

ETHNIC HERITAGE PRESERVATION: THE ARMENIANS AS A CASE STUDY

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My name is Audrey Megerian. I am of Armenian extraction; thus, my roots are in another country. Although I was raised with little awareness of my ethnic identity, four years ago an awakening began to stir within me that has grown into a profound feeling of identification and love. I began to learn about the history of my people, and as I tried to discover my ancestral roots, I gained a great sense of pride in who I am and who my ancestors were. Those people who went before me have come alive.

Who are the Armenians? The Armenians descended from tribes inhabiting a traditional homeland in eastern Turkey, including the region around Mount Ararat. Until the destruction of all communities living in eastern Anatolia in 1915, the Armenian nation had occupied the land known as "Great Armenia" and adjoining districts for 2,500 years. The Armenians speak an Indo-European language and call their land Hayastan rather than Armenia. Armenia is the oldest Christian nation in the world, having accepted Christianity in the year A.D. 301 (See illus. 1.)

It is significant to note that many of the Armenians' neighbors in antiquity, like the Hittites, Caucasian Albanians, and Assyrians lapsed into barbarism or shrunk into obscurity while the Armenians survived persecutions intended to exterminate them. Much of their success was due to their common language, civilization, and religious faith plus their personal tenacity and courage.

It is estimated that there are six mil-

lion Armenians scattered all over the world. They are successful in business and professional life and are renowned as scientists, mathematicians, and physicians. They excel in literature and the arts. Despite their tragic history, they are noted for their humor, and they are excellent cooks and are famed for their hospitality.

The book Armenia, Cradle of Civilization states:

Armenians are argumentative, quarrelsome, and great "know-alls." An Armenian officer in the old Ottoman Army once remarked that he preferred to be in charge of a battalion of Turks than one made up of his fellow Armenians: The Turks obeyed without question, but each Armenian would have his own ingenious plan of campaign, and none would attack until all¹ had been discussed and tried out.

The book further states:

The Armenian is one of nature's individualists, a leaven for the conformist mass of the human race. Logically he should have given up the struggle and lain down to die long ago.

But he refuses and still refuses to surrender, and here lies the key to understanding the nature of this dogged, invincible, little people whose contribution to human civilization is out of all proportion to its numerical strength.²

Certainly the individualism of the Armenian people has been a positive factor in their survival.

Part of the joy in searching out my roots has been in gathering biographical material. May I share a little with you? My great-grandfather, Kevork Santikian, was born in Maden, Turkey, in 1825. He was a barber and a poet with twinkly blue eyes. His son brought Kevork and his wife, Toomian, to this country when they were quite old, settling them in Fowler, California, on a small vineyard. Only two of their nine children lived to maturity because of severe privations in Turkey. Their life had been very hard. How they loved America!

Kevork loved the Bible; all the saints and prophets were his friends. Thus, during the big noonday meal, he blessed each saint and prophet plus all his friends on earth, sometimes for twenty minutes, while the food grew cold.

Takouhi Azhderian, another great-grandmother, was a sensitive, devout woman born in Merzifon, Turkey, in 1827, the daughter of a priest and the wife of a judge. Though a woman of means in her own right, when she died it was discovered that not a penny was left of her wealth. Gradually, and anonymously, she had given it away to the poor.

My grandfather, Hovannes Santikian, was born in Harput, Turkey, in 1863. He became a Protestant minister and was one of the leaders responsible for bringing the Armenians to the San Joaquin Valley in California around the turn of the century. A very colorful personality, he was his own man, speaking the truth as he saw it.

Grandfather once conducted a funeral service in Fresno for a man who drank too much. In spite of all the advice and guidance given to him by my grandfather, the man still kept on drinking and finally died of his affliction.

Speaking to the dead man, Grandfather said, "Arshag, Arshag, Arshag, you drank

and drank and drank and you burst and you died." Then he turned to Arshag's brother sitting on the front pew and said, "Hagop, Hagop, Hagop, if you don't stop drinking you will die just like your brother, and I'm going to bury you by his side."

