

THE ARMENIANS IN GREECE

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The Armenians and the Greeks

As for the Greek – Armenian relations, a lot has been reported mainly since the 4th century BC, according to records by Strabo, Plutarch, Herodotus and Xenophon. Greek was the formal language of the Armenian Royal Court, of the state and of the upper social class and after Alexander the Great's conquests, it became more widespread. The Greek inscriptions from Armavir of Armenia inform us that at least until the end of the 3rd century BC the language of the state and of the secretariat was the Greek language. Schools opened and the Greek language was taught there. At that time, the Gods of the Greek Pantheon became known, Apollo – Tir, Athena – Nane, etc.

Christianity was spread by Greek missionaries and until 373 AD the Greek Bishop of Caesarea ordained Armenian Patriarchs who used the Greek language and preached it. The invention of the Armenian Alphabet by Saint Mesrop Mashtots gave a boost to the Armenian nation. Prompting religious and national self-awareness Mesrop's work was adjusted by the Greek Rufinus from Somosato and was influenced by Greek civilization. Mesrop's students were sent to Constantinople (Istanbul), Athens, Alexandria, Antioch in order to learn the Greek language and gain insight of the Greek civilization. Greek works were translated, and from the 2nd half of the 5th century the "School of Ellinophili" (friends of the Greek), famous to the philosophical movement, started its operations and that contributed to the spread of ancient Greek and of other religious testimonies to the Armenian people.

The recent developments, like the Arabic rule the battle of Matzikerk in 1071 and the Setzouki's settlement in the area, led the Armenians to find shelter in Cillium, where the Armenian state had privileged relations with the Byzantine Empire. The princess of Cillium wedded with Theodor I of Laskari, and as George Acropolites wrote, "the Queen of the Armenians married the King".

Later on, the uprisings during the Ottoman rule provided a proof that both the Armenians and the Greeks struggled for freedom, like Miselis Vardijan in the revolution of the Greeks in Spinalonga, in Crete in 1716, like the Jeremian family in 1897 "those families were totally devastated during the Armenian slaughter houses". Rigas cried at in his work "Thourios" (that was translated in the Armenian language at the end of the 19th century) "Armenians and Greeks". In the 7th article of the Constitution of free Greece, it is emphasized "without barring of religion or dialect, Greeks, Albanians, Vlachos, Armenians" whereas the 122nd article recognizes "to the Armenians, the rule of each one's estates".

The Greeks were the first ones to provide support to the Armenians after the Armenian slaughters of 1915-1918. In his letter to Bogos Doubar, King Alexander

emphasizes the solidarity of the Greek Parliament to Armenian's dramatic situation. Also, the Greek State was the first to officially recognize the Republic of Armenia.

Eleftherios Venizelos recommended the foundation of a Pontiac-Armenian State and Chrisanthos, the Archbishop of Trabzon, visited Yerevan in 1919 and negotiated a kind of federation with the Armenians. In January 1920, the Armenian Prime Minister Al. Hatisian and Colonel Katheriotis of the Greek Army signed the agreement's military part. During that time, the guerrillas (rebels) in Pontus collaborated with Andranik, the flagship figure of the Armenian Resistance. Side by side with the Pontiac Rebels, Andranik took part in battles against the Turkish Army. Also, for many years, the Greeks lived in Armenia (Hankavan and Aghtala regions, etc).

After 1922, a large number of Armenians settled in Greece, who mainly lived in Attica (wider region of Athens) but there were also a lot of communities in Thessaloniki, Kavala, Xanthium, Komotini, Alexandropoulos, Orestiada, Didimoticho and Iraklion of Crete. The number of immigrants and refugees was also noteworthy. Those people came from the former Soviet Republic of Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) and found shelter in Greece during the last few years. It is estimated that there were a few thousands of them and most settled in the cities of East Macedonia and Thrace.

The Armenian Communities in Greece

The Recent history of the Armenian communities in Greece can be divided into two time periods. For the first one, which has existed since the time of the Turkish rule, there are some genealogical reports on certain old Armenian families, sparse historical records and of course, the most indisputable are the three oldest Armenian churches in Greece. These are the temples in Iraklion of Crete (that dates back to 1669), in Didimoticho (built in 1735) and in Komotini (built in 1834). However, the fragmented information referring to it should be elaborated and examined thoroughly.

