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THESSALONIKI ON THE EVE OF WORLD WAR I
AND ITS AFTERMATH*

In choosing Thessaloniki as my topic I was not influenced only by my long stay in this city but also by the following considerations:

a) Thessaloniki was already before 1914 the most important Balkan city of the Ottoman Empire, as it had previously been in the Byzantine Empire.

b) Its population exceeded before World War I, the population of the capitals of the other Balkan States except, of course, Constantinople since the Ottoman Empire was a state with Balkan provinces and not a Balkan state.

c) The city was coveted by both Greece and Bulgaria whilst the Ottomans were certainly not ready to leave.

d) In the years 1900-1912 Thessaloniki did not undergo substantial changes despite the war in its neighbourhood and despite terroristic activity which endangered not only the life and the property of local people but even of foreigners enjoying diplomatic status.

e) In the years 1913-23 substantial changes occurred with the result that the city has completely changed from both the economic and social points of view.

I intend to discuss in the first part the developments in the years 1900-1912 and in the second the developments during 1913-23. The analysis in the first part will be carried out: first, in considering the stratification and differentiation under the influence of geographic, economic, political, religious, intellectual and national factors; second, from the point of view of the relations of all these factors; third, the connections of the various classes in the city with rural population living nearby or in distant areas. In the second part I will examine the influence of the events in 1912-23 on the conditions prevailing when Thessaloniki was delivered from the Ottoman yoke in October 1912. A short conclusion will follow.

A. 1900-1912

Life and social conditions were influenced (1900-1912) in Thessaloniki, before its liberation by the Greek army on October 26, 1912, by the develop-

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ments connected with the Greek-Bulgarian struggle and with the Young Turks' revolution. As a matter of fact before the Balkan wars started Thessaloniki felt, first in 1903-8, the gradual weakening of its intercourse with the country-side through the fighting between Greeks and Bulgarians, with eventual interference of the Ottomans; second, the Young Turks' revolution (1908) which achieved to stop the Greek-Bulgarian struggle and created for some time the hope that all the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, independently of origin, religion and race would enjoy equality of rights. This led to some improvement in the country-side and to the increase of production and of trade both ways between Thessaloniki and the region around; third, the reestablishment of order which had been shattered within the city in the years of struggle in the country-side, as shown by the bombardment of big foreign boats in the harbour and by the killing of two foreign consuls; fourth, the Austro-hungarian desire to occupy Thessaloniki, if possible with Ottoman consensus, independently of the complications which would have been created; fifth, Thessaloniki's liberation on October 26, 1912. Let me add that the social and economic conditions prevailing in 1900-12 in Thessaloniki did not differ substantially from those prevailing there before the end of the XIX century.

I

The stratification and differentiation in Thessaloniki has to be examined, first from the geographic point of view. The Greeks were mainly living in the upper town and in the center around Egnatia street; the Jews and the Levantines South, close to the White Tower; the Turks close to the center of the city beginning at the White Tower towards the Western outposts. Of course this division did not apply 100% as it would have been with ghettos. This is shown a) by the site of the catholic church within the area where mainly Turks were living, b) by the extension of the Greek area southwards, c) by the activity of the Jewish banks and shops in the center of the city where the Turks were established.

The stratification, on the basis of the geography of residence, follows the stratification on the basis of nationality as is shown in the previous paragraph with the same exceptions. Social relations existed as a rule only within the ethnic community concerned. It has to be stressed that the Turkish community paid special attention to the separation of men and women. In the upper income groups social relations were substantial between Greeks and Levantines and between the latter and Jews whilst those between Greeks and Jews were less developed. This did not prevent them from having business contacts and in some cases even collaboration.

Politics had not in Thessaloniki, in the years 1900-12, the importance they have now. Trade unions did not exist, inspite of the guilds in the city. The various ethnic groups, rich and poor, were fighting for the realisation of their natural aspirations. The latter were, in the case of the Greeks, liberation and union with Greece; in the case of the others the maintainance of the status quo, except in the case of the holders of Austro-hungarian nationality and passports, who favoured the annexation of Thessaloniki to their Empire.

It follows that the stratification on the basis of geographic, national, political and religious factors was running in Thessaloniki (1900-12) on parallel lines. This cannot be said for the intellectuals whose professional ties were not unimportant. Those who had enjoyed University training, mainly in Central and Western Europe but also in Athens and even in Constantinople, had to compete between each other but formed a class by themselves. It has to be stressed in this connection that before 1912, Turks going to the University or being in business were few. They were mainly working in agriculture, in the army and in the administration. This characteristic of the Turks led to a supplementary distinction and separation with the other ethnic groups and explains the prestige the non-Turkish doctors had among the Turks, who in case of illness had to rely on them.

