

Armenia Urges US, Iran to De-Escalate Tensions

YEREVAN (RFE/RL) – Armenia has called on neighboring Iran and the United States to de-escalate their tensions following the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.

Official Yerevan also pledged over the weekend to maintain neutrality in the conflict while offering condolences to Tehran over the death of the powerful commander of Iran's elite Quds Force.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Armenian counterpart Zohrab Mnatsakanyan discussed the crisis in a phone call which the Armenian Foreign Ministry said was initiated by the Iranian side.

"On behalf of the Government of Armenia, Foreign Minister Mnatsakanyan expressed condolences to the Government and people of Iran on the demise of the high-ranking Iranian official," the ministry said in a statement.

It added that Mnatsakanyan also "stressed the importance of preventing further tensions and de-escalating the situa-



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan meets Iranian President Hasan Rouhani in Tehran in February 2019.

tion through peaceful means."

"Iran is a friendly country for us and the United States is a friendly country for us,"

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said later on Sunday. "In this situation we certainly cannot be drawn into anti-Iranian actions. We cannot be drawn into anti-American actions either."

"So our message is that our partners in Iran and the United States should refrain from steps that would aggravate the already tense situation in our region and international relations," Pashinyan stressed in a live video address which he aired on Facebook during a hiking tour in north-eastern Armenia.

Yerevan was quick to express serious concern after the US strike in Iraq on Friday, January 3, which killed Soleimani as well as other Iranian military officials and their Iraqi allies. But unlike Russia, Armenia's main ally, it stopped short of explicitly condemning the assassination.

Soleimani's killing raised fresh fears in Yerevan of a direct military conflict between the US and Iran which could further complicate Armenia's transport and

see IRAN, page 3

Virabyan Expanding and Making Armenia's National Archives More Accessible

By Aram Arkun
Mirror-Spectator Staff

YEREVAN – Anyone who has had occasion to use the National Archives of Armenia (<http://www.armarchives.am/>) has come into contact with its hearty and energetic director Amatuni Virabyan. He has worked for many decades at the archives and has left a strong imprint on the institution.

The decision to establish the state central archives in the Soviet period took place in

1923. By 2006, after various stages of organization, the central archives came to have 11 provincial branches (including also a film, photo and audiovisual archive in Yerevan; <http://www.armarchives.am/en/content/69/>) and 29 regional offices (<http://www.armarchives.am/en/content/73/>). They contained at that date, according to the official website of the archives, 5,759 fonds (record or archival groups) preserving 3,419,353 documentary units.

The oldest document in the archives is a 1607 deed signed by Shah Abbas I of Persia on land benefits to the Armenian meliks or see ARCHIVES, page 3



Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II celebrating Christmas.

Christmas, New Year's Celebrations in Armenia

YEREVAN – Armenia celebrated New Year and later Christmas with pomp and ceremony on January 6.

Special services were held in all churches; Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, his wife Anna Hakobyan, and government officials attended the services at the Gregory the Enlightener Cathedral in Yerevan. Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II presided over the services.

Pashinyan issued an address on New Year's Eve at Republic Square, referring back to the site being instrumental in his Velvet Revolution.

see CHRISTMAS, page 2

Armenia Projected To Have Highest GDP per Capita in South Caucasus

YEREVAN (RFE/RL) – Armenia's GDP per capita is on course to exceed neighboring Azerbaijan's and Georgia's this year, according to the International Monetary Fund.

In its most recent World Economic Outlook, the IMF forecast a GDP per capita of \$4,760 for Armenia in 2020, compared with \$4,720 for oil-rich Azerbaijan and \$4,630 for Georgia.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan made the same prediction when he spoke in the Armenian parliament in December.

Pashinyan seized upon the IMF projections in a Facebook comment posted on Monday, January 6. "Based on the results of 2019, we have surpassed Georgia [in terms of GDP per capita,]" he wrote. "In 2020, we will also surpass Azerbaijan and become the leading country of the South Caucasus."

The Armenian economy has expanded robustly since 2017 after years of sluggish growth that followed the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. According to government data, economic growth reached 7.5 percent in 2017 but slowed to 5.2 percent in 2018, which saw a dramatic regime change in the

see GDP, page 2

NEWS IN BRIEF

Armenia Expresses Condolences to Australia

YEREVAN (Armenpress) – Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Zohrab Mnatsakanyan has expressed "full solidarity" with Australia amid the raging bushfires in the country.

"Most disturbed by the catastrophe of #AustralianBushfire. The victims and millions affected bear very powerful message and call for action globally, this concerns every nation on earth. Condolences to bereaved families. In full solidarity with people and government of #Australia", Mnatsakanyan tweeted.

Earlier on Sunday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison warned that the devastating bushfires raging in the country might go on for months.

At least 24 people have died since the fires began in September, according to the BBC.

