

**REPATRIATION AND
PEOPLE'S HISTORICAL MEMORY**

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Abstract

As a result of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1922) some of the Western Armenians, who were dispersed to the different countries of the world, periodically (1920-1930s, 1946-1948, 1962-1965) repatriated to the Mother Armenia. In Soviet Armenia the repatriates withstand economic, political, juridical and moral-physiological hardships. Although, their cultural-professional development and their ability to public adaptation, proceeding in the direction of approach, constitutes a component of the national identity and the consolidation of the Armenian nation.

As a result of the forcible deportation and the Genocide of the Armenians in advance planned and organized by the government of the Young Turks in 1915, the Western Armenians were expelled from their native cradle, they lost their historical Motherland and were driven to the deserts of Surudj, Ras-ul-Ayn, Meskené, Rakka, Deir-el-Zor, sacrificing to the Turkish yataghan a considerable part of its genofund, more than one and a half million people, while those who were miraculously saved dispersed to the various countries of the world to earn their daily bread. The Armenian Diaspora was thus created as a historical reality.

The Armenian emigrants, uprooted from their ancestral lands, ignorant of foreign languages and laws, were, in alien countries, nothing but cheap labor, in spite of the fact that the skillful mastery of the Armenian patrimonial craftsmen, such as tailors, shoemakers, jewelers and blacksmiths or the fine embroidered articles and the ornamented rugs made by the gifted Armenian women won the admiration of foreigners.

Whereas the horror of assimilation, degeneration and, especially, of unemployment gave no rest to the wandering Armenians and the nostalgic songs of the emigrant Armenians were woven as a consolation:

*I have moved away from my home and place,
I have lost my kin,
I long for my homeland,
Have patience, my soul, have patience!*

*We found ourselves in foreign lands,
I yearn and long and cry,
May the Armenian problem be solved soon,
Have patience, my soul, have patience!*

*Rejoice and do not cry in grief,
Stand firm on your feet,
You will soon hear about repatriation,
Have patience, my soul, have patience!¹*

The return of the homeless and fatherland-deprived Western Armenians to Eastern Armenia started by the consecutive repatriation caravans. First, in the years 1920-1930 from Constantinople, France and Greece, followed, in the years 1946-1948, by the massive repatriation from Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, France, Greece, the Balkan countries and

¹ Svazlian, Verjiné. *Kilikia. Arevmtabayots banavor avandutyune [Cilicia. The Oral Tradition of the Western Armenians]*. Yerevan, "Gitutian" Publishing House of the NAS RA, 1994, p. 202.

distant America and, ultimately, in the years 1962-1965, from Egypt, Cyprus and Iran. And thus nostalgic songs were created:

*I miss you, magnificent Yerevan,
You golden Lake Sevan higher than many seas,
You have such fishes in your depths as Koghak and Ishkhan,
My soul may testify, I'll give you my life.*

*Hey, dear Yerevan, you, my Armenia,
Hey dear, hey dear, lovely Yerevan.*

*Yerevan, my dear, be always firm,
You are surrounded with orchards and flower-gardens,
Your air and water are sweet, your view is splendid,
Whoever doesn't love you isn't a real Armenian.*

*My dear Yerevan, you, my Armenia,
Hey dear, hey dear, lovely Yerevan.²*

The repatriates returned to the Motherland, Armenia, singing the anthem “Free Soviet land, Armenia...” They came to put, hand in hand with their sisters and brothers in the homeland, a soothing balm over the bloody wounds of the Motherland caused by the Second World War.

For that noble purpose, the workers were bringing the force of their arms; the craftsmen, the skill of their hands; the intellectuals, their knowledge; the rich, their belongings and factories; the parents, their children.

