

# The Forgotten Diaspora

## Bulgarian-Armenians After the End of Communism

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Armenian Church and community center in Plovdiv.

As long as my neighbor is worse, I don't have to be better," goes the Bulgarian saying. When faced with enormous problems, a sense of relative wellness might provide temporary comfort. A decade after the fall of Communism, Bulgarian-Armenians describe the current state of their community with both pessimism and hope – and offer many ideas for a preferred future.

Unlike Diaspora communities in non-Communist countries, the Armenian community in Bulgaria (and half a dozen other Eastern bloc countries) was part of the "forgotten" diaspora.

"Our cultural life was self-supporting as we were officially not on the map of the Diaspora," explains Bulgaria-born Sevda Sevan, 55, Armenia's Ambassador in Sofia. "We only had informal contacts with Yerevan. A few Armenian delegations visited Bulgaria, but only with Moscow's approval," she adds.

The establishment of Communism in Bulgaria in 1944 was a major blow to the politically and culturally thriving community. "Communism broke the backbone of the community," says Philip Mesrob, 71, whose father established the first Armenian school in Sofia in the 1930s.

"In the Soviet-dominated Diaspora, Communism destroyed the communities. We were forced to become Bulgarians without ethnic or national distinction. We lost our ability to think Armenian," laments Mesrob, who established the Contemporary Armenian History Club in Sofia in 1991, to do some local lobbying. The Armenians, like other minorities in Bulgaria, including the large Turkish and Roma communities, are not allowed to have political parties.

During the Communist years, the Armenian Apostolic Church was permitted to remain functional. The Bulgarian state even allocated annual funds for the functioning of the church, and paid clergy's salaries.

Mesrobuhi Tankaranian, author of an unpublished volume called *History of Armenian Schools in Bulgaria* writes, "In 1961, all Armenian schools were closed by a government decree and students were ordered to

attend Bulgarian state schools where Armenian language would be taught after regular school hours."

However, since the end of Communism a decade ago, the community has started to restore its institutional life. Virtually all organizations that had been closed have been reestablished, including the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Armenian Relief Society (ARS), the Hamazkayin Cultural Association, the Homenetmen sports club. But, unlike other Diaspora communities where rivalries among organizations are rampant, in Bulgaria there is close cooperation among the various "ideologically" divergent organizations.

"We don't have problems with each other, we support each other's functions. This is the norm in this community," says Onnik Panikian, 24-year-old law student and executive member of AGBU Sofia chapter. His mother is a member of Homenetmen.

"We all have very good relations with each other and work in harmony," concurs Sheni Papazian, Chairwoman of the ARS.

And Sonia Avakian Bedrossian, AGBU chairwoman, adds, "We are a very small community and cannot afford fighting with each other. In fact, there are people who are members of three organizations: AGBU, ARS, Yerevan Association; this happens often. The youth, especially, don't see a difference," she continues.

Ambassador Sevan explains that as all political parties were shut down during Communism, "the ideological differences among the members of the community diminished." Through the decades, "People from all backgrounds had come to view things from a wider pan-Armenian perspective than a narrow political or party perspective," she adds.

"In a twisted way, Communism brought us together," adds Vartanush Topakbashian, editor of the bilingual *Yerevan Weekly*, established in 1944. "Communism forced us to unite under one organization, the Yerevan Cultural Association." It was funded by the Communist Party.

Still, the suffering caused by the Communists is not forgotten. "Armenian Communists betrayed other Armenians," says Topakbashian. "Until now, Dashnaks and ARF-sympathizers have not forgotten those who were persecuted and suffered heavily," she says.

Today, the Bulgarian-Armenian community faces daunting problems, especially emigration and assimilation. Added to these already complex issues, is the presence of tens of thousands of citizens of Armenia who have settled in Bulgaria since the early 1990s.

## Creating New Cultural Scripts

Ancient Techniques for Modern Expression in a New Bulgaria

In 1997, more than 150 works by 50 artists (including 13 women) were exhibited under one roof, in Sofia, Bulgaria. The artists ranged from those who had come to Bulgaria as refugees, such as Tbilisi-born Grigori Agaronian (1896-1978), Trabizon-born Kamer Medzadurian (1908-1987), and Swiss-born Carl Shahveledian (1898-1953), and Bulgaria-born Araksi Karagiosian (b. 1896), Diran Sarkisian (1894-1970), Ovagim Ovagimian (b. 1908), Hilda Haritnova (1908-1990) as well as more contemporary painters and sculptors.

