



100 Years Since the Burning of Smyrna

SEPTEMBER 2022



SMYRNA • Evangelia Bolani, Oil 50 x 70

**This special edition is partly sponsored by
Michael & Robin Psaros and Dr Spiros & Amalia Spireas, Sigmapharm Laboratories**

The Smyrna Quay: The History of a Symbol

By Achilleas Chatziconstantinou
Special to the National Herald

Back in 1865, when 44 of the most important merchants in Smyrna – Greeks, Armenians, and Levantines – AKA European Easterners – sent a letter to the Vali (local governor) requesting the construction of a new pier, this multinational city had a population of 185,000 (Slaars, 1868), with the Greeks being the predominant ethnic group, and was home to the consulates of 17 Western nations which were continually expanding their services. Just a year earlier, it had become the capital of the Vilayet of Aidinio. However, there was one paradox associated with the city. The Ottoman Empire's most important commercial harbor for over a century did not have a pier or quay. And so, large wooden sailboats and then state-of-the-art steel steamships were forced to drop anchor offshore, inside the safe confines of Smyrna's large harbor, where boatmen – who constituted one of the most powerful guilds in the city – undertook the loading and unloading of cargo and passengers. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Smyrna-Aidinio railroad line, the first railroad in the East, was nearly complete, which meant that the iron caravan that replaced – to a degree – the traditional camels, could transport

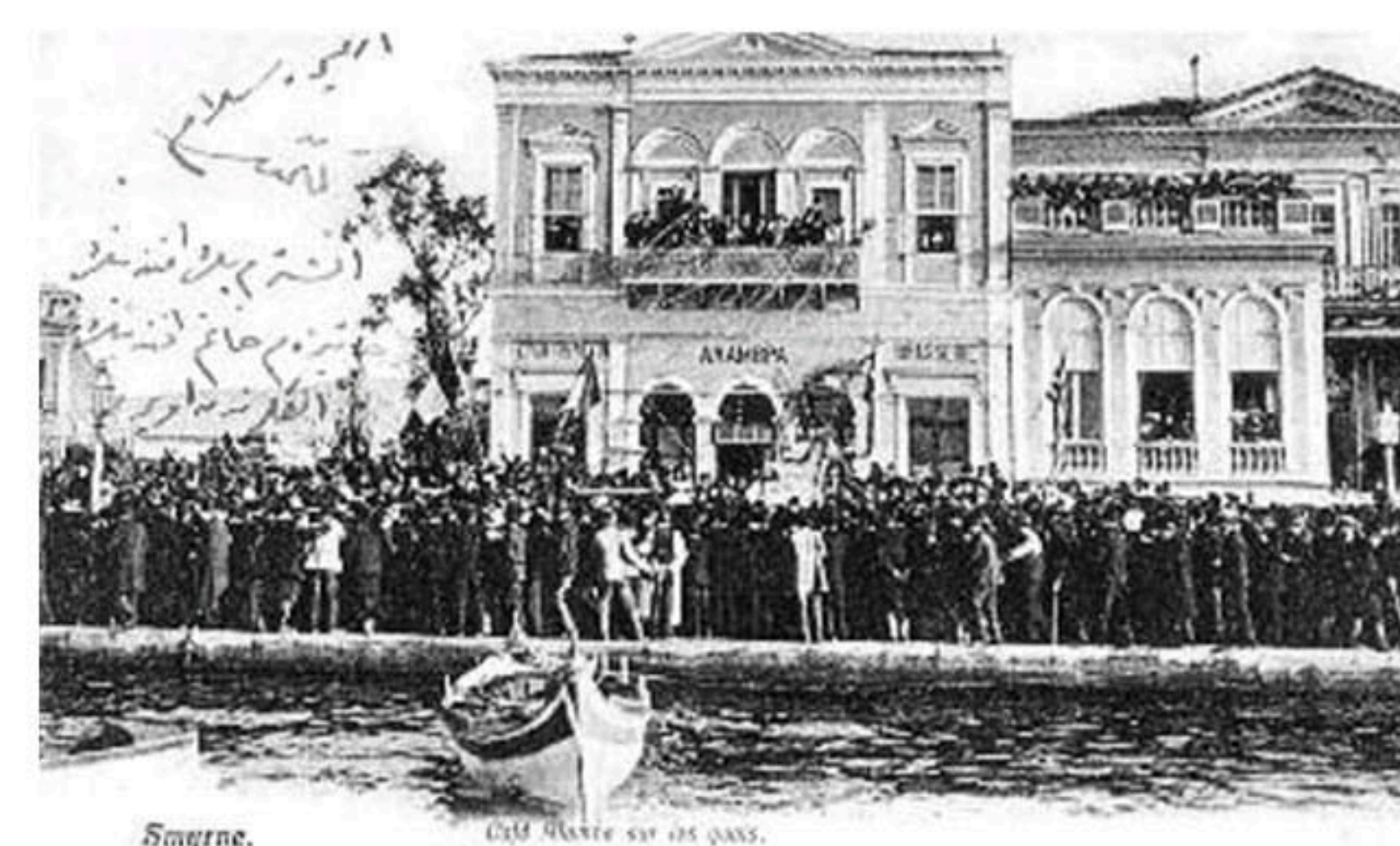
much more products than before. Each year, merchants would jubilantly deliver tons of dried fruit (figs, raisins), tobacco, cotton, and other cash crops from the fertile valleys of western Asia Minor, such as Maiandros and Hermos, which earned Smyrna the distinction of being the largest transportation hub in the eastern Mediterranean, featuring over 180 inns and dozens of warehouses. Afterwards, these products had to be processed on site, with no time to lose, before they could be packaged and sent to the West, reaching as far as the United States. The local economy had skyrocketed to another level, as did consumer demand, but the corresponding infrastructure in the city, with the exception of the gas plant established in 1862, was mired in the pre-industrial era. However, the future of Smyrna envisioned by the aforementioned 44 prominent merchants was not limited simply to increasing their profits, but at the same time extended to creating a modern city that could rival the large European ports in the western Mediterranean, such as Marseille, Genoa, and Trieste, which were connected with Smyrna through regular ship routes. Together with its flourishing commerce, over the next half century the city would become adorned with modern



