

The Japanese at Smyrna: September 1922*

Stavros T. Stavridis

One of the controversial aspects of the evacuation of Smyrna in 1922 involves the existence of one or more Japanese ships that took on Greek and Armenian refugees at a time when the European powers would not. There is one author who believes that the Japanese ship in Smyrna believes is a myth.¹

When I visited the U.S West Coast in 2003 and 2004, some of my Greek–American friends told me that their parents and grandparents had told them of 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 kept an open mind.

On my return to Australia, I couldn't find any evidence of a Japanese ship being in the harbor of Smyrna at the time of the Greek exodus from Asia Minor. Considering my initial disappointment, I let the matter rest until I accidentally came across newspaper articles and a U.S. Department of State document mentioning an unnamed Japanese ship in Smyrna. Two accounts were also provided by Dan Georgakas, based on family information. However, the discovery of the Japanese ship's name and the captain's name in old Athenian newspapers rewarded by patience.

The views of the US Consul-General, George Horton regarding a Japanese ship cannot be dismissed and should be regarded as a reliable source. He wrote to the U.S Secretary of State on September. 18, 1922 that "A Japanese boat brought off some refugees and I have heard threw overboard some of their cargo for that purpose. Passengers on the ship speak in the highest terms of the kindness of the Japanese officers and men."² This report was reprinted in the *Indianapolis News* on September 20, 1922.³

A few days earlier the *New York Times* also noted the existence of the Japanese ship. An untitled piece dated September 18 reported: "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

* Dedicated to the memory of our friend and colleague Dan Georgakas

Italian. The American and Japanese steamers accepted all comers without examining their papers, while the others took only foreign subjects with passports." ⁴

A month after the *New York Times* article, John S. Owns Jr. of Atlanta, Georgia, wrote to his parents of the horrors he had witnessed and the role of the Japanese ship:

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 remains for the lowly Japs to prove their mettle. I was proud of them because after all east could meet west...I rushed back to Athens to get a place to rest for the night. The next morning I was up bright and early. A Japanese ship was loading its last batch of refugees. As I stood there and looked on I just thrilled to the ground. I don't know why, unless it was because of the realization that Japan is at least human, and not a barbarian, as we imagine of the yellow peril.⁵

A newspaper in Japan also wrote about the ship. It reported a U.S. official who was praising the work of the American colony in Smyrna had noted, "A Japanese merchantman brought succor to the refugees en route to Greece and gave them the kindest treatment."⁶

A detailed account was offered by Mrs. Anna Harlowe Birge, the wife of Professor Birge of the International College at Smyrna. She stated:

...the desperate refugees crowding each other off the wharves as Smyrna began to burn. 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 the freighter was loaded with several hundred refugees, who were taken to Piraeus and landed in safety on Greek shores.⁷

The newspaper articles and Horton's dispatch clearly 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. All of these news stories were published in respected U.S and Japanese newspapers, and all portrayed the Japanese in a positive light. Finally, three of the accounts refer to a single Japanese ship; John S Owens Jr. mentions two.

A search of the U.S. Department of State records on Turkey to locate additional materials on the unnamed Japanese ship have not shed any light on this matter. Nor did war diary entries compiled by Admiral Mark L. Bristol, the U.S. High Commissioner in Constantinople (1919-27), for the period August-November 1922. Why such a piece of information wasn't recorded in the war diaries is difficult to say. Certainly, 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 do list the names of American, British, French and Italian and Greek ships that were later involved in the evacuation of foreign nationals and refugees from Smyrna.⁸

On September 20, 1922, Bristol noted in his diary a record of a conversation he had with Count Uchida, the Japanese High Commissioner in Constantinople regarding the Near Eastern crisis. Uchida had come to find out information on what happened in Smyrna however, Bristol remained silent on the subject. Uchida believed it would be "a great mistake for the Allies to bring a new war here with the Nationalist Turks and the Allies without reinforcements could not hope to stand off a determined attack by the Turkish Nationalists." On the other hand, Uchida disagreed with Britain's policy in the Near East. Uchida like Bristol were sympathetic to the Turks. There is no mention of a Japanese ship recorded in their discussion while it can be assumed that Uchida might have been aware of the ships presence in Smyrna harbor.⁹

No information about a ship being in Smyrna harbor in mid-September-October 1922 has been found in the *Japan Times and Mail*, a Japanese newspaper published in English in Yokohama. There is scant data regarding shipping movements destined and leaving the port of Yokohama at that time. On the other hand, the newspaper reported that there were four Yokohama based Japanese ships (*Suwa Maru*, *Altai Maru*, *Fushimi Maru* and *Mishima Maru*) that serviced European clients from shipping centers that included Marseilles, and Port Said, Suez. One of these ships could have diverted its course for Smyrna for an unexpected order or a transaction in the unofficial or underground commerce.¹⁰

