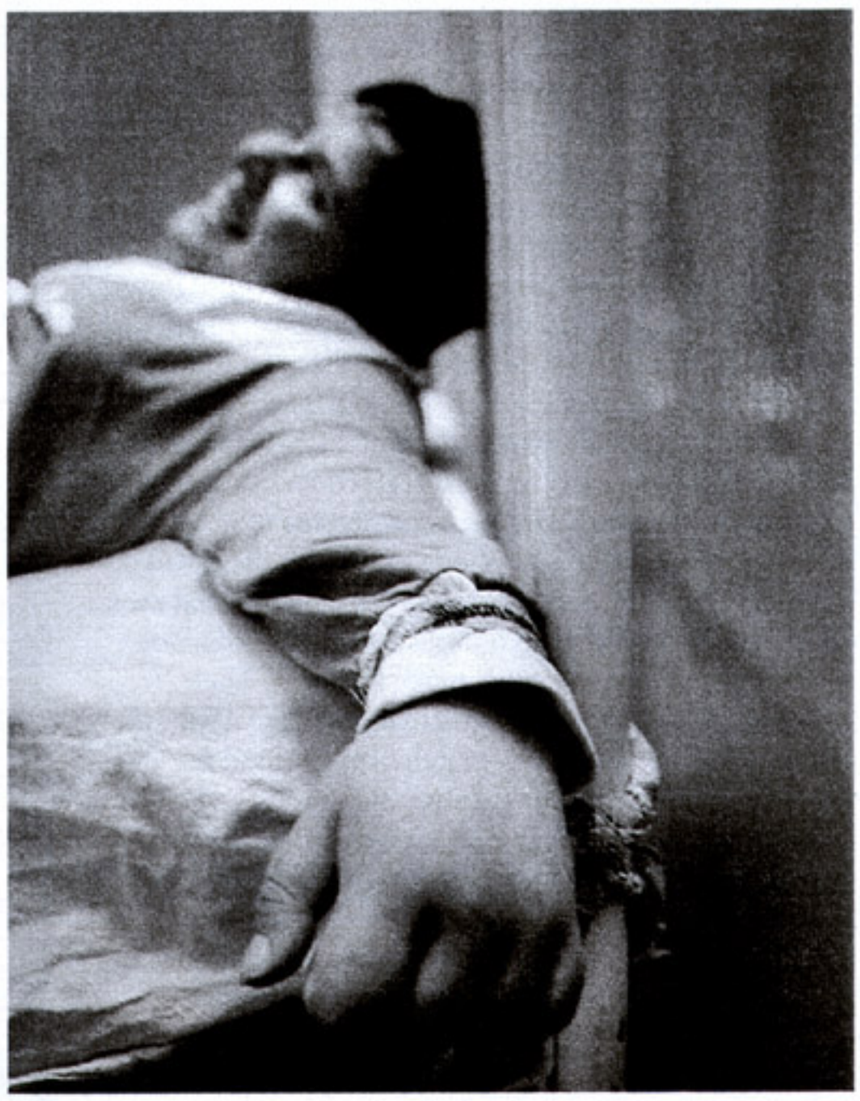
In truth, the staff have little idea of what is wrong with any of their 81 patients, aged between 24 and 95. Some have been abandoned here for two or three decades. Scanty records show some suffer from psychosis, senile dementia and depression. Others are mentally or physically handicapped and are labelled "idiots" or "incapable". Some have simple medical problems such as stomach ulcers; but they are old, or they have no family, or their family has no time for them. "Our job is to do what a doctor tells us," says one of the institution's five nurses. But there is no doctor or psychiatrist in regular attendance, and the nurses and 75 auxiliary staff are left to do the best they can.