These and many other stories are priceless to me. Through them I have grown to have a great love for and identification with my ancestors.

In addition to biographical material, I have searched for documents that uniquely identify people—those containing first and last names, places and dates of births and deaths, and places and dates of marriages. I soon discovered that a complete collection of Armenian genealogical materials had never been gathered.

As my interest in this matter increased, I soon found there were numerous ethnic groups with similar problems. I saw how interdependent nationalities are realizing that each ethnic group is like a unique and lovely flower, giving beauty and variety to the garden of the world. The challenge, as I saw it, was to understand the true value of our ethnicity and then commit ourselves to its preservation.

If you were given the assignment to preserve the precious records and histories of your ethnic heritage, what steps would you take? I want to tell you how we, the Armenians, have proceeded. Our problems are similar to those of many ethnic groups; thus basically, what we have learned will apply to you.

In January of 1978, Dr. Nephi Kezerian, a prominent orthopedic surgeon from Provo, Utah; George Aposhian, Jr., the well-known head of a civil engineering company in Salt Lake City; and I formed a corporation for the express purpose of gathering genealogical records. We called it the Armenian Genealogical Records Search Foundation. Its mission is to influence the development of regional repositories of Armenian records

so that all Armenians in the world might be as successful as possible in researching their ancestral roots.

The main role of the foundation is to locate and inventory Armenian records in preparation for microfilming. Here are some challenges we have faced:

1. Organizing a tax exempt corporation
2. Fund-raising
3. Gathering the records of a dispersed people
4. Preserving an Armenian identity
5. Discovering the location, volume, and time periods of the records
6. Assessing the condition, discontinuity, and precarious situation of the records

Here is how we have, to this point, met these challenges.

ORGANIZING A TAX-EXEMPT CORPORATION

We found a very competent lawyer who was sympathetic to our cause: not only did he donate his services, he also gave us our first contribution. He drew up our by-laws and articles of incorporation and handled the process so we could become legally incorporated.

Our next step was to become cleared as a corporation, exempt from federal income tax, in order to begin a successful fund-raising campaign. Justifiably, the IRS wanted to be certain of our credibility as an organization. On the basis of information in our application for recognition of exemption, we were cleared nine months after our initial application. The process took forbearance and tenacity.

The first meeting of the trustees was held January 2, 1978. At that meeting we elected our officers. Dr. Kezerian became president, Mr. Aposhian became the vice-president/ treasurer, and I became the executive secretary. We have functioned in these roles from that time. (See illus. 2.)

FUND RAISING

During the organization of the foundation, experts were also needed for the second step. We visited people professionally involved in raising money including the head of the Development Office at Brigham Young University. Through them we learned correct principles of fund raising and became assured that raising money even for the noblest cause was an art as well as very hard work.

We wrote a proposal explaining our organization, its cause, and its need. Then a professional writer prepared the text for a brochure and a graphic artist did the illustrations for the brochure and the proposal.

Three men were asked to endorse the foundation: Dr. Avedis K. Sanjian, Director of the Armenian Studies Program at UCLA; Sarkis Arslanian, head football coach at Colorado State University; and Theodore M. Burton, past-President of the Genealogical Society of Utah. These men graciously wrote endorsement statements that we included on the inner flap of the brochure and in the proposal. Pictures and vitae of the trustees were included on a brochure insert.

Each trustee has used these handouts to sell the foundation's cause. The proposal has been used strictly to solicit funds from those of substantial means, while the brochure has been given to everyone interested in the work. Besides potential contributors, Armenian scholars, clergymen, artists, and others have asked for information about our project. Those of other nationalities have also expressed keen interest in our progress. As many funds have been received from non-Armenians as from Armenians—all who have seen the vision of what we are doing. Our main challenge is the uniqueness of our program: we are selling a new concept to people and as yet, even many Armenians cannot see the value of our work.

To solicit money we traveled to other

parts of the United States to meet with individuals, and we held meetings with several interested people at one time. We have presented our cause at family reunions, and we have sent materials in the mail to hundreds of people. We have approached friends, family members, strangers—anyone who might be sympathetic to our cause. Much remains to be done.

