

3. The Egyptian Greek communities

In general, Greek immigrants quickly organise themselves into communities when settling in reception countries. These Greek communities function as real state mechanisms “in miniature” and meet essential social and economic needs. The members of the Greek communities which flourished in the Balkans, Russia, Europe, Asia, and Africa placed a great deal of importance on institutions and social services. They ensured that the internal needs of the community would be catered for by establishing churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages and homes for the elderly. As a result, quality of life in the communities was improved, their unique cultural character was emphasised, and finally a sense of national identity and consciousness was consolidated, well beyond the boundaries of the Greek state.

The relations of the Greek communities with the Egyptian state were typically harmonious, those of a good citizen and the statutory authority. In terms of domestic social, institutional and administrative structures, Egyptian Hellenism was centred around three poles: the Patriarchate, the Consulate and the Community.

The economic life of the Egyptian Greeks developed mainly in the fields of commerce, industry, communications and finance. Indeed, their contribution to the establishment of the cotton industry, which was central to Muhammad Ali’s plans for the transformation of the Egyptian economy, was fundamental.

At the same time, they served as a substitute for the non-existent Egyptian bourgeoisie in three spheres: the creation of a domestic market and the import of western products; the transport of raw materials, cotton mainly, to the West; and the creation of a skilled and educated workforce capable of contributing to the socio-economic progress of Egypt.

In its first phase, the economic activity of the Egyptian Greeks mainly took the form of individual enterprises, such as that of Michael Tositsas, which will be examined below. Economic activity of a more collective nature took place in a second phase. At first, Egyptian Hel-

lenism flourished primarily in Alexandria and Cairo. The first modern Greek community in Egypt was established in Alexandria in 1843. Michael Tositsas, one of its most eminent members, served as its first president.

Tositsas was born in 1787 in the town of Metsovo in Epirus. As a young man he moved to Thessaloniki, where he was employed by his father, Anastasios, a fur merchant. Later on, the Tositsas family expanded its activities into the Mediterranean region, and in 1820 the headquarters of the family concern was transferred to Alexandria. Having secured for himself exclusive distribution rights for Egyptian cotton, Tositsas soon acquired a significant financial and social standing. He was appointed the first Consul General of Greece in Egypt, and a few years later was elected the first president of the newly founded Greek Community of Alexandria.

During his tenure as president between 1843 and 1854, Tositsas succeeded in placing the community and its dependent institutions under the authority of the Greek government and the protection of the General Consulate of Greece. This arrangement represents a radical innovation within the Ottoman Empire, where Greek Orthodox communities, schools and charitable institutions, all functioned under the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and its representatives, who were in turn answerable to the Ottoman authorities. From 1843 onwards, the Patriarchate of Alexandria maintained only spiritual and religious authority over the Greek Community of Alexandria. After the establishment of the community, the Patriarchate lacked any jurisdiction over communal affairs and institutions. The example of Alexandria was to be followed by all the other Greek Communities subsequently founded in Egypt.¹³

Georgios Averof was born in 1818 in Metsovo, the hometown of the Tositsas family. At the age of 22 he settled in Cairo and worked with his brother as a textile merchant. In 1866, at the age of 48, he moved to Alexandria, where he was engaged in commerce, banking, real estate and river transport, gradually acquiring a huge fortune. In 1885, Averof was elected president of the Greek Community of

Alexandria, occupying the office until his death in 1899. Under his auspices, the community made significant educational and cultural progress.

Emmanuel Benakis was another distinguished Greek established in Alexandria. He was born on the island of Syros in 1844 and educated there, later continuing his education in Manchester. He returned briefly to Syros and before moving to Egypt in 1865. Through his intelligence and industriousness, he gained the confidence and respect of Ioannis K. Choremis, an eminent Greek cotton merchant. In 1870, he married Virginia Choremis, became a partner in the cotton firm Choremis-Mellor & Co, and settled permanently in Alexandria. He was soon recognised as one of the leading foreigners in Egypt, due to his exceptional commercial success. In 1901 he was one of the founder members of the Greek Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria and was elected its first president. He maintained that position until 1911, when he was invited to Greece by the modernising prime minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, in order to take over the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, which later became the Ministry of National Economy. He also served as president of the Muhammad Ali Club in Alexandria and was unanimously elected president of the Greek Community of Alexandria between 1901 and 1911.¹⁴

From a different angle, the construction of the Suez Canal between 1859 and 1869 and the transfer of skilled labour from other European countries led to the formation of a class-structured social system in Egypt. Of the 13,000 labourers engaged in building the canal, 6,000 were Egyptians and Syrians and 7,000 were Europeans. Of the Europeans, 5,000 were Greeks.¹⁵ The Greek labourers formed an institutionalised community in Suez and were connected with both the European and the Egyptian labour forces. It is remarkable that from its early stages the Greek Community of Suez had a clear political and class orientation and constituted an important nucleus for the formation of the Left in Egypt. Thus, alongside the already existing commercial and business poles of the Egyptian Greek communities, a proletariat began taking shape.

THE EGYPTIOT GREEK COMMUNITIES

The American Civil War (1861-1865) provided a significant impetus for the development of the Greek community in Egypt. Initially, it caused an international shortage of cotton and then an immense rise in demand, which resulted in the explosion of Egyptian cotton exports. As a result, the Egyptiot Greeks gained recognition not only as businessmen, but also as trustworthy supervisors of the production process (the cultivation, processing and transport of cotton). The subsequent influx of Greek merchants, craftsmen and office workers constituted a significant component of a numerically important petite and middle bourgeoisie. This petite and middle bourgeoisie represented the majority of the Egyptiot Greek population, alongside the 60 to 70 families who constituted a haute bourgeoisie at the top of the social pyramid, and a large numbers of unskilled labourers.¹⁶