

# Culture & Society

## Jews in Armenia

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### *The Hidden Diaspora*

Vartan Akchyan

While the territory of Armenia has shrunk consistently, the Armenian map of the world has widened and now encompasses almost every single continent. A piece of Armenian culture lives and thrives in the most remote areas of the world, while Armenia itself only houses approximately 30 percent of the global Armenian population. This dispersion gives birth to quests for personal identity among many Armenians in the Diaspora.

Although Armenians are usually thought of as a single group, similar to the Jews, there are several subgroups that make up the greater Armenian ethnicity. Western Armenians are comprised of the Diaspora while Eastern Armenians are comprised of Armenians in the Republic of Armenia. These two groups, in turn, include smaller communities of Armenians living throughout the world, such as North and South American Armenians, Australian Armenians, Iranian Armenians, etc. While these communities have shared traits that are distinctively Armenian, there still exist important differences, which can be used as identity markers to distinguish among the various subgroups. This creates syntheses of identity based on national, religious, territorial, and ethnic characteristics. Is a person living in the United States with an Armenian grandfather really an Armenian? Who decides? Much about the

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Ambiguity and uncertainty are the children of such prescriptive labels, and when fantasy of the future and nostalgia

in order to function. His only presence in Armenia is through his English language, which is foreign to Armenia. Only when located in Canada is he seen as an effectively powerful and perhaps Armen-

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for the past are conflated in the Armenian psyche after the traumatic experience of near annihilation at the beginning of the twentieth century, the present becomes further distorted—a mere fable. Currently, Armenian collective consciousness preoccupies itself with the shared collective memories of the past among a disparate and diffuse ethnic group of the present. It is important to note that, from the perspective of the Diaspora (approximately 70 percent of Armenians in the world), an Armenian in Armenia is nameless and faceless—she is merely a part of Armenia. As a result, Armenia itself becomes something less than real. It becomes a utopian idea without a strong foundation to support it, while it is this foundation that renders the group capable and the individual important. Otherwise, the individual is faceless and incapable, neither an actor nor a creator—a mere shadow.

In Atom Egoyan's *Calendar*, for example, the Armenian protagonist of the film is, in effect, "dead" in Armenia. He is nameless and faceless, powerless and out of place. Visually, he is never present in Armenia. He is in his ancestral home, while the very Armenian environment and his presence there turn him into a stranger and "make him from somewhere else."<sup>1</sup> While recognizing that "he is from there," he is in need of an intermediary

ian character. One that is able to overcome personal trauma (the loss of his Armenian-speaking wife) by reducing historical, cultural, and religious baggage to a self-created wall hanging (a calendar of Armenian churches) and by reconstructing and facing the reality of his loss through the presence of foreign-speaking women in his home, which represents his unconscious attachment to a fragmentary temporal and spatial relationship with Armenia. Such complex identity searches, marked by dispersion and personal journeys of revelation, become the reference points of self-discovery and common ground for Diaspora Armenians, who look inward towards Armenia, and Jewish Armenians, who look outward towards Israel.

### Historic Overview of Jews in Armenia.

Various Jewish communities have lived in Armenia. Perhaps the first appearance of Jews took place in the first century BCE, when Armenian King Tigran the Great exiled thousands of Jews from the Holy Land to the Armenian Empire. The ultimate fate of this community remains unclear, but the works of Khorenats'i inform us that they first settled in the Armenian cities of "Artashat and Valarshapat."<sup>2</sup> While according to Khorenats'i's account the Jews were converted to Christianity, the

Greek geographer Strabo claims that “the tribesmen and townspeople, except for those of Jewish and Greek birth, spoke the Armenian language.”<sup>3</sup> Since there are no clear historical accounts that recorded the fate of this particular community at a later date, we can speculate that they were either eventually assimilated into the Armenian culture or have abandoned Armenia. In particular, these Jews may have been the predecessors of today’s Zoks, who are often considered ethnic Armenian Jews.<sup>4</sup> As Rabbi Burshteyn claims,

Unofficially, Zoks are the descendants of ancient Jews who lived on the territory of Armenia and later converted to Christianity. Today, they consider themselves to be Armenians and their point of view is also shared by the Jewish world. However, I do believe that one day the world will know who the Zoks really are—whether they are a myth or reality.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting account of possible Jewish presence in Armenia beginning in the seventh century comes from Ya’qubi. The medieval kingdom of Khazaria existed from 650 to 1016 when “the far east of Europe was ruled by Jewish kings who presided over numerous tribes, including their own tribe: the Turkic Khazars. After their conversion, the Khazar people used Jewish personal names and spoke and wrote in Hebrew.”<sup>6</sup> Ya’qubi writes that “the Khazars were they who conquered all the lands of Armenia.”<sup>7</sup>