Additionally, no direct account of a person saved by the Japanese ship has been found. There are two accounts regarding this interesting incident passed down by survivors to relatives in the U.S. One of these accounts was written by Dan Georgakas, the

late editor of this journal, who related how his mother and uncle then aged 12 and 11, were saved by the Japanese. These events were spoken of at his home when he was a child, not at political events or patriotic gatherings. He says that this was one of the few events in Turkey that his mother was willing to speak about and what she said was independently repeated by her brother. After harrowing experiences fleeing from their village, included losing contact with their relatives, they arrived in Smyrna at a time when European ships were only saving their own nationals. A humanitarian group of some kind took them to a ship flying a flag with a rising sun. He writes:

Before they even had a chance to call for assistance, rope ladders were dropped for them to board. My mother had become so weak that she feared she would lose her grip and fall into the sea. But Greek adults boosted her from behind until she neared the top of the ladder where a sailor reached over the side to scoop her to safety. Once on the deck, she was lifted on the sailor's shoulders and pointed to a huge pot of hot rice. The man gave her a small bowl and used his hands to indicate, she should eat with her fingers. As he encouraged her to feed herself, my mother become conscious for the first time that his eyes looked slanted and his skin was different from her own. At that instant, she imagined her savior was one of those genies she had learned about in fairy tales. His kindly smile confirmed that he was truly of the good kind. Looking around, she felt she was in a boat filled with magical beings, an impression greatly reinforced when she saw her brother being carried to her side.¹¹

Another personal story is by Phyllis (Kiki) Sembos who doubted the validity of her grandmother's account, Aspasia of a Japanese ship. Aspasia had two sisters Aphrodite and Alexandra who lived "in a section of Smyrna called Kallithea" who witnessed Turkish soldiers "tossing cans of benzene against the houses of neighbors, setting them afire. Turks, then, dragged the occupants out into the street and killed them. The skies, they wrote from Athens much later, were gold from the flames."¹² The three of them managed to escape by jumping into sea and finally clinging to a floating log until they spotted a ship that saved them. "Yes, it was a Japanese ship according to my yiayia. I'm now sorry that I doubted it at the time. I couldn't imagine Japanese ships around Greece's harbor. The ship took up so many people from the waters and given aid and they stayed on the deck and then taken to Piraeus harbor where they disembarked." Sembos wished she "had just one letter my yiayia received at the time."¹³

Both Georgakas's and Sembos's information relayed by his mother and her grandmother respectively tell of Japanese ship rescuing Greek refugees from Smyrna and taking them

to Piraeus. I believe there are many other personal/family accounts waiting to be told that would further strengthen the existence of this Japanese ship.

After a decade of searching, I finally struck gold and discovered the name of the Japanese ship: the "Tokei Maru" which was published in the Athens newspaper, *Embros* on September 4, 1922, under the heading 'The Brave stance of the Japanese. Japanese Philanthropy'.¹⁴ A little while later, a similar article in another Athens newspaper, *Athenai* published on September 4, 1922, provided the name of the Japanese captain as Mr. Lou.¹⁵

In the *Embros* article, the Japanese captain was touched by the massacres and refugee appeals and sent out small craft to pick up as many refugees as possible. The Kemalists circled the boats threatening to sink them. He told the Kemalists that in the case of even harming a refugee's hair, he would consider it as an insult to the Japanese flag and would demand immediate satisfaction.

Seeing that the Japanese captain meant business, the Kemalists decided to leave the refugees undisturbed to board the Japanese ship. The Japanese action was one of bravery in the wake of Turkish threats and a dramatic display of humanity.¹⁶

The *Athenai* article states that 823 refugees arrived at Piraeus from Smyrna who showed gratitude and had tears in their eyes for the noble and charitable initiative of the Japanese captain and his officers in bringing them to a safe place. When the Turks tried to ban the loading of refugees, Mr. Lou considered these poor souls as having the protection of the Japanese flag. Moreover, he was ready to provoke the intervention of the Japanese High Commission in Constantinople if the Turks offended the Japanese flag. The courageous Mr. Lou took a risk. The Kemalists allowed the refugees to leave Smyrna. There was no way that Count Uchida, the Japanese High Commissioner would have acceded to such a request by the Japanese captain, since he was known for his pro-Turkish sympathy.¹⁷