More than a decade after Greece was singled out as the only member of the European Community to receive substantial financial aid specifically aimed at improving the country's mental health care, it appears little has changed in small institutions like I Theomitor. From 1984 to 1996 nearly £32m was poured into mental health care in Greece, £9.5m of which was to reform the country's most notorious mental asylum on the island of Léros, where, in the late 1980s, the appalling conditions experienced by hundreds of patients, kept naked, underfed and chained to their beds, were exposed to the glare of international publicity. When the government cleaned up Léros it shifted some of its patients to I Theomitor (despite attempts by those responsible for the latter to deny this). Unseen, they ⟶

AGENCE VU/ PROPAGANDA PICTURES



Left: the locked gates at the entrance to I Theomitor. Above and right: at night, many patients are kept chained to their beds. Often there are only two night-duty staff at the sanatorium, usually with little or no medical experience. Some staff are afraid of the patients, and spend their shifts locked in a room doing crossword puzzles and smoking. Previous pages: Maria, naked and confused, has been left to fend for herself. Interned simply because she is blind, she has since developed mental disorders. Pages 26-27: humiliation and suffering are everyday experiences



are left to languish in conditions of squalor and neglect.

At night the patients are left in the hands of just two members of staff, some of whom have no medical training and work as part-time builders. Some members of staff are afraid. They tell stories of being chased by patients brandishing knives and scissors. So at night, some duty staff pass their shift locked inside an airless room, smoking, doing crossword puzzles and obsessively washing their hands. When they leave this room they take a thick wad of tissue in their hands, through which they touch anything they fear may be contaminated by the patients' infectious diseases. They believe some have tuberculosis and hepatitis. The records on each patient are kept under lock and key, so they have no real way of knowing.

A glance at the most recent entries in the duty logbook gives a sense of the hopelessness the staff feel: the 11.8.99 entry notes that a female patient suffering from diabetes has been experiencing fits and hallucinations: "Doctor called – says she should drink plenty of water – says he will come tomorrow." Three days later, an entry shows that the woman's blood sugar level has risen: "Called doctor again. He has not come." Later the same day, seemingly resigned to the lack of medical attention, another entry simply notes: "Batsi needs his toenails cut."

Those patients with the more severe mental handicaps and psychiatric illnesses are kept in wards on the first floor of the three-storey blue and cream building. Among them are five patients who were transferred from the notorious childcare centre on Léros, where young adults incarcerated since childhood were housed. According to I Theomitor's nursing staff, more than two dozen other patients were transferred from Léros at the end of 1988 but have since died. The five still alive are among those whom the staff refer to as the institution's "heaviest cases"; they are kept huddled together in the most distant wards on this floor.

Pacing up and down the long, bare corridors of the floor above are some who are able to talk about their life in the institution. The stories are disjointed, some clearly full of fantasies and hard to follow. But there are enough consistencies in what they say, and in the admissions of those members of staff who want to see conditions improved, to reveal a shocking pattern of abuse.

Krisoula Magoufi is among those who have been at I Theomitor the longest, since November 19, 1978. Krisoula, 40, was brought to the institution with her sister Panagiota, 43, and brother Takis, 37, by an uncle after their parents died. Medical records have the siblings diagnosed as "mentally retarded"; all have a marked speech impediment and walk with the same awkward gait. Krisoula remembers only fragments of her life before being incarcerated: "I remember my grandmother used to call me a little devil because I used to tease people. I called my uncle an arsehole. I told him I knew one day he would steal my mother's fortune. He beat me so badly I almost died. He told us we were going to visit another relative. Instead he brought us here and left us to rot like dogs... I screamed and screamed that they were cretins and they chained me to a radiator," says Krisoula. As she talks, her brother, who has a permanently startled look in his dark-rimmed eyes, chops the air with the palm of his hand. "*Poli xilo, poli xilo*," he says ("Much hitting, much hitting"). Their gentle sister Panagiota says little. Dressed like a rotund shepherdess, she eventually wanders off to tend the goats and chickens in the institution grounds.

Enquiries in the village near Grevená, in northern Greece, where the siblings lived before being brought to Lesbos, reveal that the Magoufis' mother had once owned around 30 square kilometres of agricultural land. Villagers believe it passed into the hands of the trio's uncle when their mother died of breast cancer several years after their father died. Watching the ➳→

The stories are disjointed, but there are enough consistencies in what the inmates say to reveal a shocking pattern of abuse

Above: Bishop Jakobus Frantzis (centre), president of the board of directors at I Theomitor, with his acolytes. 'Things are not how we would like them to be,' he says. 'But the problems are small and not worth comment'

three together, it is hard to believe they are too mentally disturbed to lead an independent life.