"Armenian creative work in Bulgaria is connected with Armenian emigration," writes curator Adelina Fileva in the exhibit catalog. "Far away from Armenia and Armenian reality, they live with faithful memories," continues Fileva. This yearning of the artists "is expressed in emblematic, symbolic images, themes and plots about the unattainable Ararat, the emerald Lake Sevan, the majestic and sacred shrines of Ejmiatsin, the traceries of the stone crosses, the alphabet of Mesrop Mashtots, the images of the wars for freedom of General Andranik and General Garegin Njdeh."

Three of the artists whose work appeared in this first-ever ambitious exhibition (organized by the AGBU Sofia Chapter and sponsored jointly by the Sofia City Art Gallery, the Soros Foundation and shown in Sofia, Rousse, Varna and Plovdiv) continue to explore new "artistic discourses" that create connections with universal social and cultural questions.

### Multicultural Art

"Through my paintings I try to give some sense of the East," says Varna-born artist Krikor Sarkissian, 38. "The motifs in my paintings are both from the Far and the Middle East. Living in Europe, I look to the East and try to bridge the two. In the West, we've lost much of our philosophy of life and there's much we can learn from the East and be enriched by it," explains Sarkissian, who has studied eastern cultures and philosophies extensively.

The only son of a Bulgarian mother and an Armenian father, he grew up speaking Bulgarian at home, but spoke Armenian with his grandparents, who came to Varna from



**New Divisions**

When asked about the size of the community in Bulgaria, everyone, without exception, gives two distinct numbers for the community's two halves: 12,000 for the older community of Bulgarian-Armenians and 40-50,000 for the recent immigrants from Armenia. Discussions revolve around "us" and "them" – the "locals" versus the "newcomers," the "Diasporans" versus the "Hayastantsis."

"The local Armenians don't help the new immigrants, and the new immigrants are not in a position to help each other," says Artur Nadosian, a 23-year-old singer-entertainer who came from Yerevan when he was 18.

He got married in Bulgaria and will soon become a citizen. The Yerevan friends he had stayed with when he arrived in Sofia have all gone back to Armenia or moved elsewhere.

Apo Benlian, 34, a Sofia lawyer who helped new immigrants for several years, explains that in the beginning they came for business opportunities. "With a \$10,000 investment, Armenian citizens could receive legal status in Bulgaria. But many applied as refugees for lack of money," he says.

"In those years, the Armenian community helped a lot, but when problems started –



Buried side by side: **Kristapor Mikaelian, 1859-1905**, One of the three founder of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. Vramshabuh Kendirian, 1870-1905, Kristapor's comrade in arms. Both were killed by accidental bomb explosion during military training in Vitusha mountains near Sofia. Buried in Sofia's Central Cemetary, Ally No. 52. Note, the plaque on Kristapor's tombstone has been vandalized.



Gemlik, Turkey, after the Genocide.

"When I was growing up, my grandmother used to weave carpets with different motifs, for home use and to give them as gifts. I grew up with these images. My early memory of these images and colors are reflected in my paintings as well. Later on I studied Armenian kilims and carpets from Cappadocia and Anatolia," says Sarkissian, explaining the Armenian roots of his paintings.

"I want to express the passing of time, and that, ultimately, culture becomes universal not particular," explains Sarkissian, adding that he experiments with different materials and love, using various media which give a sense of time.

"I do commercial art as well," he adds, "to make a living. The income helps me do what I really want to do." Sarkissian did the paintings for Hollywood's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's "Varieties of Madness." His cartoons and drawings are regularly featured in Metropolis magazine, a glossy Bulgarian monthly.

But Sarkissian's passion remains his attempt to create "a new script for a new discourse on culture, universal culture."

**Commercial and Artistic success**

"Silk is my monopoly," says a confident Garo Mouradian, 44. On his 40th birthday his silk paintings were exhibited in Brussels and Vienna.

"You need special paint for silk and you cannot make mistakes" he explains. "Oil-based paints have a mechanical connection with the canvas, but silk has a chemical link, and that is why it can preserve the vibrancy of the colors for centuries. This is a very interesting technology that has been used for thousands of years." He explains that working with silk also affects the composition of a painting, "because light reflects differently on silk than on canvas and has a different texture and look."

The influence of Martiros Saryan is apparent in Mouradian's paintings.

"The color temperament in my works is Armenian," he affirms.

Mouradian, who also teaches at the Sofia Art College, sees first hand the affects of a





Plovdiv's old Armenian neighborhood where the church and community center are located.

such as theft, illegal dealings – the local community pulled back,” he explains.

