

## The Great Catastrophe and the Smyrna Fire: 94th Anniversary

In September of 1922, the world witnessed the savage burning of the great city of Smyrna and the mass slaughtering of thousands of civilians. The events of the Great Catastrophe ended 3,000 years of Greek presence in Anatolia. As we commemorate the 94<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragedy, we recall two heroic individuals who bravely intervened to save innocent civilians in the face of insurmountable evil.

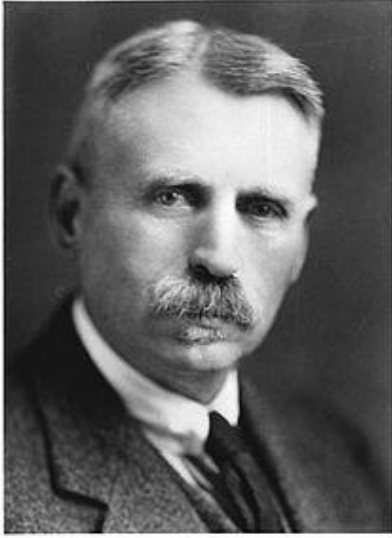
As the terrifying days of the holocaust were unfolding, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, stationed outside the city of Smyrna, gave orders to rid of the Christians once and for all from Anatolia. The forces of Kemal Atatürk set the city ablaze after plundering and massacring the Christian and minority communities. At the same time, the Greeks were left hopeless as Greece's allies stood idle as spectators to the human slaughtering, refusing to intervene because of their selfish political and economic interests.

The burning of Smyrna by the Turkish troops, accompanied by the violent displacement of Greeks, Armenians, and Assyrian Christians from Asia Minor was motivated by the desire of Kemalist-Nationalists to achieve the goal of "Turkification". Indeed, the first quarter of the twentieth century was marked by the violence and massacres directed by the state itself that aimed to remove these communities from their historic homelands.

The human trauma of the tragic fire has been widely recorded in numerous books, articles, and personal accounts collected from the event. Melville Chater, writing in *The National Geographic Magazine*, provided just one picture of the nightmare of 300,000 souls crushed together on Smyrna's quay:

*"The dance of flames became a fiery hurdle race, as the wind-fanned flames leaped from a balcony to balcony across the narrow streets: then the race became a hungry conflagration whose roaring mouth ate through and gulped down that mile-and-a-half breadth of city down to where the 300,000 refugee souls huddled between a waste of fire and a waste of sea... the city had become a Titanic blast furnace, whose wind-driven heat fanned the quay with so dreadful a heat that the multitudes dipped their blankets in the sea and swaddled themselves. Maddened horses... ran amuck through the press, leaving a wake of crushed bodies, which roasted where they lay... Affrighted faces mingled with wild-eyed animals, and human cries with the neigh of horses, the scream of camels, and, last, the squeaking of rats, as they scuttled by in droves from the underworld of a **lost Smyrna**." - National Geographic Magazine, November 1925, "History's Greatest Trek", Melville Chater.*

The world was shocked by the magnitude of violence and massacre waged on innocent people. Giles Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, wrote "what happened over the two weeks that followed must rank as one of the most compelling human dramas of the twentieth century. Innocent civilians - men, women, and children were caught in a humanitarian disaster on a scale that the world had never before seen".



Despite the allies' refusal to help the victims of Kemal Ataturk, two heroic individuals emerged during the tragic events in Smyrna who intervened to save thousands of desperate souls. These individuals – George Horton and the Japanese Captain of the boat "Tokei Marou" – should be recognized for their brave interventions to save innocent civilians in the face of Kemal Ataturk's vicious forces.

**George Horton**, the US General Consul in Smyrna, was an honorable humanitarian who, during the most terrifying days of the destruction, attempted to do everything humanly possible to save the Christian population of Greeks and Armenians from the ongoing slaughter of the Turks. George Horton even risked his diplomatic career since he had taken a different political direction from that of the US, which had refused to intervene in the violence in Smyrna.

He, at one point, offered the great Archbishop Chrysostomos the opportunity to escape, but Chrysostomos refused to save himself. The Archbishop chose a savage death at the hands of the brutal Turks who were getting orders from the notorious Nurredin Pasha, the governor of Smyrna.

George Horton was forced to leave the Consulate building moments before it collapsed from the fire set by Ataturk's forces. As he was getting aboard the battleship Litchfield, he looked back at the voracious flames encircling his beloved city and with great sadness uttered his immortal phrase:

***"I feel ashamed to belong to the human race."***

On September 4, 1922 in the midst of the violence, **the Captain of the Japanese boat "Tokei Marou"** and his sailors demonstrated extraordinary courage and human compassion.

After his arrival at the port of Smyrna, the Japanese Captain of the merchant ship Tokei Marou gazed at the scene of the port of Smyrna that was "worse than hell" for thousands of helpless women and children who faced inevitable death with fire raging behind them, the inhospitable port forward, and Turkish troops blocking any escape.

The Japanese captain ordered his crew to toss overboard cargo that consisted of precious silks, lace, and porcelain. Then he saved the lives of 825 women, children, and elders whom he transferred to Piraeus.

The heroic actions of the Japanese captain have been confirmed by the American Consul George Horton and from the newspaper EMBROS, 4 September 1922 (see attached copy in Greek), and from the eyewitness accounts of American Anna Harlow Birge and others.

On 15 September 2012, the Research Center held a major event commemorating the 90th-year anniversary of the great fire of Smyrna. The Consul of Japan in Chicago as well as members of the Japanese community were invited to the event. To recognize the heroic captain and show appreciation to the Japanese nation, a plaque was presented to the Honorable Kotaro Matsuzawa. During his acceptance remarks, Mr. Matsuzawa expressed his sense of honor to have ancestors such as this captain and thanked the Greek American community for recognizing the humanity of the captain and crew.

This year, on the 94<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Catastrophe in Smyrna, the Research Center remembers the thousands of victims that were uprooted from their homelands and faced unimaginable tragedy, as well as the honorable individuals who courageously fought to save innocent civilians.

The destruction of Hellenism in Asia Minor, the burning of Smyrna, and the death of more than 100,000 people became a humanitarian disaster the world had never experienced before. The Asia Minor and



Pontos Hellenic Research Center is dedicated to expanding our understanding of these events and ensure that we never forget the thousands of victims lost in the senseless violence of this era.

Please visit our website ([www.hellenicresearchcenter.org](http://www.hellenicresearchcenter.org)) for more information.

*George Mavropoulos, AMPHRC Founder, on behalf of the Research Center*

*Vicky Stavropoulos, AMPHRC Board Member, on behalf of the Research Center*