GATHERING THE RECORDS OF A DISPERSED PEOPLE

Armenia's tenacious stand in behalf of her Christian beliefs has caused her untold suffering throughout the centuries; Armenians have been surrounded, persecuted, and conquered by many nationalities of other religions. An excerpt from a fifteenth-century Armenian colophon illustrates this point. The scribe laments, "in these bitter times, when our unprotected Armenian nation was subjected to manifold afflictions, because they demand a price for our faith, may the protection of God and of our Lord, Jesus Christ, sustain our nation until His second coming."

Being a persecuted and driven people, the dispersion of the Armenians has been going on for centuries, reaching its climax in the genocide of one-and-a-half million Armenians in 1915 in Turkey. This national catastrophe compares to that suffered by the Jews under Hitler; and like the Jews, the Armenians now live in every country on earth. This fact alone makes the task of locating, inventorying, microfilming, and gathering the Armenian records throughout the world formidable.

Two months after beginning this work, I visited an Armenian clergyman in New York and introduced our program to him. He said, "My dear, if you had a greater understanding of the scope of your task, you would never have had the courage to begin."

PRESERVING AN ARMENIAN IDENTITY

The Armenian Apostolic Church has been a

significant factor in keeping the Armenians ethnically and culturally alive. This is not to say that other Christian Armenian denominations have not also played an important role in preserving the Armenian heritage. In the minority report, The Armenians, we read, "The establishment of a national church proved of vital importance in preserving Armenian national unity. Such were the political pressures that without their church the Armenians would long ago have been assimilated by their neighbors."⁴ The situation in Lwow, Poland, illustrates this point.

In the fourteenth century, through successive immigrations, the Armenians of Lwow gradually formed a colony that became a significant presence in the city. Unfortunately, the peaceful colonial life was destroyed by the ambitions of an Armenian abbot who became Roman Catholic and confiscated the properties of the Armenian churches. Ninety percent of the Armenians left, and the remaining 10 percent were forced to accept the Roman Catholic faith by the abbot's successor. Armenians in Poland today can trace their origin, and they maintain some of their traditions; but they have lost their national church connection and their language.

Though the Armenians are an intensely nationalistic people and today are striving in their various adopted countries to maintain every aspect of their ethnic identity, the majority are gradually becoming assimilated into their new cultures, through embracing new religions, intermarriage, the loss of their language, and other factors.

In Anatolia, in Turkey, during and after the massacres, thousands of Armenian women and children survived only by becoming absorbed into the Turkish and Kurdish cultures and have therefore lost their ethnic identity.

This factor of assimilation is obviously a tremendous challenge to the preservation and continuity of records. Those

assimilated have lost interest in their heritage and thus do not value the records in their possession. What can be gathered does not include them, an essential link to the past. Those lost to other cultures, as in Turkey, are as if dead to their living Armenian relatives, one of the greatest tragedies of all.

DISCOVERING THE LOCATION, VOLUME, AND TIME PERIODS OF THE RECORDS

As the project progressed, many Armenian clergymen and scholars encouraged me to take a fact-finding trip to discover the extent and time periods of the records. All agreed that our project was a first in the Armenian world.

Indeed, one of the most rewarding and intriguing facets of this work has been meeting gracious and interesting Armenians throughout the world. Though I was born in America without the Armenian language or culture, I have felt a complete identification with these Armenian men and women of the same blood and heritage. Each person seems to be part of my own family.

During the spring of 1979, I took a ten-week fact-finding trip around the world. Before leaving I wrote to clergymen and archivists, informing them of my itinerary. Names and addresses of these people were obtained from Armenian clergymen and scholars in the United States and from printed directories of Armenian churches around the world. My letter was brief. It informed these men in charge only that a work had begun which would benefit Armenians everywhere. I did not want them to have preconceived ideas about our project; I desired to introduce this new and unique program in person.

With me I carried letters of recommendation from Dr. Sanjian and others. I visited twelve countries making fourteen stops.