As I stand talking to Krisoula, another patient tugs at my arm: Nikos Georgiou, a towering 26-year-old who was brought to I Theomitor at the age of 16, diagnosed as suffering from gigantism. He leads me to a corner of the corridor on the top floor and stoops to finger a large metal loop in the wall close to the floor. Then he slumps to the floor with his leg against the loop. "This is where they chained me. This is how I used to sit. Do you see? I still have the marks," he says, rolling up his trouser leg to reveal a dark purple welt around his left ankle.

As the other patients watch him do this, several gather round, laughing nervously and looking over their shoulders. "You still have to be careful of some of them here. They don't use chains now. But they scold us and threaten that they will beat us like when we were children," says Nikos. I discover later that the institution stopped using chains to restrain patients just nine years ago, after a soldier doing his military service at a nearby barracks wrote a long article for a news magazine criticising the way the patients were treated. After questions about the institution were raised in the Greek parliament by Stratis Korakas, then head of Lesbos's Communist party, a vice-minister for health and social welfare visited the institution. "He said, 'My dear colleague, you were right, it is terrible. Something must be done.' Nothing was... It is a scandalous case," says Korakas, now a member of the European parliament.

Some of the more mobile inmates, like Nikos and Krisoula, are allowed to visit the small village of Agiassos, 2km away, during the day. They are shunned by villagers who fear that their presence taints the small community, already regarded by many islanders as isolated and backward, with a tradition of intermarriage. Most patients, however, are confined to spending their days wandering the corridors or sitting on their beds doing nothing. To one side of the sanatorium is a large workshop with a fully equipped pottery, built with the aid of EU money in recent years to offer patients occupational therapy. In the beginning, a potter from Agiassos was paid to help patients learn basic skills. Now, most of the time, the workshop is locked and the equipment lies thick with dust; I Theomitor has declared its inmates "untrainable".

On the first floor, patients spend their time standing staring at a faulty television bolted high on a wall in the corridor, squatting semi-naked on soiled blankets on the floor, huddled on their beds, or crouched in their wards rocking to and fro. Some are tied to plastic chairs. Staff admit that at meal times they are so overworked they end up spooning food into patients' mouths "like they are pigs, without allowing them time to swallow".

While some of the staff show a genuine sympathy for their patients, others treat them with sadistic brutality, prodding, pinching and pushing them around, watching with amusement as they crawl around on the floor naked. One male member of staff delights in pulling on a short length of string twisted around the finger of one of the more severely mentally handicapped patients – the middle-aged woman's only toy. As he yanks on the twine he watches her leap from her bed onto the floor on all fours, shrieking in terror.

Another middle-aged woman in a blue floral dress stands shouting by the stairs: "I want to get out of here. I want to get out." She is ignored. One of the oldest patients sits on her bed reciting poetry at the top of her voice. Francesca Kajilou is 83 and was brought in six months ago by her daughter. Her records note she has senile dementia. She is described as "abandoned". "My daughter went to London. She will come to visit me. How is your Queen? Is she still alive?" Francesca asks with a toothless smile. Then she recites a long poem, with passion and great clarity. It ends: "Remember me, my child/Me and my other children/Do not let the foreign lands seduce you/So that you will forget us."

"How much money do you want to take me away from here?" Francesca finally pleads, her frail arms flailing in the air. I cannot look her in the eye again when my interpreter tells me what she has asked. We leave quietly.

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I Theomitor was originally founded in 1939 as a state-run sanatorium for tuberculosis sufferers. By 1972 its patients had dwindled and it was transformed into an institution for the long-term care of the mentally and physically handicapped and put under the same control as a smaller institution in the centre of Agiassos. Now the isolated sanatorium in the forest is known as building B, and the one in Agiassos is building A, or the *palataki* – the little palace.

As he yanks on the twine he watches her leap from her bed, shrieking in terror

The *palataki* is cleaner. There are paintings on the walls. There is a day room full of plants where patients can sit and watch television. At one end of the day room is an elaborate chapel. This is where the administrative staff of I Theomitor work. They include an accountant, a pharmacist, a social worker and the administrative director, George Davliakos, who has worked there since 1970, first as a book-keeper, then deputy director before taking over as director in 1996.