II

It follows that in Thessaloniki (1900-12) the stratification was mainly based on geographic and religious lines which more or less were parallel; that the intellectuals formed a group by themselves, excluding as a rule the Turks; and that the relations between those groups were in general unimportant except for strictly professional reasons. As a matter of fact when those concerned had to buy or to sell, at least as a rule, they tried to get the most favourable terms without caring from what area, from what nationality and from what religion their counterpart was coming. This may be acknowledged to those concerned as a proof of rational consideration which is often missing even in our days in countries with multinational populations as in Lebanon, and in the interwar years in countries created in virtue of the 1919-20 peace treaties. The expectation of an eventual annexation of Thessaloniki by the Austro-hungarian Empire did not affect social stratification, nor relations between the groups, nor relations with the rural population. It may however be noticed that this induced some people to try to get the Austro-hungarian nationality with the corresponding passport and with the privilege to be submitted to the jurisdiction of an Austro-hungarian consular court. In the Ottoman Empire the acquisition of a foreign passport was relatively easy and

very important for businessmen as the corresponding consular court had to decide both in civil and in many criminal affairs. Efforts were also undertaken to attract Austrian capital, to intensify trade and other contacts with firms established in Austria and in Hungary, even in the desire to diversify risks and to proceed to investments there.

III

In examining the economic relations of the inhabitants of Thessaloniki with the rural population one has to distinguish those living near the city and those living far away. In 1900-12 slow railways and horse or cow-driven carriages did not allow the daily contacts, I mean the coming of the farmers to the city and returning home on the same day, in a radius exceeding some 30 kilometers. This was rather substantial. Outside this area trade was more difficult and in the years of the Greek-Bulgarian struggle more dangerous. It was however not disrupted as much as could have been expected because the Ottoman government protected the railway which operated normally. It may be said that also in this intercourse commercial and not political or religious criteria were decisive. Get the best, the cheapest, the quickest, if possible from a kinsman, from a relative, from an adept of the same religion, but only if those not belonging to same group were unable to offer under more favourable conditions.

The period considered here ended with the liberation of Thessaloniki by the Greek army on October 26, 1912. In those days private and commercial deals were not affected by war as it began with World Wars I and II. Independently of this the liberation occurred three weeks after the beginning of the hostilities. There was no change in social stratification, independently of the loss of face and of power by the Turks. It was without importance if they were private people in the case of army personnel or members of the administration. The rather rapid establishment of the Greek administration and the outcome of the second Balkan War confirmed the general belief that Thessaloniki had become definitely Greek. Under these circumstances it was not astonishing, first that the importance and the prestige of the Greek community increased substantially, and second, this change induced the other groups to consider what they ought to do.

B. 1913-1923

Thessaloniki was to undergo more radical changes in the decade 1913-23. They were caused 1) by the new frontiers in virtue of the 1913 treaty of Bucha-

rest which limited substantially Thessaloniki's hinterland¹; 2) by the arrival of the Entente armies which stayed 1915-9; 3) by the great fire of 1917; 4) by the gradual departure of members of the Jewish and of the Levantine communities which expected unfavourable repercussions from the reduction of Thessaloniki's hinterland and from the fear that the establishment of the Greek administration would lead them to an eventual discrimination in favour of their kinsmen²; 5) by the settlement of Greeks coming from every Greek province; 6) by the settlement of the refugees following the defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor, from Eastern Thrace, from Constantinople and from the Asian coasts of the Black Sea; 7) by the compulsory departure of the Turks in virtue of the Greek Turkish agreement of 30 January 1923.

I

Businessmen in Thessaloniki were accustomed before the latter's liberation in 1912, to have a vast hinterland extending North of Monastir up to Skoplie and eastwards within Thrace. This hinterland was seriously reduced following the Balkan wars and would have been even smaller if Greece did not get, after the second Balkan war in virtue of the Bucharest 1913 treaty, Eastern Macedonia with a new frontier towards Bulgaria along the Nestos river. This limitation in connection with war damages, e.g. the Bulgarians burnt down Seres which was a prosperous town, affected unfavourably the turnover of the firms established in Thessaloniki. It started inducing those concerned, provided they were not Greeks, to consider departure. In the meantime the life in the city continued within separate communities as in the past but with certain changes, namely:

a) A substantial diminution of the Ottoman community following the departure of all those connected with the army and with the administration, in combination with the loss of face due to Turkish defeat not only by the Greeks but also by the other Balkan countries.

b) Gradual and substantial increase of the size and of the importance of the Greek community which however was stopped in the years of the Entente armies' presence, particularly when their commander³ in chief treated badly both the Greek inhabitants and the Greek administration 1915-7.

c) No change worth mentioning, in the Levantine and in the Jewish

1. It would have been worse in this connection without the 2nd Balkan war.

2. They did not know what a wellknown American journalist said so well: "Greeks are nasty only to themselves", of course much later.

