

Chapter IV

THE ROLE OF AMIRAS IN THE *ARMENIAN MILLET*

Amiras, individually and collectively, wielded such great power that they dominated the national life of the Armenian *millet* during the entire period under consideration in this study. Their connections with Ottoman officialdom and positions within the government, on the one hand, and their economic wealth and financial means, on the other, formed the sources of this power. We have already examined their role in the Ottoman central administration and economy. Now we turn our attention to their role in the Armenian *millet*. It would not be an exaggeration to state that from 1770¹ to 1840 they were all-powerful.

The center of all aspects of Armenian life was the patriarchate, located in Istanbul. Control of this institution meant mastery over the entire *millet* within the boundaries of the empire. Therefore, *amiras* strove, and generally succeeded in bringing this central national institution under their dominance. The most efficient and immediate way to reach this goal was the use of their economic power, which manifested itself in many areas of activity.

One of the uses of this economic weapon was in charities. In the spirit of the times, *amiras* donated large amounts for philanthropic and charitable purposes. For instance, in 1829 Harutiun *Amira* Bezdjian gave 100,000 *kuruş* (piastres) for distribution to the poor. A few years later, in 1832, a special fund was set up through Bezdjian's efforts,² in order to institutionalize assistance to the needy and destitute. The fund was administered by a thirty-six member body, called *Tnangats Matakarakarutiun*, "Assistance to the Homeless." This committee or council was comprised of six "classes" or categories, each of which was headed by one or two prominent *amiras* and

¹ Until 1764 the patriarchal office was occupied by a strong-willed man, Hagop Balian who, during his long tenure (1741-1749 and 1752-1764) was his own man.

² Reportedly Bezdjian was emulating the Jewish *millet* which had established a "Danger and Accident Treasury" to help the poor and needy. P. Ketchian, *Patmutiun Hivandanotsin*, pp. 38-39.