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THE ARMENIANS OF SAMOS: THE PATH THROUGH HISTORY AND CULTURE OF AN ARMENIAN COMMUNITY ON A GREEK ISLAND

ABSTRACT: This paper deals with the settlement of Armenians in Samos in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly after the destruction of Smyrna in 1922. It goes through the families of Armenians of Samos, their professions and their fate until the early 21st century, when this small community disappeared due to biological decay and death of its members. Finally it examines the ways in which the Armenians of Samos, mainly through their relations with the Orthodox Church of the island, fully integrated into the local cultural system, which has been a key part of their identity.

KEY WORDS: Samos, Armenians, national consciousness, cultural identity, Asia Minor.

RESUMEN: Este artículo estudia el asentamiento de armenios en Samos a finales del s. XIX y comienzos del s. XX, en especial después de la destrucción de Esmirna en 1922. Repasa las familias de armenios de Samos, sus profesiones y su destino hasta comienzos del s. XXI, cuando la pequeña comunidad se extinguió por muerte de sus integrantes. Finalmente analiza de qué modo los armenios de Samos, principalmente a través de sus relaciones con la Iglesia ortodoxa de la isla, se integraron plenamente en el sistema cultural, que ha sido un rasgo clave de su identidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Samos, armenios, conciencia nacional, identidad cultural, Asia Menor.

Samos is a Greek island in the eastern Aegean which from 1834 to 1912 enjoyed a peculiar semi-autonomous status, known as the “Principality of Samos”. It was a principality that paid taxes to the Sublime Porte, whilst its prince governor or *hegemon* had to be an Orthodox Christian and subject of

the Ottoman Empire. Such a polity brought financial, social and cultural prosperity, creating at the same time a cosmopolitan environment on the island. This was the context in which a small Armenian community arose on Samos, which we will deal with in what follows.

The Armenian community on Samos came into being about the middle of the 19th c. and from the start it consisted of only a few members. The Samiot historian Epameinondas Stamatiadis reported that the “Gregorian Armenians” resident at Limin Vatheos, the capital of the Principality of Samos, were two in number¹. Three years later, in 1889, Georgios Stavrides reports that five Armenians had settled and were living in the capital². The sources available to us, which will be dealt with in detail below, tell us that the number of Armenians on Samos increased significantly after the various outbreaks of slaughter against the Armenians at the hands of the Turks in 1909 and in particular after the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922. The first estimation that employed evidence to calculate the number of the small Armenian community occurred in about 1938. At that time in an official document from the Central Council of the Armenians of Greece to the Greek authorities, published by G. Kevorkian, the number of Armenians on Samos is said to be about thirty³.

In the period before the first decade of the 20th century, Karabet Gedikian was of particular note among the few Armenians of Samos. He was a professional photographer, one of the most notable and well-known of those active during the period of the Principality, and operated at Limin Vatheos, today’s Samos Town, at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, a fair number of his photographs with Samiot subjects and landscapes were used for post cards⁴.

Having learned the techniques of photography probably in Smyrna, Gedikian opened his photography business in the capital of Samos during the 1890s⁵. He photographed *hegemones*, plenipotentiaries, metropolitan bishops,

¹ Επ. ΣΤΑΜΑΤΙΑΔΗΣ, *Σαμιακά ήτοι ιστορία της νήσου Σάμου από των παναρχαίων χρόνων μέχρι των καθ’ ημάς* 4, Σάμος 1886, p. 96.

² Γ. Ι. Σ. ΣΤΑΥΡΙΝΙΔΗΣ, *Η Σάμος, γεωγραφική, τοπογραφική, ιστορική και πολιτική περιγραφή της νήσου Σάμου προς χρήσιν της σπουδαζούσης Σαμίας νεολαίας αρρένων τε και θηλέων*, Αθήνα 1889, pp. 32-33.

