

armenians

Transnational Culture and Identities

By KRISTEN KIDD and HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

Intermarriage by Armenians has usually been frowned upon. A small enough nation, enough have been lost to massacre or assimilation, no need to lose any more went popular wisdom. So, when John O'Connor of Massachusetts coined the term to refer to himself and others like him, he didn't realize that he wasn't just using a new term to describe the same old "Hye Pesa" or "Hars", but rather, a new kind of non-Armenian spouse.

Perhaps out of a sense of guilt, many Armenians who married non-Armenians made a special effort to teach their spouses Armenian, keep their children particularly close to Grandma. Ironically, second and third generation Armenians themselves often had trouble remembering the language or keeping their children close to Grandpa's history and values. As sociologists will tell you, the second generation has to make a conscious choice to maintain its ethnic identity. The purposeful choice to participate and contribute to the development of that identity is even a tougher decision. In that environment, the active involvement of non-Armenian spouses becomes quite noticeable.

No longer is it eating pilaf and saying *barev* a sufficient measure of Armenianness. The new generation of non-Armenian spouse really is an ABC—Armenian by choice—consciously, actively contributing to community projects and goals, often in ways beyond what an Armenian, burdened by generations of victimization may not be able to do.

The ABCs profiled here, each from a different walk of life, are featured now on the occasion of John O'Connor's run for US Congress—he did coin the term after all. But they are not unique. From Bill Parsons at the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, to businessman Dimitri Dimitri of Los Angeles, to Armen Haghazarian in Germany. There are

many such ABCs. So many, in fact, that we will be regularly highlighting them in the FACES section of this magazine.

Hopeful heir to a Kennedy throne

JOHN O'CONNOR

Candidate for US Congress

When it became clear that no Kennedys would be running for Massachusetts' 8th Congressional District, John T. O'Connor, activist and "Armenian By Choice" threw his hat into the ring.

O'Connor is the man credited with coining the phrase ABC. "I like to joke with my friends and say it was easy falling in love with the Armenian community because I fell in love with my wife Carolyn Mugar. I have not only found out how wonderful Armenian people are, because they have a fighting spirit and a sense of human dignity that I believe is second to none, but they also taught me what being an American was about."

If you think that sounds like the prose of a politician, he will be quick to disagree. Politician is one label O'Connor adamantly refuses to accept. "I think the difference between people like me and politicians is that I'm a fighter. I fought on a national and international stage, and we were actually able to get a bill through Congress when people said we were nuts for trying!" O'Connor is referring to his successful struggle in the 1980's to

pass the "Superfund" toxic waste site clean-up bill through Congress and the White House, a time when the political climate was much more friendly to big business than to the environment. "So I will tell you I'm a slightly different breed from people who enter so-called politics. I'm a lifetime fighter and I've actually beaten the big oil companies."

O'Connor's successful battle was inspired by his own experience with poisonous pollution. "I grew up in Stratford, Connecticut, in back of the second largest asbestos company in the world. They had a lake of solvents that ran underneath our neighborhood. They also built a baseball diamond right on the toxic site, and they sponsored our Little League baseball team. As a child I thought it was pretty normal for five or six of my childhood playmates to get cancer," O'Connor recalled in an impassioned tone. "This corporation knew that their asbestos was killing us and didn't tell any of us."

That early outrage toward a corporate mentality that puts profit before public health made a lifelong impression on this descendant of Irish immigrants. Two years ago he co-authored a book called *Who Owns the Sun? People, Politics and the Struggle for a Solar Economy* (Chelsea Green, 1996). The book outlines O'Connor's ideas on shifting America from an economy reliant on fossil fuels to one which taps into

solar power more heavily. "You know every time a Californian puts a solar panel on their roof they prevent money from going to Azerbaijan and the Middle Eastern oil thugs, and prevents their kids in Los Angeles from getting urban asthma," O'Connor stated. Protecting the environment is one of O'Connor's top campaign issues. It's a cause he is championing both in America and Armenia.



sbbychoice

For example, O'Connor and his wife Carolyn Mugar helped found the Armenian Tree Project, under the auspices of the



Armenian Assembly of America, to reforest the Armenian countryside. Already 100,000 new trees have been planted through the program.

O'Connor sees saving the environment as a means of protecting Armenian heritage along with preserving the planet. "Armenians have got to broaden out the battle. We've got to take on big oil, we're going to take on the Turkish lobby and the Azerbaijani lobby, we've got to go for campaign finance laws, we've got to get the big money out of American politics," O'Connor insists.

