



The Kordon today at the Pasaport Pier, Smyrna. © Paul Watkins

SMYRNA: RETURN OF THE GREEKS?

Paul Watkins wanders the streets of old Smyrna (Izmir) looking for survivals of the 1922 Catastrophe



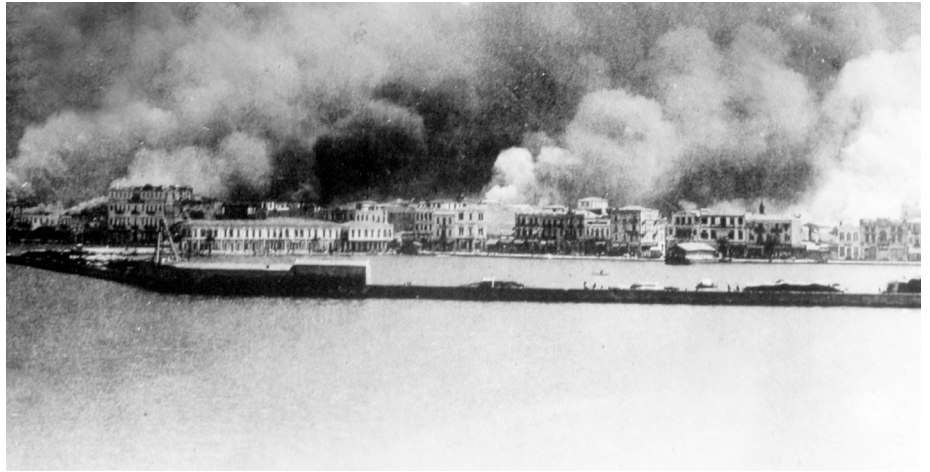
*Old Levantine houses in the Purlu.
© Paul Watkins*

Walking north along the two-mile stretch of Smyrna's promenade, the historic Kordon, with the Mediterranean Sea to your left and the high-rise blocks to your right, you'll catch a glimpse, out of the tail of your eye, of a poignant memento of another city, cauterized and buried but not yet erased from your mind. This is the sea-worn rampart of the old quay, overlaid now with a smart walkway of tessellated waves.

Mute stones that weep with the buffeting sea, and with the spectral touch of feet – burnt by the hot stones, gripping the edge before the plunge. For many of the thousands forced onto the quay by a vengeful army and merciless flames, the water was no salvation but a stay of execution, either by rifle shot or drowning in a vain attempt to reach the heedless ships anchored offshore.

This was the scene during the terrifying days and nights of September 1922, when in the wake of the retreating Greek army, sent by the Greek prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos three years earlier, Turkish troops under Mustafa Kemal (later Kemal Atatürk) had marched on Smyrna from the north. The Greek troops, making good their escape via the Çesme peninsula to the south, thus abandoned the people they were sworn to defend, the city's Greek majority. For the Christian Smyrniots, accustomed to centuries of tolerance by their Ottoman masters, it was a bitter adieu.

The great fire of Smyrna, otherwise known as 'the Catastrophe' lasted two weeks and destroyed nearly two thirds of the city. Estimates of the human toll vary greatly, often depending on the viewpoint of the observer. The consensus is that out of a joint Greek and Armenian population of 200,000, approximately 50,000 died as a



The great fire of Smyrna, September 1922.

result of the holocaust and the rest were forced into exile. As to who started the fire, a long-held theory that it was the Armenians, fleeing from their historic foes, who wished to deny their property to the Turks, has been disproved. Cumulative eye-witness reports describe Turkish soldiers pouring petrol on Armenian houses, in anticipation of a wind that would ignite the Greek and Armenian quarters, sparing the Jewish and Muslim areas. Levantine commercial properties – those lining the central Frank Street and the Cordon – would also be destroyed.

The outcome of the tragedy was the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which provided for a mass exchange of populations. More than a million and a half people were forcibly resettled – Muslims living in eastern Thrace sent to Turkey and Greek Christians living in Asia Minor to Greece.

Why Smyrna?

The genesis of this dynamic multi-cultural city on Turkey's western seaboard lay in its superb deep-water harbour, which unlike others on her antique Aegean coastline (Greek Miletus, Ephesus and others) had not silted up, leaving their port-cities stranded. From the earliest Greek settlement (c. 9th century BC) Smyrna had been an important centre of trade, contested by the

Lydians but ultimately flourishing under Alexander the Great's colony on Mount Pagus, a mile or so inland. Its commercial development was galvanized during the Byzantine period by the competition between Turks, Venetians, Genoese and others for its possession, and the issue of the first 'capitulations' from the Greek empire. Renewed later by the Ottomans after the fall of Constantinople (1453) these were the special trading concessions offered to foreign companies that allowed them to trade freely throughout the subject territories. Beneficiaries of these concessions (often won by military achievements against the Ottomans themselves) were first the Genoese and the Venetians and then the French (1569), who were to become long-term allies of the Turks. Later on, capitulations were extended to the English (1580), the Dutch and other trading nations. In the case of the English, trade was consolidated by the founding of the Levant Company (1581), which guaranteed its protection under the English crown. The company's monopoly – similar to that of the East India Company – brought it great power and influence in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean, including Smyrna and Alexandria, which made its representatives – the English Vice-Consuls – minor potentates whose businesses

and families enjoyed special privileges including exemption from the taxes and laws of the state.

