

THE PANEPIROTIC FEDERATION

A Brief Outline of Our History and Achievements

The Panepirotic Federation of America was founded in 1942 in Worcester, MA by immigrants from Epiros who had collected in the city to work in its many plants and mills. They were assisted by their compatriots in other regions, especially Epirote communities in New York and Philadelphia.

A guiding force in creating the national organization out of smaller groups formed in urban centers where Epirotes had settled was the leader of all Greek Orthodox Christians in the U.S., Archbishop Athenagoras, who was born in a small village in Epiros and would become patriarch of Constantinople in 1948. To form the Federation, Epirotes from all over the East Coast collected at an estate in Northboro, a suburb of Worcester, from July 19-21, 1942, and forged the first national organization of Epirotes in the U.S. The first president elected at the convention was Dr. Photios Kyritsis.

The first major effort of the new organization was to raise the awareness of Americans about the suffering of Greeks in Epiros, the site of some of the most vicious fighting in all of Europe as World War II unfolded, first during the invasion of Italian forces from Albania in 1940, which the Greek army stopped cold, then during the brutal occupation by the Nazis in 1941.

In the four years after its inception, the Federation, led by Dr. Kyritsis and assisted by Nick Cassavetes, father of actor John Cassavetes, also tried to build up U.S. support for the people of Northern Epiros so that they might realize their claims when the war ended. The Federation achieved a major success when Senator Claude Pepper of Florida successfully sponsored a resolution in the Senate (S.82) that backed their aspirations.

The pledge would ultimately go unfulfilled because the Communist forces of Enver Hoxha seized power in Albania at the conclusion of the war and closed the country to the outside world for the next 45 years.

As Hoxha consolidated his power in Albania, Communists in Greece tried to seize power there by force of arms, and the mountains of Greek Epiros became the major battleground of the conflict. During this period, the Federation struggled to generate as much support as possible for the many refugees of the civil war, a number of whom emigrated to the U.S. Among the leaders in that effort were Federation presidents Athanasios Kotsis, Evangelos Cotsidas and Vasilios Lokis.

When the civil war ended in Greece in 1949 and stability returned to the country, the attention of the Federation returned to the plight of their compatriots trapped in Northern Epiros, where Enver Hoxha was exiling, imprisoning and executing them by the thousands. While the Federation could bring little direct pressure on Hoxha, its leaders tried to prod him to loosen his grip by appealing to the United Nations and other international groups. The leaders of that effort over the next 40 years were Federation presidents Kostas Dimas, Dr. Basil Photos, Panayiotis Siepis, Menelos Tzelios, Elias Betzios, Vassilis Michelis and Demitrios Tsoumbanos.

When Communism collapsed in Albania in 1990, everyone expected that the persecution of ethnic Greeks in Northern Epiros would end. But the new democratic government that took over in 1992 under the leadership of Sali Berisha launched a new pogrom, arresting five leaders of the Greek minority on bogus treason charges, harassing hundreds of other activists and unleashing a climate of fear in Northern Epiros aimed at forcing ethnic Greeks to leave their homes and head south to Greece.

In the face of these provocations, the Federation sprang into action, organizing an international protest that freed the five minority leaders and waging a fierce campaign against the coercive policies of Berisha. In 1996, the then president of the Federation, Nicholas Gage, met with President Clinton and persuaded him to call for new elections in Albania and freeze all loans to the country until the elections were held. When they were, the following spring, the Berisha party lost decisively and its leaders knew why. Baksim Gazedede, the head of the Albanian intelligence service, SHIK, went before the Albanian government and declared: “The Panepirotic Federation led by Nicholas Gage is responsible for the fall of the Berisha government.”

