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Greeks Living in the Czech Republic – Assimilation and Identity

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Introduction

This paper deals with questions of assimilation and identity of the Greeks living in the Czech Republic. The main group of Greeks arrived in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and 1949, expecting to return home after the end of the Greek Civil War. In the period from 1948 until the last Greek Children's Home was closed down in 1962, which I will call the first period, the emphasis was on studying in Greek language in separate Greek schools. By 1962, it had become clear that the return to Greece would be delayed, and the Greek children were integrated into the Czech education system. Between 1962 and 1975, which I refer to as the second period, the emphasis was on ways of ensuring that the Greek children would continue to study and learn Greek language. In 1967 there was a coup d'état in Greece and the dictatorship that was installed seemed at the time to postpone the return indefinitely. The Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact intervention in August 1968 were matters that involved the Czechs and the Slovaks more than the Greeks, whose leadership was pro-Soviet. Moreover, there were important problems of the Greek Communist Party and the situation in Greece at that time. As far as Greek identity and assimilation was concerned, the next major date was 1975, when the Greek government that followed the dictatorship declared amnesty for the political refugees, and a return to the motherland became a real option, though in fact it took until 1990 for questions of pension rights to be worked out. By 1990, about two thirds of the Greeks living in Czechoslovakia had returned home. In the third period, 1975–1989, Greek children who were to a great extent culturally and linguistically assimilated, and who, like many of their parents, had never been to Greece, nevertheless began to prepare to return home. In the fourth period, from the Changes in 1989 until Czech accession to the European Union in 2004, the Greeks in the Czech Republic were able to travel frequently to Greece, to watch Greek satellite television and listen to Greek radio. Many of them set up or worked in businesses (tourism, Greek restaurants, transport) which brought them into daily contact with Greeks in particular and foreigners in general. In this period, cosmopolitan attitudes became advantageous, and in particular the ability to switch between Czech and Greek languages and cultures has brought economic as well as social benefits. The emphasis has been on finding ways of funding and providing Greek language classes, which both Greeks and a number of Czechs attend on a voluntary basis. A fifth period began on May 1st, 2004, with Czech accession to the European Union. Questions of passports and visas, which had been a sad obsession for much of the period since 1948, became irrelevant. The Greeks in the Czech Republic enter this period well prepared for the single market and for open borders, but must

continue, with the help of the Czech authorities, to support Greeks and Czech Philhellenes who will learn how to switch between Czech and Greek languages and cultures.

„Ethnic Minorities“ Greeks living in the Czech Republic were recognized as an „ethnic minority“ by the Law of June 2001 on ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic. The term „ethnic minority“ is unfortunate, as it implies racial and other distinctive cultural and language features of a group of people, with allegiance to ancestral ties, and perhaps even antagonism toward the majority population. It emphasises differences from, rather than similarities with the culture of the main group. It can overlook considerations such as assimilation within cultures, close interactions between cultures and the impact of cultures on each other within the same nation. Where assimilation and intermarriage has been taking place, as it has between Czechs and the Greeks resident in the Czech Republic, it fails to reflect the fact that there is a continuum between virtually assimilated (perhaps a child with one Greek grandparent) and the virtually unassimilated Greeks, who speak no Czech and have little understanding of Czech ways (typically recent arrivals in the country). Czech friends of Greece, who enjoy Greek food, dance and music and speak a few words of Greek language, can count themselves as close and welcome associates of the Greek community. The concept of an ethnic minority does not reflect the positive effect of bilingualism, biculturalism and even multiculturalism of an individual, or a group of individuals on the mainstream culture of a nation. Neither does it reflect the ever-increasing international cultural mobility in the world, or the fact that an individual may have more than one identity within his own social and cultural group.

This paper will discuss issues of assimilation and national identity of the Greeks living in the Czech Republic, showing how and explaining why the emphasis has changed since 1948, when the differences between Greek and Czech were great, and there were strong arguments for the Greeks at that time to maintain their separate identity. Nowadays, on the other hand, both the Czech Republic and Greece are members of the European Union, we are all European Union citizens, and there are great advantages for those who can switch easily between Greek and Czech language and culture. Bearing this in mind, the term “Greek ethnic minority” as applied to Greeks living in the Czech Republic will be avoided; instead this group of European Union citizens will be referred to as Greeks.

