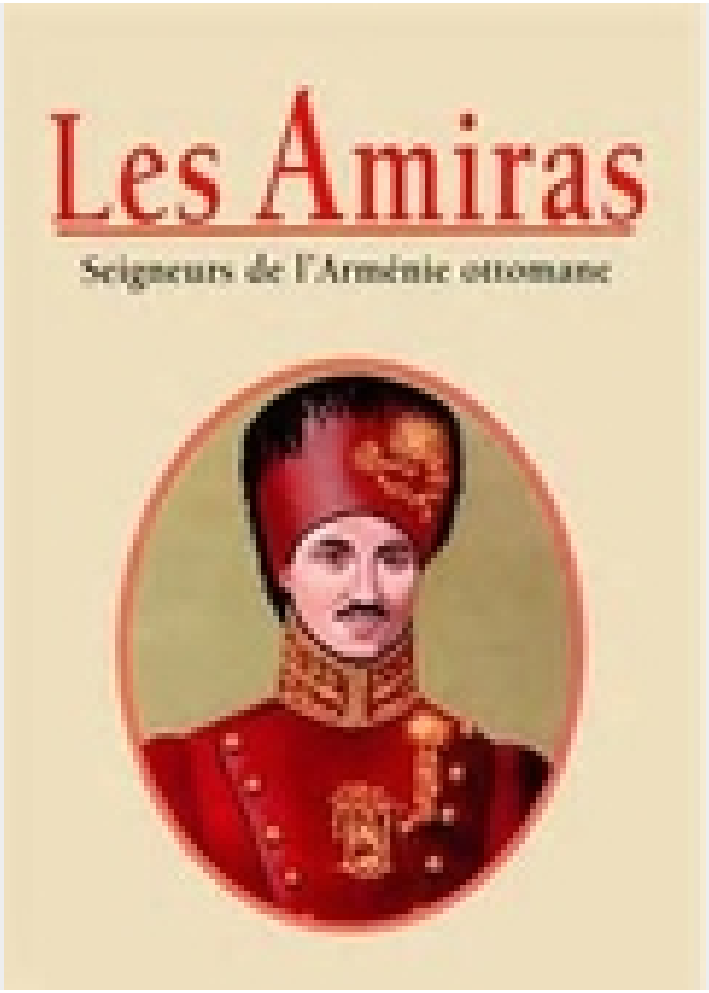
CHALABIS, KHOJAS, AMIRAS AND EFFENDIS (2/2)

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Category: Opinions

by **Dr. Antranig Chalabian**
Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian**
Part II

Amiras

Before I present the Armenian Amiras and then the Effendis it's important that I digress from the subject matter and present a glimpse of Bolis, the Armenian Constantinople of the era. At the beginning of 1800's Bolis had 850,000 inhabitants of whom 374,000 were Muslims; 152,000 Creeks; 150,000 Armenians and 44,000 Jews. The remaining 80,000 were Europeans, Copts, Assyrians and others.

In 1850's Bolis had become the financial, the political and the cultural center of the Western Armenians. The community was continuing to swell in numbers at the expense of the Armenian populated cities in Eastern Turkey. Everyone wanted to settle in Bolis. It should be noted, however, that a good segment of the Armenians who came to Bolis were migrant workers who would work, at times for years, to save money and return to their villages and homes.

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The number of Armenians in Bolis between 1860-1880, had peaked to an all time high estimated to be around 275,000. Bolis was unsurpassed among the Armenians worldwide, including Armenia. In

1859 there were 42 Armenian schools in Bolis with a total enrollment of 5531 students and 197 teachers. In 1871 the numbers were swelled to 48 schools with an enrollment of around 6000 students. The cultural and scholastic revival among the Armenians in Bolis may be better appreciated in stating that the famed American University of Beirut was established later, in 1886, and until 1945 had only 500 students; while in Yerevan the Eastern Armenians numbered 13,000 and were a minority overwhelmed by the presence of 17,000 Tatars. Most of the Eastern Armenians in the region lived in Tiflis and Baku.

The unprecedented cultural revival among the Armenians in Turkey was cut short from 1876 and onwards for reasons we all know too well.

During this time trade in Constantinople was in the hands of Greeks and Armenians. For many years the pulse of Ottoman royalty was in Armenian hands and its distinguished denizens were titled "Amira". The word is Arabic in origin and was bestowed upon the wealthy and influential Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. A good number of the Amiras, whose number ranged between 80 to 100 individuals, came from modest provincial backgrounds notably good many of them hailed from the small town of Agn (today's Kemaliye) in Anatolia's Erzincan province. They were a remarkable group of enterprising and ambitious Armenians who rose to the forefront of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th, and 19th centuries. At times, the succeeding generations of the same Amira family served the reigning Sultans faithfully and accomplished great things. They also became enormously influential in running the affairs of the Armenian community and became the link between the Sultan's palace and the Armenian Patriarch who had legal jurisdiction over the entire Armenian subjects of the Sultan.