The second period, which is definitely the most creative, begins toward the end of the 19th century. More specifically, in 1875 a few dozens of Armenians settled in Thessaloniki in order to serve as administrative employees for the Ottoman state and for foreign companies. Around that time, a small number of Armenians arrived in Dedeagats (Alexandropoulos) in order to find jobs in the works of the railway expansion between Thessaloniki-Constantinople (Istanbul). In 1891 hundreds of Armenians stayed in Loutraki for a short period of time in order to work for the channel reaming of the isthmus of Korinthos. The number of the political evaders and rebels that resorted to Greek regions (the Aegean islands, Crete and Piraeus) remains unknown. This took place after the dramatic events in Koum-Kapi in 1890, the slaughters of 1894-1896, in the first decade of the 20th century and in 1915.

However, the most important wave of Armenian movements to Greece – regarding numbers and consequences – took place right after the destruction of Asia Minor in 1922. Their number exceeded 80 000 and if we add up the 7000 – 8000 Armenian orphans (mainly from American orphanages and other foreign nursing centers of Turkey) this number reaches 90 000. This population spread around almost over the whole Greek territory, forming smaller or bigger communities out of Athens, Thessaloniki and Trace (Xanthium, Komotini), which managed to survive.

Ever since their first settlement in Greece and until their big repatriation in 1947, the Armenian population had constantly been on the decline. In 1924 a big number of

this population and most of the abovementioned orphans, were channeled into other countries. A year later, after a two-day agreement between Greece and the USSR, 3000 Armenians living in the Soviet Union returned to their countries. In 1931, after another Greco-Soviet agreement, around 8000 Armenians were transferred by Greek ships to Batumi. Therefore, with all these departures, the number of Armenians in Greece just before the war did not exceed 50 000.

But the most dramatic reduction of the population of the community took place in the period between 1946 and 1947 with the big Pan Armenian campaign for the repatriation of the Armenians of Diaspora back to the Soviet Armenia. With consecutive missions from Piraeus and Thessaloniki around 20 000 people migrated from Greece to the Soviet Armenia. If we add up the migrations to other Western countries (Canada and South America) the Armenian community in Greece at the end of the 50s dropped down to 15 000 people.

At the beginning of 1960s, the economic and social development of the Armenians in Greece and Greek immigrants, which had settled in the cities, followed the same path. If we leave aside the few hundreds that lived in expensive districts and had financial security, the majority of them shared the same problems like the Greeks in the outskirts of big cities, among which are Athens (Dourgouti, Kaissariani, Peristeri), Piraeus (Kokkinia, Agios Dionisos, Tabouria, Lipasmata) and Thessaloniki (Kalamaria, Harilaou, Kato Touba, Harmankioi, Sikies).

Moreover, it is an important fact that some of these districts were given an indicative popular name like “Armenika” in Dourgouti and “Armenohori” (“Armenian village”) in Sikies in Thessaloniki.

By the 1960s, the vast majority of the Armenian people were, more or less, financially secured, socially integrated and legally protected (by 1968 everybody had received Greek citizenship). What follows, is an attempt of a more thorough record of Armenian communities throughout the Greek territory.

Kavala:

Until 1922 only a few dozen Armenians lived in the region. After the destruction of Asia Minor, 1,500 Armenians arrived in Kavala. At that time, the headquarters of the “Near East Relief” organization were established there and it managed to put up hundreds of orphans. As time passed, the population of the community was constantly in decline, reaching 800 residents in the 1930s and only 150 residents in 1947. Now, there are only a few dozen residents. Until today, the city has an Armenian church that the community purchased in 1932, which has changed its name from “Saint Paul” Church to Sourb Khach (Saint Cross).

Drama – Serres:

During the prewar period, these two regions hosted around 1000 Armenians (Drama 700 and Serres 300 people), who displayed intense social activity until 1947. However, the repatriation depopulated these regions from the Armenians.

Didimoticho:

According to archaeological findings (gravestones, etc), Armenians have lived in this region since the 17th century. In 1735, the Greeks of the town gave them the church of Saint George, where a new church of the community was built, with the same name in the Armenian language (Sourp Kevork). Until the war their number

reached to 150 people, but after the repatriation this number was reduced to 60 people and today there are only 30 Armenians left.

Orestiada:

The Community there was established in 1920, when together with the Greek refugees, the Armenians settled there as well, after the annexation of the area to Greece. Upon their arrival, their number reached to 100 people but, in time, their number went down to 40 people. Today, there are no more than 20 residents.

Komotini:

According to reliable sources, the Armenians had settled in the city since the 17th century. Most of them were merchants from Adrianople and Odessa and lived in the eastern part of the city, where Sourb Grigor Lousavorich (Saint Gregory the Illuminator) lived. Until 1922, there were 300 people but after the arrival of the refugees from Lanai their number reached to 1300 people. Until 1947 there were 800 Armenian residents but after the repatriation there were no more than 200. Today, around 100 residents have remained in the city but the community is present.

Xanthi:

Until today, it is one of the most active Armenian Communities. By the end of the 19th century, 20 Armenian families had already settled in the city, most of them were craftsmen, merchants and tobacco workers. In 1922, 3000 Armenians arrived in the wider area. Upon their settlement, they immediately created a small church inside a tobacco warehouse and three years later, after they had purchased a piece of land, they founded the church dedicated to Virgin Mary (Sourb Astvatsatsin) that stands until today. Moreover, a school (Kindergarten and primary school) was built in the fore-court. Migrations, hardships and the hard Bulgarian occupation led to the residents' reduction in number, thus by the end of the war in Xanthi there were only 500 Armenian residents, whereas after the repatriation in the 1950s there were no more than 200. Today, this number is cut in half but the community continues to be active.

Corfu (Kerkira):

The first Armenians were recorded in the island in the 16th century. Actually, they were the ones that created the village named "Armeniades" (people from Armenia). Also, we could later see Armenians in Erahadadi and in the village of "Potamos", where there is an Armenian church "Sourb Nigoghos" or Agios Nikodimos (now closed) and in the villages of Knides and Gastouri. It is worth noting the fact that the surname "Armenis" is especially common in the island and this probably has to do with their long-lasting presence on the island of Corfu. After the destruction of Asia Minor, 3000 people along with 1,300 orphans settled there. But within a few years, they were all transferred to other areas of the country. As for the orphans, the majority was transferred to other countries, so the community ceased to exist.

Lesbos (Lesvos):

After the fall of the front in Asia Minor, thousands of Armenians resorted to the island because it was near the coast and they had an easy access. The first Armenian school in the Greek territory operated there after being granted a state license. Because

of the constant immigrations to other parts of the country the community was short-lived and, a little after the end of the war, it ceased to exist.

Siros:

In 1922, more than 600 Armenians arrived in Siros, mainly farmers from Thrace, Pontus and central Asia Minor. From 1923 to 1930, Near East Relief Foundation ran the American Orphanage. Until 1929, thousands of Greek and Armenian orphans were accommodated, educated and cared for in its huge facilities.

Larissa-Volos:

Before the war, 700 Armenians lived in these two cities (400 in Larissa and 300 in Volos). Everybody arrived in 1922. The repatriation in 1947 cut the population down which basically led to the elimination of the two communities.

Peloponnesus:

Peloponnesus was one of the Greek regions, where, after 1922, a big number of Armenians settled. Until the war, there were as many as 1,500 residents. In Kalamata, 800 people lived in the so-called "stalls", 500 in Petra and dozens of them in Aegis, Pirgos, Korinthos and Nafplio. After 1947, these communities scattered and only few residents were left, mainly in Petra.

Crete:

In the most southern part of Greece, Crete, we come across the oldest Armenian settlement in the country. Their presence in the island dates back to the Byzantine years. Also, it was found that the tombstones with the Armenian inscriptions that were preserved belonged to Armenian immigrants' families who lived in the island in the 17th century. In 1669, a wealthy Armenian merchant dealer bought the church of Saint John from Dorion and donated it to the Armenians of Handaka (the old name of Iraklion) who, in turn, dedicated the church to Saint John the Baptist. The church runs services until today. Apart from Iraklion, the refugees, who arrived in the island in 1922, settled in Rethimnon and Sitia (where some Armenians from Corfu also arrived a bit later). Today we find Armenians mainly in Iraklion and Sitia and their population is limited to a few dozens, like in all other communities in the country.

