Egypt's Greek Population and the Panic Over Foreigners' Employment (1960)

Source Reference:
Chambre de Commerce Hellénique d'Alexandrie, 24 October 1960, no. 165/60.
Letter, in Greek, from Alex. M. Kazoullis (General Secretary) and Giagkos Chrysovergis (President) to P. Mamopoulos (Representative of the Alexandrian Greek Chamber in Athens), p. 1-2.
[Note: The letter has no title, but it is addressed as "extremely urgent."]

Source:
Dear Mr Mamopoulos,
Inclosed you will find the newspaper article about the new decree 263/1960 concerning foreigners' employment in Egypt. The decree, which will come into force on the 16th of November, will be the *coup de grâce* for the Greek communities in Egypt.

As of last Thursday, the 20th of this current month, when the above-mentioned decree was published in the press, all the Greeks in Egypt, regardless of class or occupation, are in a PANIC, since it was determined that the number of foreigners in any type of business cannot exceed 15% of the total number of employees. This is a complete extermination targeting Greeks (given other foreigners have already left the country), with many of them likely to be fired and some of our businesses to be shuttered.

Prior to this tragic development, the chamber's board, in the presence of the General Consul, Mr. Th. Baizou, discussed the current situation and decided the following:
We think that no action from the community's institutions would prevent, change or cancel this unjust decree. Neither a diplomatic action from our embassy or consulate in Egypt could bring a result. We believe that only a Greek minister, who should arrive WITHIN A WEEK and discuss this issue with the Egyptian government, could bring a positive outcome and stop this justified panic.

We won't exaggerate if we say that the Greek government would need to send many ships to receive thousands of Greeks in Egypt, who would soon be unemployed, since not even their residence permit would be valid. We do not need to provide more details, as it is so terrible what is happening right now to the Greeks in Egypt.

If our government cares about the approximately 60.000 Greeks in Egypt, and their own economic benefits, should hurry to send even within a day a minister to discuss our problem, without asking for favors, but discussing this issue on the base of the international law and our bilateral obligations.

Dear Mr Mamopoulos, we kindly ask you on behalf of our chamber, the community's institution in Alexandria, our commercial and business world that has suffered a lot lately, and the thousands of the Greek employees in Egypt, to urgently contact the prime minister, Mr. K. Karamanlis and communicate to him the tragic situation that the new decree brought. Only a Greek minister could talk to the Egyptian government and bring a positive result. Otherwise, consider that the 16th of the coming month will demarcate the end of our community, and be prepared to accommodate the thousands of refugees in Greece.

We look forward to hearing the news of the immediate arrival of a Greek minister.

With warmest regards, and great agony,
The General Secretary — The President
Alex. M. Kazoullis — Giagkos Chrysovergis

Blurb:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Greeks, like other Europeans, started to settle in Egypt. Greek islanders, especially from the Dodecanese islands, and Greek Cypriots, constituted most of the foreigners in Egypt, by the end of that century. The Greek population was a mosaic in terms of citizenship, local origin, labor activities and economic status. What attracted Greeks to Egypt were primarily social and economic factors, such as the the privileges and protection extended by Muhammad Ali (r. 1805–1848) under the system of the Capitulations (*al-Imtiyāzāt*), the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the cotton boom in the 1860s. Greeks settled throughout Egypt; in Alexandria and Cairo, in the Suez Canal and in Upper Egypt. Their number reached its peak after the First World War (from 56, 731 in 1917 to 76, 264 in 1927), but started to decrease from the 1930s onwards due to several socioeconomic and political events, such as the abolition of the Capitulations (1937) and the Second World War and post-war economic stagnancy. By 1947, the community's numbers had fallen back to 57,500 and in the mid-1960s only 17,000 Greeks remained in Egypt.

The source presented is a two-page letter from the Greek Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria, established in 1901. The letter was sent on the 24th of October, 1960, by Alexander Kazoullis and Giagkos Chryssovergis, the President and General Secretary of the Greek Chamber of Commerce in Alexandria (GCCA) to P. Mamopoulos, the representative of the Greek Chamber of Commerce (GCC) in Athens. The issue at hand was the new decree 263/1960, which was related to the 19/1959 law regarding foreigners' employment conditions. The law was enacted in 1959, but came into effect in November 1960, through the 260 and 263 decrees.

Decree 263/1960, which was introduced by the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor, Mohammed Tawfek Abdel Fatah, comprised 20 articles concerning the employment of foreigners in Egypt. Article 1 declared that any foreigner that wished to work had to obtain a work permit to be allowed to work in the country. Article 5, which the representatives of the GCCA addressed to Mamopoulos, was the most critical in specifying the terms of the new regulations. All foreign workers and employees could obtain work permits depending on the needs of and the non-competition to the Egyptian labor force. Specifically, foreigner workers in a business should not exceed 15% of the total staff, and that their salaries should not surpass 25% of the total payroll of the business. Article 5 was modified by Article 2, which essentially exempted businesses with five or fewer employees from the decree and its aforementioned conditions. Hence, small and medium-sized businesses could still operate in the post-colonial Egyptian society and market. Even though many Greeks were not affected directly by these rules, the fully capitalized word 'PANIC' on the letter was telling, reflecting a general feeling of having no future anymore in Egypt.

New laws that protected Egyptians in labor market were part of a larger Egyptianization policy that had been introduced before the outbreak of World War II in reaction to population increase and rising unemployment. For example, the first Company Law 138/1947 favored the position of Egyptian citizens in the labor market, and demarcated the distinction between Egyptians and foreigners in the labor market, intensifying the need for Egyptian citizenship.[1]

The decolonization process in the Eastern Mediterranean and the tripartite military intervention in 1956 (Suez Crisis) intensified the Egyptianization process (see, for example, the 1957 Laws), and caused more fear and insecurity about the Greek community's future. Furthermore, the new legislation on citizenship introduced by Gamal Abdel Nasser aimed to define the Egyptian community and delineate an attachment to Egypt.[2] Due to the anti-imperial and anti-colonial feelings of the period, it started to become more complicated for foreigners to become an Egyptian national.

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[1] Angelos Dalachanis, *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration: 1937–1962,* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 94-95. On the Italian presence in Egypt and how Italians affected by these laws, see: Joseph John Viscomi, *Migration at the End of Empire: Time and the Politics of Departure between Italy and Egypt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[2] Gianluca P. Parolin, *Citizenship in the Arab World. Kin, Religion and Nation-State* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 81.

The Law 160/1950 replaced the previous Law 12/1929, which granted Egyptian nationality to those who had a common cultural, linguistic or religious background. The naturalisation process was no longer automatic, but based on the right of blood (*jus sanguinis*) and the right of soil (*jus soli*). Moreover, Greeks and other foreigners could only obtain one-year permits after the 1956 laws. Thus, securing Egyptian citizenship and work/residence permits became necessary. Hence, the decolonization process, in tandem with Egyptianization, policies refashioned the relationship between the Egyptian state, Egyptian nationals, and non-nationals such as Greeks.

Further Readings:

Chryssostomidis, Sofianos. "The Left, Nasser, and the Exodus of the Greeks from Egypt." *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*. Special Issue, 35/2 (2009): 155-159.
Dalachanis, Angelos. *The Greek Exodus from Egypt: Diaspora Politics and Emigration: 1937–1962* New York: Berghahn, 2017.
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Kitroeff, Alexander. *The Greeks and the Making of Modern Egypt.* Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2019.
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