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“Organizing the memory of the ‘lost Homelands’. The Asia Minor memory culture and forms of refugee sociality in Greece during the interwar period”*

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Today the memory of the “lost Homelands” in Greece has become a major object of public discourse. The term “lost homelands” stands as a metaphor for Asia Minor and all its constituent regions where Orthodox Christians lived before they were forced to move to Greece. This catch word is full of emotional and metaphorical meaning although it was invented many years after the events which followed the long wars of 1912-1922 and the signing of the Lausanne Treaty. In the last ten to fifteen years articles in the periodic and daily press, historical novels, cooking books, TV programs and documentaries, organized tourist trips but also various cultural events like music festivals or theatre performances hosted in Greece or Turkey, not to mention the extensive number of refugee associations in every major or minor city in Greece attest to the growing memory culture of “lost homelands” with specific emphasis on Asia Minor. For many Greeks today, particularly those of refugee origin, the memory of the “lost homelands” was and still is of major importance for their own identity and self-perception and therefore Asia Minor holds an important symbolic space in contemporary Greek society. Of course for all the reasons I mentioned above the memory culture of Asia Minor is also a prosperous business, but I will leave this aspect entirely outside of this presentation.

In view of this situation a number of specific issues are raised. Is today’s thriving memory of Asia Minor part of a common memory culture stretching back to the 20’s?

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Or, instead, there is little value in bounding the different aspects of this culture to a common thread. Even more crucial is the issue of who was remembering and to what effect. Acts or remembering widely diverged according to who was invoking Asia Minor and what kind of space was that. Were all first generation refugees for example in position or in need to conceptualize Asia Minor as a coherent, unified space or they simply referred to their specific place of origin before anything else? And who were responsible for providing Asia Minor with a unique and common nature transcending all local and peripheral differences?

Addressing these issues is in my opinion necessary in order to understand the memory of “lost homelands” in Greece as the kind of cultural practice which involved the rehabilitation of Asia Minor as a space where everything remained as it once was. It is my contention that the memory of Asia Minor or any of its parts should be contextualized in specific historical conditions and therefore the memory culture of Asia Minor is far less coherent and continuous than it appears at first sight. First generation refugees were occupying a liminal space where the option of living in Greece, a place with which hundreds of thousands of refugees were unaccustomed, overlapped with the expectation of return. Although this expectation was dashed after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty it took some time before all refugees realized that the situation was permanent and that they would never go back. Dashed hopes coexisted with more pressing issues like housing, employment and nutrition which attracted the full attention for almost all refugees. As a consequence, the commemoration of the lost homelands and the bitter experiences of the last years of Christian Orthodox presence in Asia Minor were last in a long list of other priorities. However the refugees remembered. It is difficult to believe that the refugees simply discarded any recollection of their towns and villages or their bitter experiences because they needed food or employment. Until today historiographical emphasis is put on various aspects of refugee settlement but the question of refugee memory is almost entirely untouched. This neglect is fully consistent with the almost total indifference of historians towards issues of memory- in fact memory studies in history is a quite recent phenomenon- and with the fact that during the interwar period refugee associations paid small attention in the commemoration of the “lost homelands”. But, small attention did not equal complete apathy. In fact, there are numerous statements in various occasions suggestive of the strong nostalgic or bitter memories of the “lost homelands” among the refugees which,

however, failed to form a coherent narrative. In addition, a few years after 1922 at least some initiatives were undertaken to commemorate the “lost homelands” by particular groups of refugees. I am referring specifically to educated individuals who took upon themselves the task of organizing the memory culture, or should I say the politics of memory of Asia Minor. Journalists, teachers, lawyers, priests and others mobilized to commemorate the Greek presence in Asia Minor through various initiatives which almost always remained without official or state backing. This applies particularly to the Metaxas dictatorial regime [1936-1941] which followed a policy of very friendly relations with Turkey and strongly discouraged any expression of anti-Turkish feelings. In the current stage of my research I have traced a number of ways for commemorating and remembering the “lost homelands”,¹ but here I will focus on a major form of memory culture in the period under discussion which was the collection of folklore material.