Let us visit some of the Armenian centers around the world:

New York City, USA

St. Vartan Cathedral in New York City was consecrated April 28, 1968. Here I met with the archbishop and received his blessing and a letter of recommendation for my trip. Because the Armenians began arriving in America the latter part of the last century, the records are relatively new. A large population of Armenians exists in New York.

London, England

Armenian merchants came to England in the 1820s. By 1860 there was a considerable community. An Armenian church was built in Manchester in 1869 and one in London in 1922. The latter is a beautiful little edifice copied from the bell tower of the thirteenth-century Haghpat Monastery in Armenia. There are nineteenth and twentieth century records in the churches.

Paris and Marseille, France

An important, long-established Armenian community exists in France. There are several Armenian churches and an excellent library in Paris. In Marseille there are still a "Rue des Armeniennes" and a lovely Armenian cathedral. The records date to the last century, and they are plentiful.

Venice, Italy

During the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, there were fifty Armenian churches in Italy. Established in 1717, the oldest Armenian colony in western Europe is Venice. It has been best known as an intellectual, cultural, and spiritual center. The beautiful and tranquil island of San Lazzaro is the home of the Catholic Armenian congregation of the Mekhitarists. The Mekhitarists have published a great number of important books on the island. They house a wealth of precious artifacts and ancient Armenian manuscripts with beautiful and priceless illuminations. The genealogical materials contained at San Lazzaro are monographs, family genealogies, compatriotic

Armenian cemetery where many famous Armenians are buried. The cemetery chapel was built about 1800.

Yerevan, Armenia, USSR

Nearly two-thirds of the Armenians in the world make their home in the USSR. Present-day Armenia takes up one-tenth of the territory of ancient Armenia.

In Yerevan we find the Matenadaran, meaning "library" in the Armenian language, the Institute of Ancient Manuscripts named after Mesrop Mashtotz, the inventor of the Armenian language. It is one of the oldest and richest book depositories in the world. There are over 10,000 Armenian manuscripts here and 1,000 manuscripts in other languages. Gratefully, a wealth of Armenian genealogical records are also preserved in this library.

Twenty kilometers from Yerevan is Holy Etchmiadzin, Catholicate of the Armenian Church and home of His Holiness Vasken I, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians. The first cathedral in Etchmiadzin, built in the fourth century A.D., is one of the oldest in Soviet territory. (See illus. 1.)

Near Lake Sevan, in the central part of Armenia, lies the village of Noraduz. It is here that a sixth century Armenian cemetery is found, with its imposing and beautiful Armenian tombstones, called Khatchk'ars. (See illus. 2.)

Calcutta, India

Records of Armenians in India date as far back as 1497. Colonies of Armenians have flourished in this exotic and interesting country since the seventeenth century. They traded in silks, spices, and precious stones and were pioneers in the jute and coal trade. Though the Armenian communities in India are dying, cemeteries mark the places of those who lived rich, productive lives on this land. Also, records exist in the churches of such cities as Bombay, Madras, and Dacca.

ASSESSING THE CONDITION, DISCONTINUITY, AND PRECARIOUS SITUATION OF THE RECORDS

Because of the numerous massacres, destruction of churches, fires and other disasters and the mobility of the people, many irreplaceable records have been lost. Many ancient Armenian cemeteries throughout the world have preserved on tombstones that which has been lost in record books. A study of the Armenian cemeteries in the world could be made and the findings published. This would be a tremendous effort and contribution.

Although today Armenians everywhere are making a concerted effort to preserve their rich heritage, one of the most disturbing realizations during my trip was the discovery of records crumbling from excessive moisture, eaten by worms, or consumed by other forces. Although we cannot resurrect or replace what is lost, we can gather and lovingly preserve what exists as rapidly as possible. (See illus. 3.)

From my trip you can see that the Armenian records are located in some of the most precarious areas of the world. Besides the countries I visited, rich collections also exist in Iran, Burma, Syria, Cyprus, and Egypt and other areas. With the world situation changing so rapidly, we feel an urgency to move as quickly, and yet as carefully, as possible. Time is of the essence.

Those are some of our challenges. Now let me describe how our project will proceed.