entertainment venues, bathhouses, cinemas and theaters, luxurious clubs, modern educational facilities, hospitals and hydrotherapy spas, large railroad terminals, steam-powered factories, velodromes and soccer stadiums, a racetrack, a spacious boulevard with a horse-drawn tram featuring an enchanting view, as well as shops stocked with all the finest and newest products that Western civilization and fashion had to offer a household. The manner in which such a grandiose project could be carried was more or less the same as it is today: one or more financiers would be given exclusive commercial rights to the area by the Sublime Porte for a set period of time (i.e., 30 years), establish a joint-stock development company and implement the BOT

(Build-Operate-Transfer) model. Thus, the state would end up securing a percentage of the profits without spending a dime. But who was in a position to undertake the development of a quay in Smyrna? The answer lay 600 nautical miles to south, at the end of the Suez Canal. The Dussaud Brothers, subcontractors for Ferdinand de Lesseps, already possessed the capital and knowhow to build long piers. In fact, they even used reinforced concrete, which was a very innovative technique for that era. In 1869, the same year that the Suez Canal was being inaugurated with every formality, the Dussaud Brothers' Société des Quais de Smyrna began working on the embankment of Smyrna's coastline. The Dussaudes, then their successors the Guiffraes, would become the bosses of

the quay and the most powerful men in the city. The first phase of the project lasted six years, while the second lasted another five. Construction also faced a lot of opposition, because it caused not only unprecedented upheaval in citizens' daily lives, but also redefined – or rather streamlined – the manner in which maritime commerce was conducted. Anyone who transferred commercial goods from the private ladders stationed all across the coastline and protected by the concession system, had to now do business through the official Customs House on the new port and pay the corresponding tariff. Moreover, the ability to dock ships on the pier meant the loss of a major source of revenue for the boatmen. The solutions provided were the product of tough negotiations and included



No. 11. Ed. Zaidouk & Kony, Hayatou 1904/05 No. 11, Smyrna.

measures like a grace period, reductions in profit margins, etc. It was no coincidence that just as the project was being completed in 1875, the oldest known 'Almanac and Guide to Smyrna for the leap year of 1876' – the city's first commercial directory – was printed, featuring in its 72 pages all the existing businesses and professionals in the city, among other things. This was, however, only one aspect of the project. The other had to do with the creation of a new strip of land 3.5 kilometers in length, which began from the Aidinio railroad station in Punta and reached all the way to the military bar-

racks. Over 50 city blocks were handed over for development, along with two roadways running north to south, which were characterized by the famous Parallel Street in the city's interior and the legendary Kai Street in front of the city, running alongside the shoreline. These were depicted on the new official topographic map of the city drafted in 1875 by Lamec Saad. Between 1875 and 1922, the quay in Smyrna developed rapidly and changed in appearance, casting off its old Ottoman facade and symbolizing the progress and prosperity attained by the residents. The zoning of land set aside for exclu-

