

## 90th Anniversary Commemoration: The Uprooting of Hellenism



By Harriette Condes-Zervakis

*The anonymous Japanese captain of a freighter, along with his crew, saved the lives of hundreds of Christians while the crews of other ships in Smyrna harbor had done nothing to help.....*

On September 15, The Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center (AMPHRC) and The Pontian Greek Society of Chicago sponsored "Smyrna 90-Year Commemorative Event Honoring the Thousands of Victims Who Lost Their Lives During the September 1922 Fire." Over 200 people attended the pre and post receptions and filled the auditorium for a program that included Greg Bedian, Ronald Levitsky, and Dr. Constantine Hatzidimitriou. Emcee was AMPHRC Board Member Dr. Anastasia Giannakidou.

Additional distinguished guests and speakers included the Honorable Consul of Political Affairs of the Japanese Consulate Kotaro Matsuzawa, His Eminence Metropolitan Iakovos, and the Honorable Consul General of Greece Ioanna Efthymiadou. Ambassador at Large David Schaffer from the Illinois Holocaust and Genocide Commission, officers from many Greek-American organizations, and Judges Jesse Reyes, James Booras,

and James Karahalios were also in attendance, as were members of the Assyrian, Armenian, and Jewish communities.

Audience members had the rare opportunity to see the Smyrna Documentary: The Chronicle of the Forced Migration, a film produced by Ajax Films and shown by special permission from ERT of Greece (AP#1669).

State-sponsored massacres and the burning of Smyrna by Turkish troops - coupled with the forced expulsion of Greek, Armenian, and Assyrian Christians from Asia Minor in order to achieve the goal of "Turkification" desired by the Kemalist Nationalists - shocked the civilized world during the first quarter of the twentieth century. These tragic events are historically significant for all mankind and especially for Hellenes everywhere.

In September 1922, after arriving and seeing the scene at Smyrna harbor that was "worse than hell" for thousands of helpless women and children facing certain death with the fire raging behind them, the unfriendly harbor before them, and Turkish troops preventing any escape, the Japanese captain of a commercial ship ordered his crew to throw a cargo of precious silks,

laces, and china overboard. He then saved the lives of hundreds of innocent victims by transporting them to Piraeus.

The heroic actions of this Japanese captain have been documented by American Consul George Horton, American eyewitness Anna Harlow Birge, and Greek-American historian Dan Georgakas whose mother and uncle were saved and transported to safety.

To recognize this heroic captain and to show appreciation to the Japanese nation, a plaque was presented to the Honorable Kotaro Matsuzawa. Applause echoed through the auditorium as he accepted on behalf of his country in memory of the compassionate Japanese captain and crew. 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. He added appreciation for the assistance that Greece had sent to Japan following an earthquake.

In his remarks, His Eminence Metropolitan Iakovos commended The Pontian Greek Society and George Mavropoulos for their work in disseminating the story of the uprooted Christian refugees. His Eminence revealed that his parents had been refugees from a village near Smyrna. "As children we asked, 'Why did this happen?'" he said, "but we never received an answer."

"We pray to the Almighty that this never happens to anyone," His Eminence concluded.

The next speaker was Greg

Bedian, an electrical engineer and activist from the national Armenian American community who serves on the Illinois Holocaust and Genocide Commission. He noted that this episode in Smyrna was the last great massacre of Armenians, an ethnic minority that had comprised a vibrant economically and culturally successful community in the Ottoman Empire and specifically in Smyrna. "We talk about numbers, but this shields us from the trauma," Bedian stated. "Imagine...being in Smyrna, about to be enveloped by flames."

Following Mr. Bedian, Ron Levitsky, recipient of awards for Excellence in Teaching, trustee for West Deerfield Township, and author of an outstanding teaching unit on genocide, referred to the "autogenocide" of the Ottoman Empire, a genocide of the empire's own citizens. During WWI, the Christians were made the scapegoats following Turkish military losses to Russia. Christians "could not be trusted" and groups such as the Pontian Greeks faced the "utmost cruelty." For example, priests were soaked in kerosene and used as "human torches" to burn congregations of people who were trapped

### Asia Minor Ancestry

*Do you have ancestors from Asia Minor? Would you be interested in joining an Asia Minor Society in Illinois? If so, please send an email to Paris at [parisa@wow-way.com](mailto:parisa@wow-way.com) or leave a voicemail message to Harriette at (630) 427-1485.*

## from Asia Minor; Recognition of a Heroic Captain and Crew

within their churches.

Though the Christian population was educated and successful, they were separated by religion, restricted, and generally maltreated. Eventually, one third of the Anatolian population was either "relocated" or killed. "Christians were persecuted not for what they did," said Levitsky, "but for how they were perceived."

The third major speaker was Associate Adjunct Professor at St. John's University and author of three books, Dr. Constantine Hatzidimitriou. He summarized the progress that has been made in the recognition of the genocide of Christians in Asia Minor and Pontos, outlined key facts documented by American eyewitnesses who were in Smyrna in 1922, and described the "exceptional humanity" of the anonymous Japanese captain and crew who saved so many lives — in contrast to the crews of the 30 other ships in Smyrna Harbor who were under orders to avoid offending the Turkish Nationalist regime and therefore refused assistance to the refugees.

According to Hatzidimitriou, in the late 1800's, 5,000,000 Christians lived in Asia Minor under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid. Of these Christians, approximately 2,000,000 were Greek. By April 1909, a German observer would state "The slaughter was unsparing..." Many Christians were hacked to pieces, hanged, or burned alive in their homes. Pretexts were used for planned massacres or, at a moment's notice, entire Greek villages and towns were notified that they would be "deported" to the

interior.

"Deportation" was a euphemism for death marches. The victims were forced to keep moving for days that turned into weeks. Lack of food and water would lead to the victims literally dropping dead along the way. Dr. Hatzidimitriou related an incident in which victims reminded their Turkish guards that there was no more food or water. The Turkish guards pointed to a mosque and replied, "The high road lies in Islam."

While their families were "deported," Greek men were forcibly drafted into "Labor Battalions" that were actually slave labor gangs. In 1914, over 200,000 men were taken into such battalions. Very few survived.

In September of 1921, according

to British sources, 60 people a day were being hanged in the Pontos region.

Dr. Hatzidimitriou summarized the results of Turkification as "unprecedented suffering and murder on a mass scale." The forced expulsion of the Greeks and other Christians from Asia Minor culminated in September 1922 with the Great Fire at Smyrna that lasted for three days, burned only the Christian quarters of the city, and obliterated the evidence of the looting and the rotting corpses in those neighborhoods. The fire forced any Greeks or Armenians who were left in hiding to flee to the waterfront of Smyrna.

On the quay in Smyrna, "In September 1922, 250,000 people suffered every cruelty known to

man," said Hatzidimitriou. The Turkish government still denies the massacres and the events that led to the end of a Greek presence in Asia Minor. "Genocide denial is the last stage of a genocide," Dr. Hatzidimitriou continued.

"With recognition of the truth, nations can move on."

Twenty one countries and 43 states in the U.S. have passed resolutions granting recognition of the genocides in Asia Minor.

As part of her brief remarks to end the commemoration, Consul General Efthymiadou quoted poet George Seferis and stated a truth that audience members could sense, "Smyrna is a wound in our collective memory."

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Members of the Japanese community, George Mavropoulos, Honorable Kotaro Matsuzawa, Honorable Ioanna Efthymiadou, Judges Jesse Reyes and James Booras on the right. Picture courtesy of Pontian Society President Soula Skoupas