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THE SUPPORTERS OF RIGAS VELESTINLIS
IN THE SERBIAN TOWN OF ZEMUN

*In memory of Leandros Vranoussis
an unforgettable friend and tireless Rigas scholar*

The documents relating to Rigas Veletinlis, which were published by Emile Legrand and translated by Spyridon Lambros, tell us that Rigas' associate, Theoharis Georgiou Touroundzas, who was a native of Siatista, made the following confession when interrogated. He had received from Rigas Veletinlis three "Charts of Greece" and fifty copies of the portraits of Alexander the Great, which he had despatched to his brother, Georgios Touroundzas, who was to sell them in the Serbian town of Zemun. When he was in Zemun in March 1797, he had sung Rigas' "Thourios" in the presence of his brother and three merchants, Fylaktos Nikolaou, Georgios Athanasiou, and Georgios Afxendiou, because they were all eager to hear this revolutionary song. Finally, on October 1797 he had received from Rigas Veletinlis' own hands a copy of his revolutionary proclamation, and brought it with him to Zemun in December of the same year with the intention of making it known to his friends there¹.

There can be no doubt about the significance of this information, for it tells us that Rigas Veletinlis' revolutionary plans found response in the Greek community of the Serbian town of Zemun, which at the time was on the border between the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire. This fact has been underlined by modern scholars who have investigated the life and work of Rigas Veletinlis². However, as we have seen, the documents also mention

1. *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα περί Πήγα Βελεστινή και των συν αυτώ μαρτυρησάντων εκ των εν Βιέννη αρχείων εξαχθέντα και δημοσιευθέντα υπό Αιμιλίου Λεγράντ μετά μεταφράσεως ελληνικής υπό Σπυρίδωνος Π. Λάμπρου* (= Unpublished documents relating to Rigas Veletinlis and those who had martyred with him, taken from the archives in Vienna and published by Emile Legrand, with a Greek translation by Spyridon Lambros), Athens 1891, pp. 100ff. (hereafter: Legrand-Lambros, *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα*).

2. See L. I. Vranoussis, *Ρήγας* (= Rigas), Athens 1957, p. 65, with relevant bibliography.

the names of certain Greek citizens of Zemun, to whom historians have not given the attention they deserved. No light has been shed on the life and work of these supporters of Rigas' to confirm modern scholars' contention that the Greek national martyr's revolutionary ideas had spread through all levels of society³. This is precisely the subject of the present study.

First of all, the information that Rigas' associate Theoharis Touroundzas, son of Georgios, had a brother in Zemun named *Georgios Touroundzas*⁴, i.e. bearing the same Christian name as his father, gave me pause and raised doubts in my mind. Though not unheard of, it is extremely rare in eastern Europe for a father and son to share the same Christian name. So I turned my investigations in another direction and managed to locate some reliable data which illuminated the subject. Specifically, a few years later, in 1806, there was a teacher at the Greek School in Zemun named Ioannis Touroundzas. His father's name was Georgios and, like Theoharis Touroundzas, he was a native of Siatista; he was also, incidentally, a very progressive teacher⁵. In all likelihood, this teacher was the brother of Theoharis Georgiou Touroundzas. This is borne out by a further piece of historical documentation, dating from 1780: the list of subscribers given in Iosepos Moisioudax' *Apologia*. According to this list, the two brothers' grandfather was named Ioannis⁶; and this, as tradition demands, would have been the name of Theoharis' elder brother in Zemun, the Greek teacher, *Ioannis Georgiou Touroundzas*.

This supporter of Rigas Velestinlis was one of Zemun's most notable Greek teachers. One of his students was a Serb named Sima Milutinović-Sarailija, who was to become a famous poet, and whose autobiography provides valuable information about his Greek teacher. According to Milutinović, Ioannis Georgiou Touroundzas attached great importance to the humanities and did not encumber his students with superfluous knowledge. In his religious instruction, for instance, he selected his material with the utmost care, in an effort on the one hand to convey only those aspects of theology which might ennoble a human being, and on the other to avoid

3. For Rigas Velestinlis' wide circle of supporters, see Vranoussis, *Ρήγας*, pp. 66, 71.

4. In the Austrian documents he is referred to as *Georg Torunzia* (see Legrand-Lambros, *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα*, p. 102).