³ G. KEVORKIAN, *Amenun Darekirk* 7 (1960), Beirut 1959, p. 281. Cf. I. K. ΧΑΣΙΩΤΗΣ, «Οι Αρμένιοι της Ελλάδος. Ιστορία, οργάνωση, ιδεολογία, κοινωνική ενσωμάτωση», *Ιστορ* 8 (1995) 85-112.

⁴ Δ. ΚΟΓΙΑΣ, «Η καρτ ποστάλ στη Σάμο την περίοδο 1898-1920», in: Δ. ΚΟΓΙΑΣ, *Σάμος 1862-1920. Φωτογραφίες και καρτ ποστάλ*, Αθήνα 1999, p. 10.

⁵ Μ. ΒΟΥΡΛΙΩΤΗΣ, «Φωτογραφία και φωτογράφοι στη Σάμο (1862-1920)», in: Δ. ΚΟΓΙΑΣ, *Σάμος 1862-1920. Φωτογραφίες και καρτ ποστάλ*, Αθήνα 1999, pp. 20-21.

intellectuals and teachers and students at the Samos Pythagorean Gymnasium⁶. It seems that he still was alive in 1931, because we have mentions both to him and to his art. He married Maria Hatsatourian⁷ and settled with his family in Samos, where he subsequently lived. Of his students, the most well-known is the Samiot photographer Giannis Spyrou, who earned many distinctions⁸.

Also significant is the fact that towards the end of the 19th century Armenian stone craftsmen, who likewise came from Smyrna, were employed in the building and paving work on the harbour avenue at Limin Vatheos⁹. It is highly probable that some of these workers finally stayed on Samos, together with the few other Armenians already on the island, so that they continued working as builders and stone-workers on the many public and private buildings then under construction in Samos, which at the time was at the peak of its prosperity.

Regarding the events of the Armenian genocide carried out by the Turks and those of the Asia Minor Catastrophe and their impact upon the Armenians of Samos, we possess an important source, in the shape of the archives of the French School of the Roman Catholic Nuns of St. Joseph, who were at the time settled on Samos. We learn that after the slaughter at Adana, in Cilicia, in April, 1909, a fair number of nuns from the community of the Order of St. Joseph at Adana reached Samos. In fact, one of these, sister Marie-Geneviève, who came from the Adana community, sought refuge first in Smyrna, later to reach Samos on 29 March 1922, and left the island on 15 April 1945, was of Armenian descent. Her secular name was Euphrasie Kadifian and she was born in Tokat, in Turkish Armenia, on February 11th, 1889¹⁰.

In the period immediately after the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the burning of Smyrna by the Turks, the Roman Catholic School on Samos served as accommodation for some tens of Armenian children, as did the convent where the nuns resided. Some of the children remained in this accommodation for

⁶ ANONYMOUS, «Φωτογράφοι του περασμένου αιώνα στη Σάμο», *Απόλλους* 5 (1911), pp. 74-75.

⁷ See *Φως* 22 (20 Οκτωβρίου 1902), p. 3.

⁸ See the information given in «Μια συνέντευξη του φωτογράφου Γιάννη Σπύρου», *Απόλλους* 5 (1991), p. 60.

⁹ Αργ. ΠΕΤΡΩΝΩΤΗΣ, «Μάστοροι κτίστες και λαϊκοί αρχιτέκτονες στη Σάμο Α΄. Εισαγωγικά, οι παλαιότερες μνείες, αλλοφερμένοι μάστοροι (I)», *Πρακτικά Συμποσίου «Η Σάμος στα νεότερα χρόνια (17^{ος}-20^{ός} αιώνας)»*, Αθήνα 2002, p. 162.

¹⁰ Σπ. ΓΑΟΥΤΣΗΣ, *Η Γαλλική Σχολή των καλογραιών του Αγίου Ιωσήφ στη Σάμο. Τα Ημερολόγια της προσφυγιάς και του πολέμου*, Αθήνα 2001, p. 70. On the Armenian diaspora, see Jean MECERIAN, S. J., «Un tableau de la diaspora arménienne», *Proche Orient Chretien* 11 (1961), p. 163.

quite some time and were taught by the nuns both the subjects covered by the school curriculum and foreign languages, above all French¹¹. Of these children, who were mainly Gregorian, a few converted and were baptized in the Roman Catholic faith. For example, in January 1927 two such baptisms are recorded, whilst in 1929 priests and nuns of the mission on Samos were decorated by the French state for their support of the Armenian refugees¹².

