

Event honors Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen, a compassionate man,

On May 24, 170 people gathered at the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago to honor Dr. Nansen and to celebrate Dr. H. J. Psomiades' final book, *Fridtjof Nansen and the Greek Refugee Crisis 1922-1924*. The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center, the Pontian Greek Society of Chicago, and the National Hellenic Museum sponsored the event, which included many non-Greeks, as well as Greeks.

Kathy Hareas, board member of the Asia Minor and Pontos Research Center (AMPHRC), introduced the following people who each gave a short greeting: Stephanie Vlahakis, president of the Hellenic Museum; Maria Lampros, trustee of the museum, Anastasia Spiridis-Skoupas, president of the Pontian Society, and Ioanna Efthymiadou, consul general of Greece.

Mette M. Bower, president of the Norwegian Chamber of Commerce said:

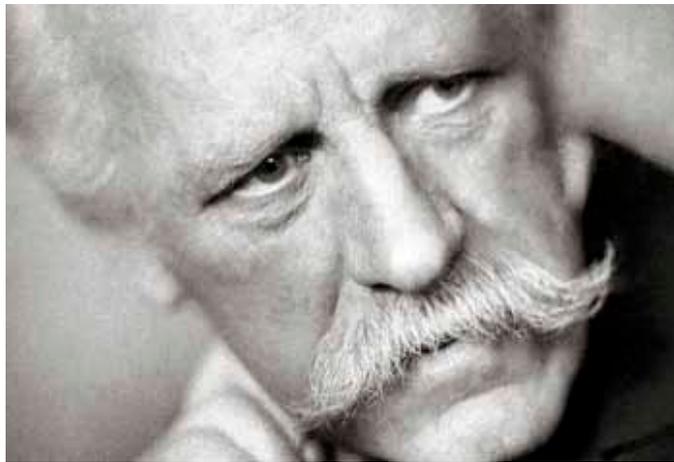
"Many consider Nansen to be one of the greatest men Norway has ever nurtured...Long after his death millions continued to remember him as the foremost exponent of human compassion. After the First World War he devoted his energies to people in need in a way which gave humanitarian relief work a new dimension. Wherever Nansen turned his attention, there were lasting traces of his efforts."

Dr. Elaine Thomopoulos, a historian and author, related Nansen's life story. She included his exploits in the arctic, his student days working on a Ph.D. in zoology, and his work as a pioneer in the fields of neurology and oceanography.

Thomopoulos emphasized his humanitarian efforts following World War I. A year and a half after the end of World War I, prisoners of war were languishing in Russia, German and other European countries. Through the newly formed League of Nations, Nansen united 427,885 POWs with their wives, children, mothers, and fathers.

In 1921, the League of Nations asked him to help the one and a half million Russians who had fled their homes because of the Bolshevik Revolu-

tion. Nansen arranged for them to be placed in France and the Slavic countries of southeastern Europe. For the unfortunate refugees who were left without a country, he established the Nansen passport. The Nansen passport was also used by Armenian and Assyrian refugees who had fled



Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen, a compassionate man, labored tirelessly to relieve the suffering of victims of famine and war following World War I. He saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Greek refugees, as well as millions of others throughout Europe.

slaughter by the Ottomans.

"In September 1922, another crisis brewed in the wake of the Turkish victory over the Greeks in the Greek-Turkish War. After the departure of the Greek army from the port of Smyrna, Turks burned the Greek, Armenian, and European sections of Smyrna, with great loss of life. The city at that time was crowded with refugees who had fled from the interior of Turkey. The survivors of the fire were pressed one against the other on the wharf, without food and water or even room to sit down. They waited for ships so they could depart from this hell. Men of military age were not allowed to board the ships. They were conscripted into the dreaded labor battalions and shipped to the interior where they faced almost certain death. . . .

Brutal attacks by Turks were not uncommon. A survivor told her story, which was broadcast

on Youtube:

"The girl next to me was trying to remove her earrings for the Turk. 'Leave it,' says the Turk and taking out his knife, slices it off and drops her ear into his handkerchief. I, next to her, said, 'Please Panagia. Help me, please, to take off my earrings. If you do, I will never again wear earrings. Never again have I ever worn earrings.'"

"Throughout Turkey, thousands of Christians fled their homes. . . . The lucky ones made their way to Greece. But what of those still in Turkey? From 1914 to 1922, the Ottomans had already killed hundreds of thousands of Greeks, Armenians, and Assyrians. Would those remaining in Turkey survive? . . . "Through the League of Nations, Nansen stepped in to help the refugees who were caught in the tangled web of war and politics.

Mr. George Shirinian, executive director of the Zoryan Institute of Toronto, Canada said:

"I would like to add only a few words to what we have already heard about Fridtjof Nansen today, with a particular focus on Nansen and the Armenians. According to

the League of Nations reports, some 300,000 Armenian refugees from the Ottoman Empire were without valid papers in the years after World War I and were stateless. Along with Greeks, Assyrians, Russians and Jews, they were scattered throughout the Near East, the largest number being in mainland Greece and Syria. . . ."I would like to say something about the Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center. Today's event is a doubly appropriate occasion to do this, not only because it is organized by this group, but in a very profound way, the seed for today's event was planted by Professor Harry Psomiades, whose book we are celebrating, twenty years ago.