Historical Background

The appearance of Greeks as a large compact group in Czechoslovakia dates back to the spring of 1948 when children from the war zone of the Greek Civil War (1946–49) started arriving in Czechoslovakia for protection and safety. They were followed by other missions of children and then in 1949, the adults, fighters and nonfighters, followed them. By 1950, Czechoslovakia was the host country of approximately 12 000 Greek political refugees, of whom 5 185 were children. By December 1990, after amnesty had been granted (1975) by the Greek government and all issues of repatriation, including pension rights, had been bilaterally solved, about 10 000 Greeks from the then Czechoslovakia had returned to Greece. The latest population survey (2003) of the Czech Republic shows that 3 219 people had declared Greek ethnicity. This number does not include the majority of the Slavomacedonians of Greece, who on arrival in former Czechoslovakia had represented 30% of the Greek political refugees. The majority of Slavomacedonians still living in the Czech Republic have not until now joined the Greek Community. (Slavomacedonians are a Slav-speaking minority of Greek Macedonia).

In 1990, Greek Communities were established under the Association of Greek Communities in the Czech Republic: the communities of Prague, Brno, Ostrava, Jeseník, Krnov-Mesto, Krnov, Sumpérk, Vrbno, Bohumin, Havírov, Karvina and Trinec. The majority of the Greek Communities are in the Moravia-Silesia region, where the Greeks had been concentrated on arrival. The now adult “children of the Greek Civil War” and their families form the nucleus of the Greek Community. Other members are students who arrived to study at the universities

in Czechoslovakia with the support of scholarships from the Greek Communist Party in the mid-1970s and 1980s and gradually settled in Czechoslovakia through marrying Czech citizens. There continue to be Greek and Greek Cypriot students in higher education in the Czech Republic, studying mainly medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, music and engineering. The number of Greek students in the country, including students on EU exchange programmes, is about 250 at any time, the majority of them in Prague.

Further, a number of Greeks who had repatriated in the 1980s, have returned to the Czech Republic for personal reasons, such as failure to find satisfactory jobs, failure to adapt to the Greek culture and style of living after over 30 years in exile, or in order to find greater security in their old age and to be near their family members.

Developments Affecting the Sense of Belonging

The issues in the national and ethnic identity of the Greeks in the Czech Republic today are closely related to the historical background of the arrival of the main group as political refugees of the Greek Civil War (1946–1949). They had been born in Greece, mainly in northern Greece (Epirus, Greek Macedonia and Eastern Thrace). They were settled on a “temporary residence” status in the then Czechoslovakia with the expectation of returning to their homeland after the end of the Civil War. In the event, they were stripped of their Greek citizenship by the then Greek government, and their temporary residence in Czechoslovakia turned into a more permanent sojourn, especially after the coup d’état in 1967 in Greece.

They were not able to start returning home until amnesty was granted in 1975. This can be considered a turning point. By December 1990, their status as stateless political refugees had changed and they had to choose between accepting Czech citizenship or Greek citizenship. Most of them obtained both Greek and Czech citizenships. Those who remained in the Czech lands were now “Czech by choice”.

A third important development which had an impact on the sense of belonging to one or the other country, or to both, was the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in May 2004. This membership has weakened the more ethnocentric tendencies and any narrow national allegiances of the Greeks.

Issues in the National Identity of the Greeks in the Czech Republic

First Period – 1948 to 1962

The first period of forming and safeguarding the national identity of the Greek children and their parents stretches from 1948 to the early 1960s. Both children and adults went through schooling and technical education, but very few went on to universities at that time. The children were all housed in special Children’s Homes for Greek children, thus forming a compact social group. This group went through a highly ethnocentric education based on the policy of the Greek Communist Party in cooperation with the Czechoslovak authorities and the Czech Red Cross, for these children were to remain Greek, acquiring Greek values, learning about Greek customs and traditions, and above all speaking Greek. The language of education was Greek, alongside an intensive programme of learning Czech. Their education was mainly intellectual and ideological, and not military or paramilitary. Above all, they were expected to return to Greece as educated persons and thus as potential leaders of Greek society. An analysis of the Greek textbooks of the first period (with only limited changes, the same books were used until 1989) of the “temporarily” settled children demonstrates the goal and aims of the ethnocentric education and upbringing of the children.