In 1926, few years after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty, the first calls were made for the gathering of folklore material from the devastated homelands. Konstantinos Lameris, Chairman of the Association Anatolē, which was founded in 1891, announced the establishment of a special scientific committee for collecting folklore material from Anatolia. Lameris was in agreement with George Hatzidakis, Professor of linguistics in Athens University, who had already expressed interest in the immediate collection of linguistic material from the refugees because he feared that it would soon be lost if the pace of linguistic integration of the refugees was rapid, as Hatzidakis believed it was. The initiative of Lameris was followed in 1927 by the former Metropolitan of Trabzon, Chrysanthos, who declared the establishment of a scientific committee for the research of history and folklore of Pontus. The Society of Pontic Studies and its review, the Archive of Pontus whose first volume was published in 1928 became a central bearer of memory culture in Greece during the 30's. The Archive of Pontus published almost exclusively studies of folklore and to a far lesser degree of history with main emphasis on the different linguistic idioms and dialects of

¹ These initiatives were originally scant and largely uncoordinated. Of major interest are a number of publications narrating the final years of Greek presence in Asia Minor with particular reference to major military, administrative and religious figures who played major roles in the outcome of the Greek campaign, like Stergiades, Venizelos, various Greek generals of the army and the bishop of Smyrna Chrysostomos. Also of interest is the initiative to erect a statue of Chrysostomos in the newly established refugee district of Nea Smyrne. The statue was finally erected in 1965. I would also mention the publication of nonfiction accounts of men taken prisoners and used in the infamous *Amele Taburu* [Labour battalions]. Stasis Doukas, *Ιστορία ενός αιχμαλώτου*, Elias Venezis, *No 31 328*.

the region of Pontus. Among the first articles published in this review is the epic poem of Digenes Akritas, collections of fairy tales, demotic poetry and songs, riddles and jokes and other kinds of popular expressions which were already recognized as an important field of folklore studies in Greece since the late 19th century.

Similarly refugee newspapers grew an intense interest regarding the collection of folklore material from Asia Minor. *Prosfygikos Kosmos*, an Athenian daily owned by the Sinanides family, took major initiatives for the collection and publication of folklore material as well as for the mobilization of artists and writers of refugee origin in order to invigorate literary and artistic production in Greece with the refugee potential. In 1929 *Prosfygikos Kosmos* made concerted efforts to mobilize educated refugees for the purpose of collecting, classifying and publishing folklore material from their places of origin. Arethas Argaios, alias of George Askitopoulos a former inspector of Greek Schools in Izmir and contributor to *Prosfygikos Kosmos*, published extensively on this issue encouraging literate refugees from both Greek and Turkish speaking communities to follow some common rules in spelling and accent to accommodate the different local idioms used in Asia Minor. Argaios prioritized the collection of folklore material because as he put it, “folklore material being an indication of our descent from Hellenistic and Byzantine times is also the expression of our individuality which is bound to disappear in the future due to the mixing of the refugees with indigenous Greeks.” Argaios believed that the collection of this material would ensure its preservation in the future. He also considered folklore material as the most authentic and rich expression of popular culture which did justice to the centuries old Greek presence in Asia Minor. This choice seems quite consistent with the need to accommodate the different local traditions of the Christian Orthodox and the dispersed memories of Asia Minor within a broader national narrative. Let us remember that the time span between the expulsion of the Christian Orthodox populations from Anatolia and these initiatives was very short. For many refugees who were struggling to gain a life in the squalid quarters of Athens, Salonica and elsewhere, the “lost homelands” represented a space which remained practically unchanged. The refugees simply remembered with nostalgia their places of origin without being aware of the extensive changes which transformed their former homelands, particularly urban areas like Izmir, to the extent that they became unfamiliar. What mattered for them most was to keep intact in their minds what they were forced to abandon as if their native places would

stay forever as they remembered them. Asia Minor was still part of the refugees' own existence for what it was remembered to be not for what it was becoming. To the extent that these memories were reduced to particular individuals or small collectivities they did not fit to a common or coherent narrative pattern. Instead, the collection of folklore material was believed to be by many a far more promising project because it provided stable ground for establishing the Greek historical presence in Asia Minor without denying the individuality of the different Christian Orthodox communities. It was there for everyone to see or hear its chronic presence and its unchangeable qualities being the measure of its value.

Of course, there was nothing new in this project since nationalist discourses throughout Europe had already raised popular culture to a homogenous whole, the sole and most authentic expression of national culture. The nationalization of folklore material was a precondition for recognizing this disparate material of oral and material sources as belonging to the same matrix despite immanent variations. To the extent that local individualities in Asia Minor were considered as expressions of a common national soul and therefore not antagonistic between themselves they could be studied together as part of a common body despite obvious and sometimes unbridgeable differences. Folklore material offered the possibility for arguing in favor of national coherence and historical continuity assuming of course that this kind of coherence and historical continuity already existed. This material provided the elements for articulating a consistent narrative which bound the different, localized, indigenous cultures into a common narrative. Therefore, lumping together all sorts of popular artefacts, outfits, jokes and demotic poems made sense only as a national project which testified to the chronic presence of the Greek nation in Asia Minor through the materiality of folklore. Bearing that in mind one could put this project into perspective, as an effort to associate folklore material from Asia Minor with the Greek national culture at the time when the Great Idea was finally over, the unification of Greece was completed with the cost of the mass exodus of Christian Orthodox, and many indigenous Greeks reacted negatively towards the refugees questioning their relation with the Greek nation.

