



Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios Mansion (Lefkosia)

CYPRUS TOURISM ORGANISATION

The Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios Mansion is located inside the Venetian Walls of the Cypriot capital. It is in the neighbourhood of St. Anthony, at the corner of Hadjigeorgakis and Patriarch Gregorios V Streets, near the Archbishopric. The mansion dates back to the end of the 18th century and is considered the most significant sample of urban architecture of that era surviving in Lefkosia. It has always stood out among the other brick and stone houses prevailing in that area. At the time, two-storey stone houses, with latticed windows and kiosks (covered balconies) projecting over the streets, such as the Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios mansion, as well as gardens with lemon and palm trees, mosques with minarets, hammams (Turkish baths) and souks rendered an oriental colour to a city under Ottoman occupation for three whole centuries. The inhabitants of the capital were also a mixed crowd of Turks, Greeks and Armenians, with marked differences, but united in their love for the land all of them considered as their homeland. Such were the impressions of Louis Salvator, Archduke of Austria, when he visited the capital in 1873.

The Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios mansion, or konak, as it is also known, stands out both in terms of its monumental character, distinctive architecture and unique painted interior decoration, and of its historical significance.

We start our walk through its history by examining these elements one by one:

This mansion was the residence of Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios, who hailed from Kritou Terra in the Paphos Province and held the title of Dragoman (i.e. Interpreter) to the Serai. This was a significant office awarded to highly-educated individuals with mastery of the Greek and Turkish languages. As an Interpreter, Hadjigeorgakis dealt with matters of taxation and administration, which brought him into contact with the local administration of Cyprus, i.e. the “muhassil” (Turkish governor) and the aghas on the one hand, and the “kocabacis” (the local prelates) on the other. The people and the clergy held Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios in high regard and esteem. His cooperation with the clergy was a key factor for the dismissal of the tyrannical Governor Hatjibakkis and earned him increased power and influence. Around 1796 he was appointed life-long Dragoman of Cyprus by edict (khatt-i-Sherif) issued by Sultan Selim III.

As a result of his position and connections, the Dragoman amassed considerable wealth. However, he never used his power and riches for his personal benefit. According to a poem by an unknown author composed after Hadjigeorgakis' decapitation, as well as other

written sources, Hadjigeorgakis contributed greatly to the protection of Christians and lepers, offered financial and moral support to the Church of Cyprus, and promoted education. He and his wife Maroudia, Archbishop Chrysanthos's niece, displayed patriotic and charitable sentiments.

Nevertheless, there were many that nursed negative feelings against the Dragoman. His own and the Archbishop's ascendancy to the position of arbiters of the political and financial life of Cyprus caused the envy and anxiety of the Turk aghas, who as conquerors had been accustomed to being the principal agents of authority and the privileged beneficiaries of such authority, but now saw themselves being supplanted.

On the other hand, a part of the population resented the heavy taxes placed upon them – and consequently, resented Hadjigeorgakis, who was responsible for the collection of such taxes. The French consul Regnault was also hostilely disposed towards him because he considered him a Russophile and, by consequence, an enemy of France.

This resentment manifested itself also in the 1804 revolt of the islands' Ottomans caused by the increased taxation and the wheat shortage. The insurgents initially revolted against the Turkish authorities, but the authorities managed to turn their wrath against the Church and the Dragoman. The angry mob broke into and sacked Hadjigeorgakis' mansion. The Dragoman himself escaped with his family to Constantinople, where they stayed for three years. Hadjigeorgakis appointed his assistant, a man named Nicholaos Nicholaides, as his commissary. Nicholaides was quick to take advantage of his position to become rich. He collaborated closely with the muhassil and resorted to tyrannical methods for the collection of taxes. When the Dragoman was cleared of all charges, he returned in 1807 to conduct an audit of the accounts. To avoid being called to account for their arbitrariness, Nicholaides and Hasan Agha sent a slanderous report against him to the sultan. The Sublime Porte then issued an order for the Dragoman's arrest and for a full examination of his accounts for the past 20 years. Hadjigeorgakis was informed of this development and once again fled to Constantinople to prove his innocence. However, this time he was not successful. By order of the new Grand Vizier Youssouf Zia, who hated him, he was beheaded in Constantinople in March 1809 despite the efforts of the ambassadors of England and Russia; by the time they secured the sultan's order for his release, it was too late.

The Dragoman's estate was confiscated and his family suffered several years of exile and imprisonment. Hatice Hanım, of the Turkish family of Magnisalı, bought the mansion for 13,000 gross.

In 1830, Tselepi Yiannos, the Dragoman's youngest son, returned from Constantinople and bought the mansion with a loan he received from the Archdiocese. Tselepi Yiannos settled there with his wife Iouliani, née Vondiziano. He died in 1874 and his wife remained at the mansion with the family of her niece Ourania Zachariadou Oikonomidi, whom she had adopted for she had no children of her own. The mansion was then inherited by Ourania's four daughters. The last tenant, Julia Piki, died in 1979. In accordance with her wish and the wish of her sister, Anna Dimitriadis, the part of the mansion that belonged to them was donated to the Archdiocese together with the furnishings. The remaining part was acquired by the Department of Antiquities.

