

**Address of H.E the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic**  
**Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis**  
**at the opening of the exhibition**  
**“Asia Minor Hellenism: Heyday – Catastrophe – Uprooting – Creation”**  
**Benaki Museum, 14 September 2022**

Your Excellency, Madam President of the Hellenic Republic,  
Madam President of the Benaki Museum,  
Mr. President of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

One hundred years ago to this date, on the shores of Asia Minor, the final bloody act of the “Ionian Vision” was written. Smyrna had already been delivered to the flames, and its Christian residents were being slaughtered. Meanwhile, those who managed to escape the Turks’ rage trailed behind the Greek army towards the Erythraia Peninsula, in an attempt to cross over to our islands, and, from there, to their salvation. Holding on to their lives and lives alone. Their belongings had been lost.

A short time thereafter, in Lausanne, the termination of the Hellenic presence in Ionia, Cappadocia, Pontus and Eastern Thrace for over twenty-five centuries was written in ink, having been already written in blood. Through an exchange of populations, one and a half million souls took off for their great Exodus. But they decided to grow roots again, in their new homes in the Motherland.

They travelled carrying the bare minimum of their possessions and a few precious relics. These are the very same relics that have found their place today in this unique exhibition co-organised by the two great arks of the memory of Ionian Hellenism: the Benaki Museum and the Centre for Asia Minor Studies, with the kind contribution of 88 more institutions. For decades, these two foundations have kept alive with their diligent efforts and passion the heritage of the Greeks from the lost homeland. And for this, we are rightfully grateful.

This uprooting was the heavy price to pay to secure peace and open a new chapter in the life of our Nation. Eleftherios Venizelos wrote: “By signing this Treaty, the unfortunate refugees are given the means to start anew. Under much better terms than anyone could have hoped for after the disaster in Asia Minor”. This was the rallying march for the national reconstruction effort that was to follow.

And indeed, the very same refugees proved him right, much sooner than he would have expected. For, if the Asia Minor Catastrophe is, perhaps, the greatest collective trauma of our recent past, the successful integration of the refugees in the national body is probably the greatest peacetime achievement of the Greek state.

A country exhausted and bankrupt, after 10 years of war, politically volatile, and with scarce resources at its disposal, achieved nothing less than a miracle: it turned the woes of tragedy into a breath of creation. It managed to trace its own mistakes and wrong choices; to rise again on its own feet and follow its familiar historic trajectory that always turns disaster into triumph; turning the strength and determination of the refugees into the pivot and the catalyst for modernizing the land.

Ilias Venezis, this great son of Asia Minor, who experienced firsthand the atrocity and the rebirth, wrote: “The Hellenism of Anatolia stood on its feet by working the bitter land.

Clearing the harsh mountains, drying swamps, penetrating the main body of the country's life. In industry, shipping, commerce, Arts and Letters, reaching the top in every domain. Changing the tempo of work and production and motivating healthy competition. Instilling a new, more awake spirit, in all transactions and relations among people".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All of the above, the catastrophe and the rebirth, are visualised in the adjacent rooms and their exhibits. I would suggest that we visit them not only to refresh our memory, but also as motivation for improving our own national self-awareness. Because, undoubtedly, History does not repeat itself, nor instructs by itself. It does help, however, in the search of our collective self. It does define, to a great extent, the environment through which we move today. And sometimes, it can be a prudent guide through a constantly changing world.

The Asia Minor Catastrophe and the integration of the Dodecanese in Greece in 1947 defined the final geographic contour of the country. The Lausanne treaty governs our coexistence with our neighbours since, despite the fact that Turkey violated it by uprooting the Greek element in Constantinople, Imbros and Tenedos. And despite the fact that Turkey unfortunately continues to undermine its crystal-clear stipulations by challenging our sovereign rights.

Nevertheless, people on the other side of the Aegean should realise that this Treaty has been in effect for a century and will remain in effect for many more. This is dictated by History and Geography, by international legality and stability. This is why Greece guarantees and will continue to guarantee compliance to the Treaty by the shield of its diplomacy and its alliances, but also by the deterring spear of its Armed Forces. And above all, by its constant progress.

For, the true reckoning of the country is not with its past, but with its future. In September 1922 Hellenism may have lost one of its most creative hubs, immediately after however, the country learned how to win the battle for prosperity: it reinforced its national homogeneity avoiding the "ghosts" of other Balkan countries; it fought again, once again on the right side of History; it boomed after the war and made life for Greeks better.

And today, Greece is one of the oldest members of the European family, taking a leading role among them. This has not been a flawless path, as the National Division that predated the Asia Minor adventure unfortunately recrudesced in different forms. This is why we experienced a Civil War and a seven-years long dictatorship. While, just a few years ago, we witnessed the revival of this division in the form of populism against yet another economic crisis that rather demanded national reconciliation.

All this, however, belong to the past. The choices Greeks make now demonstrate how the traces of their historical experience become their guides on a steadier course. How every great retreat gives way to an even greater national success. And how, today, the "Great Idea" is no longer reflected in geographical conquests, but in a modern, "Great Greece". The strong and self-reliant land of our future that does not forget precisely because it wants to advance.

I would like to conclude my remarks in the modest words Ilias Venezis chose to close his text on the Asia Minor drama: "After living through so much passion, we keep as our shelter and attendant a vision of Humanity that is purely Greek: a sense of decency and freedom that amounts to virtue". Indeed, allow me to borrow the very title of the book in which this passage was published, as it fits perfectly to today's exhibition: "Hail, Asia Minor!".

Thank you.