5. *Φιλολογικός Τηλέγραφος ήτοι Ελληνικού Τηλεγράφου Φιλολογικά* (= Literary Telegraph, or Writings of the Greek Telegraph), Vienna 1820, No 6, col. 52. *Gradja iz Zemunskih arhiva za istoriju prvog srpskog ustanka*, vol. 1, Belgrade 1955, pp. 331-2, No 240.

6. See Iosepos Moisioudax, *Απολογία* (= Apology), Part One, Vienna 1780, p. XI, republished and edited by Alkis Angelou, Athens 1976, p. 10: "The most honourable Georgios Ioannou Touroundzas, of Siatista".

those doctrines which were a vehicle for hypocrisy and bigotry. A friend and ally of enlightened monks, the Greek teacher disliked and resolutely avoided the fanatical ones. Dositej Obradović, that great and progressive reformer of Serbian education, seized every available opportunity to sing his praises⁷.

Another supporter of Rigas' in Zemun was a merchant, whom our Austrian source refers to as *Phylacto Nicolaus*⁸, i.e. Fylaktos Nikolaou. As we shall see directly, there was indeed a merchant of that name in Zemun; which makes it all the more puzzling why Spyridon Lambros, when he translated the document, rendered the name in Greek as "Nikolaos Fylaktou"⁹. Fortunately, further historical evidence about Fylaktos Nikolaou survives: we know that he came from Ioannina and settled in Zemun c. 1787: he was one of the town's major hauliers and a big name in the transport business¹⁰; one of his main clients was the famous trading firm of Mihail Țubru in Brașov¹¹.

We also have a fair amount of information about Rigas Velestinlis' third supporter in Zemun, *Georgios Athanasiou*. He was from the market town of Selitsa (now Eratyra) in Western Macedonia and settled in Zemun c. 1790, where he worked in the wholesale trade. The life and soul of Zemun's Greek community, Georgios Athanasiou was also one of the prime movers in the founding of the Greek school¹².

Even more information is available about Rigas' fourth supporter in Zemun, *Georgios Afxendiou*, or, as other sources call him, *Afxediadis*. Born in Zupani (now Pendalofos) in Western Macedonia, he studied at the Tirnovo School under the noted teacher Ioannis Pezaros. One of his fellow students and a close friend was Konstandinos Koumas, who was destined to become a great scholar. Both as a man and as a teacher, Pezaros profoundly influenced his student. In late 1792 or early 1793, Georgios Afxendiou left Tirnovo and went to Zemun in response to an offer of employment as an assistant

7. Sima Milutinović-Sarailija, "Životospis", *Književna Istorija* 33 (1976), 180.

8. Legrand-Lambros, *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα*, p. 102.

9. Legrand-Lambros, *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα*, p. 103.

10. See Ioannis A. Papadrianos, *Οι Έλληνες πάροικοι του Σεμλίνου (18ος-19ος αι.)*. (= The members of the Greek community of Zemun, 18th-19th cc.), Thessaloniki 1988, pp. 65-66, n. 187.

11. *Arhivele Statului din Brașov*, *Mihail Țubru* section, year 1792, No 1028; year 1794, No 491.

12. *Istorijski Arhiv grada Beograda*, *Zemunski Magistrat* section, year 1793, f. 21, No 34 (hereafter: *IAB, ZM*).

in the shop of a Greek merchant named Georgios Mandzarlis¹³. He did not remain in this position long, however, for in September 1794 he became the first teacher at the Greek School of Zemun, throwing himself into the task with great enthusiasm. He taught until the last months of 1796 and then returned to the world of commerce in partnership with Georgios Padzis, who was from Ambelakia¹⁴. This is why the Austrian documents state that in March 1797 Georgios Afxendiou was a merchant¹⁵.

Afxendiou did not stay in Zemun: in 1802 he went to live in Vienna, where he remained until his death in 1813. A scholar and a true son of his homeland, he showed his loyalty to his birthplace, Siatista, by leaving his large library to the schools of that town, rather than to any of his relations or friends¹⁶.