sive usage appears not to have followed any plan formulated by local authorities, but rather, allowed the existing situation and urban development to continue based on the rationale of districts. Hence, a purely residential district developed to the north, which was quickly covered by homes that combined the architectural features of eclecticism and tradition (enclosed balconies) and were virtually identical to one another. The so-called 'Smyrnian' or 'Chian' home featured a structure relatively short in width (8-12 meters) and much larger in depth, depending on the shape of the lot, which was intended to house middle and upper-class families, together with their domestic staff. Some of these homes were used as consular residences, with the title of consul often being bestowed by foreign governments upon their nationals who were at the same time prominent members of local society. An afternoon stroll on foot or trip on the tram was a favorite pastime of local residents, and an opportunity to admire their city's new visage. To the south lay the cosmopolitan district of Kai Street, which featured entertainment venues – a little slice of Broadway where across just 530 meters one could come across cinemas like Paris and Pathé, theaters (with the most important one being the Greek Theater or 'Theatron Smyrnis'), gentlemen's clubs like the Sporting Club, cafés and brasseries, as well as luxury hotels. This was where the Smyrna of entertainment came to life, and its residents knew how to generously spend their wealth on life's pleasures. Leading ladies of the theater like Mari-ka Kotopouli and Kyveli would bring audiences who would flock to the city's many summer and winter theaters to their feet, while European theatrical companies would regularly include performances in Smyrna on their tours. The brasseries also stood out, because, in addition to the genuine Viennese or local beer that one could sample, these establishments also frequently featured a set of bands composed of talented performing artists – a European band and a band

performing traditional or eastern music, such as the famous Estoudiantina “Ta Politakia.” The triad of cosmopolitan hotels, the Hotel de La Ville, the Krämer, and the Huck offered guests multi-star comfort and luxuries, which inspired urban legends.

It was precisely this image of Kai Street that proved to be completely incompatible with the coal train that was initially supposed to pull in a little further down by the Customs House, using the same tracks as the tram. As a result, the seaside train line was scrapped from very early on and the fig packers guild, the Smyrna Fig Packers Ltd, took over the train station.

By then, the 18-meter wide shoreline boulevard had become the most popular public area in Smyrna, serving as the center of celebrations and reception ceremonies for foreign dignitaries and royals, or even the “battlefield” for ship crews from opposing nations with rivalries that dated back centuries. In fact, one such skirmish between French and German sailors turned into a full-scale brawl that left two of the most famous cafés on the quay, the Apollo and the Hermes, destroyed.

The next and final district included the closed port and its piers, the Passenger Station and Customs House, and the open port. The view of the quay from here featured dozens of boarding houses, complete with coffee shops on the street level entrance, maritime offices, insurance firms, and other companies, banks, warehouses, and buildings belonging to the state authorities, such as the Tobacco Regie, the Chamber of Commerce, the Bourse, and of course, the municipality’s administrative headquarters known as the Konaki.

From May to October – especially during the summer months – for someone to walk down the street of the quay, which was paved with stone slabs from Mt. Vesuvius, they would have to pass through a bustling crowd of workers, manual laborers, travelers, coach drivers, caravans, and even flocks of sheep – or



It was precisely this image of Kai Street that proved to be completely incompatible with the coal train that was initially supposed to pull in a little further down by the Customs House, using the same tracks as the tram. As a result, the seaside train line was scrapped from very early on and the fig packers guild, the Smyrna Fig Packers Ltd, took over the train station.



make their way across the tables of the cafés and piles of sacks featuring all sorts of merchandise ready to be loaded and unloaded.

The Greek or bilingual (Greek and French) signs that appeared every step of the way gave the impression that the city was a Greek port. The boarding houses that were Greek-owned had names like ‘London,’ ‘Egypt,’ ‘Epirus,’ ‘Alexandria,’ ‘Lesbos and Kydonia,’ ‘Labyrinthos,’ ‘Ioannina,’ etc. The same held true for the dozens of coffee houses, lined up next to each other with their open tents, which often formed a unique display of Greek geography: ‘Krini and Chios,’ ‘Samos,’ ‘Rhodes,’ ‘Vourla.’ From here, people could catch the Hamidiye company’s boat to Kordelio, Karatasi or other suburban waterfront docks in Smyrna Bay – a means of travel that remains popular in the city until today – after previously enjoying a warm ‘kattimeri’ (a type of crepe) made out of phyllo crust from the Zakka bakery located across the street or a coffee from the adjacent Mokka café belonging to Kostis Chatzimarkou.

