Reckoning with Refugeedom – Artist Commission

1. Communities in Exile

Founding constitution and minutes of the ‘Union de Reconstruction d’Arpaoud’.

Archives Départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône, 4 M 836

This was the first of 23 associations established by the Armenian community in Marseille between 1931 and 1936, each of which aimed to reconstruct a particular Armenian town, village or region. The goal of this association was to ‘build a new village of Arpaoud, in Armenia. And to defend the interests of compatriots from Arpaoud, either in France or abroad, morally’. The founding committee members were Krikor Gasparian (a hairdresser); Vartan Der-Vartanian (a manual labourer) and Hagop Minassian (a manual labourer), all resident at the Impasse Davin, Madrague-Ville.
CELEBRATING THE CREATIVE TALENT OF EXCEPTIONAL REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER ARTISTS, AND SHARING REFUGEE EXPERIENCES THROUGH GREAT ART AND CULTURE

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Flier advertising a speech by M. Tahmazian, Vice-President of the Armenian Communist HOK Committee, to the Armenian community in Marseille, describing his four month trip to Soviet Armenia; Salons Longchamp, 26 April 1931; ADBR 4 M 2354
2. Petitionary Culture: The Diaspora takes on the Bureaucracy

A letter from the President of the Union Nationale Arménienne de Marseille to the Prefect of the Bouches du Rhône, 12 October 1923, ADBR, 4 M 957

This letter complains about the poor treatment received by Armenian refugees arriving on the ‘Albano’, including the fact that each refugee was illegally charged 3frs as a landing fee by corrupt dock officials. Appealing to France’s self-image as a caring land of refuge, as well as recent wartime experiences, the letter asserts that the French ‘paternally welcomed the debris of a nation that was the victim of its fidelity to the allied cause during the war, and this humane behaviour inspires nothing but thankfulness among Armenians towards France’s magnanimity’. This, the petition claimed, would surely spur the Prefect to act against the exploitation of Armenians arriving into France.
On 5 January 1923, a group of 131 Syrian Christian refugees arrived into Marseille, en route to Argentina. They were the first of several thousand and, when their onward passage was blocked by the Argentinian authorities, they were stranded in the southern French port city. Most would remain in Camp Oddo, a refugee camp in the centre of Marseille, for years. Quickly, two rival groups emerged, each claiming to represent these refugees – one, led by a priest named Petros, and the other led by the self-styled ‘Prince’ Malik Cambar. Throughout the 1920s, supporters of both Petros and Cambar consistently petitioned the French authorities demanding that their man be recognised as official leader of the Syrian Christians in France and denouncing their rivals as frauds, imposters and criminals. These letters deliberately and creatively played on the ignorance of French authorities concerning Syrian Christian society – Malik Cambar, for instance, described himself as a ‘Prince’ and as ‘Head of the Djilo Tribe’. This appears to have worked for a time, until someone in the French Ministry of the Interior finally worked out that there were no ‘tribes’ in Syrian Christian society, and that ‘Malik’ is actually better translated as ‘mayor’ than ‘prince’. This did not prevent Cambar from launching a propaganda campaign presenting himself as the leader of the Syrian Christian nation in exile, which included issuing his own passports to refugees (which were, needless to say, not recognised by the French). Eventually, the French authorities decided he was fraudster, and that he had sent false priests around the city collecting money on behalf of Syrian Christian refugees, which he had pocketed rather than distributing among his compatriots in Camp Oddo. He was expelled in October 1925.
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Petition signed by the heads of 31 Syrian Christian families, asking that ‘Prince’ Malik Cambar be named their representative, 24 March 1924; ADBR 4 M 2368

Letter from ‘Prince Malik Cambar, head of the Djilo Tribe’ to the Prefect, denouncing two of his rivals, 28 Feb 1924, ADBR 4 M 2368
Report from the French Ministry of the Interior, calling into question Cambar’s credentials as a ‘prince’ and pointing out how difficult it is to ascertain his real background, April 1925, ADBR 4 M 2368

Self-published booklet by Cambar, attempting to justify his credentials as a Prince, ADBR 4 M 2368
Prefectoral note confirming the Expulsion of Cambar, 12 October 1925

**Cabinet du Préfet**

**Prefecture des Bouches-du-Rhône**

*Copie Paris, le 12 Octobre 1925*

**Direction de la Sûreté Générale**

Le MINISTRE de l’Intérieur

2° Bureau

à Monsieur le Préfet des Bouches-du-Rhône.

**Police Générale**

En réponse à votre communication du 2 octobre, j’ai l’honneur de vous faire connaître qu’il y a lieu de mettre le nommé CAMBAR, Benjamin, Verda, dit “Prince MALIK CAMBAR”, sujet assyro-chaldéen expulsé, en demeure de quitter le territoire français.

J’ajoute que je ne fais aucune difficulté au départ des Assyro-Chaldéens qui veulent partir, sous la réserve que leurs passeports ne seront visés que pour l’aller seulement.

Pour le Ministre de l’Intérieur
Le Secrétaire Général,

siené: