

GENOCIDE-CYPRUS

THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AND CYPRUS

Setting up a new life on a quiet
island across Cilicia

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Between 1915-1923, the Ottomans and the Young Turks systematically and ruthlessly annihilated over 1.500.000 Armenians, who had for centuries been living in Asia Minor and Cilicia, in order to create «a Turkey for the Turks». This article examines the relationship of Cyprus to the Genocide during the period 1915-1930.

Between 1915-1918 and, especially, between 1920-1923, Cyprus widely opened its arms to welcome about 9.000 Armenian refugees, mainly from Adana and Seleucia, but also from the cities of Constantinople, Smyrna, Sis, Marash, Tarsus, Caesarea, Hadjin and Aintab, as well as 41 other towns and villages. These persecuted refugees, who sailed from the harbours of Alexandretta and Mersin with any ship they could find, arrived in all ports of Cyprus, mainly that of Larnaca and, to a lesser degree, Kyrenia and Famagusta, although some did arrive at the ports of distant Paphos and Limassol.

But why Cyprus? For some it was pure luck, as with the money they had the steamship could only carry them up to here. Some chose Cyprus because of its proximity to Cilicia, in the hope that sometime they would go back, while others chose Cyprus because of the safety the British administration offered. Most of them eventually made arrangements to settle in other countries.

Yet, about 1.300 Armenian refugees eventually stayed and made Cyprus their homeland.

Industrious, cultivated and progressive, they brought new life into the old community of the «*deghatsi*» (local Armenians) and did not need long to find their feet in hospitable Cyprus and establish themselves as people of the letters, the arts and the sciences, formidable merchants, able entrepreneurs, unsurpassed craftsmen, pioneering professionals (*dentists, photographers, printers, shoemakers* etc), conscientious civil servants, disciplined policemen etc. The first locksmiths and watchmakers, it was they who introduced the cinema in Cyprus and baklava, gyros, koubes, lahmadjoun, lokmadhes and dried apricots in the Cypriot cuisine, all very popular today.

Some served in World War I, as muleteers and translators, while some participated in the Armenian Legion, which was trained in the Carpass between 1916-1918.

Some refugees remained in Larnaca, where there was a small cemetery (1897), an AGBU chapter (1912), Saint Stephen's church (1909) - the oldest monument in the Diaspora in memory of the Cilician massacres' martyrs - and the Mousheghian School (1909); in 1923, with funding by the Adana Studios Association, a new building was built, whose second floor the benefac-



tor Garabed Melkonian built in 1926. Between 1920-1922 Haig Djizmedjian of Homenetmen formed a small Armenian scouts group, while between 1927-1930 the Armenian school had a small scouts group. Between 1923-1925 the Armenian Bibliophile Association used to publish the weekly liter-

literary «*Kraser*» newspaper. In 1923 the American Academy teacher Manuel Kassouni founded the Armenophony Association, which between 1926-1929 used to publish the monthly educational «*Lousarpi*» newspaper. Between 1924-1929, Mardiros Mosditchian used to publish the initially fort-



Panoramic view of the Melkonian (1926)



The Magaravank (1926)



GENOCIDE CYPRUS

The Melikian School band with Vahan Bedelian as its master (1930).

nightly and later on weekly political «Arax» newspaper. Later on, in 1931, the Larnaca Armenian Club was established, by individuals affiliated with the Dashnaksoutiun party.

Some refugees headed for Limassol, where by initiative of Archbishop Bedros Saradjian a school was established in 1928 [later on, an AGBU chapter was founded (1936) and the church of Saint George was built (1939)]. Others settled in Famagusta, where with the help of the Presbyterian Mission a school was established in 1927 (later on, in 1936, the Virgin Mary of Ganchvor mediaeval church was granted). Certain refugees formed a small colony in the Amiandos village on Troödos, where since 1904 operated the famous asbestos quarry of Amiandos Mines Corporation, with the support of which a small Armenian kindergarten used to operate between 1928-1948.

A few Armenian refugees inhabited around the famous Magaravank (Monastery of Saint Makarios in Halevga, Pentadhaktylos), where they cultivated its vast land areas and between 1910-1922 a small Armenian school used to operate in the Attalou settlement, in which Archimandrite Krikor Bahlavouni taught, also known as «Topal Vartabed», possibly due to an injury he suffered during his service in the Armenian Legion.

In 1926, by donation of the benefactor Garabed Melkonian, the road linking Halevga with the monastery was constructed, which was since used as a camping site and a resort. Also in 1926 the chapel of the monastery was renovated (donation of Dickran Ouzounian, Ashod Aslanian and Garo Balian), while the entire monastery was restored in 1929 (donation of Boghos & Anna Magarian).

However, most Armenian refugees

headed for Nicosia, the island's administrative centre, where within the walls lived a small but affluent Armenian community, mainly Turkish-speaking. Within the Victoria street compound, which was the centre of the Armenian-Cypriot microcosm, there was the Prelature (1783-1789), the gothic church of the Virgin Mary (1308), the Vartanants school for boys (1886) and the Shoushanian school for girls (1902). Later on, in 1932, the Genocide Monument was constructed, the second oldest of its kind in the world, which by an irony of fate it became itself a victim of the Turks in 1963. Outside the walls (Ledra Palace area) there was an ancient cemetery: it is believed that the first burials took place circa 1810, while inside it Saint Paul's chapel was built (1892). With the arrival of thousands of refugees of the Genocide, soon the place proved to be small and so the last burial was carried out in 1931, when the Ayios Dhometios cemetery started operating.