Scores of German Songs by Komitas Published

VIENNA (Panorama) – The scores of nine songs written in German by Armenian composer Komitas, as well as a piano composition, have been published, soprano Hasmik Papian wrote on her Facebook page on January 7. The publication of the scores, she said, was one of her long-cherished dreams.

Komitas created the songs during his years studying in Germany, using texts of poets Ludwig Uhland, Wolfgang von Goethe and Nikolaus Lenau.

Papian next thanks all people who contributed and coordinated the publication of the scores, among them the former director of the Yeghishe Charents Museum of Literature and Art Henrikh Bakhchinyan for providing the copies of Komitas manuscripts, expert in literature Albert Musheghyan for translating the texts into Armenia, Director at Komitas Museum Nikolay Kostandyan for the photos of the Berlin period of the composer's life.

The scores are available electronically. Papian also promised to gift copies to libraries.

Ryanair Launches New Armenia-Greece Flights

DUBLIN (Breaking Travel News) – Ryanair announced this week Greece as its newest direct link with Armenia.

Two new, twice weekly routes from Gyumri to Athens and from Yerevan to Thessaloniki will start in May, as part of the low-cost carrier's extended Armenia summer schedule.

Armenian consumers and visitors can now book their summer holidays to Greece as far out as October.

INSIDE

Albanian Star, French Doctor

Page 13

INDEX

Arts and Living	13
Armenia	2,3
Community News.	6
Editorial	18
International	4,5



ARMENIA

News From Armenia

Defense Minister Visits Military Pantheon

YEREVAN (Armenpress) — Minister of Defense Davit Tonoyan visited the Yerablur Pantheon military cemetery in Yerevan to pay homage to those who died in service to Armenia. Tonoyan visited the cemetery today, on January 7, the day following Christmas which is marked as Merelots – the day of commemorating the departed.

Yerablur is the final resting place of many renowned Armenian statesmen and military figures such as military commander Andranik Ozanian, Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsyan, military commander Monte Melkonyan and others.

Defense Ministry Spokesperson Artsrun Hovhannisyan posted photos from the cemetery showing Tonoyan laying flowers at the graves and praying in a church.

Armenian MP: Amulsar May Torpedo Tourism

YEREVAN (news.am) — The activities of the Amulsar gold mine may torpedo tourism in Jermuk, the deputy of the Prosperous Armenia faction of the National Assembly Naira Zohrabyan told Armenian News-NEWS.am on January 7.

According to her, during a recent talk with residents of Jermuk, she became convinced once again that they aren't preparing to retreat and won't let Lydian Armenia exploit Amulsar gold mine again.

She stated that the parliament's ad hoc investigative committee will soon invite the company's representatives and environmentalists to clarify a number of issues that are related to mining and particularly the issues of Amulsar.

Zohrabyan added that the Prosperous Armenia faction goes against any action that may pose a threat to nature protection in Armenia and cause severe harm to nature. She recalled that Nikol Pashinyan has declared several times that if there are environmental risks, no international tribunal can intimidate the Armenian authorities.

Since mid-2018, environmentalists have been blocking Lydian Armenia's access to the mine and declare that exploitation of the mine will have a devastating impact on tourism in Jermuk and incite an ecological disaster. The Armenian authorities still haven't dared to apply force against the environmentalists and the residents of Jermuk.

Filmmaker Avetisyan Selected for Berlinale

YEREVAN (PanARMENIAN.Net) — Armenian filmmaker Jivan Avetisyan has been selected from over 3,400 applicants from 134 countries to attend the Berlinale Talents in Berlin, Germany.

Berlinale Talents is an initiative of the Berlin International Film Festival. Avetisyan's new feature film project "Revival," slated for production in Spring 2021, was the premise of his selection. The six-day summit will be held from February 22 to 27.

The selection committee shared with Avetisyan: "We appreciate your ambitious approach to filmmaking and to the content of your stories. In 2020, Berlinale Talents is going collective: the six-day summit looks at proven and experimental community models in four creative fields: "Cinema," "Film Set," "Company," and "Society." Collectives from the film, art, and theater worlds will come to Berlin for the nearly 100 talks, workshops, and networking events."

Avetisyan thrives to tell Artsakhian stories through film. His latest project, "Gate to Heaven," is set to premiere in Los Angeles on Saturday, March 21, at the Alex Theatre. The drama film was co-produced with Armenia, Lithuania, Germany, France, Bulgaria, Czech, Italy, and the U.S.. "Gate to Heaven" is presented in four different languages: English, Armenian, German, and French, but is primarily in English. Richard Sammel (Germany) and Tatiana Spivakova (France) play the lead roles, while Sos Janibekyan (Armenia), Naira Zakaryan (US), Leonardas Pobedonoscevas (Lithuania), Nina Kronjager (Germany), Benedict Freitag (Switzerland), play the supporting roles. The premiere was held in Armenia on October 17 with over 600 attendees.