First, the records will be located. As I have already mentioned, this phase of our work has begun and will continue until all existing Armenian records have been discovered. Although the records are widely dispersed, their total is impressive. They exist in families, churches, dioceses, patriarchates, catholicates, monasteries, libraries, archives, and other places. For genealogical purposes, these documents are as though buried. Our task is to uncover and make these

records available through the modern miracle of microfilm and computers.

Second, the records will be analyzed for microfilming. At the time the records are located, factors such as types of records, number of volumes, number of pages, page size, time periods, color of ink, and the condition of the records will be recorded in preparation for microfilming.

Third, the records will be micorfilmed and gathered. Because of the great expertise of the Genealogical Society of Utah, the foundation has contracted to have the Society microfilm the records. Before the microfilm photographer goes into an area, the foundation will help coordinate and facilitate the work. Prior to filming, clergymen may even ask church members to bring Bibles and family records to the place where the filming will occur, and also have their personal documents copied.

Fourth, the records will be accessible through a computer catalog for maximum use.

Fifth, copies of the collection will be made available to libraries and Armenian centers throughout the world. This is our goal, our mission. We plan to copy the collection of films and place them in institutions, such as universities, in areas where large populations of Armenians exist. Also, it is feasible that in the future, when sufficient funds are acquired, one main Armenian genealogical center will be established. Not only films could be housed, but a library of Armenian genealogical books, personal collections, personal and oral histories, and other Armenian genealogical materials could be sustained.

Sixth, a copy of the collection will be placed in the Granite Mountain Record Vault for permanent preservation. Here in this storage complex in the Rocky Mountains, the Armenian collection will be safe from natural disaster, man-made devastation, vandals, or other factors that destroyed Armenian records that are

lost. This priceless collection will be a legacy for future generations of Armenians and an invaluable research source for historians, demographers, scientists, theologians, and others.

This project, with its numerous challenges, is unquestionably a big job, a labor of love. Why the effort? Would it be worth it for you to make a like effort to preserve your ethnic heritage?

Genealogy could be defined as the science of personal identification: we are introduced to ourselves when we learn about our ancestors. We can come to full flower in our own background. And we broaden the circle of our love when those who were once names in a Bible or census schedule become living, caring, interesting human beings. Knowing about our roots gives more depth to our lives and widens our arc of experience.

It has been my privilege to walk where the Apostle Paul walked in Ephesus, to view the magnificent Parthenon in Greece, and to visit the Forum in Rome. As interesting as these places were to me, they didn't compare to my experience of visiting the birthplace of my grandfather in the ancient city of Harput in eastern Turkey. As I stood there on the plateau, I looked over the valley where a vast community of Armenians once lived. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I envisioned my grandfather and his family leaving their ancestral home to escape the oppression of the Turks. I could see them in their horsedrawn cart with their three small children, leaving all they had known to venture forth to a new land in search of peace and freedom. Born an American, I had completed an arc and realized I was reaping the fruits of their hardships and sacrifice. An overwhelming feeling of love, gratitude, and respect swept over me on that memorable day. My heart has been greatly turned to those of my kin who have gone before me; these feelings have given me great joy and inspiration.

We need to learn about our heritage,

cultivate it, and make our children proud of it. By learning about the foundation of our lives, our progenitors, we can build upon and be motivated by their progress and culture and thus bequeath more to future generations. By contributing the uniqueness and beauty of our ethnic heritage to the world, we bless the family of God as a whole. Ours is

such a difficult challenge; yours could not be harder. As one Armenian clergyman in California said to me, "It is a beautiful thing you are doing, a fountain from which all Armenians will draw." May each existing ethnic group be motivated to supply living waters to their fountains, that all peoples might be able to draw deeply, with success.

NOTES

¹David Marshall Lang, Armenia, Cradle of Civilization (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970), p. 43.

²Lang, Armenia, p. 44.

³Avedis K. Sanjian, Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301-1480, A Source for Middle Eastern History (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 124.

⁴David Marshall Lang and Christopher J. Walker, The Armenians (London: Minority Rights Group, 1977), p. 7.

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