In the mid-1990s there were up to 56,000 new Armenians in Bulgaria, according to Benlian, “But many of them left for other destinations when the Bulgarian economy slowed down.”

Those who stayed started to organize. They opened their first club in Plovdiv, called the Hayas Club, supported by businessmen from Armenia who provide \$200 a month. But so segregated is the community that the editor of one of the local (old-time) newspapers had not heard about this new center.

Eduard Arsenian, 68, a seventh-generation Bulgarian born in Plovdiv, admits, “We do not associate with each other.”

Arsenian doesn't explain why, but others mention racketeering and ransom kidnap-

pings, reminiscent of Los Angeles, Moscow or St. Petersburg.

Nevertheless, Arsenian is hopeful. “Now I see that their children, the new generation, are coming around and integrating with us, especially through the Armenian school.”

Plovdiv's newcomers are middle class merchants in open-air markets, but there are also a small number of wealthy, successful businessmen. The older community is spread over 15 cities. The newcomers “are even more dispersed,” says Ambassador Sevan.

Indeed, the history of the Armenian community of Bulgaria is the story of constant movement and settlement.

#### History

The earliest traces of Armenian settlements in Bulgaria, and generally in the

Balkan region, go back to the fifth century. Byzantine emperors deployed Armenian military units in the northern frontiers of the empire in order to protect their domain from frequent hostile attacks.

More Armenians were voluntarily and involuntarily settled here between the sixth and 11th centuries. By the Middle Ages, there was a well-established Armenian community in Plovdiv. However, this first wave gradually assimilated, leaving behind churches and names of settlements. Today one still finds place names such as Armenovo, Ermenlii, and Armenite throughout Bulgaria.

The second wave of Armenian settlers – forcibly removed from Wallachia, Moldova and Crimea, or escaping epidemics, starvation and wars in Eastern and Western Armenia – came to Bulgaria between the 16th and 17th centuries.

These new settlers established communities in Burgas, Haskovo, Pazardjik, Ruse, Shumen, Sliven, Sofia, Varna and a dozen other cities. They built churches and schools everywhere they settled and engaged in crafts and trade – goldsmiths, carpenters, tailors, spinners, masons. They even formed their own trade guilds.

After Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottomans in 1887, Armenians were granted equal rights with Bulgarians and contributed to building the newly independent state. Such freedom and rights made Bulgaria an attractive destination for thousands of Armenians living under repressive regimes in other parts of the region.

Some 20,000 refugees, mostly from Istanbul and adjacent towns arrived by boat to Varna and Burgas after the 1894-96 massacres in Western Armenia.

However, the largest wave of refugees came in 1922 after the Turkish-Greek war when, under Kemal Ataturk, Thrace and Asia Minor were “cleansed” of their Christian population. A small number of survivors of the 1915 Genocide were among these refugees. Some 25,000 Armenians came.

“The Bulgarian government had decreed that they should be welcomed to Bulgaria,” says Sevan. “There was even a law that said Armenians should not be viewed as refugees, but with full rights as citizens of Bulgaria. As far as I am aware, Bulgaria is the only country that welcomed the Armenians fleeing Turkey with such a warm embrace,” she observes.

By 1926, the size of the Armenian community in Bulgaria swelled to 36,000. Indeed, an Armenian, Hovanes Boghosian, founded the first carpet-weaving factory in Bulgaria. Armenians also introduced silkworm breed-

ing and production, as well as new technologies for the textile, tanning, milling and tobacco industries.

In addition, wealthy Armenians, especially from Istanbul, moved their businesses to Bulgaria. They established cooperative banks – named Sevan, Asparez – in the 1930s in Sofia and Plovdiv. Many acquired large farms, largely along the Black Sea coast.

Nevertheless, the community consisted predominantly of refugees who worked in the tobacco industry, as cart and carriage drivers, porters and dock workers.

### Political Activism

In the early decades of the 20th century, Bulgaria became a major hub of Armenian intellectual and political life. Especially, after the collapse of the first Armenian Republic (1918-1920) many political and public figures, including writers, doctors, engineers, architects, settled in Bulgaria.

Indeed, the Fourth General Assembly of the ARF was held in Sofia. “Bulgaria was the ARF’s most important center,” says Mesrob, “where they planned and implemented various operations such as the raid on Bank Ottoman, led by Armen Garo.”

One of the ARF’s three founders, Kristapor Mikaelian, is buried in Sofia. He was killed in 1905 when a bomb accidentally exploded during training for an operation, which targeted Sultan Abdul Hamid for assassination.

