

The Lively Greek Community of Constanta

IN ANTON Hiropedi's office in Constanta almost none of the objects on display indicate that one is actually in Romania. Greek devotional objects decorate the headquarters of his successful shipping company, which he opened immediately after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu's communist Romania.

"I am Greek," Hiropedi says with pride.

These few words seem to have resounded loud enough to also convince his daughter's Romanian husband, who took Hiropedi's not very Romanian family name.

Greeks have lived in Romania for almost 27 centuries, and at times their presence amounted to hegemony. Today, Hiropedi, also vice-president of the Hellenic Union of Romania, optimistically places the number of Greeks in Constanta at 1,200.

But according to the last census, carried out in 2002, only 512 persons declared they were Greek in this city of 300,000, which itself was once founded by Greeks as the colony of Tomis sometime around 600BC.

Hiropedi, a son of a Greek father and Romanian mother, has reason to grieve. At the end of the 19th century, every fourth inhabitant of Constanta was Greek.

"The peninsula was once full," he says.

Kept secret

Despite Ceausescu's favouring of Romanian culture at the expense of minorities, the Greeks like others in the multicultural Dobruja region, on the Black Sea, kept their identity, often secretly.



A street named after a Greek in downtown Constanta

However, the number of Greeks in Constanta, as in all of Romania, dropped sharply since the early 1990s, as Romanian Greeks, facing the same hardships as their fellow countrymen, left in droves. Yet, it is not just that.

"The younger generations often don't have any strong feelings about their identity any more," says Nicolae Anton Chirea, 33.

Born to a Romanian father and Greek mother, he runs Dimos, a home heating-and-air-conditioning company.

Together with Hiropedi, he also leads the local branch of the Hellenic union and strives to keep the Hellenic side of Constanta alive.

One project includes trying to buy the former Greek school, which today is a state-run Romanian school. Meantime, the Greek theatre Elpis is still active, although the plays are mostly in Romanian for the moment.

Hiropedi, himself a former football player of internationally renowned side Dinamo

Bucharest, since 2000 has been trying to promote the historic side of team Elpis Constanta, currently playing in Romania's 4th division. Despite carrying a Greek name, the team are open to players from all ethnicities.

The city also has a Greek Orthodox church, with services occasionally held in Greek, yet not every Greek in town is able to follow.

While digging into a plate of Greek food at Elleniko Steki in Constanta, Chirea, whose self-described Greek is "far from being perfect", says a regularly held Olympiad of the Greek Language encourages local Greeks to improve their language skills.

"Every stone turned around in this town would reveal traces of Greek settlement," says Elleniko Steki owner, Alexandros Papaalexandru, in fluent Romanian.

He first came to Romania in 1976 as a bus driver taking shipping crews from Piraeus to Constanta. He eventually decided to settle in the city and open a restaurant.

'Flourishing'

"Greek life was once flourishing here," Papaalexandru says. "Just opposite from here, at the house on the corner, that was also a Greek place."

When asked what the building was used for, Papaalexandru has to smile, for it once housed Constanta's Greek brothel.

Although there are Greek companies and businessmen operating in Constanta, there are only a handful of Greeks from Greece actually living in the city.

"They want to teach us a lesson, but the Romanian Greeks know how to make something out of nothing."

On March 25, the Constanta Greeks celebrate Greek National Day, and on October 28, they mark Ochi Day. This is also when a traditional dancing group performs Greek dances.

It is a time when girls like Janina and Ruxandra, both half-Greek, show their commitment to keeping Greek traditions alive. Some of their fellow dancers, like Maria, have no Greek roots at all. The three girls just came back from their summer holidays in Asprovalta, near Thessaloniki.

Maria says: "It started with learning the beautiful Greek language. From there I discovered the unique Greek culture. Greek is not about carrying Greek documents. It is a state of mind. You need to feel the Greek spirit."

A native of Passau, Germany, Sebastian Saam is a journalist with Euronews. He is currently living in Romania where he is working on the production of a documentary film.

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Businessman Anton Hiropedi, president of the Constanta branch of the Hellenic Union of Romania