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Homage to Professor Maria Petrou

Being a researcher, a way of life

I had the pleasure to meet Prof. Maria Petrou when I was at the difficult time to start my PhD. Time when one is not certain about the future, not only in the research field but also in the professional career and personal life. Together with my supervisor Dr. Joan Martí from the University of Girona (Girona, Spain), I was lucky enough to establish a collaboration with Prof. Maria Petrou. At that time, she was working in the Center for Vision, Speech, and Signal Processing (CVSSP) of the University of Surrey (Guildford, UK). After some initial emails, we did our first meeting in Andorra, where the Pattern Recognition for Remote Sensing Workshop organised by Maria was taking place [1]. That was the beginning of my PhD and my first contact with Maria, the most outstanding researcher I have had the pleasure of working with. Most importantly, she was a marvellous person who extremely loved her work, being a reference for many people like me that learnt a lot of things from her way of living research.

Prof. Maria Petrou offered me the possibility to work within her research group at the CVSSP, which I visited on a number of occasions each lasting several months. I started to work in the field of *Photometric Stereo* applied to texture classification under different imaging conditions. This was actually the research field of my PhD that was co-supervised both by Joan Martí and herself [2]. Fig. 1 shows a picture with them the day of my PhD viva.

From the beginning I realised that she was very special. It was amazing for me to see how she always had time and good answers for my numerous questions and doubts. This was remarkable, considering that she was supervising more than 10 PhD students and research assistants at the same time, and I was only a visitor in the group. Apart from being fully dedicated, Maria was passionate for her work and found on new research challenges stimulus to learn, think and propose solutions.

During all the years I was working with Maria I really discovered the meaning of doing research and its deepest implications. She was able to transmit to everybody the enthusiasm and energy needed to stay focused on research. She was brilliant and very clever, yet radiating a brilliant sense of humour and a warm personality. I remember once, during my first stay at Surrey, that I got stuck for some days doing a theoretical formalisation. I had a meeting with her to explain the problem and my situation. I clearly remember that the day after she came early in the morning and told me that she had got stuck as well, but in a big traffic jam the way back home! Time enough for her to start writing down things while finishing overnight the mathematical formalisation of the problem we were dealing with. This kind of things, that only researchers can understand, is what impressed me more about her way of doing things. She was able to take care of many people, helping them to progress along their own research path. Not only providing advice on what to do next but always showing the proper way of doing things; invaluable guidance, that nowadays many of us are trying to provide to our PhD students.

After finishing my PhD I also had the chance to collaborate with Maria, at that time working at Imperial College of London, as well as to meet her in several conferences around the world. For a long time and among the numerous challenges she had in mind, I remember specially the Ironing Robot project. She had the ideas very clear and fought hard for several years to materialise this innovative challenge as a key objective in an EU project. After several proposals, one of which our research group was involved with, the project that she had in mind succeeded, being recently founded and becoming a reality (CLoPeMa, http://www.clopema.eu).

Prof. Maria Petrou was involved in the organisation of many research events and acted as Editor and Chair of many International Journals and Conferences, being also awarded with numerous distinctions during her life. Even though her agenda was very busy, she had always time for others and never refused the chance of doing seminars to research groups or even invited lectures to undergraduate or master students. She came several times to the University of Girona, where she left valuable advice, ideas and plenty of good memories to our research staff and students. Prof. Maria Petrou has had a big impact in the research community, leaving a vast research legacy, including books, papers, PhD theses, and unforgettable experiences and moments to all who had the tremendous pleasure to know her.

I will always be grateful to Prof. Maria Petrou for offering me the opportunity to work with her, for her comments, suggestions and ideas which have been immensely helpful to me. I know that working with her helped me to find other research positions and indeed the academic position I am holding nowadays.

She will always be remembered as an outstanding researcher, being a pioneer in many domains. However, what I found even more impressive is that she was a person that really loved what she was doing and dedicated her life to research. She radiated her passion and ways of doing things to many young researchers that thanks to Maria discovered this world. I can affirm that meeting her changed my life and also my way to live it.