Thanks to the efforts of the Department of Antiquities, the mansion was declared an "Ancient Monument" in 1935. From 1981 to 1987, it underwent thorough maintenance and restoration and was awarded the Europa Nostra prize. In its present form, the mansion maintains the layout it had at the end of the 19th century, i.e. before it was divided among the heirs and partitioned.

It is a monument that preserves and exudes the atmosphere prevailing both in Hadjigeorgakis' era and in its more recent history. Today it functions as an Ethnological Museum and a venue for cultural events.

Let us now walk through the monument and become better acquainted with it.

It seems that there was already a structure in place which the Dragoman renovated and extended. The date 1793 inscribed into a tablet inside the main gate quite likely marks the completion of the renovation works. Hadjigeorgakis and his family used the existing mansion as their residence, as well as a house at the back of the property, which was subsequently demolished and only its front door survives.

Although the Dragoman had his office in the Serai, it seems that he regularly used his konak as an office and as a place where he worked with his associates and put up his guests.

The mansion is a large two-storey building of local poros blocks and has three wings arranged in the shape of the Greek letter Pi. Its external façades are castle-like, with three rows of iron barred windows set high in the solid walls. The upper floor windows are larger and the iron grilles cover only their bottom half, whereas the top floor ones are smaller and latticed. A wooden kiosk, i.e. a closed balcony, projects above the main gate in the mansion's north façade. A pointed arch lintel with relief decoration (perhaps from an earlier building) is crowned with a built-in marble slab with the winged Lion of Venice. The Lion faces outwardly, with its right foot on an open gospel bearing a Latin inscription on the two pages: "Pax tibi Marce Evangelista meus" ("May peace be with you, Mark, my evangelist"). To the right of the lion there is a ruined turret with a flag at its top, whereas at the centre of the slab there is a double-headed eagle on a shield, flanked by branches with pomegranates arranged horizontally. At the centre of the eagle there is a cross on a hillock and at the bottom of the slab there is a band of *anthemeia* (palmettes). In its simplest form, the cross brings to mind the coat of arms of the Podocataros, a Latinized Greek family, one of the most important families in Cyprus ca. 1500. One of the bastions of the Lefkosia walls (the Podocataro Bastion) was named after that family, which funded its construction. However, the slab as a whole does not constitute an escutcheon and must have been carried here from another, older edifice.

Entering the mansion, we see the two wings facing south and enclosing part of the internal court which opens into a garden. Contrary to the external façade, the largest part of the floor consists of a timber frame filled with masonry and other materials and has many windows.

Before moving on, let us look back towards the entrance. Laid into the wall above the main gate, we see a marble tablet meant to ward off evil spirits. It bears Hadjigeorgakis' monogram and the date 1793 rendered in alphanumeric elements beneath three crosses carved in relief. The middle cross bears the abbreviation IC XC NI KA (= Jesus Christ is victorious), a Spear and a Sponge, symbols of the Holy Passion. The same composition is repeated in the relief decoration of the marble slab set on top of the marble fountain in the court between the two wings. The fountain also bears the date "1803 July 29" in relief. At the centre of this marble slab there is a double-headed eagle, flanked by two anthropomorphous birds standing on decorative half-columns. Behind the fountain there is a built water cistern. The water used to flow into an ancient rectangular sarcophagus.

Turning now our gaze towards the three wings of the mansion, we see that the west one, built of solid poros blocks, maintains the castle-like masonry of the exterior façades, whereas the upper floor of the east and north wings is made up of a wooden frame filled with various filling materials. The wooden elements, the multiple openings and the whitewashed walls render these wings a lighter character. The pointed arches running the interior length of the ground floor, creating a gallery around the court, constitute a distinctive architectural feature of the monument. One of the ground-floor rooms in the eastern side of the north wing has been modified into the warden's office, and the large northwestern room is used for exhibitions, lectures, musical performances and other cultural events.

Attached to the east wing of the mansion, a roofed wooden staircase leads to the first floor, which is decorated with the furniture that already existed there in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries (i.e. the period of British Occupation), as well as with furniture and various objects dating from the same period donated to or purchased by the Department of Antiquities. Climbing the stairs we find ourselves in the entrance hall, the "iliakos" (sun-room). It is a sitting room well lighted by the many windows, and the main rooms of the mansion open onto it. The portrait of Constantine Zachariadis, brother of the last tenant of that wing, Ourania Zachariadou, occupies a conspicuous position. That portrait is a painting in oil by artist E. Ioannidis.