Thessaloniki (Salonika):

It is the oldest organized community in Greece and the only one holding recorded files. The files of the church of Thessaloniki, where official records were kept since 1885, are of great value for the history of the community and, also, for the city of Thessaloniki itself. It was saved after the big fire in 1917 and it has been here for 125 years. The number of the people in the community had reached to 300, but after the arrival of the refugees it went up to 10 000 people. Since 1903, there has been a church dedicated to Virgin Mary. The famous Italian architect, Vitaliano Poselli is considered to have built it. Poselli is also known for most of the architectural monuments in the city. With the repatriation of 1925-1927 and also the immigration to other countries the number of the people in the Armenian community was no more than 6000 just before the war and after 1947 it went down to 1300 people. It is an interesting fact that before the 1920s there were five Armenian schools, whereas

today, when there are approximately 800 Armenians, there are only schools which students attend on a weekly basis. These schools are the branch of the sports club “Homenetmen” of the Armenian Mercy Cross run by the cultural associations “Hamaskain” and the Armenian Youth and Pre-Youth of Greece. Also, the community runs the beautiful campsite in Pefkohori in Haikidiki.

Attica (Athens):

Since the end of the 19th century, there was an Armenian community that counted 200 permanent members but a few thousands stayed there for a small period of time (from one month up to two years) during all those years. Beginning from 1900, the Armenian Church in Koumoundourou Street already ran services and in 1905 the grounds of the current cathedral in Kriezī Street were bought. The church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator was built there (wooden structure) in 1908 and in 1935 it was remodeled to the one as it is today. In 1922, hundreds of refugee boats brought 35 000 Armenians to Attica and they settled in many districts of the capital city, such as Dourgouti, Kesariani, Vironas, Peristeri, Apelokipi, Faliro, Kallithea, Marousi, Kokkinia, Lipasmata, Tabouria, Agios Dionysius, Moshato. Most Armenians reached Dourgouti (8000 people), Kesariani and Vironas (3000 people), Kokkinia (7000 people), Lipasmata (4000 people), and Agios Dionysus (3000 people). Furthermore, Armenians settled in very remote areas of Attica, like Lavrio. Sixteen Armenian schools had been opened until the 1930s. Apart from the city’s Cathedral in the centre of Athens, churches were also built in Dourgouti, Kokkinia and Peristeri. The decline in the population was not an exception even in Attica’s case. There were 35 000 people in 1922, 25 000 in 1926, whereas in 1938 there were no more than 20 000 people. After the repatriation in 1947 and the immigration to other countries, the Armenian residents in Athens and Piraeus hardly reached 8000 in 1960. The biggest Armenian settlement which was in Dourgouti (informal capital city of Armenians in Greece) ceased to exist in the mid 1960s and the majority of its residents, depending upon income and profession, was distributed in the wider area of Attica. The same thing happened in Kokkinia. In our days it is only the churches and clubs that motivate Armenians to gather in these two settlements.

Today, there are approximately 5000 Armenians living in Athens, 3 primary schools and one high school. Also, four orthodox, one catholic and one evangelical church are in service. Finally, the following organizations operate here:

- The Armenian Blue Cross with 5 branches (N. Kosmos, Kokkinia, Kareas-Kesariani, P. Faliro, Athens).
- The Armenian Athletes Association “Homenetmen” with two branches (N. Kosmos, Kokkinia).
- The cultural Association “Hamaskain” with two branches (N. Kosmos, Kokkinia).
- The Armenian Youth and Pre-Youth of Greece with 2 branches (N. Kosmos, Kokkinia).
- The General Armenian Charity Association
- Athletic and Philological Association “Ararat”.

Before we end this historical and geographical flashback of the Armenian communities in Greece which, by the way, is not a thorough register but only an attempt to broach the subject and is certainly deficient, we must take a note of the following.

Since 1991, after the independence of Armenian, a big number of compatriots who, according to some sources are as many as 30 000 to 40 000, migrated to Greece and particularly to the northern regions of the country and gave new life not only to communities that were slowly disappearing (for example Alexandroupoulos, Serres, Kalamata) but also to active settlements like Xanthi, Komotini, Thessaloniki.

The Armenian Community in Alexandroupoulos

After the establishment of Alexandroupoulos as a new city in the coast of Evros around the mid 19th century, a lot of workers came from the Ottoman Empire to the then “Dedeagats” to work in the infrastructure and mainly in the rail works. Among them we found several Armenians, who arrived massively in the town during the period from 1870 to 1875. At that time, they built the school and their first church, dedicated to Saint John the Baptist (“Sourb Karabet” in the Armenian language). Indeed, this church was the first one ever to be built in the town, since, at the time, Alexandroupoulos was only a small settlement of fishermen who lived in the shadow of Ainos.

