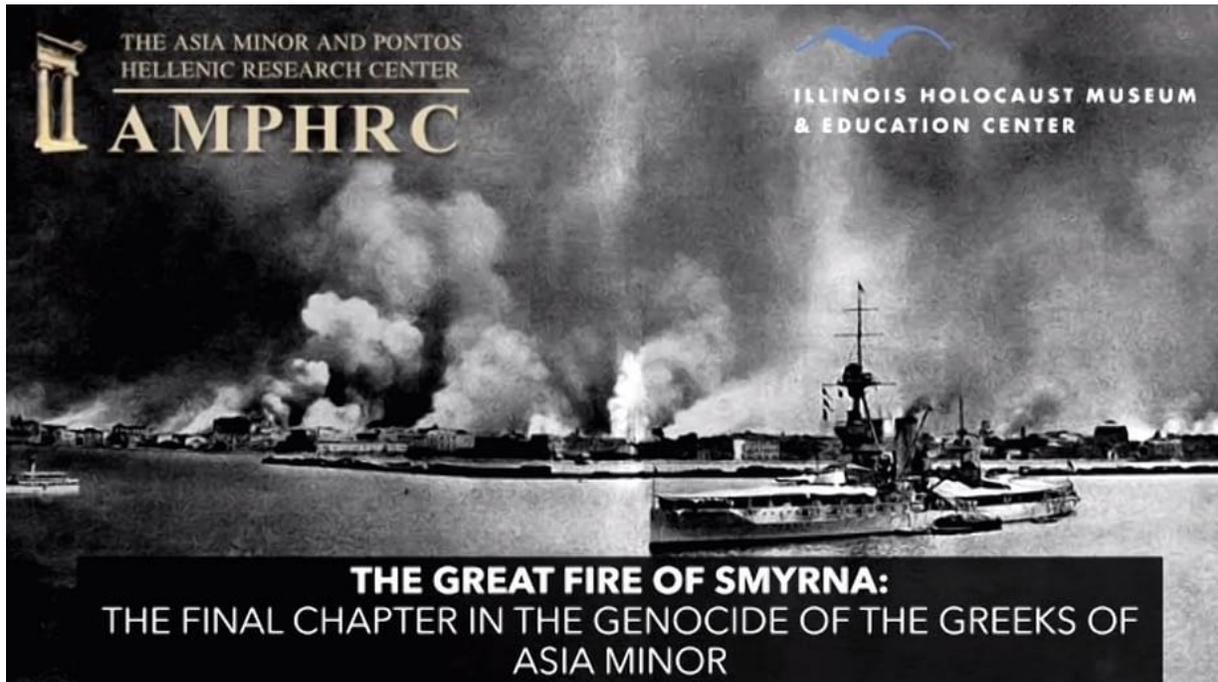


THE NATIONAL HERALD

Smyrna Centennial Commemoration Held at Illinois Holocaust Museum
By Eleni Sakellis



The Illinois Holocaust Museum and the Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center presented The Great Fire of Smyrna, the Genocide of Greeks in Asia Minor 100th Anniversary Commemoration on September 18. Photo: TNH Staff

SKOKIE, IL – The Smyrna Centennial Remembrance Conference 1922-2022 was held in person at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie and via Zoom online on September 18. The Illinois Holocaust Museum and the Asia Minor and Pontos Hellenic Research Center (AMPHRC) offered an afternoon of discussion and presentations by renowned scholars and educators as they addressed one of the most tragic and major events in modern Greek history.

Titled The Great Fire of Smyrna, the Genocide of Greeks in Asia Minor 100th Anniversary Commemoration, the event featured insights from the distinguished speakers as well as testimony from eyewitnesses in a video clip from the AMPHRC-produced documentary film Lethal Nationalism and in statements read by descendants of survivors of the Catastrophe.

The speakers included: George Shirinian, author and Executive Director of the Zoryan Institute; Dr. Constantine Hatzidimitriou, Adjunct Assistant Professor at St. John's University and City University of New York; Dr. Paul Bartrop, Emeritus Professor, Florida Gulf Coast University; and Kelley Szany, Senior Vice President of Education and Exhibitions, Illinois Holocaust Museum and Co-Chair, Illinois Holocaust & Genocide Commission.



