ETERNAL MEMORY, ETERNAL EXILE:

# *THE PONTIAN "SELF" IN RESETTLEMENT*

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## Background

- Pontians are historically a Christian Anatolion community, who lived in what we would now call north-eastern Turkey around the Black Sea.
- Pontians were forcibly deported to Greece beginning in 1920s, following a series of ethnic cleansing episodes and massacres commited by Turkish forces.
- Their journey to Greece was dangerous and long, as most were forced to walk to port cities in Anatolia, and then traveled by boat first to Istanbul and then to either Athens or Thessaloniki.
- In Greece, they were stereotyped as "dimmer" and "more Turkish" than both Greek natives and other refugee groups (Charitidou, 2024).
- During the process of resettlement Pontian refugees had to contend with the assimilative pressures of the state, and balance that with a desire to prove their memories of Pontos. (Kontogiorgi, 2006)
- This project asks one main question: "How did Pontians conceptualize their identity over the course of their resettlement?"

## Methods

- I planned to use oral histories from the archives of both the Centre for Asia Minor Studies (KMS) and the Pontic Studies Committee (EPM).
- KMS oral histories were collected by dictation in the middle quarter of the 20th century from the last generation of Pontians to be born in Pontos.
- EPM oral histories were collected as videos and transcribed later in 2015, and taken from the first generation of Pontians to be born in Greece.
- I selected 60 oral histories in total include in my analysis, with 35 coming from the KMS collection, and 25 coming from the EPM archive.
- I chose a wide geographic spread of participants originating from Western and Eastern Pontos, from both rural and urban areas, as well as a near equal amount of male and female participants.
- As a heritage Greek speaker, I translated relevant sections of the oral histories for use as quotes in my analysis.



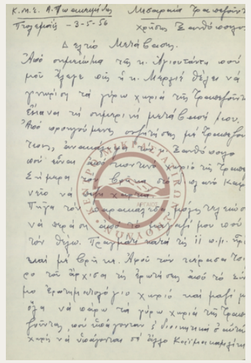
Cover of April 1936 edition of "Pontian Leaves"

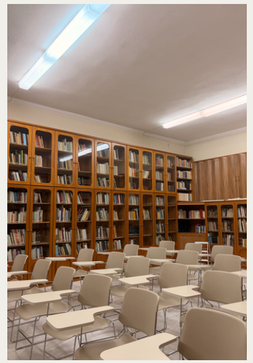

Traditional Pontian womenswear by Michael Pappas



Pontian newspaper "Epoch" with title written in both Greek and Ottoman Turkish characters


Photographs of Pontian childrens culture show in January 1965 edition of "Pontian Hearth"


Sample oral statement from KMS


Reading room at EPM

## Preliminary Findings from KMS Archive:

- In the KMS oral histories, the word "Pontian" is rarely used to describe their identity. When speaking about their villages and language, the word Romaioi or Romaika is most frequently used.
- KMS oral histories document friendly relationships and kinship networks existing between "Greek" and "Turkish" occupants of Pontos
  - *"The Turks, the ones we had in Larahani, became very worried and cried over our departure. As if they were frightened to be left there alone. All the Greek houses would be shuttered."* - Aristidi Charitidi, 1963
- Pontian refugees felt deceived by the Greek state, and describe feeling as if they were sold a lie
  - *"We heard the word Greece and said we would go and find the goodness of Abraham and Isaac, and instead we found ourselves in hell."* - Alexandra Pouzoukidou, 1966
- In the 30 years after their resettlement, Pontians commanded a range of identities - Greeks, Romaioi, non-natives, and exiles from the new state of Turkey.

## Preliminary Findings from EPM Archive:

- It is in the oral histories of the first generation of Pontians born in Greece that the term Pontian as a description of identity comes into high usage. Only two of the participants ever refer to their identity or language as *Romaioi* or *Romaika*.
- These *ellinopontoi* (roughly Greek-Pontians) experienced Pontos through a diasporic lens such as:
  - Discrimination as unwholesome Greeks, or Greeks distorted by Turkishness (these accounts are explicit in their discussion of name-calling coming from native Greeks, such as being called "Turkish spawn"
  - Language marginalization, such as being forbidden from speaking Pontian in schools
  - Dance, theatre, and magazines (Interviewers guide participants into talking about their experiences with Pontian cultural organizations and publications, which are their major window into Pontos)
- This generation viewed their identity as 1) explicitly Pontian, 2) a previous point of shame, and 3) a current point of pride and ethnic exceptionalism.

## Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Sibel Sayek, who has provided me with invaluable guidance in my academic and personal growth. I would also like to thank Ms. Panagiota Tsiligkaridou from EPM for her support during my stay in Athens. This research would not have been possible without the generous funding I received from the Tyler Center for Global Studies.

## References:

*Charitidou, Georgia. "Pontian Hellenism in Continuous Exodus - prosfygia. Testimonies and interviews" Cahiers Balkaniques (2024)*

*Kontogiorgi, Elisabeth. "Refugee Resettlement in Macedonia." Population exchange in Greek Macedonia: the rural settlement of refugees 1922-1930. Oxford University Press (2006)*