The first and only Armenian military school outside Armenia was set up in Bulgaria. During the Balkan Wars in 1912, a battalion of 280 Armenian soldiers, headed by ARF leader Garegin Njdeh fought in the Bulgarian army against Turkey. General Andranik Ozanian, too, was well known within Bulgarian military circles.

### Emigration

Some Armenians had left Bulgaria in the 1960s and headed for the US, Canada and Australia. During the last decade, thousands more have followed them.

While acknowledging that with the end of Communism, “Other good things happened, freedom of speech, religion, so on,” Benlian says these are not sufficient to make a living. “Those young Armenian professionals who have the means are leaving,” he explains.

But he doesn’t think leaving is bad.

“If a Diaspora Armenian leaves his country of birth or residence, that’s not a problem,” he continues, “but if an Armenian from Armenia leaves, that’s a problem. The Diaspora is a constantly shifting and moving reality. So it doesn’t make much difference where you live. It’s

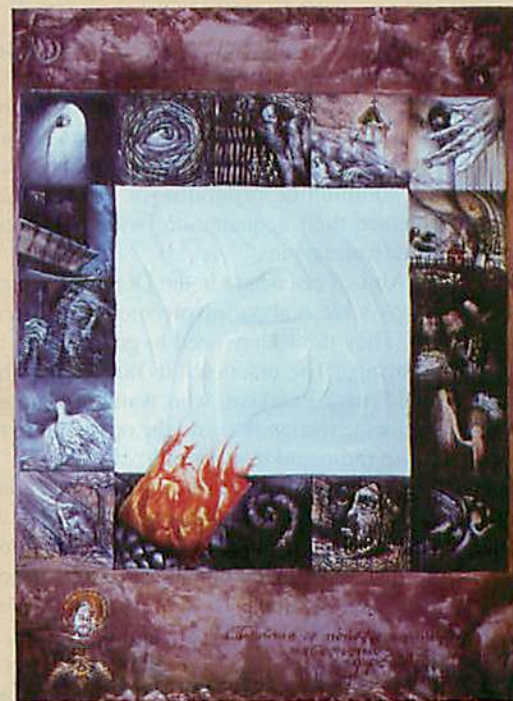


free market on artists. “Today, you have to appreciate art. If you’re not educated and literate, you don’t pay even \$5 for something you can’t eat.”

### A Master Craftsman

Ecological and environmental themes and concerns are predominant in the work of Onnik Karanfilian, 37. Faith is another dominant subject in Karanfilian’s art, who also donates his work for charitable causes. Religious symbols and images of Christ are common in his series on faith.

“I want to express how I feel in my heart and with my eyes,” he explains. “I present metaphors that make the onlooker think, ask questions.” He adds that graphic art is one of “the most intelligent forms of art because you can express and present so many themes at the same time. Oil is emotional, graphic art is intellectual. Graphic art allows you to contemplate. And unlike ‘traditional art’, you can mass-produce it.”



Karanfilian, who graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia in 1994, has seen his works displayed at such prestigious venues as the Osaka Triennale and the Sapporo International Print Biennale exhibitions, both in Japan.

Unlike many of his generation in Bulgaria, he speaks fluent Armenian. And Armenian letters appear here and there in his creations. Indeed, Karanfilian’s creations present a modern version of “manuscript making” where memory, thought and message are presented and preserved for posterity. Like ancient scribes, Karanfilian says, “You need to know about printing techniques and art techniques,” to create in this medium.

there, without clearly defined boundaries." An avid Internet user, Benlian stays connected through Armenian websites.

But Panikian, a Melkonian graduate, who unlike most of his generation is fluent in Armenian, is optimistic about the future. "There is work here," he says. "I'm a junior partner in a law firm. Why should I go somewhere else?"

In an effort to slow the emigration trend, the AGBU Plovdiv chapter has started a placement service, of sorts. "When a businessman is looking for employees, we encourage him to hire people on our list," says Arsenian, AGBU vice chairman.

The fiscal strains caused by the economy affect not just individuals, but community institutions as well.

"The financial situation is so bad that the Bulgarian-Armenian community could not even send a delegate to the first Armenia Diaspora Conference in September 1999 because they could not afford to pay for the delegate's airfare," laments Ambassador Sevan.

Even more telling is the community's inability to provide a \$150 a month salary to the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Bulgaria who is also the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Romania and resides in Bucharest.

Recently, after negotiations with state officials, the Bulgarian government agreed to pay the Primate's salary.

### Integration and Assimilation

For those who stay, economic difficulties are compounded by other socio-cultural dynamics.