References

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Fig. 1. Picture of the PhD Viva. From left to right, Dr. Joan Martí, Dr. Xavier Lladó and Prof. Maria Petrou.

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Maria Petrou, editor and researcher (1953–2012)

I met Maria several times at small workshops in Germany including the Dagstuhl seminar on the theoretical foundations of computer vision [3,4] in Dagstuhl and the 2nd MLDM workshop (Second International Workshop on Machine Learning and Data Mining in Pattern Recognition) [5]. I remember Maria from these experiences.

Maria was the invited editor of the special issue of Pattern Recognition Letters for the 2nd MLDM. I submitted a contribution to this special issue of PRL and my paper was conditionally accepted [6] with the wording that "'The paper will be accepted after linguistic correction." As is usual for non-English-speaking authors, it was difficult for me to prepare a flawless manuscript in English. My final draft was linguistically checked by a native English speaker and the corrected version seemed to be satisfactory. I printed out the final manuscript and sent it to Maria by air mail since this was before the era of online submission through the internet. After several weeks, I received a reply from her with corrections on my printed manuscript and the comment "Please correct again." In particular, the definitive articles needed correcting. Thanks to her linguistic editing, the contents of the paper was much clearer. I should say that Maria is the corresponding author of the paper. Sadly, I will not have any more manuscripts with her correction by red ink.

Maria went to Cambridge after completing her undergraduate degree at Thessaloniki. In banquets of small workshops, participants sometimes talk about unexpected and unusual experiences on journeys to international meetings. During the banquet of the second MLDM in Leipzig at the historic restaurant Zum Arabischen Coffe Baum, Maria told us about the Magic Bus, which she experienced during her studying at Cambridge. Maria's Magic Bus was a regular-route coach service between Victoria Coach Station, London and Thessaloniki, Greece. Maria used this coach when she was student in Cambridge. It took three days from Thessaloniki to London through countries formerly known as Yugoslavia. Many students and young backpackers used this route in the '70 and '80. Maria said that her mother accompanied her to the coach station in Thessaloniki with food and drink for her daughter's long journey to England. I remember her smile over the banquet table at Zum Arabischen Coffe Baum as she described the behavior of backpackers of the '80 as seen through the eyes of a promising young student in mathematics during her long and hard coach journey. This time, she has gone by the one way bus.

Fig. 2. Maria Petrou at Dagstuhl Seminar 98111: Theoretical Foundations of Computer Vision: Evaluation and Validation of Computer Vision Algorithms 15–20 March 1998, Schloss Dagstuhl Germany. Maria Petrou in the second row on the second from right. You can see late Piero Zamperoni in the second row, first from right. With the courtesy of Reinhard Klette of the University of Auckland.

At the Dagstuhl seminar, working groups are usually formed to discuss new and old ideas in the field. This is the tradition and highlight of the Dagstuhl seminar. The participants take home the results of the discussions and ideas, and some start new topics of research based on the discussions of the working groups. At the workshop we both participated in the same working group. Maria led the discussion on the statistical foundations of computer vision and the validation of statistical methods. A current trend in computer vision is the deployment of machine learning to deal with large amounts of statistical data. In this field, the handling of large amount of statistical data and the validation of the methods are fundamental problems. The discussion at Dagstuhl demonstrated Maria's ability to foresee the future trend and direction of pattern recognition and computer vision. In medical image analysis, statistical data analysis is an essential methodology. At Imperial College London, Maria headed the medical image analysis group. We have lost a pioneer with many ideas for new directions in medical image analysis (Fig. 2).

References

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Recollection of Maria Petrou at University of Reading

Maria Petrou joined the NERC Unit for Thematic Information Systems (NUTIS) in the Department of Geography in Reading University on a one-year research fellowship in 1986 [7]. She was funded under a British Alvey IT project to develop a system for the knowledge-based