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George Bredin Travel Fund Report

With the generous grant awarded by the George Bredin Travel Fund, I was able to return to Amman, Jordan for 8 weeks over the summer to explore the Circassian community in the city while improving my skills in the Arabic language. My interest in the minority began towards the beginning of my year abroad in Amman when the ever-queried, "Where are you from?" resulted not in many individuals claiming to be "from" Jordan, but instead from Palestine (mostly) and Circassia (rarely). My classmate, Emily Roper, and I decided to explore this concept by conducting a small interview project surveying identity and this looming question among a small selection of the city's Palestinian and Circassian communities. We published summaries of these interviews in the Oxford International Relations Society's Hilary edition of *The Lighthouse*. Our small project encouraged me to speak with more people of Circassian descent as their stories especially intrigued me, and I was surprised I had not heard about them before. While I was already set on returning to Amman in the summer to live with a host family and take a few more language classes, I decided to focus my time in the city on conversations with more individuals of Circassian descent alongside trips to visit their social clubs, schools, and, surprisingly, international TV station headquarters and a professional dance rehearsal.

For a bit of background, the Circassian population originated from the Caucasus region, just North of modern-day Georgia and Abkhazia. After an approximately 100-year-long war against the Russians, and some under the table deals between the Russians and Ottomans, in 1864, most Circassians were murdered or expelled and dispersed throughout the Ottoman Empire, "to distribute the warriors from the Caucasus throughout the empire," or, "bring the Muslim Circassian people under the domain of Islam," two accounts of rhetoric surrounding the deal according to Circassians in Amman today. They were distributed throughout modern day Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Egypt; with the largest populations in Turkey at 7 million and Jordan at 180,000.

Focusing then on Jordan, the Circassians settled on the future Jordanian territory 57 years before the founding of the country itself. As many individuals pointed out to me, these years are what made the Circassian community in Amman and Jordan so integrated in society. They formed villages, built the first houses on the land, lived and fought alongside and against the Bedouin, eventually forming peace pacts and excellent relations with Arabs and particularly the Hashemite family. To this day, as many were ready to tell me, the King's Royal Guard consists exclusively of Circassians due to the history of trust between the population and Hashemites and their proven reputation for respect, honour, and loyalty.

I began by interviewing Circassian individuals in Amman, and I was amazed at how ready people were to tell me about their heritage. I hardly had to ask any questions; people were simply ready to share (at least, most of those I encountered). I found myself drawn to the varying ways individuals expressed the same sentiments. As in, no matter how the details of the legends, stories, founding of Jordan, etc. differed, the underlying pride in being Circassian and value they hold in respect pervaded it

all. From these oral recollections to dance traditions and material symbols like their dagger (Qāma), oxen cart, traditional dress, and the colour green, pride in being Circassian existed alongside pride in being a respectful people.

Respect for the land fell at the highest level of value, just above respect for elders, women, and guests. I was naturally sceptical of some of the claims I was hearing such as, “we treat our women right,” and, “our women are spoiled,” as it seemed to me that to feel the need to call attention to these qualities, there may not be as much respect as is actually claimed. However, as I spoke to more people, I noticed I was greeted with handshakes, hugs, and spoken to as an equal in social settings. People wanted to know my opinions and hear my contributions to conversation, and an air of underlying respect was created. I cannot be sure whether this is because I am a woman or because I was in the position of a guest or outsider from a well-known university, but there was something *different* in the air in these interactions that I had not noticed was absent from my daily life in Jordan.

The respect for women was of course reflected in their tales as well. Ayan, a Circassian filmmaker I spoke with, described how in the homeland, when people try unsheathing a sword in a shop, they have to do it in a private fitting room to avoid taking it out in public and showing off, in fear of a woman potentially walking in. He also described to me, as many did, how Circassians stand when elders or women walk by out of respect. This custom too I thought might be a tale to emphasise their values, but when leaving the ICCA (International Circassian Cultural Academy) with Simaza, a girl my age whose family I spoke with, a group of young Circassians hanging out at the club did a small little stand-up-sit-down rocking motion. I asked Simaza if they “stood” because we’re women and she responded, “No! It’s because we’re human!”

Ayan also noted that the only time they’re allowed to show off is in their dancing. Every person I spoke with told me about the importance of dancing and explained the symbolism of it, but it was Yanal who introduced me to the world of Circassian dance as it exists in Amman. Yanal, advisor to HRH Prince Ali Bin Al Hussein, and one of the leading figures at the ICCA, also teaches their dance troupe The Highlanders (they’re worth a google; I was left incredibly impressed by their rehearsal). This prominent man in the community is the same one who called the TV producers about bringing me to the studio for a meeting that day; not because I had nothing to do with the meeting itself, but because the producers are older than him and out of respect, he needed to request their permission. Returning to the dancing— show off they did. I was impressed not only by the moves, which were challenging in their own right, but by the commitment these dancers had to what they were doing and in the perfection and precision in every movement (for every move has a specific meaning, and the entire dance represents a conversation). This commitment struck me, so I asked one of the dancers, Diana, about whether she chose to dance the traditional Circassian dance or whether her family put her in the classes. She said she was not aware of anyone (in this group) whose family forced them to dance, but that they all want to come and practice because of respect and pride for their heritage.

In the tales and legends from the homeland as well, I noticed the importance and value of respect. I heard stories about the historic warrior culture and how their flag has three arrows on it because if a knight approached a town carrying only three arrows, it meant he came in peace. It was emphasised that the Circassians became warriors to protect their little slice of heaven (the homeland). It had nothing to do with needing to be on the attack; they respect the land, and needed to protect it. Ayan even described the element of respect in their sword design. There were hollow lines cut into the sword that allowed air into the wounded body, causing a quick death where the other individual does not bleed for a long time, and they coated these same swords with painkiller. He claimed they did this because their people understood nature and the need to kill for defence purposes, but they did not want to.

