



The Armenian community of Cyprus prospered throughout the British Era, by establishing associations, choirs, scout groups, musical ensembles etc. Armenian churches, schools and cemeteries were founded in Nicosia, Famagusta, Limassol and Larnaca, including the Melkonian Educational Institute. In many ways unique across the whole Armenian Diaspora, the

Melkonian was built between 1924-1926 after the generous and benevolent donation of the Egyptian-Armenian tobacco trading brothers Krikor and Garabed Melkonian.

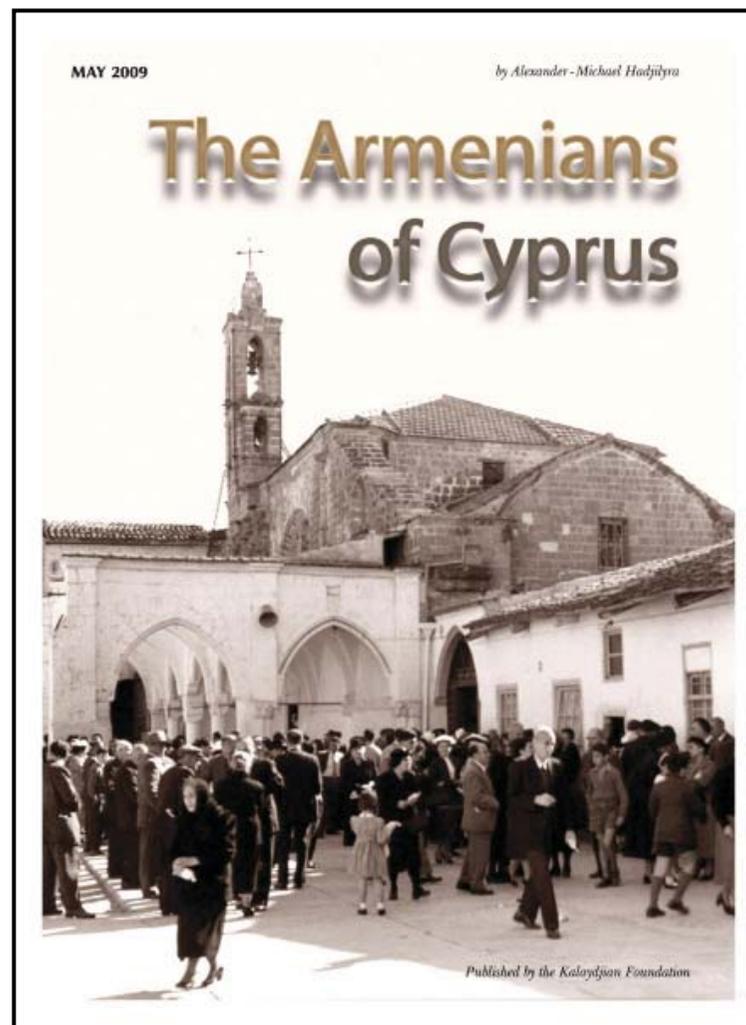
Law-abiding by nature, Armenian-Cypriots always had a high profile with the British administration, and many became civil servants and policemen, or were employed in the Cyprus Government Railway and in Cable and Wireless. Throughout the 1920s-1950s some worked at the asbestos mines at Amiandos, and the copper mines of Mavrovouni and Skouriotissa, many of whom had been trade unionists. Some Armenian-Cypriots participated in the 1897 Greco-Turkish War, the two World Wars (1914-1918 & 1939-1945) and the EOKA liberation struggle (1955-1959). Also, the Eastern Legion (later called Armenian) was formed and trained in 1917 near Boghazi village, consisting of over 4.000 Diasporan Armenian volunteers who fought against the Ottoman Empire.

With the independence of Cyprus in 16/08/1960, the Constitution recognised Armenians, Maronites and Latins as religious groups, which later opted to belong to the Greek-Cypriot community. During the intercommunal trouble that broke out in 1963-1964, extremist Turkish-Cypriots evicted the Armenian-Cypriots from their ancient quarter in the walled city of Nicosia, where the Prelature building, the church and the schools, as well as the Genocide monument were located; they were also deprived of their medieval church in the walled city of Famagusta. As a result, many left for Soviet Armenia, Great Britain and elsewhere. After the unlawful and savage Turkish invasion of 1974, Armenian-Cypriots from Famagusta, Nicosia and Kyrenia became refugees, and the Magaravank was occupied. On 24/04/1975, Cyprus became the first European country (and the second world-wide) to recognise the Armenian Genocide.

With the help and support of the Cyprus government, Armenian-Cypriots managed to thrive and prosper, preserving their religion, education, culture and language. In the last few decades, Armenians from Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Lebanon, Russia and Syria have also settled here as political and economic immigrants. Represented by an elected MP, Armenians today number about 3.500, mostly living in urban areas. They have their own churches, schools, clubs, associations & foundations, monuments, sports teams, radio programme, newspapers, web pages, and the Kalaydjian Rest Home for the Elderly.