Some of these children who converted to Roman Catholicism would seem finally to have remained on Samos. It is not surprising that we have record, in March 1940, of the journey from Chios to Samos of a Capuchin priest, «to help the Armenians in their religious duties»¹³. Such information indicates that part of the equally small Roman Catholic community on Samos was drawn from the Armenian converts on Samos, who had sought refuge on the island during the tragic events of August and September 1922, when the Christian population was expelled from its ancestral birthplace and endured systematic genocide at the hands of the Turks.

In view of these events the local Orthodox Church of Samos and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople responded in timely and effective fashion. On 23 March 1924, Constantinos Vontzalidis, metropolitan of Samos and Ikaria, requested guidance from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which was the ecclesiastical authority to which he was responsible, on how he was to deal with the problem that had arisen¹⁴, in the hope of stopping the flow of Armenians to the Roman Catholic church. The Patriarchate replied on 14 April 1924, informing the metropolitan of its decision, published on the 29 March 1919¹⁵, in accord with which Orthodox priests were to satisfy any religious needs of the Armenians, but were also to allow them to take communion during liturgies celebrated according to the Orthodox rite.

This decision was taken by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Orthodox Patriarchate¹⁶ and was put into effect from 1919 in all the areas over which

¹¹ Σπ. ΓΑΟΥΤΣΗΣ, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹² Σπ. ΓΑΟΥΤΣΗΣ, *op. cit.*, p. 50. Cf. Arthur BEYLERIAN, *Les Grandes Puissances, l'Empire Ottoman et les Arméniens dans les archives françaises (1914-1918). Recueil de documents*, Paris 1983, pp. 713-716.

¹³ Σπ. ΓΑΟΥΤΣΗΣ, *op. cit.*, pp. 55.

¹⁴ Μ. Γ. ΒΑΡΒΟΥΝΗΣ, «Ο μητροπολίτης Σάμου και Ικαρίας Κωνσταντίνος Βοντζαλίδης (1857-1926). Συμβολή στη νεότερη εκκλησιαστική ιστορία της Σάμου», *Πρακτικά 28^{ου} Πανελληνίου Ιστορικού Συνεδρίου*, Θεσσαλονίκη 2008, p. 423.

¹⁵ See Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople Archive, Codex 1, 93, p. 765 (protocol n^o. 1242).

¹⁶ Μ. Γ. ΒΑΡΒΟΥΝΗΣ-Παν. ΤΖΙΒΑΡΑ, *Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο και Ιερά Μητρόπολις Σάμου και Ικαρίας 1. Πατριαρχικά Γράμματα 1861-1928*, Αθήνα 2009, pp. 31, 150-151, with comments on pp. 189-190, n. 174, and p. 232, n. 216.

the Ecumenical Throne held spiritual and pastoral jurisdiction¹⁷. The view that informed the decision was that the Armenians already lived among Orthodox and regarded themselves as such, which meant that, in accord with divine providence, they could be permitted to take communion during Orthodox liturgies, since they did not possess their own priests. The decision certainly makes it clear that the Armenians on Samos had grown in number, at least temporarily, thanks to the destruction of Smyrna in 1922. At the same time, the fact that no other Armenians converted and that the Roman Catholic community on Samos did not therefore grow further in the years immediately following seems to suggest that this measure achieved its aim. In the meantime, in 1927 the Greek state passed a law granting Greek citizenship to the children of the Armenian refugees born in Greece and to all Armenians under the age of 22 years¹⁸. This arrangement certainly also held for the Armenians of Samos, who became Greek citizens.