If he is elected, O'Connor intends to take on his old adversary the oil industry. To begin with, O'Connor would like to see tax laws reformed. "Every time they spend \$10 million dollars buying the foreign policy establishment and lobbyists we as taxpayers give the big oil companies tax deductions. We as taxpayers give these guys an incentive to choke our sacred democracy. That has to stop!"

O'Connor believes this is the key battle Armenian Americans must get behind. And he wants to lead the battle. To do so, he must win in the primary election on September 15, where he is up against several well-known Democrats. O'Connor's campaign team is asking voters who are not Democrat to re-register for this primary in order to vote for O'Connor. The deadline to do so is August 26. If he is defeated next month it will be a missed oppor-

tunity for more than just the 42-year-old activist since only the top vote-getter will win the chance to run against the Republican candidate in November.

"I'm not just going to go down there and vote the right way for Armenians," O'Connor pointed out. "I'm going to be leading an effort to try to stop Turkish aid, I'm going to be leading an effort to say that we shouldn't reward thugs or people who kill their journalists, and their students and their activists, and we should not be giving aid to people who don't recognize the Genocide. I'll be damned if I'm going to let America put profits of oil companies before the sacred principals of self-determination and what it means to be an American."

Like Father, Like Son-in-Law JOSEPH STEIN

Business and real estate developer

"I am definitely an ABC. There is no question about it," declares Joseph Stein, business and real estate developer and former president of the California State Board of Education.

The Stein family's involvement with Armenians goes back long before Joseph Jr. was born.

His father, a Congregational minister, had extensive contacts with Armenians in the Middle East when he was a professor at the American University of Beirut (AUB) from 1921 to 1924. "This was the time when the Diaspora was still developing" explains Stein. "My father used to travel in the area and help the newly-established Armenian schools. He used to tell us stories about taking hot meals to the Armenians living in caves in Aleppo," he recalls.

It was through the Congregational Church's Board of Near East Missions, which

was actively involved in helping the Armenian communities in Turkey and Lebanon, that Joseph Stein's father and his future father-in-law Stephen Philibosian met.

The friendship grew over the years. And one day, after a Board meeting in New York, Philibosian offered Rev. Dr. Stein and his son a ride back to Philadelphia, where Joseph Jr., once a seminary student, was attending college. Philibosian invited them to his house for dinner. "That's when I first met Joyce," Stein's future wife. "We had *chikofieh* and *shish kebab* that night. This was my first introduction to Armenian goodies," things he would come to love.

Joseph and Joyce married in 1954. After a two-year service in the army, Stein joined Stephen Philibosian's oriental rug business.

He became fully immersed in Armenian life. "I was introduced to the Armenian world mainly by my father-in-law. It was a very natural and very happy introduction," states Stein without hesitation. "Joyce's father was actively involved in philanthropic activities with



special interest in education. He would ask us to help him with various projects and we would attend the numerous community events with him."

For more than four decades now, Joseph Stein and his wife continue the work started by

Top: Hirair Hovnanian, Carolyn Mugar, Alice Peters at an Armenian Assembly of America event. Bottom: Joseph and Joyce Stein.

Stephen Philibosian. Joyce is the president of the Philibosian Foundation, established after her father's death in 1974, which distributes over \$500,000 annually to various charities and educational institutions mainly in Armenia and Lebanon.

Recently, the Steins were honored by the Haigazian University in Beirut, during the opening ceremonies of the Stephen Philibosian Student Center on campus. Philibosian was one of the visionary pioneers who conceived the idea of an Armenian college back in the late 1950s.

Joseph Stein, in addition to perpetuating the philanthropic legacy of his father-in-law, is involved with numerous Armenian organizations and projects. He has served on the Boards of AMAA, the Armenian Assembly of America and is vice-president of United Armenia Fund (UAF). He is also involved with the Junior Achievement program in Armenia. In politics, he has helped the campaign of a number of Armenian candidates, including Governor George Deukmejian and others.

"I have been fortunate in life to have been introduced to Armenians and consider it a privilege to be involved with the Armenian community," says Stein. "They've expanded my horizon in realizing what potential people have. It is amazing to me that after so much persecution and difficulty in their past, they still have so much impact on society, way beyond their numbers."

