

“Quartier Grec: A town within the town”

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In 1882 took place in Egypt the Revolution of Orabi. It was a movement against colonialism, against the foreigners. Eventually though it resulted in the predominance of foreigners. Right after the revolution, the British dominated and the team for the English prevailed. In this frame the Greek power, that dominates, aims not only at the development of its relations, but also at activity with British and by extension with the international community.

«Quartier Grec»

The *Quartier Grec* was given birth from the Revolution of Orabi in 1882, and declined after an other Revolution, that of Gamal Abdel Nasir in 1952. It is also indicative that these two revolutions aimed mainly and simultaneously at the foreigners. Their main reason was the confrontation of the force that foreigners had in Egypt and they were carried out in order Egypt to return to the Egyptians. Trying that, as it will be reported below, the Greeks placed the bases of westernization of the Egyptian state in order to achieve the opening to the world society and stood rear officers in the civilizing not only the urban class but also all Egyptians. However this movement was proved to be a boomerang for the Greek Settlers.

The concept of *Quartier Grec* obviously is prior to Chatby and concerns the existence of Greek Community in the wider region of Alexandria. Chatby delimits the *Quartier Grec* almost when the realisation of the appearance of building infrastructures in the Greek Community begins in this area and thus begins to emerge as the focal point of Greek activity, of *Quartier Grec*, while there are found infrastructures, such as the church, the schools, the enterprises, the banks, the seat of Community, the General Consulate and distinguished people. The *Quartier Grec* is mainly for Greeks the place of meeting, the Greek node.

The *Quartier Grec* constitutes a concept that can't be easily dissociated from the Greeks and should be delimited only with the presence of Greek element in Alexandria. The *Quartier Grec* is mainly the Greeks; their presence only puts the bases in order to speak for *Quartier Grec* in Alexandria. To the Greek presence should be added the entirety of the activities that the Community's Hellenism in Alexandria develops during its

stay in Egypt. The key point of the crystallization in *Quartier Grec* is always the person, the Greek Settler.

In *Quartier Grec*, people constitute the community. The community is a community of life, with the concept - notion that is recorded by Professor Sideri in her published essay with the title "Community dynamic and social cohesion" and where she proves to us that the social cohesion is elected in highest report for the politicalness of community.

In the frames of local life in Quartier Grec, every one knows persons and things and familiarity dominates. The community constitutes the city, a city with all the activities (*hospitals, schools, associations, orphanages, cinemas,*

enterprises, banks etc) and all the Administrative and Religious Authorities (*General Consulate, Commercial Chamber and the Patriarchate*).

The *Quartier Grec* is an autonomous and self-sufficient entity, which is found in another city and of course full of examples in continuous contact, communication, action and interaction with the rest of the city. It is not only the settler's node of communication between Greeks, but also simultaneously the node of communication between Greeks and Egyptians and between Greeks and international community.

The presence of Greek Settlers in the Egyptian society

The connection of eminent Greeks with the international society was mainly achieved through the function and the activity of Greeks in several sectors, such as in economic sector, in political sector, in social policy as well in culture. Greeks constituted the factor that would contribute to the historical opening of Egypt to the West, so that Egypt follows the developed Europe slavishly¹. The Greeks shaped the "lacking" urban class in Egypt².

Mohamed Aly³ wanted to "build" an urban state but the conditions were peculiar. The urban class did not exist in Egypt. The Greek tradesmen played the role of this lacking urban class, this is why Mohamed Aly protected them. During the period that Mohamed Aly wanted to create the "new" Egypt (around in the second half of 19th century), Greeks happened to be found in the apex of their enterprising activity and developing with astonishing rapid rhythms. In that period Greeks constituted the necessary mechanism of the Egyptian economy's development. The program for westernization of Mohamed Aly was realised substantially by the Greeks.

¹ It is the season of opening to the West.

² See Stratis Tsirkas, Kavafis and his season, 1983, Publications Kedros, p. 39-41.

³ Mohamed Aly controlled in Egypt the period 1805-1848.

For this reason Mohamed Aly supported with his policy the presence of Greeks in many ways⁴, mainly supplying to them the so known capitulations.

The Greeks contributed substantially to the change of the Egyptian economy, a) shaping internal "market", while stimulating the monoculture of cotton and the industrial products, b) trafficking the agricultural products and raw material and c) forming and participating in the mechanisms of configuring the executives' and intellectual personnel needed for the socioeconomic life in Egypt.

Greeks – Economy

The presence of various Greeks in the economic activity was dynamic. The economic activity of Greeks was related with trade, banking work and financial transactions, navigation and in a little smaller degree with industry. Greeks were framing an economic activity, and especially a productive process, with the most complete possible way, from the growth of the product to the financier framework of its production, its treatment and its distribution as well.