The evidence afforded by fieldwork suggests that during the 1940s it was only in the capital of the island, in Samos Town, that the Armenians lived and that there were only five or six families. The surviving evidence refers to Vahan and Kirkor Abrahamian, son and father respectively, who during the pre-war period maintained a clothes' cleaning and dyeing business in a basement in the Gefyraki area of Samos Town. After the Second World War, they returned to Soviet Armenia, whence they migrated to America, where they finally settled¹⁹. Grigorios Basmatzian was a watchmaker located on the commercial road of Samos Town²⁰. His son, Kyriakos Basmatzian, who died a few years ago, was a teacher of French, holder of a doctorate and university professor. He was resident in Athens and visited Samos only during the summer holidays.

The brothers Vartkes and Sarkis Tsaousian kept a shoe-shop in the centre of the town, on the road leading to the Pythagorio High School. They were

¹⁷ Cf. Ιακ. ΑΚΤΣΟΓΛΟΥ, «Πληθυσμιακά στοιχεία και εκπροσώπηση των μουσουλμάνων-μη μουσουλμάνων υπηκόων στη γενική Διοίκηση Ικονίου (Vilayet-I-Konya) κατά το έτος εγείρας 1317», in: *Οικουμενικός Πατριάρχης Βαρθολομαίος ο Α΄. Δεκαπέντε έτη ευκλεούς πατριαρχείας (1991-2006). Δώρημα νυχής*, Κομοτηνή 2007, pp. 302-305. On the Orthodox of Armenia and on the Haihorum, see Γ. Κ. ΣΚΑΛΙΕΡΗΣ, *Λαοί και φυλαί της Μικράς Ασίας*, Αθήνα 1922, pp. 340 ff., and Γ. Ι. ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΑΔΗΣ, «Χάι-Χου-ρουμ (Αρμενόγλωσσοί Έλληνες)», *Μικρασιατικά Χρονικά* 4 (1948) 37-48. They came mainly from Erzizian and Bithynia. See Α. Α. ΠΑΠΑΔΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, *Ο υπόδομος Ελληνισμός της Ασιατικής Ελλάδος εθνικώς και γλωσσικώς εξεταζόμενος*, Αθήνα 1919, pp. 73-74.

¹⁸ See on this Κ. Κ. ΧΑΤΖΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, «Οι Αρμένιοι της Κομοτηνής», in: Κ. Κ. ΧΑΤΖΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ-ΤΖ. ΚΑΣΑΡΙΑΝ (ΕΔΣ.), *Οι Αρμένιοι της Κομοτηνής*, Κομοτηνή 2009, p. 54, n. 45. See also Παν. ΑΝΤΩΝΙΟΥ, *Η ελληνοαρμενική κοινότητα της Αθήνας*, Μυτιλήνη 1995 (PhD thesis), p. 77.

¹⁹ Μαν. Ι. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΪΔΗΣ, *Σαμιώτικες εικόνες*, Αθήνα 1997, p. 136.

²⁰ Μαν. Ι. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΪΔΗΣ, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

also notable for their prowess in football, since they played in teams fielded by Samos²¹. Of the Armenians who settled and lived on Samos during the years of the Principality²² and after the Asia Minor catastrophe of 1922, the most enduring proved to be the Derderian family, the members of which lived until recently on the island. The father, Horen Derderian, founded a flourishing business processing and selling coffee. Involved in this business were his sons: Artin, who died young in a road accident, Ruben, who was deaf and dumb, although possessing a talent for sketching and caricature, and Ayaz, who held the family business until his death²³. The last descendant was his daughter, Miriam Derderian, and today the traditional coffee-grinding business has closed.

Finally, the case of the Zarizian family, Roman Catholic Armenians who came to Samos from the flames of Smyrna, deserves mention. The last descendant of the family, Stephanos Zarizian, was also French consul at Samos. He bought the building of the Catholic mission to Samos, on the seafront avenue of Samos Town, after the Roman Catholic clergy had left the island²⁴. There are still descendants of this family living on the island today.

