

THE HERITAGE OF CYPRUS - ARMENIAN-CYPRIOTS

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Distinguished guests, fellow Cypriots, ladies and gentlemen,

The earliest signs of civilisation in Cyprus can be traced back to the early Neolithic Age, circa 8.000 BC; the native population (*Eteocypriots*) are until today of obscure origin. As early as 2.400 BC, we have the influx of other peoples, either as settlers or as masters: Hittites, Greeks, Phoenicians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Ptolemies, Romans, Jews, Byzantines and Arabs. During the Byzantine period (330-1192) we have the arrival of the first Armenians, Maronites and Latins, with the oldest group - the Armenians - tracing their first recorded presence in 578 AD. Soldiers, merchants, nobles, landowners, craftsmen, scientists, artists, intellectuals, scouts, food makers, sportsmen, politicians, this is their story:

Throughout the Byzantine period, Armenians came here for political, commercial and military reasons. The Armenian Bishopric in Nicosia was established in 973 AD. During the Frankish and Venetian Eras (1192-1489 and 1489-1570), the number of Armenians in Cyprus significantly increased, as the Frankish Kingdom had commercial and familial ties with the Kingdom of Cilicia, but also because Armenians found refuge in Cyprus escaping the Muslim attacks on Cilicia and the Holy Land. They had a significant church presence and contributed greatly to the commercial development and security of our island.

Following the Osmanian conquest (1570-1571), a number of Ottoman Armenians who were drafted for the conquest remained in Nicosia, where the Prelature was recognised as an Ethnarchy, based on the *millet* institution; gifted with the acumen of industry, Armenian-Cypriots practised lucrative professions. However, the oppression and taxation decreased the number of all Christians dramatically, compelling many to become *Linobambaki* (Crypto-Christians) or to embrace Islam. Some Ottoman Armenian families settled here throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, with a few becoming huge land owners, especially in Kythrea and Dheftera. During the Tanzimat period (1839-1876), further improvements were observed, mainly of administrative nature.

After the arrival of the British in 1878, numerous Armenians were contracted to work in Cyprus as interpreters and civil servants. The number of Armenians in Cyprus significantly increased when nearly 10.000 Armenians, fleeing the massacres, deportations and the Armenian Genocide, sought refuge in our island between 1894-1923. About 1.500 made our island their new homeland, bringing new life into the old community and quickly establishing themselves as people of science, the letters and the arts, able entrepreneurs and merchants, formidable craftsmen and pioneering professionals. As part of their contribution to Cyprus, they introduced new arts, crafts and professions, as well as new items in the Cyprus cuisine, all very popular today.

The Armenian-Cypriot community prospered throughout the British Era, by establishing associations, choirs, scout groups, sports teams, musical ensembles, churches, cemeteries and schools, including the Melkonian Educational Institute. In many ways unique, it was built just outside Nicosia between 1924-1926, after the generous and benevolent donation of brothers Krikor and Garabed Melkonian, initially to shelter and educate 500 orphans of the Genocide. It gradually became a world-renowned secondary

school, until its unjust closure in 2005, after a decision by the central board of the AGBU. Its impact on Cyprus and its role as an ambassador of Cyprus to the world is unparalleled.

With the Independence of Cyprus in 1960, the Armenians, the Latins and the Maronites were recognised by our Constitution as “*religious groups*” (**Article 2 § 3**), who opted to belong to the Greek-Cypriot community in a referendum held in 1960. In accordance with the provisions of **Article 109**, they were given political representation, each with an elected Representative: until 1965 he was a full member of the Greek Communal Chamber, while since then he is a non-voting member of the House of Representatives.

During the 1963-1964 inter-communal troubles, the Armenian-Cypriot community suffered major losses, as the Armenian quarter of Nicosia was captured by Turkish-Cypriot extremists; also taken was the Ganchvor church in Famagusta. As a result, many left for Great Britain, Soviet Armenia and elsewhere. A further blow came with the 1974 Turkish invasion: the entire community of Famagusta and some families in Kyrenia and Nicosia became refugees, while the renowned Magaravank monastery in Pentadhaktylos, as well as all Armenian churches, schools, clubs and personal property are denied use until today from their rightful owners for nearly four or even five decades.

In 1975, Cyprus became the first European country (and the second world-wide, after Uruguay) to recognise the Armenian Genocide. Despite its losses and with the help of the government, the small yet industrious Armenian community of Cyprus has managed to recover from its losses and continued to prosper in the remaining urban areas, contributing culturally and socioeconomically to our homeland.

Over the past decades, the dynamics of the Armenian-Cypriot community have changed with the increased number of marriages with Greek-Cypriots and the arrival of hundreds of Armenian political and economic immigrants from the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, some of whom have settled permanently in Cyprus. Today, the 3.500-strong community has three churches, three chapels, three schools, a daily radio programme, a football and two futsal teams, two newspapers, numerous web pages, clubs and associations and it organises various social, cultural, youth and charity events, including dance and theatre performances, as well as exhibitions and lectures. As of 01/12/2002, Armenian - the mother tongue of Armenian-Cypriots - is a minority language of the Republic of Cyprus.

Armenian-Cypriots are an integral part of the mosaic of the Cyprus society and texture, feeling equally Armenians and equally Cypriots. In the possible event of unification, they will contribute their code of peaceful co-existence with all ethnic and religious groups on the island, respecting each group’s diversity, encouraging at the same time dialogue and understanding of the different political, religious and social issues concerning the Cypriot society.

Thank you for your attention.