Davliakos, a bustling bureaucrat, welcomes me into his tidy office, offers a cool drink and indulgently unwraps a sticky sweet for a young man with Down's syndrome, whom he calls his "adopted son". He has been expecting me. The day before, I had gone to see the Bishop of Agiassos, president of the board of directors of I Theomitor, of which Davliakos is also a member. Davliakos has a copy of the constitution of I Theomitor open on his desk when I arrive. After giving me a brief history of the institution, he starts to thumb through the document and suddenly declares: "It is forbidden to have crazy people here."

What about the psychiatric patients who were transferred to I Theomitor from Léros, I ask. "Oh, they only stayed a few days. But it was no good, so they were sent away again. It is forbidden to have crazy people here. Our constitution forbids it," he repeats. A careful reading of the rules of the institution shows that it prohibits the admission of "patients with psychiatric problems that will disturb the peacefulness of the institution". Patients with illnesses "that would cause other inmates psychological trauma" are also to be refused. But the rules also require that I Theomitor be "a clean, safe and comfortable residence with proper food and continuous care for personal hygiene and continuous medical supervision". Not much attention seems to be paid to this stipulation.

When I ask Davliakos to explain the appalling conditions, he blames a lack of staff: "On paper we have three doctors – in reality we have no-one. We use a trainee doctor doing military service at a nearby air force base," he says. "This is a very big problem for us." ⟶

The Magoufi siblings, Takis, 37, Panagiota, 43, and Krisoula, 40 (left to right), who have been at I Theomitor since 1978. They were brought here by their uncle after their mother died of breast cancer. Villagers believe that their mother owned land that their uncle inherited after her death. In medical records the Magoufis are described as 'mentally retarded'

It later becomes clear that the presence of the severely handicapped Léros patients is just one of many problems overstretched nursing staff at I Theomitor complain about. "They cleaned up Léros when the world got upset about it, and then ruined institutions like this all over Greece by sending its patients where there were no qualified staff to look after them," said one nurse.

Three years ago, 23 members of the staff of building B wrote a letter to the institution's board of directors complaining about their bad working conditions: the lack of equipment, staff, night guards and proper accommodation for the patients. The board's response was to write back saying: "We consider the tone of your letter to be insulting." They threatened the staff with disciplinary action unless they withdrew their complaints. The staff did so.

When I ask Davliakos about the letter he dismisses it. "In Greece sometimes people fight... It is like when you throw a stone in the water and it makes... how do you say?" "Ripples," I suggest. "Yes," says Davliakos. "There were a few ripples."

The previous day, sitting in the airy cloisters of the Church of the Panayia, surrounded by acolytes, Bishop Jakobus Frantzis had also blamed the poor conditions on the lack of staff: "We don't have the people to do more. I am responsible for asking for more staff from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, but if they do not respond, what can I do? You have to understand they are constrained in public spending." The bishop believes the constraints stem from the country's need to meet the economic criteria set down at Maastricht for joining Europe's monetary union.

"Things are not how we would like them to be... But the problems are small and not worth comment... It is not so different from similar institutions for old people I have visited in America," he continues. "The building is poorer. But I have not seen a big difference in places I have visited, for instance in Washington."

During the course of the conversation, the bishop also attempts to conceal the presence of the Léros patients at I Theomitor: "Don't tell her about the people from Léros," he instructs my interpreter. When she explains I already know that the institution has taken in patients from the island asylum – the health and social welfare ministry says only 10 Léros patients were transferred to I Theomitor – he shrugs. "We did not know what sort of people were coming. If we had not taken them, where else would they have gone?"

When I visit the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in Athens some days later, a beautifully bound book chronicling the transformation of the childcare centre at Léros is waiting for me on the desk of Petros Yiannoulatos, director of the ministry's department of mental health. The book shows dozens of photographs of the so-called "Children of Léros" – many of them adults in their 30s and 40s – smiling for the camera on picnics, sitting around a glittering Christmas tree or enjoying a day on the beach.

"Conditions have improved very largely on Léros," says Yiannoulatos, who declared it "just" that the international spotlight fell on conditions at the asylum more than a decade ago. He explains that the population of Léros was reduced by "de-institutionalising" hundreds of patients and sending them to "small community hostels all over Greece, where they are carefully monitored, taught to cook and look after themselves". Those at I Theomitor, it seems, were moved before such "careful monitoring" began in 1989. It was then that the failure of EU aid to improve conditions on Léros was exposed in the media, and an independent team of experts was sent to the island to supervise the reforms.