The main themes concern safeguarding their national identity and cultivating their political, i.e. socialist identity. The recurrent themes are:

1. Intense patriotic feeling for the homeland.
2. Nostos and nostalgia for, and an unshakeable belief in, the return to the homeland.
3. Dedication to the Greek people’s struggles.
4. Pride in the traditions and customs of Greece.

5. Perception of the homeland as a beautiful country, albeit backward in comparison to the host country.
6. Love for the family and especially for the heroic mother.
7. Total dedication to and belief in the Greek Communist Party and its symbols.

The above themes are mostly connected with the formation of the Greek character and the Greek identity of the schoolchild.

Most of the school children knew what their Greek villages had looked like, and remembered their family life in the village. They believed in their return, and they loved their country. Moreover, they spoke Greek and they were educated in Greek. These children, now adults in their 60s and 70s, form the core of the Greek Communities in the Czech Republic, and it is they who place emphasis on safeguarding the national identity of their children and grandchildren. Thus, this stage is characterized by a very strong sense of being Greek and of resisting the influence of the host culture.

Nevertheless, an interchange of cultural and social values did begin to take place. Greeks started learning from Czechs, and Czechs from Greeks. Even now, many Czech citizens remember how difficult it was for all these Greek people to get used to eating Czech dumplings. They also recall how rapidly the scarce fruit and vegetables would disappear from the stands when the Greeks appeared on the scene.

Second Period – 1962 to 1975

A second period began in 1962, when the last Children's Home was dissolved, and the Greek children ceased to have a separate existence. In the second period (1962 until the amnesty in 1975), the Greeks continued to safeguard their national identity, but the main issue at that time was the ability to sustain the knowledge of Greek. In 1967, the coup d'état in Greece introduced a dictatorship which seemed at the time likely to delay the return to Greece. The Prague Spring and the intervention of the Warsaw Pact in August, in 1968 were matters above all for the majority population, and in any case the leaders of the Greeks in 1968 were pro-Soviet, and were more involved with internal issues of the Greek Communist Party and the political situation in Greece.

It is interesting to note that although the Greek children in this period were becoming less fluent in their mother-tongue, and excellent speakers of Czech, they still did not identify with the host culture. Two main reasons may explain this resistance to assimilation: a) the legal status as "stateless" of the Greek political refugees, and b) their firm belief that they would return to the homeland. Most young people of marriageable age would seek Greek brides or grooms, rather than Czech citizens.

With the dissolution of the last Children's Home in 1962, a decision was taken to integrate the Greek children and young students into the Czechoslovak society, and the children were sent to Czechoslovak schools. The children continued to have Greek lessons, i.e. language, history, geography and literature, but the number of lessons decreased to 4 hours a week and, soon after, to 2 hours a week. In addition, the lessons became optional, i.e., they were not part of the Czech school curriculum. The children of the 1960s and 1970s had been born in Czechoslovakia and lived, played and studied in a Czechoslovak environment. Responsibility for their Greekness now mainly fell on the family and on the Greek Communist Party organizations, which organized extra-curricular activities in the Greek Clubs. The themes of the school textbooks continued to be those of the 1950s and early 1960s, with a few changes which concerned the political upheavals within the Greek Communist Party. The insistence on creating for the children a "Greek environment" of blue skies, blue sea, sunny beaches, unknown fish and sea-food, seaports, citrus trees and fruit, traditional costumes and music, and many other Greek symbols and stereotypes, caused bewilderment to many a schoolchild, who was told that this fantastic land was in fact his or her country, while Czechoslovakia was his second country. The schoolchildren soon learned to feel in some sense Greek, to love their first motherland to which they were to return, but they also identified, on a different level,

with their second motherland. They grew up immersed in the ideas of socialism and communism. These ideas were cultivated not only through Czech textbooks, but even more vigorously through their Greek textbooks and the extra-curricular activities of the Greek Club. Some of the themes concerned internationalism, loyalty to the socialist countries and especially to the Soviet Union, respect and love for the working class and the agricultural workers. Other themes were general educational values such as love for reading, work, nature, cleanliness and order, etc.