Another community of Jewish converts living in Armenia is the Subbotniks—a community of ethnically Russian Jews that escaped religious persecution in Russia and has found its home in Armenia on the shores of Lake Sevan since the begin-

ning of eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Subbotniks are “The People of the Sabbath,” a distinctively Jewish identification. Previously, the Subbotniks were considered a sect, “but in today’s reality, after studying their experience, we come to an understanding that they are not a different sect at all, because the Torah constitutes the very basis of their beliefs, and there is nothing except the Torah.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Subbotnik experience lacks not Judaism, but the cultural identity of “Jewishness.” They are ethnically and linguistically Russian. Although the early history of the Subbotniks has yet to be uncovered, there is some certainty that they came to Armenia from three Russian cities: Tambov, Saratov, and Voronezh.<sup>10</sup> They established their own small town in Armenia and named it Yelenovka. An elder Subbotnik said, “Our ancestors had their own synagogue, their own Rabbi, and their own prayer books—which were translated from Hebrew to Russian. To this date we continue using those books.”<sup>11</sup>

Many Subbotniks still live in Armenia and practice their religion freely, but like their Armenian peers, most of the younger members of the community have now left Armenia due to economic difficulties and have established themselves in Russia, the birthplace of their late ancestors. Currently, the elder members are the only people who argue that there has been a continuity of the Subbotnik community in Armenia. As an elder Subbotnik suggests, “I was born here, and will most likely die here. Where else can we go? This is our homeland. We love our homeland. We love our Armenia.”<sup>12</sup>

Historical evidence of another Jewish community in Armenia was found in 1997 with the discovery of a thirteenth century Jewish cemetery in the Armenian highlands. According to Dr. Michael

Stone, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and head of excavations at the site, indications of Jewish communities in Armenia have been vague and sporadic: "We didn't know that Armenia had a Jewish community. We saw a hint here or a word there, but nothing from this period."<sup>13</sup> The discovery of seventy tombstones inscribed in Aramaic with Hebrew letters, which date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, constitutes the first physical evidence of a Jewish community in Armenia before the nineteenth century.

It is difficult to generate an all-inclusive picture of the Jewish presence in Armenia due to the imprecision of some historical accounts and lack of validation by other available data. However, the available combination of historical accounts and archaeological findings, while certainly less than comprehensive and mostly infrequent, provides for a modest window into the general history of Jewish presence in Armenia, but ultimately belies the clear indication of a strong and lasting relationship between Jews and Armenians characterized by intermarriage and cross-cultural pollination.

**Jews and Modern Armenian Reality.** During the past decade and a half, the people of Jewish origins living in Armenia have undergone a religious, cultural, and linguistic renaissance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its unsuccessful attempt at creating a unified conglomerate of peoples and religions under the umbrella of Communism, the first synagogue and Jewish Sunday school to open in more than a century was established in the Armenian capital. They offered Hebrew classes, Shabbat services, holiday celebrations,

and a range of other Jewish programs. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the emergence of pluralism and democratization have, in turn, led to the awakening of Jewish identity in post-Soviet Armenia.

It is important to note that Jewish presence in Armenia during the Soviet epoch was, to a large extent, transparent. Shared traditions, values, and aspirations in the two cultures brought Jews and Armenians together throughout the territory of the Soviet Union and, specifically, within Armenia. In addition, deep solidarity grew between the two peoples in the aftermath of the tragic events of the first and second world wars. While there was an influx of Jews into Armenia during the 1940s and through the 1950s, a repatriation of Armenians from Europe and the Middle East was simultaneously taking place, making Armenia home for the survivors of both Armenian and Jewish tragedies. The factor most responsible for the integration of Jews into Armenian society, however, was the establishment of matrimonial unions between representatives of the two groups. Due to the combination of these elements, Armenians no longer perceived the Jews as outsiders, but rather as insiders.

The uniqueness of Armenia's Jewry cannot be understood outside the greater context of Armenian reality as a whole. Specifically, this reality comes to life in the fusion of Armenian homeland with the Armenian Diaspora, characterizing Jewish existence in Armenia as a presence of one Diaspora people in another Diaspora people's homeland, which gives birth to a multiplicity of outlooks and frames of reference in the Armenian conscience. Interestingly, even with such dispersion and variety, being Armenian is to be in a "closed unit," since "Armenianness"

(analogous to “Jewishness”) does not provide any real windows of inclusion apart from kinship. Similar to “Jew and Gentile,” there exists an “Armenian and Otar (foreign)” dichotomy, both of which are ethnic-religious identities formulated from and reinforced by the familial institution.