Some of the Amiras were also put in charge of tax collection in the empire. Up to 1856 there was no banking system in the Empire. The Amiras filled in the void and made financial transactions with traders, trading houses, government offices and even with the reigning Sultans at exuberant rates. In 1795, the head of the Dadian family, Arakel Dad Amira, was appointed to oversee the armament factories of the Empire. From that date on for the next 75 years the descendants inherited the position and ran the Ottoman munitions and artillery along with production of paper production and military uniforms. The members of the family thus exercised enormous influence given the size of the Empire and its armed forces.

In the first half of the 19th century, one of the Armenian titans in Bolis was Harutyun Amira Bezdjian who was nicknamed "Kazaz Artin". He became a confidant of Sultan Mahmud II and was trusted with handling the personal wealth of the Sultan. His influence on running the affairs of the Empire was so strong that historians would call the era as the "Bezdjian Era".

Through Harutyun Amira Bezdjian's financial contributions the following institutions were built in Bolis: the new building of the Bolis Patriarchate in 1823; Sourp Prgitch (Saint Savior) Armenian National Hospital in 1832; The women's school of Peria in 1826; the central school of Kumkapi in 1828; Saint Arakelots (Holy Disciples) Armenian school in 1830; Boghossian Boys' School in 1832; Varvarian Women's School in 1832; Bezdjian School in Kumkapi in 1832; Ayoubian Co-Ed School in 1832; a total seven schools and three major institutions. In 1836 he established the first trade – tailoring- school for the Armenian women of Bolis. Along with these monumental charitable contributions, he also undertook the expenses for the publication of many literary works, especially that of Krikor Pashdimaljian, the noted Armenian pedagogue, linguist and philosopher. Harutyun Amira Bezdjian was buried in the Virgin Mary Patriarch Cathedral by the special permission of Mahmud II.

Limited space does not allow us to elaborate more on the amazing accomplishments of other Amiras such as the Balians, who became court architects and built such masterpieces as the Dolmabahçe Palace, the Yildiz Mosque, and the Imperial College of Medicine, which today houses the famed Galatasaray Lisesi. The Arpiarian Amira family clan, who also hailed from Agn, oversaw the silver mining in the Ottoman Empire.

For some two hundred years the Amiras served the Sultans faithfully and were accorded privileges no others possessed in the Empire.

Effendis

Let me end this article with few words about the Armenian Effendis who succeeded the Amrias of Bolis. According to Wikipedia "Effendia is a title of nobility meaning a lord or master. It is a title of respect or courtesy, equivalent to the English Sir, which was used in Ottoman Empire (Turkey)."

In 1856 Sultan Adul Majid established banking in the Empire that came to be known as the Ottoman Bank. With this historic turn of events, the Sultan, the courtiers, the governors of the provinces and others started borrowing their monies from the Ottoman Bank instead of from the Amiras. With the establishment of the Ottoman Bank the fortunes of the Amiras started dwindling and their influence eroding in the capital city. Along with the banking system came the various ministries that regulated finance, military, internal and external affairs. This gave rise to a cadre of government officials and to traders who were called Effendis. Some would also acquire considerable wealth and secure influential positions for themselves.

The Armenian traders, following the footsteps of the Khojas, would import scarves, spices, jewelry from India; clothing from Iran and muslin from Damascus. Other Armenian traders would import goods from England, France, Germany, Italy and Venice. By 1861 the number of the Armenian traders in Manchester, England had reached 30. Within the next two years the number of Armenian

traders will increase further with the arrival of new Armenian traders from Istanbul, Izmir, Kayseri.

By the middle of 19th century there were 434 Armenian Effendis in Istanbul who were traders or high placed government officials. Among such officials is Gabriel Effendi Noradoungian. He was born in 1852. After attending local Armenian and French schools he went to France where from 1870-1875 he specialized in international law. Returning to Istanbul in 1875 he entered the Foreign Ministry. He was appointed as the Foreign Minister of the Ottoman Empire in 1912. His tenure ended with the outbreak of the Balkan War in 1913.
After Noubar Pasha, Gabriel Noradoungian headed the Armenian National Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. He spent the last few years of his life in Paris where he passed away in 1926.

Dr. Nazareth Daghavarian was a contemporary to Noradoungian and another Armenian social activist. He received his medical education from the famed Sorbonne University and Pasteur Institute. After which he returned to Istanbul and started working in the French St. Savoir hospital. The Turkish authorities arrested him on the allegations that he was involved in anti-state activities. He was released by the mediation of the French Embassy. After sending his wife and children to Bulgaria, he managed to elude the authorities by disguising himself as a French Embassy employee and boarded a Greek ship to Marseille. From there he moved to Cairo with his family where he resumed his medical practice. In 1906 he and Boghos Noubar Pasha, along with several others, established the Armenian General Benevolent Union with Boghos Noubar Pasha acting the president and he as the secretary of the newly found organization.

Two years later, after the revolution of the Young Turks, trusting the new Turkish order, he returned to Istanbul with his family. The rest is another tragic chapter of Armenian history...

In summing up this section of the article, I can without any hesitation conclude that the Bolis of the 19th century, with its unprecedented achievements in finance, education, literature popularizing the Western Armenian language, presents one of the most shinning periods of our three millennia old history.