Since 1988 Stein and his wife have instituted and helped various projects in Armenia, especially with orphans and education. "Now my thoughts turn to Armenia and Karabakh," says Stein, tenderly. "There is a tremendous amount of hope for this nation."

The Voice of Survivors

DONALD MILLER

Professor of Religion, USC

University of Southern California professor of religion, Donald E. Miller, has been described by some as an ABC. He laughs at the acronym but accepts the label. "I would say I probably know a lot more about Armenian history than most Armenians do!" mused Miller. "I guess that would make me an ABC." After all, Miller and his wife Arax Lorna Touryan Miller have spent years studying and researching Armenian history through personal interviews with hundreds of Genocide, war and earthquake survivors (see AIM, April-May 1993).

In 1993 the Millers published a book titled, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (University of California

Press 1993). It is a compilation of interviews gathered through conversations with 100 survivors living in Southern California. The goal was to create a written resource for future historical studies.

Don and Lorna Miller followed that project with another in which they concentrated on Armenians who had undergone experiences placing them in one of four categories: residents of Yerevan affected by the Turkish and Azerbaijani embargoes, refugees from Azerbaijan, earthquake survivors, and people who were widowed because of the Karabakh war. This second research project also produced a fascinating photo exhibit that was shown in Southern California, Washington DC, New York and Boston. The exhibit, consisting of 3,000 black and white photographs taken by Boston-based photojournalist Jerry Berndt, is now on display in Armenia.

Miller is frequently asked to speak about his experiences. "I spoke at the Holocaust Museum right around April 24 in 1994; that was quite an interesting experience."

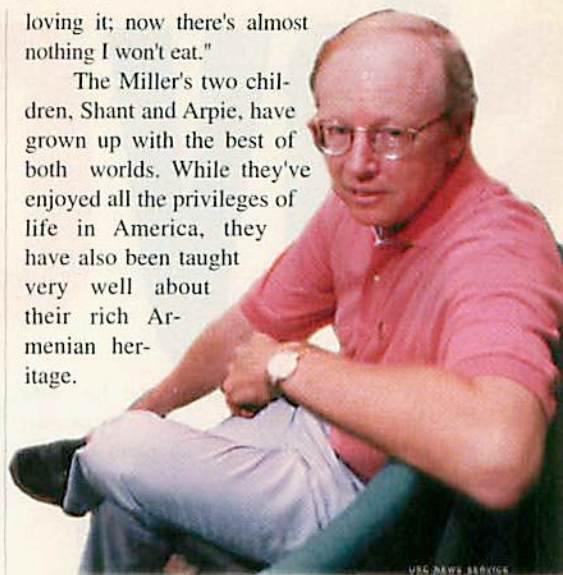
There is no question about Miller's commitment toward understanding and helping to express Armenian history to a largely unaware public. "I feel, as sort of a garden patch American, that this was something that enriched me culturally, exposed me to a world I knew nothing about prior to my marriage," observed Miller. "I have been incredibly warmly welcomed by Armenians."

Of course there were some raised eyebrows at the very beginning of the Millers' romance. "Initially I think my father-in-law was not keen on polluting the blood lines!" he laughed. "But I think my mother-in-law-to-be never raised any issues." Miller recalled a shift in his father-in-law's attitude as soon as it became obvious he and Lorna were headed toward marriage. "Once we became engaged he made it his mission to try to teach me about his culture, which I really respected." Lorna's father, Rev. Badveli Touryan, was a prominent and patriotic leader, especially in the Armenian Evangelical community, known for his active and passionate involvement in Armenian affairs.

Their courtship also involved some humorous moments as Miller recalls, "The first few times I had dinner at my future in-laws' Lorna's mother always fixed t-bone steaks. I couldn't understand that, but I later found out that she thought that's what American boys ate." Miller admits his American palate required some adjustment when it came to Armenian food. "The first time I was exposed to the cuisine, it was some kind of slimy eggplant in olive oil I think. I thought it was a little strange but I've ended up

loving it; now there's almost nothing I won't eat."

The Miller's two children, Shant and Arpie, have grown up with the best of both worlds. While they've enjoyed all the privileges of life in America, they have also been taught very well about their rich Armenian heritage.



Professor Donald E. Miller

"They did go to Armenian school for a couple years, so that was a self-conscious choice to teach them about the culture," said Miller. "But somehow they never learned the language." Miller himself does not speak Armenian, although he has a vocabulary of a few hundred words. "If I was better linguistically I would make an effort to learn, but I always had a readily available translator in Lorna," noted Miller.