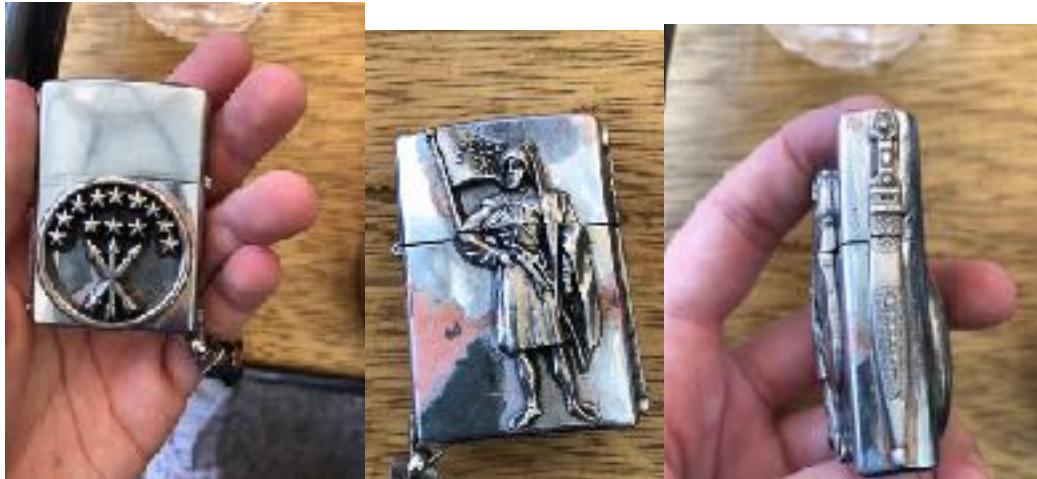
I was struck with the impression that the Jordanians of Circassian descent with whom I spoke truly were committed to keeping their stories and traditions, including their dancing and music, alive in Amman as it once existed in the homeland. Many people called attention to the fact that Circassian tradition in Amman is not the same as it is or was in the homeland or in Turkey or Syria or Palestine. Circassian-Jordanians (or Jordanian-Circassians as some may chose to identify) especially have struggled to protect their identity because it has not been under threat. In Turkey, Syria, and under the Israeli government, many Circassians were forced to not speak Circassian and instead utilise the national language in public settings and not practice their traditions outwardly and because of this oppression, they held on to these values even more. In Jordan, Circassian society flourished alongside Arab society especially since they were present on the land before the founding of the country. Ayan believes the first Jordanian governmental meeting was conducted in the Circassian language because in the 1920s, everyone in a prominent position was Circassian; and Yanal claimed the first officer in the Arab army (meaning Jordanian army) was Circassian, not Arab, and he emphasised that this role the Circassians played in establishing the country made them feel Jordanian—because there was no Jordan before 1917. Most people I spoke with said they were proud to be Jordanian, and they would fight for the country if they needed to, but they emphasised that the Circassian part of their identities cannot be overlooked.

Yet at the same time, this freedom of expression and integration led the Circassians in Jordan to not protect their language and traditions as much as, say, the Circassians in Turkey, and many recognise that the language is threatened in spite of the recent movements to encourage more people to learn it. However, there is such a strong desire to protect and perpetuate their traditions and culture for future generations, even stronger than the desire for a mass return to the homeland (based on the accounts I recorded). I focused here on the element of respect in Circassian culture in Jordan and pride in this respect, but I witnessed pride as well in their camaraderie, traditional stories, dancing, role in Jordan, and so much more beyond these. The Circassians in Jordan have, or have created, a self-aware culture that is thriving through its oral history and maintaining of cultural symbols. Most do not tell the same story exactly, or give the same explanation of some symbol, but through any explanation, the same values are promoted and a sense of pride emanates from them.

I am currently working on a longer piece that will explore the interesting relationship between Circassian-Jordanians and the homeland, their identity between two lands, and especially the idea of perpetuating cultural elements (like value in respect through stories and traditions) in the diaspora without necessarily needing to return to the homeland; but I hope this write-up provides a sample of some of the ideas I explored while in Amman this Summer.

I would like to thank Pembroke College for granting me the opportunity to explore these ideas in Amman this summer through the George Bredin Travel Fund. While the money mostly went to flights and my homestay expenses, the ability to further my language skills, especially spoken language skills, gave me the opportunity to communicate with non-English-speaking Circassian-Jordanians and explore their culture in a more authentic fashion.

## Photos



### Ayan's Lighter

I noticed Ayan's lighter while we were chatting outside a café, with three of its sides depicting prominent Circassian symbols. The first (left to right) is the symbol that is also on the Circassian flag with twelve stars, one for every Circassian tribe, three arrows (as mentioned above), and here all contained in a circle which holds importance for Circassian dance, food culture, meeting and gathering culture, and generally involving their ideas on continuity of life and nature. The second is a Circassian warrior in traditional dress with the flag behind him, and the third is the Qāma, the traditional dagger.



### Yanal's Pin

Yanal showed me this pin, the promotion of which was the subject of the meeting at the Circassian TV system, intended to be worn at gatherings to show whether you speak Circassian (green, as above) or are learning (grey). The aim of these pins, co-created by Yanal, is to promote opportunities for Circassians to practice the language with one another.



King Abdullah II with his Royal Guard (centre)  
King Hussein with the Royal Guard (left) and Crown Prince Hussein II with the Royal Guard (right)  
Hanging up at a Circassian cultural club



Simaza (left) and her parents Saimat, a Circassian language teacher, (centre) and Nazeer (right) in a Circassian language classroom in the ICCA



Me, next to a Circassian flag in a cultural club