3. The French general Sarraïl.

communities whose members however disliked Greek expansion. They considered the Greeks responsible for the unfavourable repercussions on their turnover and on their profits. Contacts however with the Greek community and with the Greek administration proved unavoidable, necessary and profitable. They were linked also with social contacts. Those busy with the various foreign companies, holding concessions in public utilities, were not affected because Greece respected and confirmed with all the treaty obligations assumed by the Ottoman Empire in this sphere.

As far as the Levantine community was concerned, radical changes followed the arrival of the Entente armies in 1915. Members of the "allied" communities, namely Belgian⁴, French, Italian, Russian, Serbian and English, felt themselves suddenly in a strong position and able to settle their problems with the Greek administration through the unofficial support of their officers. On the other hand the members of the "enemy" communities that is mainly German and Austro-hungarian had to leave if they had time to or get imprisoned until the end of the war with very unfavourable repercussions for their property, independently of the ruin of their business. The peripeties of these two communities and the certitude of the unavoidable departure of the Entente armies at the end of the war, independently of the very profitable deals which in the meantime they made possible for the business world, particularly for those holding passports of the country of the contracting military units, induced the members of the other levantine communities to consider their departure from Thessaloniki. They were strengthened in this connection 1) by the possibility of transferring their capital abroad as Greece applied foreign exchange control only in the early twenties and that for a short time; 2) by the satisfactory prices secured on the sale of land. Land property was not important for those who were not Ottomans as long as landownership by foreigners was not allowed in the Ottoman Empire. Very often one member at least of every country—holding levantine or Greek family, if the latter was not an Ottoman subject—was or became an Ottoman subject in order to be able to retain the property of their land. Thessaloniki had never had a Bulgarian community worth mentioning as shown by the non existence of a Bulgarian church. All of them left after 1913.

II

The arrival of the Entente armies in 1915—they stayed until 1919—in-

4. There were no Belgian troops in Thessaloniki but the Belgians enjoyed the full French support.

tensified the economic activity of the Thessaloniki area. Up to a certain degree they replaced the markets lost through the new frontiers. It is well known that armies—the same applies to officers and soldiers acting as private persons—are very generous and even they waste, they cannot and do not want to wait, they believe they have no time to discover lower prices than those claimed, and usually pay cash. The Entente armies as such were not concerned with social conditions provided that those inhabitants belonging to the enemy powers' communities should be arrested or removed in view of the danger of spying. This did not affect the Ottomans who in the meantime had become Greek subjects.

Anyhow the presence of numerous army personnel enlarged social intercourse and created social tensions. I do not mean strikes which did not occur then but competition for space, particularly after the 1917 fire, also troubles for the womenfolk as the Entente armies had no female soldiers or employees, and as the scarcity of space imposed cohabitation and caused frictions.

III

The 1917 the great fire destroyed practically completely the section of the city between the White Tower and its Western approaches. As the population did not diminish, the difficulties connected with the war increased inasmuch as the fire coincided with the mobilisation in the South of Greece and with the beginning of these new units' arrival in the Thessaloniki area, in order to move gradually to the front along the Strymon river. Thus the scarcity of housing, the danger of epidemics, the antagonism of races became more sensible. Let us consider that without counting war prisoners, troops from at least eight different nations fighting under a common command, were within Thessaloniki. This did not prevent misunderstandings and even minor battles. Possibilities of employment were not missing for those who were not eligible for active service in the army, even more after 1917' fire to remove rubble and to repair minor damages in housing and in anything needed which had not been completely destroyed by the fire. It has to be added that the presence of troops of so many nationalities, the similarity of the dangers due to the war, the expectation of advantages when the war would have been won, last but not least, the scarcity of housing, even more so after the fire, gradually led to the end of separate life in the various communities, to the better knowledge of each other, to the lack of any discrimination by the local authorities which had to take care of all communities without excluding the Turkish.

IV

I referred already under I to the reasons which induced gradually the Levantines and the Jews to leave Thessaloniki. The quasi totality of the first group and a substantial fraction of the second were affected and left gradually. In view of the house shortage and in view of the arrival not only of Greeks living in other parts of the country but also of refugees, these departures passed practically unnoticed. The Greeks settling in Thessaloniki had again, at least in the period with which we are dealing, the tendency to limit their social contacts to those coming from the same area. Of course with the shortage of housing they could not settle all together in the same suburb or in the same neighborhood of the city, except when the government proceeded to the construction of new sections whose houses were given for use exclusively to refugees, coming to the city. The combined result of these movements in and out of Thessaloniki was a diminution of the latter's cosmopolitan character and the substantial increase of the importance of the Greek element in all sectors of activity and so in social life which thus became nearly 100% Greek. It does not seem doubtful to the author that this development would have been realised anyhow even if the Levantines and the Jews did not leave so easily. It has to be added that those Jews who remained in Thessaloniki until their extermination by the Nazis 1941-4 managed very well in all sectors. This proved that the fear of discrimination by the Greek authorities was without any foundation and the Jews showed their attachment to Greece by their gallant fighting (1940-1) against the Axis powers and by the return of some of them to Greece after liberation, inasmuch as in virtue of a special law the property of those Jewish families which were completely exterminated went to the Jewish community without the payment of inheritance tax.