"I've enjoyed the sort of extended familial quality of belonging to an Armenian family." Like his children, most of all Miller has enjoyed the best of both worlds from his unique perspective. "I'm fortunate because I can take the identity on or off."

Leader of the Band

GARY LIND-SINANIAN

Curator at ALMA

Few people in the US know more about traditional Armenian dance than Gary Lind-Sinianian, co-curator of the Armenian Library & Museum of America (ALMA) in Watertown, Massachusetts. Lind-Sinianian has spent more than 20 years researching and teaching traditional Armenian folk dances along with his wife Susan. Together they have collected nearly 200 village dances, which makes them highly sought after instructors, and a lot of fun at family picnics.

"When we show up at a picnic, the band members always roll their eyes because they know they're going to have to play certain music for us," Lind-Sinianian remarked. "It used to be the dancers set the tone. Now the band makes all the decisions, and the vocalist

is the focus rather than being just another band member." This development does not stop the Lind-Sinanians from demanding special music to dance by. They can usually persuade the band to break from the modern melodies long enough to accompany a crowd-pleasing line-dance or two.

The Lind-Sinanians gathered all of their research on Armenian folk dancing through interviews with Genocide survivors living on the East Coast. Over the years they have passed along their interpretations of those traditional dances to many students. Lind-Sinanian points out that their teaching style can be distinguished from the Armenian dance instructors in California and Detroit. "When other teachers see a student of ours dance they can tell we gave them lessons, and we can tell when someone has had lessons from Tom Bozigian or Margaret Stepanian," he explained.

Each instructor has a slightly different take on the traditional Armenian village dances. Inevitably those differences are passed along to their students. It's an influence Lind-Sinanian said is unavoidable due to differences in each individual's body, personality and upbringing; not to mention the memory and mobility of the survivor who shared their traditions, sometimes decades after dancing them last. "They were very happy to share with us because many of them felt their children and grandchildren no longer cared," noted Lind-Sinanian who has incorporated the study of the dancers' villages along with the dance itself.

Gary Lind and Susan Sinanian met in a Lebanese dance group in the 1970's. After the group broke up Gary and Susan stayed together, and in 1977 they were married. Gary grew up in a prim and proper New England home, his parents of Irish and Swedish descent. Susan's parents are Armenian-American and belong to a Roman Catholic church. They decided it would be too difficult to try to blend Irish, Swedish, New England, Armenian and Catholic traditions into a single wedding ceremony, so they opted for a traditional Armenian affair. Being dancers, the couple wanted to perform a special Armenian wedding dance, so they began researching and they have been



Gary and Susan Lind-Sinanian

at it ever since.

Their research began through word-of-mouth connections that were not always reliable, "I could tell you stories of wild goose chases we went on," laughed Lind-Sinanian, "we would drive seven hours to New Jersey to speak to a man we heard was a great dancer from a certain village in Armenia only to get there and find out it was his brother back in Boston." By the

wedding the couple had not only joined their

names, but also compiled a sizable list of "informants" as Lind-Sinanian (and sociologists) call them, who were known to be excellent dancers in their youth. "We looked at each other and said, what do we do now, give up on finding these people? I said, are you kidding? This is fun!" So the newlyweds continued their quest and 21 years later, not only have they helped preserve an important part of Armenian culture, but they promote it as well.

The Lind-Sinanians have taught extensively in North America and Europe. They frequently offer lecture seminars and demonstrations at ALMA where the public is invited to learn about the social context of certain village dances. Next month the couple will travel to Taipei, Taiwan where they've been invited to instruct members of the Chinese International Folk Dance Society in traditional Armenian, Arabic and Assyrian dance. ■

Italian or Armenian?

With marriage comes tough decisions, like what do you do with your name? For women, the answer may be tough, but the question is easy. Do you keep your name or take your husband's name? When Joe Bocchieri of Brooklyn, New York decided to marry Sosi Kavafyan of Denver Colorado, they were confronted with the same question. But for Sosi, the answer, too, was easy. She would take any name at all, so long as she could keep the IAN ending. Joe had no trouble with that decision. He simply changed his name legally from the good Italian Bocchieri, which it had been for generations, to an equally robust Bocchierian. They married with an Armenian ceremony, their children Salpi and Arpi were baptized in the Armenian Church, and the Bocchierian family are living happily ever after.

