Interviews, Memoirs and other contributions:

GREEK-SWEDISH CONTEMPORARY RELATIONS—A BRIEF OVERVIEW

by Ioannis Michaletos

Greek-Swedish relations are not a well known subject; yet interesting connections have been developing between these states at the historical, cultural and commercial level.

The first recorded Greek national that moved to Sweden in modern times was Efrosyni Rizou-Ragavi¹. She was from a well known Greek family² and her relatives enjoyed a high social status in Greece in politics and business. She married the Swedish Adolf Eugene Von Rosen³ and moved to Stockholm in 1848. Her husband was the principal creator of Swedish railways at that time and one of the most prominent industrialists of 19th-century Sweden.

In 1870 two Greek merchants from the island of Kalymnos established themselves in Sweden and formed a commercial network whereby they imported Mediterranean goods into Northern Europe.

During the interwar period of 1919-1939 quite a few Greeks pursued studies in Swedish universities and eventually some of them settled there.

In 1941 the “Greek-Swedish friendship group” was formed, acting as the main link between the new immigrants and their host country and allowing for a number of cultural and social activities that continue still today.⁴

The main bulk of Greek immigration came to Sweden during the post-war years, 1950-1975. The economic expansion of the Swedish industry and the need for foreign workers resulted in the large admission of Greeks that mostly found employment in factory outlets and in jobs not desired by the locals.⁵

In 1967 a military coup took place in Greece and Sweden, which has been a State actively devoted to the protection of human rights and the rule of law, accepted many Greek political refugees. Some of them were to become notable figures in modern day Greece. The late Greek Prime minister Andreas Papandreou (1919-1996) sought successfully refugee status in Sweden, where he taught economics at a university during his stay there⁶. His son Giorgos Papandreou, who is the current head of the opposition party in Greece—the PASOK--has also lived in Sweden and has an articulate knowledge of Swedish language and culture⁷.

In 1972 the “Confederation of Hellenic communities in Sweden” was established in Sweden, which acts as the leverage voice for all Greek groups and communities that reside in the Swedish kingdom.⁸ There are 34 recognized members for the Confederation, which encompasses about 15,000 Greeks residing permanently in Sweden as well as about 1,000 Greek students and researchers hosted temporarily in Swedish educational institutions⁹.

Presently, there is a growing movement for the Greek elderly living in Sweden, which emphasizes on returning to Greece in order to spend there one’s retirement years.¹⁰ Younger Greeks in Sweden are rather active too. The 2005 winner of the Eurovision contest Elena Paparizou is a Greek woman, born in Sweden, that is building her career in Greece after returning in Greece in the age of 18.¹¹ Maria Paschalidou is another young Greek woman that started her career as a TV presenter in Sweden and later returned to Greece, after the 2004 Olympic Games, in order to start a new career in the same field for a Greek TV network.¹²

The main features of the Greek diaspora to Sweden are related mainly to small and medium size companies, especially in the commercial sector, whilst there is a considerable inclination towards professional education that has led to quite a few Greeks to becoming doctors, lawyers and accountants in Sweden. Another noticeable feature in today’s Greek-Swedish relations is mass tourism, especially from the latter to the former. Even though some Greeks venture into the North, there is a large movement during the summer period from the Swedish urban centers on the way to Greece.¹³ In 1997, according to the Swedish newspaper “Expressen”, there were 460,000 tourists traveling from Sweden to Greece¹⁴ and, last year, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs calculates that 330,000 visitors came from Sweden to enjoy the sun and the sea of Greece. Overall, in the period 1995-2005, about 5% of the Swedish population have spent their summer holidays in Greece, making it the most favorite tourist destination by the Swedish population. Crete, Rhodes, Athens and Kos are the top resorts for Swedish tourists, and it is fair to say that during the peak season large Swedish communities are formed in the aforementioned areas where Swedish becomes, albeit for a short time, the main local language.

Another area where Greek-Swedish commercial activities have greatly expanded during the past decade is the arms trade. Greece bought 4 Erieye type AWACS from Sweden, worth some 700 million Euros¹⁵ and 3 Arthur type anti-artillery radar systems.¹⁶ Moreover, Greece has acquired the rights to domestically produce the Swedish-born anti-tank rocket launcher Karl Gustav.¹⁷ Companies such as Volvo, Hugglands and Ericsson regularly export military hardware to Greece, e.g. electronics, trucks and special-type vehicles. Recently, the Greek coast guard ordered 3 Dragon-type fast patrol boats, heavily armored.

Concluding, one might assume that the current globalization process enabling and facilitating communication between nations will further expand the bilateral Greek-Swedish relations. Even though the archetypes of these two nations do not have much

in common, contemporary Greece and Sweden have come together via immigration and tourism and they seem to be able to expand their potential for future growth in several commercial and industrial areas.

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