At the north end of the entrance hall there is the small closed balcony with a raised floor – the kiosk we mentioned earlier projecting above the main gate. To the east of this kiosk there is a spacious square room with fourteen windows in two rows, known as "The Holy Wood of the Cross", since it used to be a prayer room. Family heirlooms, icons and samples of medieval and later pottery are now on display here. The set of 12 gilt-porcelain coffee cups in a box is particularly impressive. It was Lady Stanhope's gift to Iouliani Vondiziano.

To the west of the kiosk there is a large room with various exhibits from the Ottoman Occupation and the first decades of the British Occupation in Cyprus, such as copperware, breech-loading rifles, jewellery, pipes and coins. Silversmithing and goldsmithing flourished in Cyprus from the 17th to the 19th century. Lefkosia in particular was a

significant centre of this traditional art. Some pages of the Catalogue of Hadjigeorgakis' estate make characteristic and very detailed references to it.

To the west of the sun-room is the dining room and to the southwest is the bedroom. Both these rooms open onto the sun-room and were furnished in accordance with the early 20th century aesthetics.

On the opposite side of the sun-room, to the south, there is a corridor with large windows which looks onto the court. Three rooms open into this corridor. The first one features an interior staircase leading to the ground floor, and a wall painting depicting a male armed figure. The two adjacent rooms, which initially constituted a single space, contain educational material – literature and copies of various documents illuminating diverse aspects of Dragoman Hadjigeorgakis' personality. Also on display are plans, photographs and explanatory texts covering the architectural development of the mansion, the restoration works and the colour study. At the end of the corridor there is an 18th century Grandfather clock by Isaac Rogers. Initially it belonged to Michael de Vezin, the English Consul to Aleppo (in Syria) and Cyprus, and then it came into the possession of Zenon Pieridis in Larnaca, who donated it to the Cyprus Museum in 1961. A similar clock in a wooden case with a replica of a ship which swings on the pendulum is located in the Church of St. Anthony near the Hadjigeorgakis mansion.

The door next to the clock leads to the official reception room, the “kalos ondas”, which was also called “Aspastikon” (from the verb “aspazomai”, meaning receive cordially and politely) and was used for the welcoming of visitors. The room is furnished with low sofas, with felt covers and velvet cushions. This reconstruction of the onda was based on information regarding the furnishing of the “apano sala”, the first floor reception room, and of the other reception areas mentioned in the manuscript listing Hadjigeorgakis' estate. The furnishing is complemented with a brass tray with short wooden basis serving as table, a hookah, and a brazier. One immediately discerns features that are common to corresponding rooms in mansions situated in urban areas across the Ottoman Empire. Such distinctive features are the wooden panels on the walls with the multicoloured painted floral compositions, and the built-in cabinets –one with a secret compartment leading to the roof– set in the north wall, with faux marble painted decoration. High windows are set in the three walls of the raised-floor sitting area, whose ceiling preserves

the original elaborate gilded, painted and carved décor, with bands of floral patterns. Vivid colours and geometric motifs prevail in the central rectangular part of the ceiling. The decoration in the niche of the north wall represents a walled city on a coast, with domed roofs, cypresses, fountains and a bridge leading to its gate. The city is framed by trumpet holding angels and may symbolize Constantinople. This painted “kalos ondas” is unique in Cyprus.

Of significant value are the four portraits hanging on the walls. The two oil paintings on the south wall depict Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios holding a firman and wearing a sheepskin fur coat (“miloti”) and a sable fur kalpak (a “samourokalpako”, a high-crowned cap), i.e. the Dragoman’s official attire. The other two portraits, on the east and west walls, depict Hadjigeorgakis’s son, Tselepi Yiangos, and his wife, Iouliani Vondiziano, and were painted by Constantine Takkadjis in 1852 and 1851, respectively.

Returning to the court, we see stone-built structures to the east which housed the original kitchen and cooking hearths with chimneys. To the south, there is a detached building, the family bath (hammam), consisting of three adjacent rooms. At the back of the court there is a large built water cistern.

Using all the information and impressions you have gathered, try to bring to mind the atmosphere in 18th century Cyprus and to picture this mansion with the servants going about their daily chores, the Dragoman Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios receiving his distinguished guests in the “kalos ondas”, and his wife Maroudia sitting in the kiosk with her embroidery.

A short distance from Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios’ konak, there are other important monuments, such as: the Omeriye Mosque and Ottoman Baths (Hammam), the Church of St. Anthony, the old Archbishopric, St. John’s Cathedral, the Byzantine Museum, the Ethnographic Museum, the National Struggle (EOKA) Museum, the Pancyprian Gymnasium (Hadjigeorgakis Kornesios’ alma mater), the Severios Library, the Silichtar Aqueduct (constructed with funds donated by Dragoman Hadjigeorgakis), the Liberty Monument, the Venetian Walls and the Famagusta Gate (an Europa Nostra award winning monument).

Visiting hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 08:30 – 15:30

Wednesday 08:30 – 17:00

Saturday 09:30 – 15:30

Sunday and Monday closed

The monument is closed on the following dates:

25th and 26th December

New Year's Eve and 1st January

Easter Sunday and Monday