"In 1992, on the occasion of the commemoration of the Pontian Greek Genocide in New York, Dr. Psomiades remarked:

"Although a few Greek scholars are making

who saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Greek refugees

important contributions, what is clearly lacking and greatly needed is a major Center for Pontic Greek Studies ... the true record of the mass destruction of the Hellenes in Asia Minor and Pontos has not seen the light of day since 1922. It has been, it seems, one of the world's best kept secrets. Even worse, for all these years we Pontians have been deprived of the right to memory, our human right to know and understand these tumultuous events which have tragically marred our very existence. Moreover, all of humankind has been deprived of its obligation to understand and appreciate the awesome dimensions of these inhuman, massive and catastrophic events. In addition, this conspiracy of silence, how else is one to label it, is an unforgivable injustice to the thousands of victims and martyrs whose memorial service we observe today"

"The burning desire among the members of the Pontian Greek Society of Chicago to understand what happened during the Great Catastrophe, why, and to promote awareness of it beyond the Greek community smoldered for years. In 2006, I received a phone call from George Mavropoulos who expressed an interest in knowing what my organization, the Zoryan Institute, had been doing in this regard concerning the Armenian Genocide.

"Now, I could understand right away what George was talking about. I grew up during a time when the Armenian Genocide was truly called "the forgotten genocide." It was to understand where they came from, what their current existence meant, and what their future would be that a small group of Armenians came together to establish the Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation in 1982. The name says a lot. The mission was to use the highest academic standards to document, research and analyze the forces and factors that shape the Armenian reality today. Among the most dominant of those forces and factors were the Genocide, the diasporan experience, and diaspora-homeland relations. They understood that for a true understanding, the Armenian experience could not be examined in isolation. And from the beginning, they took a multidisciplinary approach that benefited from the particular perspectives of history, sociology, political science,

psychology, international law, among other fields of study.

George Mavropoulos, board member of the AMPHRC, spoke of his personal reflections: "We owe a great deal to Fridtjof Nansen, who devoted a great part of his remarkable life in helping displaced people and refugees, and in the course saved thousands and thousands of lives. Among those who were saved, there were Pontian Greeks from the region of the Black Sea including my father, his mother, younger brother and two sisters on their way to Greece. My grandfather had already died at the age of 44 when he was conscripted in the Turkish army. He was forced to serve in the infamous labour battalions where the Greek and Armenian men were purposefully overworked, lacking food, clothing and shelter and according to historians and Dr. Psomiades ...the average life span of Greek or Armenian men between 16-50 years old was generally 2 months. The forced service into labour battalions was a plan to exterminate the male population in Asia Minor and Pontos. "My father, being the oldest of the four children, assumed the responsibility to transport the family to Greece. He often spoke of his horrific experience on the way to Greece. Before they reached Greece, they were held at the notorious Selimeyeh Barrack, near Constantinople. The Greek government would not accept them because they were stricken with various diseases and as Dr. Psomiades writes on his book on Nansen " ...these wretched souls were held in holding camps, in conditions unfit for animals. In these camps, especially those in the notorious Selimiyeh Barrack, between 30 and 300 refugees died daily from typhus, cholera or smallpox. One observer described the camps as -a veritable morgue".

"In the midst of these tragic events, Nansen called in the League of Nations' Epidemic Com-

mission to deal with the various epidemics not only in Constantinople but also on the banks of the Evros river in Eastern Thrace. Disinfectant stations were installed and doctors treated and

saved a good number of refugees who eventually were allowed to be transported to Greece.

"My father and his family finally made it to Greece, but my grandmother passed away within two months after their arrival. The death and suicide rate was very high among the destitute refugees. An old Icon was the only thing my family were able to bring with them, along with their memories and nostalgia of their lost but not forgotten homeland that stayed with them until the end of their lives.

"We are here today to honour the memory of Fridtjof Nansen and to thank the Norwegian community for being with us to honour one its great citizens, an example for the human race, who, in a time

of major crisis and in the midst of tragic events became an International Civil Servant and fearless peacemaker.

Today, we also want to pay tribute to Dr. Psomiades. He became an inspiration and guiding force of our Society's pursuit of its mission to promoting awareness of the genocide that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Ottoman Greeks in the early part of the 20th century. He was also a great supporter of the recent establishment of the Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center in Chicago, which he continued to care about deeply until his passing on August 13 of last year. "It was an honor for us to assist in publishing his book on Nansen, which is another example of his fine scholarly work on Greek history. It serves as a fitting testament to his remarkable legacy. His contributions as a researcher and writer will help future generations of Greeks and Greek-Americans better understand their history and identity. We will do our best to honor his memory and carry on his vision. We will always be grateful to him."



Dr. Elaine Thomopoulos,