Architectural survivals

My curiosity about the fate of the Levantine families and their properties following the fire, which had virtually extinguished their community, and those of the Greeks and Armenians, brought me to Smyrna in the early summer. It was a good time to experience the contrast of the growing heat of the hinterland with the cooling breezes of the seaward-facing city, whose vision of the blue-grey infinity that lay beyond its western gulf was more bracing than the congested Istanbul where I had started my journey.

As I carried on northwards along the Kordon (now officially Atatürk Caddesi), I found it difficult to reconstruct the burnt city, which would have lain to my right, behind the modern blocks of apartments and hotels. The Kordon itself, built by a French-owned consortium in the 1870s, had extended the line of the old wooden quay into the sea by fifty metres. Its name (Turkish: 'cord') brought to mind another meaning: the cordon thrown around it by the Turks to keep the panic-stricken refugees trapped on the quay between the burning city and the sea. In its Levantine heyday, the 'quai', as it was otherwise known, would have thronged with porters and their animals, camels and donkeys carrying goods to and from the waiting vessels. Figs, raisins, raw cotton and other products from the Anatolian hinterland would have mingled with the imports, predominately the cotton-cloth from England.

The destruction of the old city had given Atatürk an opportunity to carry his national modernization programme into urban reconstruction. The original labyrinth of narrow streets and



The Kordon photographed in the early 20th century.

alleys, most famously Frank Street, the main shopping artery of the European quarter, was now overlaid by a radiating network of modern boulevards and traffic circles.

Today, the shade of the old Greek quarter lies beneath a vast parkland known as the Kültürpark, in the centre of the city, scene of a yearly trade fair. The Greek population, initially eclipsed by the arrival of the Ottomans in the 15th century, had revived dramatically in the ensuing centuries, becoming a majority again in the mid-19th. In this period it had been enlarged by Greeks from the Aegean islands, notably from Chios, whose own population had been decimated by the Turks in the Greek War of Independence. The same war, paradoxically, had brought an influx of Greeks from Greece itself, where conditions of poverty and brigandage had increased since the country's liberation. They had arrived in a city which was well established as the largest and most prosperous port of the Ottoman Empire, with a Greek population greater than the city of Athens. The leaders of the community were the Greek merchants and bankers, many of whom (such as the Mavrogordatos and Ralli from Chios) financed the building

of Orthodox churches, modern Greek schools and splendid mansions for their families.

It seemed appropriate that one of the pre-1922 buildings on the Kordon was the home of the present Greek consulate, that had been temporarily vacated for restoration. Adjoining 19th-century buildings also looked in need of repair, which might be considered a priority after a halt was put to the large scale destruction of such buildings in the '90s, following an outbreak of heritage consciousness among the Turks.

One survival stood out: the mansion wedged incongruously between two blocks that had been adapted for use as the Atatürk Museum. The discovery that this was formerly the property of the wealthy Armenian, A. Spartali, a member of the consortium (Société des Quais de Smyrne) which had built the Kordon, reminded me of the fate of Smyrna's other large non-Turkish community. The area of the city to the west and south of the Greek district, inhabited by the Armenians, had been consumed, along with its Greek neighbour, by systematic burning. With a single exception, which I was to discover later, most of the city's Armenian and Greek Orthodox

churches had been destroyed in the fire, and those that survived – either ruined or converted to other uses – had been dynamited to make way for the new city. Did any of their adherents remain in the city today? My researches into this question had largely drawn a blank. The Armenians, a thriving community in the Levantine city, had completely disappeared, just as they had earlier been expunged from eastern and other parts of Turkey by the pogrom of 1915.

The population of Smyrniot

Now I understood that their numbers had increased with an influx of Greeks, mainly from Thessaloniki, escaping the economic crisis in Greece to seek new opportunities abroad. They had been made welcome by the Turkish government and with their work and academic studies, were integrating with the Smyrniot community.

The British presence

Beyond the northern limit of the fire I turned east to explore the

half-a-dozen others in Alsançak showed that there had been no attempt to destroy monuments of the Catholic faith, the focus of the majority of Smyrna's non-Orthodox Christian worshippers. The fire, in any case, had not reached this part of the city, and I was delighted to discover the streets of old Levantine houses with the characteristic wooden balconies of the Ottoman period. Their architects, the Chian ktistes, were similar to those in Chios town. Until the late 20th century these houses had been



© Paul Watkins

The church of Ayios Voukolos.