He complains that far from becoming more tolerant, Greek society is becoming more fearful of those with mental health problems. Such social stigma derives from a culture that defines individual identity as closely linked to the standing of the entire family unit – so that anyone upsetting that welfare is regarded as a threat. Yiannoulatos, however, blames the media for exacerbating the problem: "Every time there is any major crime... the explanation is always that this person is mentally unstable... creating a general perception of a marriage between mental disease and violence... This is a very difficult situation for us... You can see how difficult our work is."

As for I Theomitor, however, Yiannoulatos says the sanatorium is not classified as a psychiatric institution, where the patients might be held against their will. As such, it is not the responsibility of his department but that of the ministry's department for the aged and persons with special needs. This department in turn argues the institution has no need of a psychiatrist because its constitution forbids the treatment of "persons with major psychiatric disorders". Only after repeated enquiries did a spokesman claim 10 new members of staff "from different disciplines" would be appointed; a local doctor has since started making visits, and the place has been sprayed for cockroaches.

'You go to Greece and sun yourself on a beach. A few miles away this is going on'

Those at the European Commission's social affairs directorate, responsible for authorising EU aid for mental health reforms in Greece, say it was up to the relevant authorities in each member state to monitor how the money was spent: "It is really the member state's responsibility to supervise that," says Luisella Pavan-Woolfe. "The commission has to make sure, of course, that there are proper systems in place so that money doesn't go to 'my friend down the road'... We also have a financial control service and we do spot checks. But we are mainly concerned that the member states have their own systems in place."

As each of those in authority passes the buck of responsibility for the shocking state of I Theomitor, its staff and inmates are left to cope with the consequences. In the winter it snows on the slopes of Mount Olympus, where the sanatorium is situated. Wool blankets covering broken windows were torn down by confused patients last winter, and snow settled in the wards. Most windows have since been repaired, but the future looks grim.

Another of the flags fluttering in the breeze outside bears a Byzantine scripture that reads: "Cleanse not only your face but yourself of iniquity." Greater iniquity than the neglect of those condemned to oblivion less than a hundred yards away is hard to imagine.

Thousands of islanders pass close to the sanatorium on the night of August 15, as they make a pilgrimage on foot to a church in Agiassos for the festival of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Nobody stops to visit, but they all feel they know a little about it. "It has a very nice climate. I hear it is a very nice place for those people with problems," says Myrna, a middle-aged woman from the island's capital of Mytilini, 26km away on the coast. "I hear it is a nice place. The people there have fun," says Maria, a younger woman whose elderly aunt was sent there last Christmas. Another young woman, Erifili, is blunt: "I have no intention of sending a relative there, so what should I care?"

How just it is to turn the spotlight on I Theomitor is best left to specialists to judge. John H Henderson, the former director of the independent team of experts sent to Léros, says the dire lack of staff in the sanatorium is typical of similar institutions all over Greece. "The absence of doctors and trained staff is just so dramatic in the whole of Greece other than in places of urbanisation," says Henderson, who blames their neglected state on a lack of "inspection and protection".

The focus of EU aid in the past has been the country's large mental hospitals, Henderson explains, on the grounds that "otherwise the jam would have been spread far too thin".

Brian McGinnis, a special adviser to Mencap, is more forthright. He stresses that there have been instances of severe neglect of such institutions in every country in Europe in the last decade: "We haven't got clean hands from the past... But this is still simply unacceptable in a modern civilised society. You go to Greece on holiday and are sunning yourself on one beach and a few miles away this is going on."

Dr Raj Persaud, a consultant psychiatrist at London's Maudsley Hospital and the Bethlem Royal Hospital in Kent, says that throughout the history of psychiatry, it has been left to outsiders to press for change. "It is a scandal – these people are there through no fault of their own. When people can't speak up for themselves, an acid test of a society's attitude to human rights is the extent to which it will reach out to protect such people. We are living in Europe in the late 1990s. If we can have this sort of thing going on, then how civilised are we? It is a test, I would argue, of European civilisation." ■