*I will go to Armenia
And stay there permanently,
What shall I do in foreign lands?
Hey! I'll go to Armenia!³*

Dense caravans of repatriates came, inspired by the victory of the Soviet Union in the World War II and, particularly, by its official claim of Armenian and Georgian lands laid to Turkey on November 1, 1945. And along with the great expectations, the popular song was woven from mouth to mouth:

*I want to go to Armenia,
I want to see Yerevan,
I want to hoist the flag
On the summit of Mount Ararat.⁴*

While the people's song resounded as a claim:

*We want them, we want them,
Kars and Ardahan are ours...
Kars and Ardahan will
Soon be returned to us
So that we transform
These waste lands into paradise.⁵*

² Op. cit., p. 203.

³ Op. cit., p. 202.

⁴ Ibid.

The Turk diplomats, however, burying in oblivion the inexpressible sufferings of the Armenians during the rule of the Ottoman Empire, dared to declare: “We have no debts in Turkish lands and rights to anyone. We shall live as honorable people and we shall die as honorable people.”⁶ And yet, as the reliable historical facts of the Armenian Genocide and the 700 oral testimonies of the eyewitness-survivors we have written down, tape- and video-recorded, studied and published testify, the past of Ottoman Turkey has never been “honorable.”

Consequently, the repatriates came also to Eastern Armenia with the great hopes of the righteous return of those lost lands.

However, the real life conditions waiting for them in Armenia were different. The displacement from the temperate coasts of the Mediterranean Sea to the Motherland having abrupt climatic changes was not a mere geographical migration for the repatriates. Along with the general post-war difficulties, it assumed, first of all, a new public-political, socialist mode of life with its unusual system and willful laws, which were often incomprehensible and unintelligible to the newcomers.

The latter had barely accommodated themselves to the new life conditions, when the dreadful 1937 events were repeated also in 1949. And a great many repatriates, together with millions of other innocent people, were exiled to Siberia. If, during the years of the Armenian Genocide, the Young Turks forcibly drove the Armenians to the most scorching Syrian deserts, then, by the raving orders of the tyrant Stalin and Lavrenti Beria, they exiled them to the severest frozen steppes of the Soviet Union in Siberia to saw enormous trees and to build towns in those regions.

Here is a fragment from the testimony of repressed Asatour Makhulian (1911, Moussa Dagh), repatriate from Lebanon in 1946, lecturer of English language at the Yerevan State University. We have inscribed it in Yerevan, in the District of 1st Nork’s Massive, in 1998.

“...By the way, let me tell you: [while repatriating] in Batumi they had checked my books five times and they had looked through my foreign language dictionaries. I had worked on several papers such as “American Democracy,” “Swiss Democracy,” “Soviet Democracy.” They confiscated them. During my questioning, these papers were on the table. They asked me: “Who has written these?”

“These are the subjects I studied at the university.”

The Chekist, who was questioning me, said: “How is it that you know English well and you haven’t been a British spy?”

They kept me under investigation for eight months. No evidence, no facts.

They declared: “The prisoner is a political spy. He has carried out anti-political propaganda. I advocate five years’ imprisonment.”

Then they asked me: “Do you have anything to say in your own words?”

“Yes. That man is lying. He has neither facts nor witnesses. He is committing state treason. I request ten years’ imprisonment for him.”

⁵ Op. cit., p. 204.

⁶ Lazian, Gabriel. *Hayastan ev Hay Date (Vaveragrer) [Armenia and the Armenian Case (Documents)]*. Cairo, 1946, pp. 372-373.

They were amazed by my boldness. On both sides of the judge, there were magistrates who had fallen asleep in the August heat. He pushed them to wake up. I said: "Here, now justice has woken up. Now there will be justice, and I will be set free."

They went away, made their decision came and declared: "Five years' imprisonment, two years' disenfranchisement."

After the trial, I was taken to the prison near the circus. They took me to a small room. Thirty people in it were lying next to each other. They gave us a piece of bread, a little watery borsch. I remained there for a month. Then they read out my name and said: "We're sending you to Russia."

I said: "I don't know Russian, why do you send me to Russia?" They gave no answer.