The Armenian church of Alexandroupoulos is located in the junction of Eastern Thrace and May 14 roads and was built based on the blueprints of Saint John from Mous, where the majority of the Armenians of Alexandroupoulos derived. They put in personal work to build it, since they carried rocks and sand from the beach on their own backs. It was finished in August 1886 and it is worth mentioning the name of “Krikor Astartian” who was a great help. It is a temple made of stone, a basilica without a dome.

Soon, as we previously noted, a school and a hall for public events were built next to the church. During the first years against the wall of the holding of the Armenian Church an outdoor drinking fountain was built, which was constructed with great skill and it was among the first ones in Alexandroupoulos. Above the entrance of the temple there is a marble inscription marking the foundation date and the words “Orthodox Armenian Church”.

Armenian refugees, among them a lot of orphan children, came from Thrace, Pontus and Asia Minor after the Genocide and settled in Alexandroupoulos in the years from 1921 to 1923. The Armenian settlement soon changed from workers in the railway and the port into merchants and manufactures of the town. So, beginning from the liberation of the city in 1920 and until 1940, the Armenian community played an important role in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the city. The poet Garaverents, who lived there between 1924 and 1930, left his indelible marks in the life of the community. However, World War II and the occupation had an effect on the lives of the Armenians as well. Moreover, after the war, many of them left and went to other countries (the USA, South America, Soviet Republic of Armenia, etc) and to other cities of Greece (Athens, Salonika, etc). In the 60s, the vast majority of the Armenians in the city were, more or less, financially secured, socially integrated, and legally protected (they all had received the Greek citizenship since 1968). Although the community had 800 people in 1947, this number dropped to only 50 people by 1990. Nonetheless, after 1992 with the neo refugees from the Soviet Republic of Armenia, their number reached to 2,500 people. Several thousand of Armenians have always taken part in the economic and cultural development of the city, and the old and financially powerful Armenians have offered their support to the region. For

example, the flour industry “Mills of Thrace SA (Mili Thrace) was founded by Onik Atzeman, whereas the merchant Hatzik Hatzikian donated the dwelling where the port police is situated today. A lot of famous people live in the city, like Haboo Maroukian – a coal merchant, Louis Dislian, who is a doctor, the Sarkisian family, the Vartan Kourbanian family, optician’s shop, jeweler’s shop and many others. Even today, the Armenian community in Alexandroupoulos is active and it has become stronger after the arrival of the new refugees from the ex Soviet Union.

Like in all the other cities of Greece, in Alexandroupoulos too, there is an Armenian church and a club where children and teenagers are taught the Armenian language and the Armenian history. There is also a cultural club “Aram Hatsatourian”, a football club “Ararat” and the Armenian Union of the Prefecture of Evros.

Conclusions

The Armenians have managed to survive even until today, leaving their marks to the march of time. They achieved all these even though they found themselves trapped, having to deal with the Genocide, totally banished from their ancestral lands and forced to spread out all over the world. They withstood all the adverse conditions throughout the centuries, because they had the ability to survive as a nation by conserving their religion, their language and their civilization, passing them from one generation to another. The Armenian communities in Greece are a similar case. For almost 150 years they have been promoting and conserving the Armenian culture which the Genocide – an organized plan – attempted to permanently eliminate.

Թեոֆանիս Մալկիդիս – Հայերը Հունաստանում

Ցեղասպանությունից հետո հայ ժողովրդի փրկված բեկորները ապաստան գտան աշխարհի շատ երկրներում՝ ամենուր ստեղծելով ազգային ուժեղ կառույցներ: Հունաստանում հանգրվանած հայերը նույնպես հույն ժողովրդի բարյացակամ վերաբերմունքին արժանացան: Հորվածում հասուկ քննության նյութ են դարձել այդ երկրում բնակություն հաստատած հայերի սոցիալական, մշակութային, քաղաքական, տնտեսական ու կրթական ներհամայնքային կյանքը, ինչպես նաև նրանց տեղն ու դերը Հունաստանի պետական, հասարակական-քաղաքական և այլ ոլորտներում:

Теофанис Малкидис – Армяне в Греции

Выжившие после Геноцида армяне нашли пристанище в разных странах мира, везде создавая мощные национальные структуры. Армяне, нашедшие приют в Греции, также были приняты доброжелательно. В статье особо рассматривается социальная, культурная, политическая, экономическая и образовательная внутриобщинная жизнь армян в Греции и их роль в государственной, общественно-политической и других сферах страны.

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