Indeed, the modern Jewish presence in Armenia reproduces itself mainly through intermarriages between Jews and Armenians—commonly labeled in the

To the ground I bow in front of these people, who in this little village on top of the mountains, in the middle of their joyous moments, spoke of the suffering of the Jews. To those I bow, who in solemn silence listened to those words.”<sup>14</sup>

Such expressions of solidarity and exchanges of feelings were characteristic of the relationship between Jews and Armenians. Even more, such mutual acknowledgements have elevated the relationship between the two groups to a level

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former Soviet Union as “the thundering merger.” Stereotypically, this “merger” meant a “union of parallels,” in which two strong cultural groups with collective pain and confidence in their own ethnicity and religion came together to create a magnetic bond founded upon their similar paths. But, at the same time, there was an ironic distance stemming from their conscious awareness that a union of parallels was in fact impossible.

This is illustrated by the experience of Russian-Jewish writer Vasily Grossman, who, in 1962, was dispatched to Armenia to write short stories about Soviet life in the peripheral republic. In one of his stories, he describes an incident at an Armenian wedding where an old Armenian veteran, after learning that Grossman was Jewish, drank a glass of vodka to commemorate the deaths of his Jewish friends during World War II. This sort of public display of sympathy and grief for the victims of the Holocaust was unheard of in the 1960s. Grossman was so moved and affected by this gesture that he later wrote: “Never have I bowed in front of anyone.

often characterized as “unique and special,” as “enigmatic and mystical.”<sup>15</sup> Although physically close, Jews and Armenians are often far apart; but, despite their differences, their fates were strangely similar. Historical events turned these groups into survivors and transformed their continued existence from mere subsistence to an imperative of persistence and prosperity into the future. “And the chain, the continuum of this people’s life was unbreakable,” continues Grossman. “In it were united youth, old age, and sorrows of the dead. The continuum seemed firm and everlasting. Misfortunes, death, invasion did not break the chain.”<sup>16</sup> These words, while describing Grossman’s perspective on the Armenian people, are peculiarly characteristic of both Jews and Armenians.

Similar to the Jews, the Armenians have come to acquire a concentricity of history, of national consciousness, and of linguistic and religious difference. In contrast to other Christian churches—and akin to practices of Judaism—the Armenian Church has been historically

a non-proselytizing institution constantly struggling to maintain its own identity (even within Christendom), since, according to the writings of Elishe, spiritual and secular models parallel to and borrowed from the Macabees were utilized to shield Armenian customs and culture from outside forces as early as in the fifth century.<sup>17</sup>

Establishing an organized ethno-cultural framework is absolutely essential for a successful salvaging of the Armenian reality. "Go ahead, destroy this race...See if you can do it," suggests William Saroyan.<sup>18</sup> Armenians have struggled throughout much of history in order to protect and maintain their social memories and way of life. They have struggled to such an extent that struggle has become a major component of their culture and identity. Who else extends an invitation to be destroyed so that they can rebuild again?

Process has become more important than sagacity; it has become a deeply-

rooted trait of Armenian character to be extremely rational and irrationally whimsical at the same time, to live life to its fullest while managing to fulfill the imperative of survival. The fear of escaping the bliss of denial and thus confronting the trauma that suspends the choice-that-must-be-made and the action-that-must-be-taken prevents Armenian reality from transforming from "process" into "choice/action." The fear of moving beyond this cycle (or paradox) is what "successfully" sustains continuity. Armenian reality has now entered the "domain of the closed circular palpitation which finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture."<sup>19</sup> The constant Armenian denial of its own historical trauma has to be derailed before Armenia, along with its Jewish community, can become a full member of the twenty-first century world. Today, however, Armenian reality is a culture of fantasy, with a suspended present and a pressingly uncertain future.

## NOTES

1 *Calendar*, dir. Atom Egoyan, perf. Atom Egoyan, Arsin e Khanjian, and Ashot Adamian, Ego Film Arts/ZDF, 1993.

2 Moses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 293.

3 David Marshall Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 126.

4 For more information about the Zoks, please refer to the documentary film entitled *Jews in Armenia: The Hidden Diaspora*.

5 Rabbi Gersh-Meir Burshteyn, interview with author, 1 July 2001.

6 "Khazaria Info Center," <http://www.khazaria.com> (Date Accessed: 28 August 2002).

7 D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 20.

8 The author's personal interviews with the Subbotniks yielded the 1730s as the date of their ancestors' arrival in Armenia.

9 Rabbi Gersh-Meir Burshteyn, interview with

author, 1 July 2001.

10 Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 309.

11 Interview with author, July 2001.

12 Nacha Cattan, "Prof discovers remnants of buried Armenian city," *Freedom*, 18 January 2002.

13 Vasily Grossman, *Povest', Rasskazi, Ocherki* (Moskva: Vagrius, 1998), 220.

14 Dr. Igor Ulanovsky, interview with author, 14 June 2001.

15 Grossman, 221. Taken from "Dobro Vam" [Peace Be With You], an account of Grossman's journey to Armenia, 1962-63.

16 Elishe, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 156.

17 William Saroyan, *Inhale & Exhale* (New York: Random House, 1936), 438.

18 Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 30.