

# Instilling the Armenian Spirit

## Armenian Education in a Transient Community

BY HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

**T**he tiny Armenian community in the United Arab Emirates, numbering less than 2000, has a collective history of about 20 years. Unlike most established Diaspora communities around the world, the most prevalent characteristics of this community is its transient nature.

"It is very difficult to think about the long term future of this community because it is a constantly moving community," explains Tamar Der Hovhannessian, principal of the one-day-a-week Armenian school in Abu Dhabi. "We came here for two years, but have been here for 20 years now—we are among the very few; generally people stay here on a much shorter term. Nobody can tell you whether this community is permanent or transitional."

There are legal, social and cultural reasons for this. By law, a foreigner cannot become a citizen of UAE or own property. One Abu Dhabi Armenian put more bluntly: "Whenever the government tells you to leave the country, you have to leave. The only thing that keeps people here is their jobs and businesses. If you lose your job, you have to leave the country, unless you find a new contract. If you ask people what is your future in the Emirates, no one will be able to give you a definite answer. We have mostly young families who are here temporarily and always tell you it's about time to go back or move to another country."

What makes the UAE different and exceptional is that only 10-15 percent of the two million population are natives or UAE citizens. The rest are foreigners and migrant workers from the Middle East, Europe, India, Pakistan and other Asian countries.

Nevertheless, everyone is satisfied to live and work in the country. Having willingly accepted and gotten used to the conditions of this country, Armenians in the UAE—and generally in the Arab Gulf states—are among the most prosperous and financially successful in the Diaspora. "The community's existence here is dependent on the economic and political situation in the region. As long as there is stability and economic prosperity, the community will be here. Right now the community is



While on an official visit to the UAE, Armenia's Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian also visited the Armenian school in Abu Dhabi and addressed the students during Feast of Vartanantz celebrations.

stable and our numbers are stable. The country has given a lot of opportunities for business and trade," says Viken Klenjian, a bank accountant and principal of the one-day-a-week Armenian school in Sharja.

Most Armenians who work in the UAE come from other Middle Eastern countries, such as Lebanon, Syria, or Iran, and consider their time there as a transitional period in their careers. "Eventually, they will move back to their country of origin or to a third country," explains Klenjian. Indeed, many of the Armenians living in the UAE have multiple citizenships—from US and Canada to a number of European countries.

While comfortable living with their indefinite temporary status, the preservation of Armenian identity is a constant concern of parents with young children. Hence, as the community started to be organized in the late 1970s and early 1980s, an Armenian school in Abu Dhabi and one in Sharja, a town near Dubai where most Armenians live, were started. "A group of us came together and realized that the children have very little opportunities in this country to be exposed to Armenian culture. Most of the Armenian community is made of young families who have come here

for work and most of the time they leave the children with baby sitters. We thought it was a necessity to teach these kids Armenian," explains Klenjian.

The school in Sharja, which started with only 23 students in 1980, currently has 120 students (kindergarten to eight grade) with 16 young volunteer teachers. Classes are held on Friday mornings at the Armenian Church and school complex, which was built last year—on a government-donated parcel of land—through the efforts and financial contributions of the community. "The school is 'purely Armenian,' it does not represent any political party or cultural organization. It belongs to everyone," says the 47-year old Klenjian, who was born in Kessab and studied in Venice at the Mekhitarist Order's Murad Rafayelian School and later economics at an Italian university.

The school in Abu Dhabi, where some 400 Armenians live, is held on Thursday afternoons on the premises of a rented private school, and has 62 students from kindergarten to eight grade, with an additional special class for students who are not Armenian-speaking. "I would say 80 percent of school-age Armenian children in Abu Dhabi attend our



Viken Klenjian, Sharja school principal (left); Tamar Der Hovhanessian, Abu Dhabi school principal, with community volunteer Gulizar Jonian (far right).

school,” says the principal. But “every year the school has a different picture and a student body due to the fact that this is a moving community. Some people leave, some new ones come, some change their jobs and so on,” explains Der Hovhanessian, who was born in Aleppo, raised in Lebanon, has a masters degree in bio-chemistry and has lived in the US for six years.

“Generally we have very high attendance rate. Indeed, at the end of the year, we give awards to those who have perfect attendance record, rather than high academic marks. This I believe is fairer approach because each student has a different level of knowledge of Armenian. We reward the students’ efforts rather than their final grades,” explains Der Hovhanessian, who taught Armenian to her own children when the family lived in Saudi Arabia for five years, then Oman and later Kuwait. They came to Abu Dhabi in 1983.

While parents pay a small nominal fee for registration for books and teaching material, both schools’ annual budgets are subsidized by the Armenian Community Committee, an executive body appointed by the Diocesan Council of the Gulf (made of nine delegates from Kuwait and nine from the UAE).

Run entirely by volunteer staff and teachers, the schools’ curriculum focus on teaching of the fundamentals of Armenian language, history, culture and religion, which are complimented by cultural and social events throughout the year involving the entire student body.

Because public schools or state-sponsored schools are for the natives, Armenian children attend private schools set up for expatriate families—such as Lebanese,

French, British or American private schools—where the language and the ‘educational culture’ of the school reflects the country of origin of the institution. As for the possibility of establishing an Armenian day school, Der Hovhanessian explains the problem. In addition to the small number of students, “Let’s say if a family will eventually return to Lebanon, that means their kids need to learn Arabic; if they are going back to France, then they’ll need to go to French schools here. It would be almost impossible to have an Armenian day school that would be able to cater to all these specific needs, unless you have a very large budget.” There are also other practical complications. The state has proposed to institute a new law to segregate girls and boys into different classes above the 4th grade, with segregated teachers. If passed, this law would not pose a problem to the one-day schools, but it would to all other regular day schools.

After they finish high school in the Emirates, the youth leave to study in universities in other countries since there are very few higher education institutions locally. “Many go to Lebanon, North America or Europe to attend universities. Some of them remain in the country where they’re studying and a small number come back and work here,” explains Klenjian, a father of two himself.

Given the circumstances and unique nature of their community, the principals of both schools explain the purpose of the Armenian school as a place where the “Armenian Spirit” is instilled and nurtured in the students. “We do not expect that our students are going to know perfect Armenian, considering that we are a one day school. Also, it is not possible, because a lot of our

students speak English at home or at their respective schools. We encourage them to speak Armenian at least during those three hours that they are with us,” says Klenjian. “Probably they would write a letter in Armenian with much difficulty and with many spelling mistakes,” he admits, “But more than the language, I believe what is important is their sense of belonging and their sense of Armenianness. It is the Armenian spirit that we try to instill in them. It is the spirit that they do not forget wherever they may be. Once you instill the Armenian spirit in them, they will never forget that,” he says confidently.

Principal Der Hovhanessian concurs. “Our purpose is to enable the students to love the Armenian. In the final analysis, our purpose is to give them a basic understanding of Armenian language, history and culture. We do not expect them to turn into Armenologists, but, if we provide them the basics, later on they can go on in life and find out more about the topics in Armenian history and culture that interests them. And even if they can’t write and read Armenian, if we are able to instill in them the Armenian spirit, that is a big success.”

Indeed, instilling the “Armenian spirit” in the new generation is increasingly become a more realistic objective of Armenian education in the Diaspora—for those who are willing to admit and adjust—than the conventional emphasis on language fluency. As the issues and problems in the Diaspora become “global” with the rest of the world and less geographically specific, the task facing Diaspora educators is to determine what the constituent elements of the “Armenian spirit” are and how is it presented to a multicultural and technologically advanced generation. ■