V

We noticed already that after the end of the Balkan wars and even more after World War I many Greek new-comers settled in Thessaloniki. They came first from Southern Greece, second from Crete, third from various ex-Ottoman provinces either freed by the Greeks or those which as a result of the Balkan Wars became Serbian or Bulgarian or remained within the Ottoman Empire. In all these cases those concerned, came out of economic considerations, namely the belief that in Thessaloniki they would secure more profitable jobs, better chances of developing their business, greater possibilities for a political career which would eventually favour their non political activity and better administration. At the same time they did and do their best to keep the links with their place of birth or of origin by spending at

least from time to time their vacations there, by marriages, by contributions to welfare institutions there, by investing there, mainly in housing.

Very often these settlers come from the country-side with the result that those born there and settling down in Thessaloniki contributed to the increase of the percentage of inhabitants of rural origin. This is an advantage not to be underestimated for the social stratification of a big city and for the possibilities of its development as long as these people are usually healthy, good workers and less affected by bad habits frequent with town dwellers.

VI

Since the constitution of 1830 of the Greek kingdom, refugees arrived periodically. They were either the victims of Turkish, and after 1906, of Bulgarian expulsions, or they had to flee from areas rising against the Turks, mainly until 1898 from Crete, as life became there impossible for those not fighting; or they decided to leave when they were expecting bad treatment owing to a deterioration of the relations of Greece with the country where they were living. Understandably the number of refugees never reached the level of the years 1922-5. In those years Greece received refugees from Bulgaria, from Russia and mainly from Turkey, namely Eastern Thrace, Constantinople, the Asiatic coasts of the Black Sea and Asia Minor. The latter were more numerous and arrived as a rule without anything except what they were wearing, or were carrying in a bag, or in a suitcase. Certainly some of them had property or bank deposits or other assets outside Turkey but they constituted the exceptions. As the Turkish inhabitants of Thessaloniki had to leave and as the city was smaller than the Athens-Piraeus area the number of refugees who settled there, I mean both in the city and in the country-side, was substantial. Their arrival exercised a great influence on the economy and on the society of the whole Thessaloniki area without avoiding frictions. These refugees were coming from countries less developed than Greece but there they were influenced and strengthened by their competition with European, Levantine and Jewish merchants and businessmen. They had not been defeated by the latter and this helped the new-comers to Thessaloniki to develop within few years in trade, industry, free professions and business in general. Their efforts were supported by inflation reducing the burden of contracted debts which raged in Greece until 1926, by the abundant supply of trained workers and employees who, being in a desperate condition, were ready to accept very low salaries provided they secured a job. The new-comers had also the previous experience of facing a foreign and really an enemy administration, whilst in Greece the whole administrative machinery was manned by Greeks even

if the quality of the service was not as a rule effective, as public employees had to face not only their routine work but also the establishment of the refugees, as well as the settlement of all the problems inherited by war, which in the case of Greece had lasted ten years (1912-22).

The massive inflow of refugees in combination with the arrival of Greeks from other areas and the departure of the Levantines, the Jews and the Turks, modified completely the social conditions in Thessaloniki. As said before the tendency to live in separate groups persisted in the years considered here but since then it has continuously weakened at least in those groups which were successful in their career and were able either to hold their wealth or to increase it.

VII

The departure of the Turks living in Thessaloniki was compulsory in virtue of the Greek-Turkish agreement of January 30, 1923 concluded in Lausanne. The Turks left with all their belongings but their houses and land remained. They got in exchange the property of the Greeks who had left Turkey as is the case of those coming from Asia Minor practically without anything. The departure of so many Turks would have affected badly the economy of Thessaloniki if they were not replaced by the Greek new settlers and refugees who outnumbered them and were as a rule accustomed to better housing than what they found in the case of Turkish houses which had certainly not been well maintained. Their repair and expansion in combination with the construction of new houses on a great scale by the Greek authorities created a great demand of manpower which was available. The employment of the Greeks living in Thessaloniki and of the new-comers together led gradually to a better understanding whilst in the first years many frictions occurred. Social relations independently of origin started only later.

Conclusions

Thessaloniki has proved a very dynamic city. It became gradually transformed from a segmented to a uniform modern city without excessive class feud. It shows since 1922 a continuous growth despite unfavourable repercussions of the world depression in the thirties, of World War II which led to the practical extermination of the Jewish community, of the political peripeties of the country, last but not least of a centralised government.

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