The final act in the drama of Rigas Veletinlis and his comrades was played out in Zemun, just inside the Habsburg Empire, and in the Turkish-held Belgrade across the frontier. Knowing full well the fate that awaited Greek patriots who fell into Turkish hands, the officials in Vienna nonetheless made the inhuman decision to hand them over. On 27 April 1798, a strong guard collected Rigas and his seven companions, Turkish subjects all, from the prison in Vienna, and, bound in chains, after a thirteen-day walking, arrived in Zemun on 9 May. The garrison commander, Colonel von Schertz, took them straight to Belgrade, where, the very next morning, he “delivered the goods” to the Turkish governor, Osman Pasha. Rigas Veletinlis and his friends were flung into the grim tower of Nebojša (which means “dauntless”), where, after forty days of torture, on 24 June 1798 (New Calender) they were strangled and their bodies cast into the Danube¹⁷.

The agonising death of the eight Greek patriots convulsed the Greek community of neighbouring Zemun, where the news was received the following month. The surviving sources relate that the subject was heatedly discussed, and the Greeks were loud in their furious denunciation of the Austrian authorities’ callous action¹⁸. Unfortunately, the sources refer to

13. See Papadrianos, *Oi Έλληνες πάροικοι*, p. 147, with relevant bibliography.

14. *Φιλολογικός Τηλέγραφος*, 1820, No 6, col. 52. Ioannis Ekonomou Larissaios (1783-1842), *Επιστολαί διαφόρων* (= Letters from various people), transcribed, researched, and with a foreword by Yannis A. Andoniadis, Athens 1964, p. 55.

15. Legrand-Lambros, *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα*, p. 102.

16. See the periodical *Ερμής ο Λόγιος* (= Hermes the Scholar). 1818, No 16, pp. 466-8.

17. See Vranoussis, *Ρήγας*, pp. 103-4, with relevant bibliography.

18. Ignaz Soppron, *Monographie von Semlin und Umgebung*, Zemun 1890, pp. 470-1. Tanasije Ž. Ilić, *Iz prošlosti Zemuna i Vojne Granice*, Belgrade 1955, p. XXXV.

Zemun's Greek community in general, without mentioning names. But there is one unpublished document in the Belgrade Historical Archive, dating from 1801¹⁹, which gives information about the relevant conduct of one particular Greek citizen of Zemun, *Konstantinos Georgiou-Kyritsas* who was a native of Blatsi (now Vlasti) in Western Macedonia. He left his Turkish-held birthplace at the age of nine c. 1744 and settled in Zemun, where he became a wholesale merchant and eventually joined the ranks of the city's highest social class, that of the "Bürgers"²⁰. In October 1799 elections were called for a new mayor, and the position of returning officer was allotted to Colonel von Schertz, the garrison commander who had signed the papers handing Rigas and his companions over to the Turks. On the day of the elections Konstantinos Georgiou-Kyritsas announced that he would not vote for any of the official candidates, but would support a syndic named Düring, who was known for his liberal views and his sympathy for the French Revolutionaries. This enraged the Austrian garrison commander, who anyway was no friend of Rigas' compatriots²¹. So this unpublished document in the Belgrade Historical Archive gives us information about one more supporter of Rigas in Zemun, who is mentioned in no other source.

To sum up our main conclusions: Rigas Velestinlis' revolutionary plans were welcomed by members of the Greek community of Zemun, namely Ioannis Georgiou Touroundzas, Fylaktos Nikolaou, Georgios Athanasiou, Georgios Afxendiou, and Konstantinos Georgiou-Kyritsas. And these supporters of Rigas represented a wide band of the social spectrum, for they were not only teachers and scholars, but also capable merchants who enjoyed considerable financial prominence and an enviable social position.

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19. *IAB, ZM*, year 1801, f. 64, No 34.

20. On the basis of their financial position and moral standing, the inhabitants of Zemun were divided into three classes: in descending order, the *Bürger (Cives)*, the *Kontribuenten*, and the *Schutzkontribuenten* (see Papadrianos, *Οι Έλληνες πάροικοι*, pp. 87-8).

21. *IAB, ZM*, year 1801, f. 64, No 34.