When the Genocide refugees arrived in Nicosia, there was already the Armenian Club (1902) and an AGBU branch (1913), while in 1925 the short-lived Armenian Readers' Association was established.

Later on, in October 1934, a group of young Armenians, affiliated with the Dashnaksoutiun party, founded the Armenian Young Men's Association (AYMA), which has ever since been the centre of the social, athletic and cultural life of the Armenian-Cypriot community. Onnig Yazmadjian of Homentmen formed a group of about 100 Armenian scouts (1925-1930), as well as a football team (1927-1928). In 1930 the «Gaydzak» football team was founded, which in March 1931 it was declared cup holder; despite its success, it shone and burnt out just like a lightning.

Between 1922-1923, Haroutiun Arslanian used to publish the handwritten and later on printed literary weekly «Azad Gibray» newspaper, while between 1928-1929 Maxoud Maxoudian used to publish the monthly literary «Ovasis» newspaper, initially with Samuel Toumayian and afterwards Dickran Luledjian as its editors-in-chief.

In 1921, by wish of the local landowner Artin Bey Melikian, the co-educational Melikian National School was constructed. It was initially considered too big, but only a year later it was full of Armenian children who survived the Genocide. Later on, in 1938, entrepreneur Dickran Ouzounian constructed the also co-educational Ouzounian

The Armenian Legion

The Armenian Legion was an auxiliary unit of the French Army, which consisted of about 4,000 volunteer Armenians from the Middle East, Europe and America. Training commenced in December 1916 at a camp in the Monarga village of the Carpass, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Romieu and the spiritual pastorate of Archbishop Taniel Hagopian, who came from the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem and would celebrate Mass at the small church of the camp. The selection of the «gamavorner» was rather strict. With the completion of the intensive training, in May 1918, the Legion was deployed in Palestine, where on 19 September 1918 it marked the great Victory of Arara. In December 1918 the Legion was stationed in the Cilicia region, where it remained until its dissolution in October 1921.



Rare Liturgy photograph in the Armenian Legion, with Archimandrite Krikor Bahlavouni as the celebrant (1918).

National School. Finally, between 1924-1926, after the benevolent and generous donation of tobacco trading brothers Krikor and Garabed Melkonian, the Melkonian Educational Institute was built, in order to provide shelter and education to 500 orphaned Armenian children of the Genocide, who planted the grove in front of the school in memory of their slaughtered relatives.

The renowned composer and educator Vahan Bedelian excelled in Nicosia, where he founded the church choir (1921) and the Melikian School band (1922), for which the Sharif of Mecca and self-proclaimed «King of Arabia», Hussein bin Ali, who was exiled in Cyprus at the time, purchased new musical instruments in 1926.

The Melkonian Educational Institute

The Melkonian, a unique and unparalleled achievement, had been the largest Armenian boarding school, a beacon of hope and culture for Armenianness and Armenophony everywhere.

Since 1930 up until its unfair closure in 2005 - after a decision by the AGBU Central Board - 1.828 male and female students graduated from here.



The Homenetmen scouts in Nicosia (1927).

The land of the school was chosen by Garabed Melkonian himself (by tradition, with the criterion that no minaret was visible from there), who on 28/12/1925 assigned the management to the AGBU. Known as «an island within an island», it started as an orphanage (1926-1940) and it turned into a world-renowned secondary school (1934-2005) with a boarding house, an exceptionally rich library (about 30.000 volumes), as well as well-equipped laboratories, which used to organise a

plethora of educational, cultural and athletic events and it influenced the Armenian-Cypriot community in numerous ways. It was initially known as the «Armenian Orphanage»: Armenian children were transferred here from the orphanages of Aleppo, Beirut, Constantinople, Corfu, Jerusalem and Sidon. In later years, the Melkonian used to have football and basketball teams (boys), volleyball teams (boys, girls), the historical 77th Cyprus' Boy Scouts System (1932-2006), the 9th Cyprus' Girl Guides Group (1950-2005) and it used to publish the famous «Ayk» magazine (1937-2006), the oldest Armenian secondary school magazine, as well as the «Tsolk» magazine (1968-1991) and the newspaper and later on magazine «Hayatsk» (1998-2000-2004).

It was somewhat like this that the age-old Armenian-Cypriot community, whose first vestiges are traced in 578 AD, was once more engrafted with new blood. If history teaches us anything about it, it is the continuous alteration: it happened several times during the Byzantine times, the Frankish Era, the Venetian Era, the Ottoman Era and the British Era, but also during the post-Independence period (1960), with the exodus of Armenian-Cypriots to Soviet Armenia («*nerkagh*» fever), Britain, Canada and America, but also with the coming to Cyprus of Armenians from the Middle East and the Soviet Union. After all, unfortunately, continuous migration constitutes the central meaning of Armenian history in general, which is a blood-stained account of martyrdom and heroic endeavour, characterised by an unwavering and unbroken faith, coloured with incurable optimism...



The first graduates of the Melkonian Educational Institute (1930).