Dr. Constantine Hatzidimitriou, Adjunct Assistant Professor at St. John's University and City University of New York. Photo: TNH Staff

In his presentation, Shirinian highlighted the history of cosmopolitan Smyrna before the Catastrophe, the prosperity, diversity, and tolerance that made it a "jewel" and so different from other cities, but also a target for the extreme Turkish nationalists. He noted that we must "never forget this trauma to the Greek and Armenian people." Dr. Hatzidimitriou spoke movingly as his mother and family survived the burning of Smyrna in 1922, the "monumental tragedy" and how a century later, the Turkish leaders continue to deny the Genocide and blame the victims. He also noted the evidence of a U.S. cover-up, what he referred to as "Smyrna-gate," as trade interests led some officials to minimize the seriousness of the situation in reports. Meanwhile others, such as George Horton and Asa Jennings, took it upon themselves to help save lives. Dr. Bartrop from Australia mentioned how thousands of Australians were lining up 100 years ago this week at recruiting offices to fight against Turkey after hearing the reports of what was happening in Smyrna. He spoke about the Allies and Greece after World War I and the circumstances that led to the burning of Smyrna. Szany noted that this commemoration is "one way to keep the history alive 100 years after the atrocities were committed" and "our duty is to reflect on lessons learned." It is "not enough to curse the darkness... [we must] illuminate the future... affirm our responsibility to humanity, to teach others and be custodians of this memory we share... pledge others to Never Forget," she said. Broadcast journalist and media executive John E. Davis, member of the Board of Directors for the Illinois Holocaust Museum and member of the Executive Board of the AMPHRC, served as Master of Ceremonies for the event, noting the need to "take a stand for humanity" and raise awareness of the Genocide of the Greeks of Asia Minor to prevent further atrocities. "The Museum stands with the Greek community," he said, to "light the torch of truth to the world."

His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago, in his remarks, mentioned that his family came from Asia Minor, was forced to flee their home, and took the first boat they could to find refuge in Greece. He said: "Today... is one of the rare occasions when there are no words to express what's in our hearts, when we are most authentic when we simply stand in silence before a mystery that is beyond our comprehension, beyond our capacity to process, beyond words... Our words fail to capture the depth and horror of this event and yet we absolutely must speak about it, we absolutely must study the historical sources, the personal accounts and the concrete facts with scholarly integrity in order to never forget and never allow falsehoods to further desecrate the dignity of those who suffered. In other words, we are called to be silent and we are called to speak the truth today, 100 years after the Great Fire was perpetrated."



George Shirinian, author and Executive Director of the Zoryan Institute. Photo: TNH Staff

Among those present, Consul General of Greece in Chicago Manos Koubarakis gave a brief history of the Catastrophe, noting that the 1.5 million refugees who sought to rebuild their lives in Greece propelled the economy forward in the interwar period, contributing in various ways, economically, socially, and culturally, to the country. He noted one of the lessons is that Hellenism must act in solidarity and unity.

Davis also mentioned the *Tokei Maru*, a Japanese merchant vessel, whose captain ordered his crew to dump valuable cargo so that they could rescue people from the Catastrophe, saving over 800 lives. He applauded the Japanese government and people, inviting a representative of the Consulate General of Japan in Chicago who thanked the Greek people for remembering the heroic humanitarian effort of the Japanese captain and crew.

The Republic of Armenia's Honorary Consul in Chicago Oscar S. Tatosian was also present and in his remarks noted the visit of U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to Armenia and the current ceasefire with Azerbaijan.

For thousands of years Smyrna was the wealthiest of cities located today on Turkey's Aegean coast, an elegant, cosmopolitan city where Greeks, Armenians, Turks, Jews and others lived and worked together – a city known for religious tolerance.

The Great Fire of Smyrna (Smyrna Catastrophe) started on September 13, 1922, after the Turkish armed forces entered Smyrna, a deliberate act by the Turkish government to destroy or expel the Greeks and any other Christian population. The entire Greek and Armenian quarters of the city were destroyed, forcing the population to flee and seek shelter in Greece and elsewhere. Historians believe that the number of victims was in the tens of thousands, while the number of refugees was over a million. Thousands of Greek and Armenian men were subsequently deported into the interior of Anatolia, where many died in harsh and brutal conditions. After the Smyrna Catastrophe the Hellenic city founded over 3,000 years before, a jewel of the Eastern Mediterranean, ceased to have a Hellenic community.

Partner organizations for the event include: The Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Chicago, National Hellenic Museum, University of Chicago Center for Hellenic Studies, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – Pontic Studies, Hellenic American Leadership Council, Armenian National Committee of Illinois, Assyrian American Civic Club of Chicago, ENOSIS – The Federation of Hellenic American Organizations of Illinois, Hellenic American Women's Council, Hellenic Link Midwest, PanPontian Federation of USA and Canada, Pontian Greek Society of Chicago, Pontian Youth Association of USA and Canada, and UCLA SNF Hellenic Center.

More information about the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center is available online: <https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/>.

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