Is it possible to suggest that the reason why folklore became a major vehicle of the memory of Asia Minor in the period under discussion was that the refugees themselves were not ready to address the trauma of their expulsion? This is a very

sensitive issue because it involves individual suffering and loss as well as the efforts to gain a second life in Greece, which in many cases proved extremely difficult. Traumatic memories of the years 1915-1922 were recorded but were not overwhelming. We know very little about all these because the refugees were either not prepared or not interested to tell their stories of survival. One should also bear in mind that the Greek state refrained from endorsing forms of commemoration which emphasized the bitter aspects of the war with Turkey and the sufferings of the Christian Orthodox. Interestingly, those who championed the collection of folklore material found reasons to disassociate this process with the trauma of expulsion. For example, Arethas Argaios rejected any reference to the tragic events which ended with the uprooting of the Ottoman Christians from Anatolia. As he suggested “the recent persecutions, torments and atrocities which we suffered [in the last wars] should not occupy our efforts because they were common for all of us and can be reduced to a few narrative forms while the richness of our folklore [λαογραφία] is far more important to record and preserve [in eternity]”.² The point was that the purpose of folklore collection was to provide the foundation of the Greek presence in Asia Minor by exhibiting all different local traditions and their relation to a common national culture at the same time. Instead reference on the suffering of the Christian orthodox would eventually fit into a common narrative pattern in which the richness of local cultures would be erased. I do not know if this argument stands well because testimonies of suffering and folklore material do not belong to the same registry but I understand that at that time there was much more reluctance than readiness to address the traumatic aspects of expulsion and inscribe the memory culture of the lost homelands to the suffering and loss of the refugees themselves.

There are two tentative conclusions which I want to offer at the close of this presentation. First, [is that] the memory of the “lost homelands” was associated with groups of intellectuals who following the rhetorical and cognitive models available since the 19th century wrote and published about Asia Minor. The form which interest in folklore studies took in the period under consideration is highly reminiscent of the similar forms of the cultural practices used by the Greek cultural associations in the Ottoman Empire. The fact that these individuals coordinated their efforts is probably due to their relation with already established literary and cultural networks some of them stretching back in the 19th century and the various cultural and philanthropic

² *Προσφυγικός Κόσμος*, 3 February 1929.

Christian Orthodox associations in many Ottoman urban centers. Urban sociality in the Ottoman Empire, particularly among the Christian Orthodox and Greek speaking groups, turned around cultural associations which mobilized a network of literate individuals to conduct research and present their findings in the regular meetings of these associations. These networks accommodated urban sociality both in the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece and in this regard there was some kind of continuity which allowed the refashioning of literary and cultural initiatives of these refugees intellectuals almost immediately after they set foot on Greece.

From my own perspective, and this is the second tentative conclusion, the issue is not the extent of success of these initiatives which were bound to interest only small groups of educated individuals. What I find more important is that these initiatives were forward looking and can only be understood as part and parcel in the making of a new refugee identity in a new country, which was Greece. In other words the memory culture of the “lost homelands” was associated with this kind of identity orientation which prioritized the integration and adjustment of the refugees and from this perspective it should be linked with a series of overlapping discourses about housing, employment, compensation and recreation of the refugees in the new country. If we take into account the tensions surrounding the reception of refugees in Greece by the host society which in some cases reached open hostility then we may understand why the making of a specific Asia Minor identity which celebrated its close connections with the Greek national culture was crucial as part of an integrative strategy.³ I am not suggesting that this was the only option the refugees had to make their claims heard but it seems the most consistent and successful. For reason which cannot be discussed in this paper the memory culture of Asia Minor was consistent with the forging of a new identity which emphasized common origins instead of local particularities in order to secure the complete integration of refugees in the Greek nation-state.

³ According to Feryal Tansug for the Muslim *muhacir* the forced population exchange is something they liked and approved since it took them “back” to their “nation”. Feryal Tansug, “Memory and Migration: The Turkish experience of the compulsory population exchange”, *Δελτίον Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών*, 17 (2011), 195-216. Obviously she refers to a kind of repatriation to the Turkish nation-state. In other words Muslims mythologized the official thesis of the Turkish state which somehow signified the traumatic experience of forced migration by making this experience more palatable.



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