One night they put me in a steel wagon: we were thirty-three; sixteen of them were thieves..."⁷

The socio-psychological adaptation of the repatriates in the new politico-economical circumstances utterly unusual for them and the difficulties with which they overcame the numerous psychological obstacles linked with those conjunctures are presented in vivid and artistic pictures in the tragicomic narratives of the repatriates in the folklore section entitled "The Newcomers" we have recorded from them, whose titles alone are picturesque and most expressive: "The Newcomer and the Thief," "The Newcomer and the Pit," "The Newcomer and André, the Militiaman," "The Newcomer and the Agitator," "The Letter Written by the Newcomer," "The Newcomer in the Line," "The Newcomer and the Brigand," "The Newcomer and Father Stalin," "The Newcomer at the KGB," etc.⁸

In spite of the political, domestic and moral-psychological difficulties prevailing in the country, however, a great number of repatriates settled down, taking advantage of the opportunity to receive free education in the Motherland, to creative work. They started to study fervently at the daytime and nighttime educational institutions raising the level of their secondary and higher professional education. Many of them became, in the course of time, heroes of labor of collective farms, eminent figures in sciences, arts and culture. With their diligence and the experience peculiar to the refugees to overcome the difficulties, they began to build, over 1/10 of their lost territory, their native home and village, founding around Yerevan new burghs and districts perpetuating the memories of their former cradles, such as Nor (New) Kilikia, Nor Zeytoun, Nor Aresh, Nor Arabkir, Nor Marash, Nor Ayntap, Nor Sebastia, Nor Malatia, Nor Moussa Ler (Dagh), etc., with comfortable private residences and well-cultivated personal plots, but the ache of the former ruined house and the extinguished hearth continued to fume in their memory, and the dream of the lost native Land was entrusted as the call of the soul from generation to generation in the form of a popular song:

*When the doors of hope will be opened,
And we shall return to our country again,
Our homeland, our magnificent country,
Which was taken from us with violence.*

*I wish to see my Cilicia,
Its air is pure, its water clear,*

⁷ Svazlian, Verjiné. *Hayots tseghaspanutyun. Akanates veraprogneri vkayutyunner [The Armenian Genocide. Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors]*. Yerevan, "Gitutiun" Publishing House of the NAS RA, 2000, p. 308.

⁸ Svazlian, Verjiné. *Kilikia*, pp. 111-117.

*I wish to see my Cilicia,
Monasteries and fortresses are plenty there.*

*When the Armenian Problem will be solved,
And our ancestors' land will be given to us,
We will cultivate our fields
And will populate our villages.*

*I wish to see Sassoon and Van,
Zeytoon, Hadjn and Moussa Dagb,
Tarson, Marash, Sis and Ayntap,
We, certainly, will embellish.⁹*

We have started to write down folklore materials and chronicle-documentary testimonies of historical memory from the repatriates living in the Motherland as early as 1955 on our own initiative and by the call of our Western-Armenian blood. We have recorded, during the years, the relics of the popular oral tradition communicated by the representatives of the various age and sex groups:

1. **Folklore in prose** – Tales, fables, moral-edifying, religious, superstitious, humorous and toponymic legends, as well as the testimonies communicated by the eyewitness-survivors of the Armenian Genocide.

2. **Folklore in verse** – Lullabies, nursery, love, nuptial, festive, ritual, emigrant, domestic, humorous songs, as well as historical songs (in Armenian and Turkish languages) pertaining to the Armenian Genocide, songs relating to the mobilization of the Armenians in 1914, to the arm-collection, the imprisoned people, the exile, the massacres, the children-deprived mothers, the orphans and the orphanages and to the liberation struggle, patriotic songs, songs related to the repatriation and nostalgic songs about the lost native Land.

3. **Folklore in formulas** – Proverbs, sayings, edifications, benedictions, maledictions, riddles, tongue twisters, idioms, popular prayers.

4. **Ethnographic ceremonies** – Birth, wedding and burial ceremonies.