The downfall of Berisha sent a message to all Albanian political leaders that persecuting the Greek minority would trigger international condemnation and it would be wise to adopt more tolerant policies. In short order, harassment of ethnic Greeks in the country abated, the climate of fear in the country lifted, and Albanian leaders began to invite leaders of the Greek minority to participate in their governments. In the current government, the ministry of labor, two deputy ministries and the prefecture of Argyrokastro are all led by ethnic Greeks. Berisha, who returned to power in 2004, is so sensitive now to criticism about treatment of the Greek minority that he appointed the daughter of the Omonia leader he charged with treason in 1994, Theodoros Bezianis, to head the department on minorities in his administration. And after declaring Nicholas Gage *persona non grata* in 1994, Berisha has received him in Albania three times in an effort to smooth over old differences and demonstrate a new, friendlier attitude toward the Greek minority.

The efforts of the Federation have not been only political. In 1987 it established a scholarship fund thanks to a generous gift of \$190,000 from the Michael Anagnos Foundation that has distributed \$400,000 in grants to Epirote students in the pass 20 years from earnings generated through the investment of the original grant.

In 1991, as the Communist regime began to crumble in Albania, several members from the Federation started the Northern Epiros Benefit Fund to help ethnic Greeks in the region. Federation chapters and individuals contributed more than \$150,000, which was doubled by shipowner Basil Papachristides, whose family comes from Epiros. In the 15 years since the fund was established, it has donated almost \$500,000 to assist organizations and individuals in Northern Epiros and to rebuild churches, construct roads and irrigation projects, and support political goals for the minority. Despite these expenditures, the fund continues to hold almost \$500,000 in assets as a result of new contributions and sound investment of the original donations.

Another area where the Federation has achieved considerable success is in raising awareness in the American press of the plight of ethnic Greeks in Northern Epiros. In fact, over the past dozen years there have been more articles in major American newspapers and magazines about the Greek minority in Albania than about all other Greek issues. Those publications include *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Nation* and *Parade*, which published a cover story about Archbishop Anastassios by Nicholas Gage in 2003.

While it has been sensitive to the needs of ethnic Greeks in Northern Epiros, the Federation has made an equally strong effort to help Southern Epiros, which has remained one of the most isolated and poorest areas in all of Europe. During the

administration of Greek Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis, leaders of the Federation urged him to devote more resources to Epiros in order to spur greater economic development in the region. As a result, he went to Epiros in 1991 and announced a series of development projects, including the expansion of the port of Igoumenitsa, the building of regional roads and bridges and the construction of the Egnatia Highway to extend from the western coast of Greece to the border with Turkey, some 645 km. away. That highway is the longest road ever built with financial support from the European Union and it will become a major artery for travel between western Europe and the Middle East when it is completed in the next two years.

Since then, Federation leaders have tried to prod succeeding Greek governments to invest more resources in the development of Epiros. Last year a north-south highway was begun that will extend from Patras to the Albanian border and cross the Egnatia Highway in Ioannina. The two super highways will help end the isolation of Epiros and the Federation has supported them vigorously, along with other infrastructure projects to help reverse emigration from Epiros and to make it a vital area for people to build good careers and productive lives.

The Federation has worked hard not only to build highways to the future but also to create monuments to the past so that Epirotes will never forget their rich heritage. The current president, Michael Servos, last year took the lead in creating a statue of Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great, and placing it at a main square in Ioannina, the capital of the region. He also led the effort to rename the airport of Ioannina after King Pyrrhus, the brilliant commander who was the last military leader to defeat the

Romans, and to build both a bust and a full statue of the legendary Epirote monarch to be erected in Ioannina, to remind everyone of his achievements.

Mr. Servos' predecessor, Peter Silis, at the Federation's convention in Florida in 2003, took the initiative in launching an effort to unite Epirotes all over the world to promote the economic development and cultural enrichment of their homeland. His vision was fulfilled last summer in Ioannina at a conference of Epirotes from all five continents, when the World Council of Epirotes Abroad was established. The conference was organized by Nicholas Gage and Chrysostomos Dimou, the head of the Panepirotic Federation of Germany. Mr. Gage was elected the first president of the WCEA and Mr. Dimou vice-president.

The goal of the new international organization is to help make the future of Epiros as glorious as its illustrious history.

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