The curtain began to come down on Smyrna’s belle époque with the outbreak of World War I, which ended with the defeat of the Central Powers and the Armistice of Mudros between the Triple Entente and the Ottoman Empire on October 31, 1918. This ushered in a changing of the guards both for the municipal administration and certain businesses operating on Kai Street, which were either owned by citizens from countries on the losing side or which had names that were closely associated with ongoing developments. Prominent examples involved the successors to Jonas Krämer, who owned the hotel bearing his name, which subsequently came under the ownership of the Bosnian Muslim Naim Bey, who renamed it ‘Splendid Palace,’ or the café-bar ‘Graz,’ which was renamed ‘Wilson,’ in honor of the U.S. president.

Nevertheless, unquestionably the most radiant moment in Smyrna’s modern history was the landing of the Greek Expe-

ditionary Force on May 15, 1919. The quay was at the center of the day’s events, which began with a brilliant ceremony attended by the Metropolitan of Smyrna Chrysostomos Kalafatis. The buildings, public and private alike, were decked out with flags and banners, while the entire Greek population of the city had gathered there to welcome the troops, cheering on their liberators as they marched through the city. However, the developments, with the ensuing clashes and casualties that were incurred, served as an indication for the Greek Army that the campaign that had just begun would certainly be no cakewalk, and that neither the Turkish element nor all their Western allies – especially the Italians – intended to accept the new reality.

Over the approximately forty months that the Greek occupation and administration of Smyrna lasted, there were many things that changed – particularly on the quay. Some of the finest private mansions were given to the Greek generals and the High Commissioner Aristeidis Stergiadis as residences. Others housed offices of the Commission and the army, including the Misthos residence, for example, where the financial offices were set up, or the Hunters’ Club, which was converted into a hall for soldiers. The establishment of a branch of the National Bank of Greece under the direction of Alexandros Koryzis represents a unique example of Greek institutions setting up offices in Smyrna. It was housed in the completely renovated Bourse building, together with the corresponding branch of the ‘Ethniki Asfalistiki’ insurance agency. The presence of Greek authorities provided the Greeks of Smyrna with the opportunity to showcase their feelings of national pride, which was reflected in the names of their establishments. Names like ‘Admiral Kountouriotis,’ ‘El. Venizelos,’ ‘Panellinion,’ ‘May 2nd’ (the date of the Greek Expeditionary Force’s arrival according to the Julian Calendar, which was still in use at the time) now adorned the facades of the cafés and hotels. The picture became complete with impressive purchases of high-profile properties by wealthy

Greeks, as was the case with the Sporting Club, which belonged to French interests and was purchased by Prodromos Bodosakis Athanasiades for the sum of 2.5 million francs – an astronomical figure for that era.

Around the same time, certain entrepreneurs began to dominate the local entertainment, dining, and hotel market, recovering from a difficult five years of financial hardship and discrimination by the Ottoman authorities. For example, the Demopoulos family owned the famous countryside recreation centers ‘Luna Park’ and ‘Corso’ in Punta, as well as ‘Paris,’ while the Vardalis and Potiris families owned a chain of hotels and a restaurant on the port named ‘Patris.’

The Curtain Falls, The Sky Darkens

The dawn of Saturday, September 9, 1922 found the residents of Smyrna terrified and locked in their homes, while thousands of refugees had gathered in city, following the retreat of the Greek army after the collapse of the front on August 30th, carrying whatever personal effects they could manage to bring along. The quay began overflowing with people holding bundles and household items, while building owners raised the flags of the Great Powers on their buildings in attempt to place them under their protection. The Greek authorities had withdrawn from the city the previous afternoon, with Stergiadis leaving amid jeers. The first companies of Turkish soldiers soon appeared, sealing the fate of the city and the new order of things awaiting it. A few hours later, Metropolitan Chrysostomos died a martyr’s death at the hands of the Turkish mob. Four days later, when the fire began in the Armenian district and spread, as planned, to the north, wiping out one Greek neighborhood after another, the only outlet to salvation appeared to be the sea. The actual number of people who crammed onto Kai Street and waited in vain for ships to take them to Greece is not known, but they must have numbered somewhere in the tens of thousands. The few available motor-

boats became underwater tombs for all those who rushed onboard, as they sunk from the excess weight that was more than they could support.

The quay had turned into an endless open concentration camp. However, the situation would truly turn into hell on Earth when the fire reached the buildings on the waterfront. Trapped between the burning walls that were collapsing and the sea, there were many terrified residents who chose to approach the latter, even if that meant certain death. In most instances, Allied ships did not wish to offer any assistance. The intervention of a Methodist minister from the U.S. named Asa Jennings was needed so that the Greek fleet could mobilize and be allowed to evacuate the Greek and Armenian residents of Smyrna over an unrelenting three-week period.