It will be clear from all of the above that the Armenians of Samos, although small in number, have shared in all the adventures of their race, from the Turkish genocide and suffering as refugees to attempts to repatriate them to Soviet Armenia after the Second World War²⁵. These trends are to be seen in the other Armenian communities in Greece too, mainly in the large Armenian community of Thessaloniki²⁶, which is examined in the bibliography. The Armenians of Samos lived in the context of a multi-cultural community, which altered rapidly after the Second World War. They co-existed

²¹ Μαν. Ι. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΪΔΗΣ, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

²² Μαν. Ι. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΪΔΗΣ, *op.cit.*, p. 167.

²³ Μαν. Ι. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΪΔΗΣ, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

²⁴ Κ. Φ. ΓΑΡΟΥΦΑΛΗΣ, *Λίγα απ' όσα άκουσα κι' απ' όσα έζησα ... 2*, Αθήνα 1994, p. 145.

²⁵ On the "repatriation" of the Armenians after the Second World War, see Claire MOURADIAN, «L'immigration des Armeniens de la Diaspora vers la RSS d'Armenie, 1946-1962», *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Sovietique* 20: 1 (1979) 81-88. Cf. Ath. ANGELOPOULOS, «Population Distribution of Greece today according to Language, National Consciousness and Religion», *Balkan Studies* 20: 1 (1979), p. 126.

²⁶ On the Armenian community of Thessaloniki, see for example I. Κ. ΧΑΣΙΩΤΗΣ-G. ΚΑΣΑΡΙΑΝ, «Η αρμενική παροικία της Θεσσαλονίκης. Ίδρυση, οργάνωση, ιδεολογία και κοινωνική ενσωμάτωση», *Πρακτικά Συμποσίου «Η Θεσσαλονίκη μετά το 1912»*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1986, pp. 257-284. See also I. Κ. ΧΑΣΙΩΤΗΣ, *Η αρμενική κοινότητα της Θεσσαλονίκης. Ιστορία, σημερινή κατάσταση, προοπτικές*, Θεσσαλονίκη 2005, and I. Κ. ΧΑΣΙΩΤΗΣ-G. ΚΑΣΑΡΙΑΝ, «The Armenian Colony in Thessaloniki», *Balkan Studies* 31: 2 (1990), pp. 214, 218.

peacefully with the Greek inhabitants of the island and maintained their habits, customs, traditions and even their language when communicating with each other²⁷.

The members of the small, but active, Armenian community of Samos shared the historical adventures of the place where they had settled and of the Greek people with whom they lived. Whilst faithful to their traditions, they were nevertheless one of the most progressive elements of Samian society and their presence enriched Samian society. For these reasons, the Samiots even today are eager supporters of the rights of the Armenians and are firm and warm friends of Armenia²⁸.

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²⁷ See on this I. K. ΧΑΣΙΩΤΗΣ, «The Greeks and the Armenian massacres (1890-1896)», *Neo-Hellenika* 4 (1981) 69-109; IDEM, «Shared Illusions. Greek-Armenian Cooperation in Asia Minor and the Caucasus, 1917-1922», in: *Greece and Great Britain during World War I*, Thessaloniki 1985, pp. 142, 174-176. Cf. also Γ. ΤΟΥΣΙΜΗΣ, «Ο αρμενικός τύπος της Θεσσαλονίκης γύρω στα 1930», *Πρακτικά 7ου Πανελληνίου Ιστορικού Συνεδρίου*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1986, pp. 109-118, and I. K. ΧΑΣΙΩΤΗΣ, «Ελληνισμός και Αρμενία: Σε αναζήτηση κοινής ιστορικής πορείας», in: *Μνήμη Αγκόπ Κασαπιάν (1946-1990)*, Thessaloniki 1992, pp. 15-23, where there are also comments on the common fate of the two peoples.

²⁸ See, for example, Ohanes-Sarkis AGAMBATIAN, *Η Αρμενία και τ' αρμενικό ζήτημα*, Αθήνα 1975, pp. 52-53.

DISCUSIONES Y RESEÑAS

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