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Special to The National Herald

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By Stavros Stavridis
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MELBOURNE

– When I visited the West Coast of the United States in 2003 and 2004, some of the my Greek American friends told me a story that their parents and grandparents had told them about a Japanese ship involved in the transportation of Greek and Armenian refugees to Piraeus from Smyrna in September 1922. My initial reaction to this information was one of skepticism, but I also kept an open mind.

On my return to Australia, I checked my files and couldn't find any evidence of a Japanese ship being in the harbor of Smyrna at the time of Greek exodus from Asia Minor. Considering my initial disappointment, I let the matter rest until a few weeks ago, when I accidentally stumbled across some newspaper articles and a U.S. Department of State document mentioning an unnamed Japanese ship in Smyrna. The news articles and documents are reproduced below:

NEW YORK TIMES

ATHENS (Sept. 18, 1922, pg. 2) –

Refugees constantly arriving from Asia relate new details of the Smyrna tragedy. On Thursday last, there were six steamers at Smyrna to transport the refugees, one American, one Japanese, two French and two Italian. The American and Japanese steamers accepted all comers without examining their papers, while the

others took only foreign subjects with passports.

ATLANTA CONSTITUTION

(Oct. 15, 1922, pg. A9)

Smyrna Horror Described by Atlantian John S. Owens Jr., Writes of Horror to Parents Here (an excerpt from a long article)... There was a Japanese warship in the harbor, Contrary to the action of every other man-of-war in Smyrna, this warship took board every refugee it could possibly find room for. There was also a cargo boat from Nippon there. When it saw this, it dumped a large part of its cargo overboard, and took off all the refugees and carried them to Piraeus. American, British, French and Italian, and everybody else told the refugees that they could only take their own nationals on board, and it remained for the lowly Japs to prove their mettle...

JAPAN TIMES & MAIL

(October 21, 1922, pg. 6)

Consul Tells of Suffering in Near East, U.S. Official Praises Work of American Colony at Smyrna (excerpt from article)... A Japanese merchantman brought succor to the refugees en route to Greece, and gave them the kindest treatment...

BOSTON GLOBE

(December 3, 1922, pg. E4)

Japanese at Smyrna, Mrs. Anna Harlowe Birge, Wife of Professor Birge of the International College at Smyrna, Tells of an Incident when Smyrna Was Being Burned. The desperate refugees were crowding each other off the wharves, and the harbor was full of men and women swimming around in the hope of rescue until they drowned. In the harbor at that time was a Japanese freighter which had just arrived, loaded to the decks with a very valuable cargo of silks, laces and china, representing many thousands of dollars. The Japanese captain, when he realized the situation did not hesitate. The whole cargo went overboard into the dirty waters of the harbor, and freighter was loaded with several hundred refugees, who were taken to the Piraeus and landed in safety on Greek shores.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

(767.68/450)

George Horton, American Consul General, Athens, Greece to the Secretary of State, Washington, Sept. 18, 1922 (an excerpt)... "A Japanese boat

brought off some refugees, and I have heard threw overboard some of their cargo for the purpose. Passengers on the ship speak in the highest terms of the kindness of the Japanese officers and men.”

There

are four conclusions which can be drawn from the evidence presented above. First, the news articles and Horton’s dispatch mention an unnamed Japanese ship and an unnamed captain and his crew who deserve to be honored and remembered for their fine humanitarian assistance rendered to the Asia Minor refugees. Second, these news stories were published in respected U.S. and Japanese newspapers. Third, the Japanese are portrayed in a positive light. And finally, all accounts refer to one Japanese ship except John S. Owens Jr., who mentions two Japanese ships in Smyrna harbor.

I conducted a further search of the

U.S. Department of State records on Turkey to locate additional materials on the unnamed Japanese ship. The war diary entries compiled by Admiral Mark L. Bristol, the U.S. High Commissioner in Constantinople (1919-27), for the period September-December 1922 did not shed any light on this very interesting story. Why such a piece of information wasn’t recorded in the war diaries is difficult to say. I can only guess that, with all the confusion and chaos taking place along the Smyrna quay, it would have been very easy to overlook this Japanese ship, as thousands of Greeks and Armenians were trying to flee from the Kemalists. The war diaries list the names of American, British, French and Italian and Greek ships involved in the evacuation of foreign nationals and refugees from Smyrna.

On September 20, 1922

Bristol recorded a conversation he had with Mr. Uchida, the Japanese High Commissioner in Constantinople, in his war diary regarding the Near East crisis. Uchida had come to find out information on what happened in Smyrna. According to Bristol, Uchida was sympathetic to the Turks. Admiral Bristol was also a known Turkophile.

I also checked

the Japan Times & Mail, a Japanese newspaper published in English in Yokohama, for clues regarding shipping movements destined and leaving the port of Yokohama covering September-October 1922. I couldn’t find information of any Japanese ship being in Smyrna harbor in mid-September 1922. But there are four Japanese ships – the Suwa Maru, Altai Maru, Fushimi Maru and Mishima Maru – which worked the European service from London, Hamburg via Marseilles, Port Said Suez, Colombo, Singapore and Hong Kong to Yokohama route. There may be a possibility that one of these ships, enroute between Marseilles and Port Said, could have diverted its course for Smyrna.

I regard this

article as work in-progress, as additional sources will need to be checked in the hope of ascertaining the name of the Japanese ship and

its heroic captain who threw a part of the ship's cargo overboard into the polluted water of Smyrna harbor. The Bristol papers and Japanese foreign office documents held in the Library of Congress and Japanese national archives, respectively, could also provide some information. Moreover, surviving records of Japanese commercial shipping companies operating in European and Mediterranean waters might provide the name of the ship.

My initial research findings raise more questions than answers; but it also offers the opportunity to examine Japanese diplomacy and trade in the Near East in the post-1919 period. A lot of Japanese historical research covering the period 1919-23 concentrates on Japan's relations with Soviet Russia, the United States, Great Britain, China and France concerning issues of economic concessions in Siberia and China and naval disarmament in the Pacific.

The examination of the Asia Minor Catastrophe from a Japanese point of view will help to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the blackest page in Modern Greek history. A comparison of the Japanese view (Far East) with that of the Europeans (Western view) would make a very interesting study on the events which occurred in Smyrna in September 1922.

I would like to hear from individuals who may have information regarding the unnamed Japanese ship and its crew, and also the attitude of the Asia Minor refugees towards their Japanese rescuers.

Mr. Stavridis is Historian/Researcher at the National Centre for Hellenic Studies & Research at Latrobe University in Bundoora, Victoria (Australia).

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