Embros is the only newspaper that published an editorial on the Japanese rescue effort on September 7, 1922. The editorial argued that "despite all the protests of the redeemed [Greeks]...unions and [Greek] organizations" regarding the destruction "of the Greeks and all the Christians of Asia Minor [directed] their appeals to three powers [Great Britain, France, and Italy] and America and the heroic efforts of Japan [aren't even mentioned]." The philanthropy displayed by Japan resulted in the rescue of Greek and Armenian refugees. Not one word of gratitude was shown "to the land of the rising sun and its noble people."¹⁸

Upon further investigation, I found that *Eleftheros Typos* and *Estia* published in their shipping columns on September 4 and 6, 1922 that the Tokei Maru a 4000 tons vessel was to depart from Piraeus for Chania and Irakleion, (Crete) and then onto Alexandria (Egypt) carrying both cargo and passengers. Details regarding this ship could be obtained through Shipping agents I.D Alevras, Athens.¹⁹ These shipping details concerning the "Tokei Maru" further strengthens the case of a Japanese ship rescuing refugees from Smyrna.

The Japanese scholar, Nanako Murata-Sawayanaki published an article entitled: The memory in a crisis: A Japanese ship helping out Greek refugees on the Quay of Smyrna in 1922 which is available online. The author is convinced that a Japanese ship did rescue Greek refugees, but further research needed to be conducted into this interesting and unknown aspect of modern Japanese and Greek history. Murata is delving into Japanese archival sources trying to obtain more information on the Japanese ship and her article also shows a picture of the Japanese ship " with a note written in Italian on its margin saying ("Smyrna September 8, 1922)." I am pleased that Murata uses and quotes some of my early research in her article.²⁰ In fact, Dan Georgakas wrote a newspaper article outlining my research and Murata's preliminary findings confirming a Japanese ship in Smyrna harbor.²¹

My historical journey on the Japanese ship has been a long one but slowly the gaps which official sources don't mention are being filled. I am confident there are Greek-Americans who may have information to share on this fascinating story of a Japanese ship. Perhaps this article will help stimulate them to come forward and add more details.

¹ Christos Papoutsy, *Ships of Mercy*, (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E.Randall Publisher, 2008), pp.125-6

² US Department of State Records relating to Political relations of Turkey and other states 1910-29, 767 68/450, George Horton, American Consulate General, Athens, to Secretary of State, Washington, September 18, 1922. The remainder of the documents describes the destruction of Smyrna

³ *Indianapolis News* (September 20, 1922) p. 10.

⁴ *New York Times*, (September 18, 1922) p. 2.

⁵ Excerpts from a long article in the *Atlanta Constitution* (Oct. 15, 1922), p. A11.

⁶ *Japan Times and Mail* (October 21, 1922), p. 6.

⁷ *Boston Daily Globe* (December 3, 1922), p. E4.

⁸ US Department of State Records relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey 1910-29, 867.00/1542-1581 August-November, 1922 :Admiral Bristol's war diaries

⁹ US Department of State Records relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey 1910-29, 867.00/1554, Admiral Mark L.Bristol to Sec of State, Washington, October 5, 1922 Enclosure Diary entry September 20, 1922

¹⁰ *Japan Times and Mail* (September-October 1922) passim

¹¹Georgakas, Dan . *My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City* (NY: Pella Publishing, 2006) pp 30-31.

¹² Phyllis (Kiki) Sembos letter to Professor Dan Georgakas, *The National Herald*, August 4, 2018

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ *Embros*, (September 4, 1922) p.1

¹⁵ *Athinai*, (September 4, 1922) p.2

¹⁶ *Embros*, (September 4, 1922) p.1

¹⁷ *Athinai* (September 4, 1922) p.2

¹⁸ *Embros*, (September 7, 1922) p.3

¹⁹ *Eleftheros Typos* (September 4, 1922) p.2; *Estia*, (September 6, 1922) p.3

²⁰ <http://hermes-ir.lib.hit-u.ac.jp> (accessed April 7, 2022)

²¹ The Japanese at Smyrna:1922, Dan Georgakas, *the National Herald*, August 5, 2018

American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues | Copyright © 2022 American Hellenic Institute Foundation, Inc.

All rights reserved. All articles appearing in the *American Journal of Contemporary Hellenic Issues* are the copyright of the Journal. The online edition is free to individuals and institutions. Copies of the individual articles are strictly prohibited. Reproduction, storage or transmission of this work in any form or by any means beyond that permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law is unlawful without prior permission in writing of the publisher, or in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) and other organizations authorized by the publisher to administer reprographic reproduction rights. Distribution of the published articles for research or educational purposes is possible, but requires the formal authorization of the Journal editor and the authors. Commercial use of the AHIF Policy Journal or the articles contained herein is expressly prohibited without the written consent of the Managing Editor at AHIFPolicyJournal@aheworld.org. AHIF 1220 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.