Cotton constituted the first basic occupation of Greeks. Greeks were those who contributed not only to the expansion of its cultivation but also to the establishment of cotton monoculture in Egypt. Their contribution to cotton was essential, while they imported new varieties; they provided their knowledge for the ways of cultivation to the Egyptians and handled with the most suitable way the distribution of the product. Greeks with their knowhow organised the production of cotton in all its stages, they searched the product, its growth and they took care of the financier framework of the

⁴The policy this consisted various privileges, as concessions of grounds except government owned cadastre, with religious tolerance policy (see Matoula Tomara-Sideri, *Alexandrian Families Choremi-Benaki-Salvagou*, Publications Kerkira, Athens 2004, pag.16-20).

production with the best possible means, so that cotton is produced, processed and trafficked in the markets of abroad. Greeks were cultivators, tradesmen-middlemen, exporters and brokers.

A great percentage of exports in cotton, perhaps the most important, was done by Greek hands. According to official statistics, around 20% to 25% of the total exported production was emanated from Greek enterprises. For the advisable distribution of their products, eminent Greek businessmen participated into the multinational commercial Association “ **Alexandria General Produce Association** ”, publishing in deed a weekly

bulletin about the movement of exports. This Association constituted the nucleus of the **Greek Commercial Chamber**, which was founded on 20th January 1901 with first Chairman Emm. Benakis. Important Cotton traders of this period were the *Firms of N. I. Kazoulis, Choremis-Benakis and Sia, Pilavelakis and Sia, Mr M. and C. Tositsas, Kassavetis, P. Achillopoulou,*

Kavafis,

Nikolopoulou and M. Salvagou and others.

With the change of the Egyptian economy which took place mainly with the help of Greeks, new Egypt owed to follow a policy of development actuated by other western characteristics. The development of Egyptian banking system was a necessity of the required "westernization". The institutional framework with infrastructures of growth for the enterprising world was needed, in order to strengthen its position to the international market. During the 50 years that followed the failed Revolution of Orabi, banks were founded with a lot of branches not only inside the country but also abroad. Greeks of great calibre, economic, enterprising and not only, played the leading part at the creation of the banking system in Egypt and many of them were found in managerial places of banking organisations that were created at this period. Such organisations were: *Banque d' Alexandrie, Banque General d' Egypte, National Bank of Egypt, Land Bank of Egypt, Bank of East, Ionian Bank Limited* etc. In these Banks a great number of factors of the Greek Community constituted their Board of Directors. The focal point of their work concerned of course the production and the distribution of cotton.

Beyond this occupation, Greeks turned their hands also to other types of companies. The contribution of Greeks to the sector of transports, and more specifically to navigation, was decisive. There also were formed a lot of companies of exploitation of fluvial navigations.

Of great importance was also the contribution of Greek workers in the opening up of Suez Canal, the offer from Greek factors of the Community who contributed to the manufacture of Ramli Railway, and the safe function of Alexandria's harbour.

Finally the action of Greeks was also referring to other sectors, such as insurance⁶ and real estate companies⁷ or other types of companies and associations, like the *Company of Water Supply of Alexandria (Alexandria Water*

Company Ltd), Distilleries of Volanakis (alcohol distillery P. Kotsikas, cognac factory

(Vrandy), Klonaridis Bros (Crown Brewery)), Industry Lagoudakis (factory cigarettes'

paper and then industry of paper) and the Industry of Cigarettes of Nestoras Tsanaklis.

All the above show the multifarious enterprising activity and economic function of Greeks. Nevertheless Egypt consists for Greeks the

suitable place not only for enterprising and economic development but also for political activity.

⁵ Such they were: Compagne égyptienne privilégiée pour le remorquage a vapeur sur le Nile et les canaux de l'Égypte, Compagne de navigation et de remorquage de Tewfikieh and United Egyptian Nile Transport Co.

⁶ Such as National Insurance Co. of Egypt, Egyptian Fire Protection Co.

⁷ Société Anonyme du Béhéra, Société agricole et industrielle d'Égypte and Société des halles centrales d'Égypte.

Greeks - Politics

Many were those Greeks who dealt with local politics, with politics of Alexandria. Eminent Settlers were members of the Alexandria's Committee of Select Persons (1870) before the establishment of the Mayoralty of Alexandria⁸. Also the Mayoral Committee of Alexandria, when it was founded in 1890⁹ aiming at the development of Alexandria, was composed of several Greeks, who had offered much to economy and to the enterprising world. Many from them were dealing with the Mayoralty and were elected for years as Mayoral Councillors¹⁰. Consequently, as it appears, the participation of Greeks in the active politics of Alexandria was not only apparent but also profound and intense in positions of great importance.

Greeks - Society

The frame of the activities of Greek settler family was multifunctional during its presence in Egypt. Greek Settlers, beyond their enterprising skill, were dedicated to benefactions and action, which include elements of modernity.

