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## ATHLETIC AND ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES OF ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES IN GREECE, CONSTANTINOPLE AND SMYRNA FROM 1923 UNTIL PRESENT

**Key words:** Athletic club, Armenia, Homenetmen.

### ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to collect data about athletic activities of Armenian communities in Greece from 1923 until today. The study revealed a remarkable level of athletic and artistic activity of the Armenians in Greece until the beginning of the Second World War. Between 1919 and 1923 more than 85,000 Armenians came to Greece from Eastern Thrace, Cilicia and Ionia. Most of them settled in Attica, Macedonia (Thessaloniki, Kavala) and Thrace (Komotini, Xanthi, Alexandroupolis). In these cities the Armenians formed communities and founded athletic clubs under the general name of *Homenetmen* in which football was the main activity. The first athletic club was founded in Athens, while in Thessaloniki up to 1940 the Armenian Athletes' Union was the most important Armenian youth club. It played an active role not only in athletics but also in education, culture and social welfare. In 1940 the Armenian clubs ceased their activities. In 1946, thousands of Armenians went back to Soviet Armenia or emigrated to Western Europe and North America. The Armenian element in Greece was reduced to 9,000-9,500 people and in result their athletic activities were seriously diminished. Today, Armenian athletic clubs function only in Athens and Thessaloniki, following their traditional philosophy: maintaining Armenian national identity and moral and athletic education of the Armenian youth.

### INTRODUCTION

Armenia is a mountainous country in western Asia in the south of the Caucasus. The Armenians made their first appearance in history in the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when tribes from Thrace and Phrygia settled at the foot of Mount Ararat (the national symbol of Armenia) [6, pp. 12-13]. Today the population of Armenia is about three million people.

Armenian history is a tumultuous one. Repeated attempts against its territorial integrity and independence resulted in frequent changes of Armenian rulers. The most tragic event in the

country's history was the genocide in 1915. After 1920 Armenia became a constituent part of the Soviet Union as the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic [4, pp. 7-8]. After the collapse of the USSR, the Armenian Republic declared independence in September 1991 [4, p. 20].

Since ancient times there has been a strong cultural link between the Greeks and the Armenians. The Armenians became strongly influenced by the Greek civilization especially during the reign of Tigranes the Great. The first Armenians settled permanently in Greece by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1919 and 1923, thousands of Armenian refugees arrived in Greek

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territories. They tried to maintain their national identity and heritage by setting up various charity and cultural organizations.

The aim of the present study was a collection of data concerning Armenians' athletic and artistic activity in Greece since 1923. The study concentrated on the Greek mainland but also examined the Armenian communities in Constantinople and Smyrna. The research was based on the archives of Armenian sports clubs as well as newspapers, magazines and books.

### ARMENIAN-GREEK RELATIONSHIPS

For the first time in history, the Armenians came in contact with Greek civilization via the Greek Ions from the west coast of Asia Minor. This is confirmed by the fact that for years the Armenians used to refer to the Greeks as Ions and to Greece itself as Ionia. An Armenian historian, Moses Chorenensis traces the oldest reference to the Armenian-Greek relationships to the Trojan War in which the legendary Armenian King Zarmair took part [3, p. 93].

During the reign of Tigranes the Great (99-55 BC), Armenia was one of the most powerful countries of the time and its boundaries were extended to the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, the country continued to be a part of the Hellenistic World. King Tigranes himself embraced Greek elements in his kingdom by encouraging Greek settlement, use of Greek coins, adoption of the Greek language in the state's administration, education and literature, acceptance or adoption of the Greek Pantheon in the Armenian religious life, construction of Greek temples, etc. [3, pp. 97-99]. From the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC the Armenian royal palace came to be called the Philellenen, and the nobles and members of the royal family spoke Greek. Moreover, Tigranes the Great not only spoke Greek but was also a great lover of Greek culture and brought Greek actors to the theatre at Tigranocerta.

There is an interesting reference regarding the participation of an Armenian athlete in the ancient Olympic Games. According to Moretti, Armenian King Varazdat took part in the 287<sup>th</sup> Olympiad (369 AD) and he won the first victory in boxing (Rutgers, after a careful study of Moses Chorenensis's text, argues for the 291<sup>st</sup> Olympiad (385 AD) [2, p. 223]). From the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century until the 8<sup>th</sup> century Armenians organized the

school of "The Friends of the Greeks". The aim of this school was translation of Greek literature, while at the same time the Armenians were studying in Greek cities [7, p. 49].