The stark image of the burning and ruined quay – the last image that the refugees of that period would encounter ahead of their exodus – became a symbol of the martyrdom and sacrifice of the Greeks of Anatolia and the epitome of the Asia Minor Catastrophe in the decades that followed.

The fire of September 1922 left behind it a city in ruins and an economy that was utterly destroyed. Several years went by until it began to recover. For example, the new street plan proposed by the French brothers René & Raymond Danger only a few months after the fire took a decade to implement, although the city received a significant boost from the establishment of the Smyrna Exhibition in 1927, following an international initiative, at the large park that was set up in the burned zone.

On the quay, oddly enough, the area that was the hardest hit by the disaster was the commercial district, not the residential one. Travelers arriving by sea who first encountered Izmir, as Smyrna was henceforth known, would see the same characteristic row of two-story homes that existed 1922 all the way until the 1950s. Perhaps the only addition to the panoramic view were the palm trees that had been planted in the meantime,

and, of course, automobile and bus traffic on Kai Street. Naturally, a trip to the city’s interior would suffice to leave any visitor completely disillusioned and allow them to see for themselves that which Smyrna native and Nobel Laureate George Seferis so succinctly described when he returned to the city years later: “Smyrna is a city that has lost its shadow, like the ghosts.”

The final blow to the city’s erstwhile privileged seaside front came with the passage of laws regarding co-ownership of buildings and the implementation of the ‘apartments for land’ system. Over the twenty years that followed the old homes fell like dominoes, one after another, giving way to narrow seven and eight-story apartment buildings. Nonetheless, if there is something that remains untouched, it is the direct contact that the city has with the sea and the beneficial sea breeze that cools off the city during the hot summer months. This remaining quality would end up being lost for good, however, over the period between 1994-1998 following the construction of a new embankment, which, although intended to solve the growing traffic problem by providing new roadways. Following the intense protests of architects, the process ultimately endowed the city with a large park.

Today, the Smyrna we know from old post cards exists only in the memories of refugees and its former residents. From the 200-plus buildings that adorned the renowned Kai Street, today, there remain only 14 fully or partially intact. Specifically, there are six homes that remain standing, one of which belonged to the Athanasoulas (paper industry) and Konstantinides (raisin industry) families, the Papademetriou residence (the old Greek Consulate), the Kapetanakis-Apergis residence (importers/exporters of packaging boxes for dried fruit) that currently houses the Greek Consulate, the Guiffroy residence (German Consulate), the mansion belonging to the Armenian carpet weaver Takvor Spartali (Ataturk Museum), the French Consulate (presently housing the Arkas Art Center), the three boarding houses ‘London,’ ‘Egypt,’ and ‘Paradise,’

the mansion belonging to the Rees maritime company, the 'Chrysoun Apidion' (Golden Pear) hall, and the branch of the National Bank of Greece. Also surviving from the pre-1922 era are the buildings housing the Customs House and its warehouses, located on the pier bearing the same name that closed off the port from the south, the Konaki (Administrative Building), and of course, the Clock Tower in the town square, which is the city's most recognizable monument. The small community of Levantines living in the city and suburbs represent a valuable link to its past, while the older generation still speaks the local dialect of Smyrna.

The residents of Izmir are proud of their city's unique history, and young people, in particular, are interested in learning about its storied past. In recent years, dozens of new books have been printed in many languages in response to the need to understand the events of the past through heretofore unknown sources. This brings together researchers and descendants of Smyrna's various ethnic communities who either once lived and were uprooted (Greeks, Armenians) or still live in the city (Levantines, Muslims, Jews). The authors of the book *The Smyrna Quay* hope that their research will serve as part of this effort to showcase Smyrna's history and culture to a wider audience, once funding is secured (hopefully soon) for the English language version of their book about what is perhaps the most characteristic part of Smyrna – its quay.



Achilleas Chatziconstantinou is a geographer and historical researcher. Together with George Poulimenos, they co-authored the book *The Smyrna Quay: Tracing a Symbol of Progress and Splendour*, Kapon Editions, Athens 2018 (winner of the 2019 Academy of Athens' Lykourgeion Prize of the Order of Letters and Fine Arts).

CYA

College Year in Athens

60 *years*

Fall / Winter / Spring / Summer

Anthropology / Archaeology / Architecture / Art History
 Business / Classics / Communication / Cultural Heritage
 Economics / Environmental Studies / History
 International Relations / Literature / Modern Greek Language
 Neuroscience / Philosophy / Political Science / Psychology
 Religion / Sociology / Theater / Urbanism & Sustainability

cyathens.org