Greeks that remained after the fire – no more than a hundred or so – had originally been limited to descendants of those made exempt from the exchange of populations in 1923, such as Greek women married to foreign nationals. Until recently these individuals had been invisible outside their own community.

area of the city which had largely escaped the conflagration. This was the part known as 'Alsançak', which was associated with the former Greek and Levantine community. I shortly passed the portico of a 'Katolik Kilisesi', the early 20th-century Roman Catholic church of the Holy Rosary, which along with

threatened with demolition by the rush for development, but now they could command their own price as highly desirable residences.

On the eastern side of 'Punta' (the northern, sea-girt quarter of Alsançak) I found myself at the 150-year-old hub of the area's business, the old Alsançak railway

station. Here the good burghers of the Levant were distinguished by a strong British presence, flagged by the station itself, built by British engineers. This was the terminus of the railway they had constructed in the 1850s from Aydin, to transport produce from the fertile plain in the south.

The old houses opposite the station, occupied by those same engineers, were recorded as once belonging to 'Warren', 'Andrus/Purser' and 'Shotton'. In addition to these, I had special information on 'Hitchens' – a gently decaying, patched up house with an attic floor. Built by a former chaplain of the Anglican church, it had served as the English Nursing Home during the Smyrna disaster and had its own heroine, Grace Williamson, who managed the home and looked after its British inmates and refugees until they could be escorted to a British ship in the harbour. Her intrepid character was shown by her return to Smyrna after the disaster, to continue running the home as a pension.

The 'corner of England in a foreign field' certainly applied to the nearby Anglican church with its adjacent parsonage, a reassuring ensemble of Gothic gables and red brick so reminiscent of other outposts of Britain's trading empire. Inside the church I found a memento of a celebrated family who had served the Levant Company in Smyrna and Alexandria, with whom I had a personal connection. Strangely, the name on the memorial, Zoë Rees, was the same as that of a friend of mine whose roots were in the family, but of a different generation and longevity: the earlier Zoë having died in infancy. Along with the Werrys, the Whittalls, the Girauds and many others of Smyrna's important international commercial community, some of whom had intermarried, the Rees family was very much a part of the city's

history over the past two hundred years.

In the villages outside Smyrna the wealthy expatriates had built splendid mansions in the classical style, most of which are still there today and in some cases owned by the families. Regrettably I didn't have an opportunity to visit the Rees villa in Boudja (modern Buca), but was fortunate to be given a tour of some of the surviving Levantine mansions of Bournabat (modern Bornova) a former forest village which offered the wealthy families a palatial retreat from the humidity and congestion of the coastal area. The village, now a suburb of modern Izmir and the home of Ege University (University of the Aegean) was still shaded by its tall pine trees, through which one could glimpse the elegant façades. Many of these buildings, such as the splendid university rectorate (originally the Whittall mansion) have now been taken over by public institutions.

Greek revival

But what of the Greeks? So far I had not discovered any ecclesiastical building of Greek origin of the pre-1922 city. The small Greek community (either descendants or new arrivals) could claim a place of worship (Ayia Photini, in the heart of the city), but this had been adapted from an old Dutch Protestant chapel which had survived the fire. Marked on my map, however, was one building that my historical guide, George Vassiadis, had mentioned. Tucked away in a poor quarter of the city centre near the Basmane railway station was the little known church of Ayios Voukolos, built in 1886 and abandoned in 1922.

For years, under Turkish authority, it had served as an archaeology museum, then in the 1950s was once more vacant and left to decay. Its recognition, in 1975, as a 'cultural entity to

be protected' was a positive step but it was not until 2008 that restoration of the church was authorised. Although principally used as a cultural centre it was returned to the Orthodox rite with a divine liturgy in August 2014 and six months later repeated the ritual in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew – the first patriarchal visit to the city in more than 93 years. In a speech to the congregation, which included not only Greek residents of the city and descendants of refugees from Greece but the Turkish mayor of Izmir and representatives of other communities, the Patriarch stressed the importance of peaceful coexistence between people of every religion.

Standing in the courtyard of Ayios Voukolos near the myrtle tree planted by the Patriarch, I gazed silently at the church's beautifully restored portico and reflected on the past of this ill-fated city. A century on, I could only imagine the music of its streets: the vibrant interplay of Greek, Turkish, Armenian, Levantine and Jewish voices in the bazaar and in the narrow lanes behind the Kordon. This had been the essential elixir of Smyrna: so many different people with so many different religions and cultural identities, living peacefully and creatively together until the heedless tide of 20th century politics engulfed them. Though ultimately doomed, and seemingly out of step in a divisive 21st century, this had for centuries been a resilient co-existence. If the Greeks came back they could, perhaps, help reclaim it.

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Recommended reading: Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe in the Mediterranean by Philip Mansel (John Murray, 2010); Paradise Lost: Smyrna 1922, the Destruction of Islam's City of Tolerance by Giles Milton (Sceptre, 2009)



The Acropolis, Athens.