### THE ARMENIANS IN GREECE

Between 1881/2 and 1893 the "Vilaeti" (area) of Alexandropoli in present-day Greek Thrace had 16,642 Armenian residents. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the same administrative area, the Armenian population reached 26,144, while in 1914 their number decreased to 19,725 due to the annexation of Western Thrace by Bulgaria [8, p. 46].

It is estimated that between 1919 and 1923 more than 85,000 Armenian refugees fled to the Greek territory from Eastern Thrace, Kilikia and especially Ionia [4, pp. 24-25]. As an administrative and economic center of Greece, Athens was destined to become the traction pole for most of these refugees [9, p. 58]. About 35,000 of them settled in Attica and 20,000 in Macedonia and Thrace.

The Armenian community of Salonika is the oldest one in Greece. Apart from what we know about the Byzantine Era, it is quite certain that a small group of Armenian traders and artisans had already been living in Salonika in the 17<sup>th</sup> century [5, pp. 257-258].

Both at a local and at a national level the Armenian communities in Greece had a relatively consistent and unvarying organizational structure. By the mid-nineteenth century they had had their own official institutional framework for self-administration within a non-Armenian environment, known as the "Armenian National Constitution" [4, p. 97]. Due to the fact that the Armenians of Greece naturally tended to stay close together, but also that the Armenian National Constitution clearly distinguished between the jurisdiction of the clergy and that of the communities' lay representatives, the Armenian communities in Greece dealt with issues of education and social welfare without any serious conflict or internal rivalry [4, p. 67].

## FOUNDATION OF HOMENETMEN

The most characteristic feature of the philosophy of the Armenian clubs founded by the refugees was the adoption of a single name, no matter whether they were cultural, charity or sports clubs. In essence, such a common title enhanced the feeling of solidarity. The Armenian sports clubs came to be known as Homenetmen – an initialism in the Armenian language meaning the General Armenian Union of Physical Education [11, pp. 7-17].

Homenetmen was founded in Constantinople in 1918 by close collaborators of Savars Krisian, who was the chief initiator of the idea. Unfortunately, he was murdered during the Armenian genocide of 1915. The slogan of Homenetmen was “Elevate yourself and others”. It means that the sports records must go with records in ethics and personal character development [11, p. 6].

The Armenian athletes took part in many athletic organizations (football, basketball, volleyball, tracks and field) achieving important success [12]. It appears that at the same time, there was no parallel artistic activity in the Armenian sports clubs in Constantinople such as Armenian Union, Armenian Kontoskali, Arax, Esagian, Armenian R. Hissar, Armenian Taxim, Armenian Yeni Sisli, Armenian Mestropian, Berberian, and Armenian Sehakian. However, Armenian sports clubs did exist before 1918 in Asia Minor. In Smyrna, the first Armenian football club was established in 1900 under the name of “Armenia”. In 1908 many other sports clubs were founded such as Vaspouragan, Knar, Vartanian and Sahakian [11, pp. 14-15].

## HOMENETMEN IN GREECE

After the advent of refugees in Athens, the Armenian football players became members of the Panionios sports club. Later on, the same football players founded the Armenia Football Club. In Athens, Homenetmen was founded in 1924. The Armenia members were involved in the new establishment and founded track and field, football, basketball and volleyball sections [11, pp. 7, 17]. At that time, the Armenian Union took the third place in the Football League after Panathinaikos and AEK [11, p. 13].

The Armenians, intelligent, hardworking and creative, heirs of a long history and ancient civilization took to the healing of their wounds. Among the great preoccupation of the Armenian refugees was the creation of a substitute of their national life. They organized schools, churches, charity and cultural organizations to maintain their national conscience and preserve their national heritage [9, p. 58].

It is widely known that in ancient Greece and especially in Athens, people combined physical exercise with music. Music, dance and physical exercise were the means to obtain the body and mind equilibrium. In modern Greece the development of sports was connected with the classical tradition. Thus the first sports clubs were clearly influenced by ancient Greek tradition, e.g. musical sports club, drama sports clubs, etc.

According to the Homenetmen statute, physical development and mental development of young Armenians were equally important. The means to attain this aim were public speeches, foundation of a library, publication of magazines and books and organization of various artistic events [1, p. 220]. The Armenians with their rich cultural heritage and clearly influenced by Greek culture organized their athletic events in conjunction with artistic events. As far as the membership of the Homenetmen clubs was concerned, there were no nationality or gender restrictions. After 1936 the Homenetmen sports clubs were founded in Piraeus, Patra, Kavala, Alexandroupoli, Larissa and Rethymne in the island of Crete [11, pp. 42-72].