During the past 50 years, we have not only written down, audio- and video-recorded these folkloric, ethnographic, dialectal and about Genocide primary source materials (over 10,000 units) banked in the memory of the Western Armenian repatriates, but we have also investigated them in the various scientific aspects and we have published them in different languages in our 23 large and small books.

It was elucidated from these long and persistent studies that modifications in time and space had been made not only in the folkloric materials and the quantitative indices of the narrators, but also within the genres themselves and certain qualitative traits of degradation, decomposition and transformation between the genres were noticeable.

The repatriates living in the Motherland had persisted in the past, owing to various historical events, in different diasporan communities side by side with other nations (Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, French, Italians, Balkans, British, etc.) and, naturally, their spoken language had been subjected to certain influences and interactions, however, the dialects themselves and the literary Western Armenian spoken language and its grammatical structure had remained stable, inasmuch as the mother tongue had been, in the foreign countries, their only means of national identity and national preservation.

Since, if in the past, the determinant was time, and the influence of the foreign environment was a secondary condition, then the influence of the new, own environment on the dialects transferred to Armenia, and the Western Armenian language was determinant, and time was the secondary condition.

⁹ Svazlian, Verjiné. *Hayots tseghaspanutyun*, p. 454.

Owing to the extensive literacy and professional education in Armenia, to the authoritative and irresistible influence of the literary, national Eastern Armenian state language (schools, colleges, universities, the press, the radio, the television, etc.) their complicated dialects and the Western Armenian spoken language yielded gradually their place, in a historical comparatively short period (in 3-4 decades), to the literary Eastern Armenian language or to the dialect of the given locality.

Up to the 1980s, a multi-layered linguistic system was noticeable in the repatriate families, namely, the elderly continued to talk with each other in their native dialects, the middle-aged people spoke in a mixed literary Armenian and the native dialects of the seniors were almost incomprehensible to the new generation born and educated in Armenia.

At present, people of the new generations master the contemporary literary Armenian and foreign languages. They keep next to nothing the folklore traditions of the past nowadays but they are enriched instead with the national and international cultural values.

Thus, the new social quality of the repatriates living in Armenia, their spiritual-conscious inner world and mentality were gradually shaped in the crucible of the higher professional education received in the Motherland, the increasing scientific-technical information and the public production relations. Their cultural development and their ability to public adaptation, proceeding in the direction of approach, constitutes a component of the national identity and the consolidation of the Armenian nation.

Tendencies of a new stream of repatriation are, at present, noticeable. A great many diasporan Armenians are not only making investments in Armenia and creating new business enterprises, but they are also buying or building houses or private residences with the object of partly or permanently settling in the Motherland, since the life conditions of the countries they live in and the fear of assimilation and degeneration urge them to think about the future of their children, their Armenian-spirited education and the preservation of their national identity.

In 2005, in the desert of Deir-el-Zor (Syria), I inscribed a testimony about representatives of the third and fourth generations of Armenians, whose great-grandparents, in 1915, in the days of the Armenian Genocide, had taken refuge in the families of Arab desert-men, had lost their mother tongue and had changed their religious faith. The above mentioned representatives of the third and fourth generations were also speaking Arabic, but they had preserved the national identity of their great-grandparents. They had heard that the Armenians had a country named Armenia, that Gharabagh had been liberated from the Turkish-Azeri rule and that those who wanted to settle there were given by the government a piece of land to cultivate and money to build a house.

Thus, there are thousands of assimilated, estranged Armenians in the Syrian deserts who have still preserved their national identity, but who hesitate to express themselves explicitly.

It is, therefore, the primary task of our government to organize the resettlement of these people in Armenia and in Gharabagh.

Since the nation can persist only on its native soil. The existence of the people outside its native soil is, sooner or later, doomed to come to an end...

Just as the grief of the lost Land is displayed in the eyes of every Armenian, so the idea of Repatriation is written all over the face of every Armenian.