Greek Alexandrian figures of consequence, functioning either as families, or individually, models of action, enterprising and humanitarian, were moved characteristically into frames of modernity in the sector of social offer as well as wider concept of concern, practising in this way various forms of social character's benefaction. In these movements not only the financing for the foundation of Radiological department in the

⁸ Ioannis K. Choremis was one from those that djete'lesan members of Committee of Select Alexandria.

⁹ In the founding statute is fixed the 28mele's Council, in which 14 members are elected residents of independent nationality, no above 3 the each nationality however.

¹⁰ Known Greeks that dealt with the Mayoralty were: K. Choremis, who was member of Mayoral Committee of Alexandria, Emm. Benakis, who was also member of Committee of Select People, but afterwards the foundation of Mayoralty of Alexandria (1890), is elected continuously Mayoral Councillor and the Mikes Salvagos is elected Mayoral Councillor but also Chairman of the Club of Mohamed Aly.

Greek Hospital of Alexandria¹¹ is registered, but also the foundation of Kotsikio Hospital, a hospital that was created for Greeks and remained finally in the Egyptians, the economic aid of poorer Greeks in Alexandria, the offer of work to many of them, and simultaneously the donations in

many Egyptian Charitable Associations.

The example of Virginia Benakis is worth of particular indication and value. Virginia Emm. Benakis-Choremis (1848-1928) founded in 1894 the Charity Company in Alexandria and dealt with the fighting of feminine white slavery and providing work, a really pioneer movement for that period of time. In December 1909 Virginia Emm. Benakis founded the Asylum for Protection of the Greek Young Women, which functioned at the same time in combination with the International Contact at the White Slavery and with the International Union of Protection of Young Women (*National Vigilance Association*), seated in Switzerland, and with the Traveller's Aid Society. The feminine presence in social offer at the same time with the benefaction stresses the intense modernity disposition of Greeks.

In the activity of social policy that Greeks practised for themselves, it should also be added the opening to the Egyptian society in their effort to maintain a good relation with the local element. This relation aimed at the creation and by extension at the existence of a reciprocal confidence and collaboration.

The aid of the Moslem Brotherhood, or more correctly, the *Moslem Charitable Association*, was realised in the frames of the general social mutual help and solidarity and by eminent members of the Greek Community. The Moslem Brotherhood was assisted concretely by various meaning personalities of the Greek Settlement, as K. Xenakis or Ev. Achillopoulos, D. Spetseropoulos and Emm. Benakis.

¹¹ From Konst. Choremis (1862-1935).

This fact demonstrated the surplus social sensitivity for the unprotected and the wider social conscience of Greek Settlers, but simultaneously constituted also a sample of integration of the Greek community in the religiously and socially multicultural environment of Egypt. Beside all these, it was also a way that Greeks reciprocated the country of their reception for their evolution. Thus channels of communication were created and the bonds of Greeks with the Moslem people and the Egyptian Authority were strengthened more.

Conclusions - Epilogue

From all above, it is obvious that the entire Greek presence in Egypt, and more concretely in Alexandria, with the development of economic function, the political action, the social policy and the cultural activity of Greek Settlers being the lever of development of the local society of Greeks with basic recipients the Greeks themselves.

As it can be emerged from the activity of Greeks in the Egyptian territory, the aim of their action was their own development. Their exemplary presence in various sectors was the one that would create the

pledges for the intensification of their presence to the international community but also to the Egyptians. It was such a necessary presence in order to develop bonds and relations not only in enterprising but also in the political world.

Beyond the political attitude of Egyptian Ruling Class towards Greek Settlers, the attitude of ordinary Egyptians is characterized by mixed sentiments. In periods of disturbances, the Egyptians destroyed shops of Greeks. Characteristically in the newspaper "Ouantitil" of 16th September 1926 under the title: "The occupation of Egypt under the Greeks" we are informed for their protests, considering the Greek "occupation" equally embarrassing, stuffy and dangerous with the English one. While during other "quiet" periods of time, Egyptians felt more close to Greeks than to other populations. Greeks differed from other Europeans. Greeks were those who contributed to the creation of "new" Egypt, helped the development of its economy and to the politicization of Egyptians. They worked beside Egyptians without however being actuated by the same motivation and the same perception of their movements. Greeks acted under the thought for development of their entire activities. Their aid and their providence aimed at the elevation of their level of life and they also aimed at preserving the distinct of their cultural character. They wanted their Settlement to maintain in time and to distinguish for enterprising, economical and wider social and political undertakings. The increased social conscience and the development of the wider region of the Community were related exclusively to the Greeks.

However the tragic irony is that finally all that Greeks created on Egyptian territory, remained to the Egyptians, after Greeks were turned away with all the foreigners, under the peculiar conditions that prevailed after the "golden age" of *Quartier Grec*. The decline of the egyptiote Greek Community and the collapse of *Quartier Grec* meant the return to the National Centre and the contribution or integration of these people to the internal developmental and modernizing processes of the Greek State.

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