The Armenians had settled in Thrace long before 1919. In 1875 many of them had immigrated to Alexandroupoli and founded the “Daron” and “Masis”, the first football teams of their Armenian clubs [10, p. 123].

In 1924, in Komotini the Armenians founded the “Gymnastic and Athletic Club of the Armenians” and were set to organize the “Thracian-Armenian Olympiad”. Unfortunately, due to the displacement of many Armenian refugees in South Greece it never took place. The successor of this club was the “Dork” sports club, which took part in many local events (1940-1). “Dork” had been an Armenian mythical hero with Herculean powers [8, pp. 60, 158].

## ATHLETIC – ARTISTIC EVENTS

In 1927, the Armenians organized the first Armenian sport event “Marzanton” (athletic festival), on the field of Panathinaikos sports club. It was a sport and artistic event in which Armenian athletes and boy scouts from Athens and Piraeus took part. The schedule included running races, field exercises, boxing fights, a football match and “live pictures” (a combination of music, speech, and theatrical representation of historical events) [9, p. 59].

Two years after that great Armenian athletic event a new one was organized under the name of “Navasart” with the contribution of Armenian athletes from all over Greece. In the Armenian language “Navasart” means the first month of the ancient Armenian year. The 1929 event, apart from the athletic contests, also included an artistic programme consisting of a concert of a thirty-instrument orchestra. In the preannouncement, the organizers invited people to attend and enjoy the festival in which not only athletes but also artists would take part [9, p. 60].

During the opening ceremony of Navasart Games the Homenetmen President made a reference to the contribution of Homenetmen to the moral education of young people. Indeed, the lines of the Homenetmen Hymn (the music of which was written by an athlete) fully reveal Homenetmen’s philosophy and focus on the moral education of young people including religious beliefs, respect of human beings, maintenance of national identity and the aim to break records and win the highest distinctions. It is worth noting that the Armenian athletes won the best character award on numerous occasions [1, p. 221].

In 1925 the Armenians made an effort to establish a sports club in North Greece, however, to no avail. The Armenian sports club in Salonika was finally established in 1928 under the name Armenians’ Athletic Union of Salonika. The club included track and field, football, basketball, volleyball and cycling sections [11, pp. 11, 23]. The athletes and coaches played an active role not only in the athletic life of the city but also in the social and educational circles of Salonika. They organized physical education lessons in Armenian schools as well as many theatrical and musical events. They established a library with more than 1000 books and published a magazine “New Generation”. At the same time they organized social welfare

activities such as a tailoring school for girls, an accountancy school for boys and a first aid school [4, pp. 24-25]. Events similar to “Navasart” took place in Salonika in 1934 for the first time under the name “Olympics” and continued to be held until the 1950s.

## HOMENETMEN AFTER 1940

In 1940 the Armenian clubs ceased their activities due to the outbreak of World War Two. In 1946 tens of thousands of Armenians accepted the Soviet Union’s invitation to settle permanently in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. At that time almost two-thirds of the Armenian population of Greece were transported to Soviet Armenia. The number of Armenians who were left Greece decreased even further five years later as many of them tried to seek their fortune in Western Europe and America. All in all, the Armenian element in Greece was reduced to between 9,000 and 9,500 [4, pp. 26-27].

Despite the large number of Armenians leaving Greece, Homenetmen continued its activities. In present-day Greece Armenian sports clubs can be only found in Athens and Salonika, still operating under the name “Homenetmen” and following the same traditional philosophy: maintenance of Armenian national identity, education and entertainment of the Armenian youth.

## CONCLUSION

In the period between 1919 and 1923 more than 85,000 Armenian refugees from Eastern Thrace, Kilikia and Ionia settled in Greece. The Armenians, heirs of an ancient civilization, tried to maintain their national conscience and heritage by setting up schools, churches, charity and cultural organizations and sports clubs of the “Homenetmen” (General Armenian Union of Physical Education).

Armenians, who were clearly influenced by Greek culture, took care that their athletic events and activities were accompanied by artistic events as well, believing that art plays an important role in the physical and mental development of the youths. Within this context, the great athletic events that the

Armenians organized in Athens and Salonika combined elements of sports and arts.

The aim of Homenetmen is clearly defined in the organization statute, the articles of which became a source of inspiration for the poet who in the lines of Homenetmen's hymn highlighted its focus on the moral education of the young. The lines of the hymn inspired the musician and the athlete Kevork Garavarents, as well as the creator of Homenetmen's emblem, who designed it in the Armenian national colors and added the motto: "Elevate yourself and the others". In present-day Greece Armenian sports clubs can be found in Athens and Salonika, and they continue to adhere to their traditional philosophy and aims.

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