Third Period – 1975 to 1989

The fall of the dictatorship (1974) brought in a government in Greece that immediately began to prepare amnesty, and in 1975 the Greeks were able to begin to return. In the third period (1975 until 1989), many of the Greek (or “partially Greek”) children did not speak Greek on a regular basis even in the home, and all used Czech at school. Most of them, and an increasing number of parents, had never visited Greece. The children were, to a greater or less extent, assimilated within the culture and language of the host country. The children grew up comfortably in the Czechoslovak environment and the Greek connection was mainly through increasingly distant relatives in Greece, perhaps through a parent and grandparents, and the remaining Greek Club activities, various traditional dance and music ensembles, amateur theatres, the gathering of all Greeks at Pan-Hellenic Festivals every two years, etc. The child may have played in a Greek band, or danced in a Greek dance group. He may have tried to learn Greek, but was also involved in most other activities together with his Czechoslovak peers. In due course he would probably marry a Czechoslovak citizen (by now all Greek children born in Czechoslovakia had Czechoslovak citizenship). In fact, a Greek child growing up in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s could scarcely avoid acquiring a Czech identity. One might have anticipated total assimilation of the Greeks of the third generation.

However, although some did assimilate, the majority began to return to its roots. When amnesty was granted in 1975, the old dream of returning to the homeland came true. The Greeks in Czechoslovakia could return, and the majority did in due course return to the homeland. An upsurge of feeling Greek, being Greek and identifying with everything Greek took place. Returning to a Greece they had never known put more pressure on the repatriating Greeks. When the return took place it was not easy. The welcome extended to the Greeks returning from the socialist countries was less than warm, and the reality of Greece was not exactly what either school or family memory had led the returning Greeks to expect. However, this topic lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Fourth Period – 1990 to 2004

In the fourth period, from 1990 until Czech accession to the European Union, there were new developments which helped enhance the feeling of being Greek. First, following the political changes in Czechoslovakia in 1989, unrestricted travel to Greece put young Greeks and children, irrespective of their national passport, in contact with the realities of modern Greece. Many parents went through the difficult experience and endless bureaucratic processes of acquiring Greek citizenship for themselves and for their children. As a result, many Greeks are holders of both Czech and Greek citizenship. Greeks in the Czech Republic did not go on holiday abroad – they went only to Greece, back to their villages and towns, visiting their relatives. The question most often asked was not if you were going to Greece, but when you were going. It was taken for granted that everyone goes to Greece, back to his roots, at least once a year.

Present Day

The issue now, following the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in May 2004, is not how to safeguard the Greek identity of the members of the Greek Community, but how to cultivate it by learning to speak the Greek language. The teaching of Greek to Greeks living in the Czech Republic and also to Czechs, is facilitated by having access to Greek satellite television, which has special programmes for and about Greeks Abroad. The Voice of

Greece broadcasts 24 hours a day to all Greeks abroad, and is widely listened to. In general, the Greek authorities show keen interest in the affairs of the Greek Communities in the Czech Republic, and its official Greek institutions give generous financial and material support for Greek cultural events and language learning. The Secretariat of Greeks Abroad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has specifically been set up to safeguard the national identity of Greeks abroad. The Greek Communities in the Czech Republic receive important financial assistance and moral support from the Czech Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture and the different Town Halls and Regional Municipalities, to carry out their cultural and language-teaching activities. Young Greeks, and also some Czechs, are now showing interest in studying Greek not only for emotive reasons, but also for utilitarian reasons: finding jobs in the flourishing two-way tourist industry between the two countries, setting up businesses dealing with Greece, working in restaurants that serve Greek as well as Czech customers, becoming entrepreneurs, etc. The advantages of being able to function in both cultures are widely recognized by the new generation of Greeks living in the Czech Republic. With the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union, Greeks do not find themselves in a state of anomie, asking themselves who they are and what they are. They have a rich cultural and historical heritage as Greeks, which they can be proud of. In addition, they are able to switch to the advantages of speaking Czech and enjoying a Czech way of life. They do not feel that assimilation to Czech culture in any way involves losing part of their Greek identity. Many of the Greeks living in the Czech Republic have a deep understanding of both Czech and Greek cultures. With their bilingualism (trilingualism, as many of them also speak English) and cosmopolitan attitudes, they are particularly well-prepared for cooperation, joint citizenship and joint ventures in the modern global village.

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