"We have a very large percentage of highly-educated people in our community," says Sevan. "At least in my generation, I would say 60-70 percent are university graduates. And experience shows that highly educated mix more easily with other cultures." As in other societies, whether this is assimilation (and therefore "negative") or integration (and therefore "positive") is hard to say.

In any case, the very high percentage of intermarriage is one indicator that this mixing goes on.

"In the past, mixed marriages were high, 99 percent for my generation," says Sevan. Father Kevork Khacherian, parish priest of Plovdiv, points out that 90 percent of the marriages he performs are still mixed. "Unlike in Islamic countries, Bulgaria is a Christian country and we do not have the safety valve of religious differences to prevent assimilation," he says.

There are also parochial conventions. "If you say you want an Armenian girlfriend, it gets very complicated," says Panikian. "People start looking for girls on your behalf

and play matchmaker. Therefore, it's easier to go out with a Bulgarian." Panikian, whose girlfriend is Armenian, says that for most young people, marrying Armenian is desirable but not essential.

### Diaspora Realities

And, as for the future, there is the regular refrain heard in all communities. "I am not optimistic," says septuagenarian Mesrob. "The youth are passive toward all community organizations."

But 23-year-old Zari Zadikian has a different view. "The old generation was divided and fighting. The old men in the organizations chased the youth away from the community," explains the law student.

And elderly males continue to serve on executive bodies, positions they've held for decades. "The old men are dead against having any young person on their committees. They always talk about youth involvement in community affairs, but what they do is exactly the opposite," says an activist.

So, the youth are taking matters into their own hands. "We rigged the ballots at last year's church council election in Sofia to have one young person, 30 years old, become a member," he explains with an apparent sense of victory.

"The youth want to be independent, they go to AGBU, Homenetmen or ARS camps without differentiation," adds AGBU's Bedrossian. Indeed, young Armenians tend to organize their own outings and social events without involving the established community organizations.

Ambassador Sevan admits that the future of the youth in Bulgaria "is not pleasant." She explains that highly-educated young Armenians "have very few chances to get together with other Armenians as there are no community programs or events that enhance their acquaintance with Armenian culture and issues."

And, as elsewhere in the Diaspora, young people's ideas about involvement are different. They think they need to get involved in lobbying. "The elders tell us not to rock the boat," says Panikian, who wants to pursue Genocide recognition and the opportunity to utilize radio and television.

He also points out that the community is far too slow in tapping available resources, such as Armenians in high public positions who don't get involved in the community. He mentions Melkon Melkonian, the Vice President of the Bulgarian Supreme Court, Dikran Tebeyan, a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and Kevork Kevorkian, the "Larry King of Bulgaria."

Slowly, some community organizations are taking advantage of financial assistance provided by international charitable organizations. Last year, one group obtained a grant to renovate the church hall from a Dutch foundation that helps minorities. More recently, an Information Center was established in the community building in Sofia, also funded by a Dutch organization.

But non-Armenians don't see these internal issues. "Armenians are pleasant, they have a good attitude towards the arts and culture. They don't have pretensions towards politics," comments TV journalist Stanyela Bedrinova, adding that "Armenians help themselves; they don't need any support; they are very friendly."

### Coming Together

Bedrinova may be right. The community has slowly started to consolidate its resources and efforts. While still financially strapped, in 1995 a new "unifying" institution was created: the Coordinating Council of the Armenian Community in Bulgaria, consisting of representatives of all 12 organizations in Sofia. The Coordinating Council has a six-month rotating presidency, held by a representative of each participating organization, and addresses community-wide issues and problems.

The Council has coordinated celebrations of Armenian national holidays and has acted as a unified representative of the Armenian community before the Bulgarian government.

In 1998, the Council held separate meetings with President Petr Stoyanov and Prime Minister Ivan Kostov and presented a number of community concerns and issues to the government, including education fees, lack of Armenian teachers in state schools, and Armenia-Bulgaria relations. In December 1999, a group of Armenian-Bulgarians accompanied President Stoyanov on his state visit to Armenia.

As a result of such coordination, the government recently allocated land for a cathedral in Sofia on the occasion of the 1700th anniversary of adoption of Christianity in Armenia. (Father Khacherian says that the community will rely on Bulgarian-Armenians living in the US for donations.)

"Knowing the history and past experience of the Bulgarian-Armenian community, every little achievement is a miracle," says Ambassador Sevan. "This was the most repressed community under Communism in the Diaspora. This community, its schools and institutions, and its national life were completely wrecked. And now when it is living a new renaissance, I only rejoice," she says, smiling. ■