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The Armenians of Cyprus

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There is a long link between Cyprus and Armenians, possibly dating back to the 5th century BC. However, the real history of the Armenian community on the island began in 578 AD: campaigning against the Persian King Chosroes I, General Maurice the Cappadocian captured 10.090 Armenians as prisoners in Arzanene (Aghdznik), of whom 3.350 were transferred to Cyprus.

Judging by the strategic position of the colonies they established (*Armenokhori, Arminou, Kornokipos, Patriki, Platani, Spathariko* and perhaps *Moussere*), it is very likely that they served Byzantium as mercenary soldiers and frontiersmen.

More Armenians arrived during the reign of Armenian-descended Emperor Heraclius (610-641) for political reasons, during the time of Catholicos Hovhannes Odznetsi (717-728) for commercial reasons, and after the liberation of Cyprus from the Arab raids by Niketas Chalkoutzes (965) for military reasons. In the mid-Byzantine period Armenian generals and governors served in Cyprus, like Levon (910-911), who undertook the construction of the Saint Lazarus basilica in Larnaca. In 973 Catholicos Khatchig I established the Armenian Bishopric in Nicosia. Between 1136-1138, Emperor John II Comnenus moved the entire population of the Armenian city of Tell Hamdun to Cyprus. After Isaac Comnenus' wedding to the daughter of the Armenian prince Thoros II in 1185, Armenian nobles and warriors came with him to Cyprus, many of whom defended the island against Richard the Lionheart (1191) and the Knights Templar (1192).

After the purchase of Cyprus by Guy de Lusignan in 1192, a massive immigration of Armenian and other noblemen, knights and warriors took place, to whom fiefs, manors and privileges were granted. Because of their proximity, their commercial ties, and a series of royal and nobility marriages, the Kingdoms of Cyprus and Cilicia were inextricably linked over time. Cilician Armenians sought refuge in Cyprus after the Fall of Jerusalem (1267), the Fall of Acre (1291), the attack of the Saracens (1322), the Mamluk attacks (1335 and 1346), and the Ottoman occupation (1403 and 1421). Due to the continuous decline of Lesser Armenia, its King Levon V moved to Cyprus in 1375; after he died in 1396, his title and privileges were transferred to his cousin, King James I de Lusignan, in the Aya Sophia cathedral.



During the Frankish and the Venetian Eras (1192-1489 & 1489-1570) there were Armenian churches in Nicosia, Famagusta, Spathariko and Kornokipos. The Armenians of Nicosia had their Bishopric and lived in their own quarter, called *Armenia* or *Armenoyitonia*. In Famagusta, a Bishopric was established in the 12th century and Armenians lived around the Syrian quarter; historical documents suggest the presence of an important monastic and theological centre there. By 1425 the renowned Magaravank, originally a Coptic monastery of Saint Macarius (*Sourp Magar*) near Halevga, was given to the Armenians, while sometime before 1504 the gothic Benedictine nunnery of Notre Dame de Tyre (*Sourp Asdvadzadzin*) in Nicosia came under Armenian possession.

During the occupation of the island by the Ottomans (1570-1571), about 40.000 Ottoman Armenian craftsmen were recruited. Many of the ones who survived settled mainly in Nicosia, with the Armenian Prelature recognised as an Ethnarchy. However, their number dramatically declined due to the onerous taxation and the harshness of the Ottoman administration, compelling many Armenians to become Linobambaki (Crypto-Christians) or to embrace Islam; a few became Catholics through marriage with Latins. Gifted with the acumen of industry, Armenians practised lucrative professions, and in the beginning of the 17th century Iranian Armenians settled here as silk traders. During the Tanzimat period (1839-1876), improvements were observed, resulting to the participation of the Armenian Bishop in the Administrative Council (*Idare Meclis*) and the employment of some Armenians in the civil service. Additionally, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 benefited the Armenians and other merchants of Cyprus.

The arrival of the British in July 1878 and their progressive administration strengthened the small Armenian community even more. Known for their linguistic skills, several Armenians were contracted to Cyprus to work as interpreters at the consulates and for the British administration. The number of Armenians in Cyprus significantly increased following the massive deportations, the horrific massacres and the Genocide committed by the Ottomans and the Young Turks (1894-1896, 1909 & 1915-1923). Cyprus widely opened its arms to welcome over 9.000 refugees from Constantinople, Smyrna and Cilicia, who arrived from all its harbours, some by chance others by intent. About 1.300 of them decided to stay, bringing new life to the old community and quickly establishing themselves as people of letters and arts, able entrepreneurs and merchants, formidable craftsmen, pioneering professionals etc. More Armenians came here as refugees from Palestine (1947) and Egypt (1956).