Karabakh Economy Continues Robust Growth

STEPANAKERT (RFE/RL) — Nagorno-Karabakh's economy grew by an estimated 9 percent in 2019, continuing a more than decade-long rapid expansion, according to officials in Stepanakert.

The Karabakh government's latest growth projections released last week show that the Armenian-populated territory's Gross Domestic Product was on course to total 341 billion drams (\$713 million). The resulting GDP per capita of more than \$4,800 would be slightly higher than in Armenia.

The Karabakh economy was worth just 70 billion drams in 2008. Official figures indicate that it has since grown by around 10 percent annually in real terms, despite the lingering risk of a renewed Armenian-Azerbaijani war for the disputed territory.

Speaking at a year-end news conference in Stepanakert, the Karabakh state minister, Grigory Martirosyan, said growth was primarily driven by trade and services in January-September 2019.

Martirosyan also reported significant increases in manufacturing and electricity production. Karabakh's overall industrial output accounted for around 30 percent of GDP, the Artsakhpress news agency quoted him as saying. A large part of that output is generated by a copper and molybdenum mine located in the northern Martakert district.

Government data cited by Martirosyan shows that nearly one-fifth of electricity produced in Karabakh was exported to Armenia in 2019.

In the words of Bako Sahakyan, the Karabakh president, Karabakh gained

"energy self-sufficiency" in 2017. That was made possible by the construction of 31 small hydroelectric plants on the mountainous region's fast-flowing rivers. A dozen more such plants are reportedly under construction now.

Speaking at a December 23 meeting in Yerevan of Armenia's and Karabakh's leaders, Sahakyan also said that Karabakh has become a major wheat exporter. "In 2019, we produced 112,000 tons of wheat, which is twice as much as our internal demand," he said.

Despite its robust economic growth, Karabakh remains very dependent on annual subsidies from Armenia's government. They will finance just over half of the Karabakh government's 2020 budgetary expenditures projected at 120 billion drams (\$250 million).

Christmas, New Year's Celebrations in Armenia

CHRISTMAS, from page 1

He spoke about the post-revolution path, expressing his pride at the gains made.

"[The year] 2019 was the first full year of the post-revolutionary year, and in my December 31, 2018 message I promised you that by 2019 we would reach new heights, record new successes and, above all, the social and economic life of our country. I am pleased to report that we have seen many visible, tangible and measurable results over the past year," he said.

He praised the economic gains of the country but also basic changes, including highway repairs and higher salaries for members of the military, rescuers, teachers, foresters, and health workers.

In addition, he said, 300 children in orphanages were transferred to homes and housing for 121 refugee families was created.

"I am pleased to note that now Armenia has been at the lowest level of poverty since the start of such accounting. The international reserves of our country have reached unprecedented volumes, exceeding \$ 2.8 billion, and the tax revenues of the state budget for 2019 have been exceeded by over 100 billion drams," he added.



Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II blesses Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.



Religious and civic leaders at the Christmas celebrations.

Armenia Projected to Have Highest GDP Per Capita in South Caucasus

GDP, from page 1

country. It was projected to accelerate to at least 7 percent in 2019, translating into a GDP per capita of \$4,530.

Vahagn Khachatryan, a Yerevan-based economist, said this growth is one of the reasons why Armenia's GDP now roughly matches that of Azerbaijan and Georgia on a per capita basis.

Khachatryan also argued that unlike the national currencies of Azerbaijan

and Georgia, the Armenian dram has avoided a major devaluation since the collapse of international oil prices which began in late 2014.

Azerbaijan's GDP per capita shrank from almost \$8,000 in 2014 to just under \$4,000 in 2016 for this reason.

In early 2018, the World Bank upgraded Armenia's status from a "lower middle income" to an "upper middle income" nation. The official

poverty rate in the country fell from 29.4 percent in 2016 to 23.5 percent in 2018.

Armenia's GDP per capita is projected to exceed that of not only the two other South Caucasus states but also six other, poorer former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. But it will still be well below the income levels of the three Baltic states, Russia and Kazakhstan.



ARMENIA

Armenia Urges US, Iran to De-Escalate Tensions

IRAN, from page 1

trade links to the outside world. Armenia's top diplomats and military officials discussed potential consequences of the crisis at separate emergency meetings held on Friday.

Pashinyan said that he has instructed relevant state bodies to "closely monitor the situation" and make contingency plans. He declined to go into details.

With Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey closed due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran as well as Georgia are the landlocked country's sole conduits to the outside world. Successive Armenian governments have therefore maintained cordial relations with Tehran.

Pashinyan has repeatedly made clear over the past year that his administration will seek

closer Armenian-Iranian political and economic ties despite the US sanctions against the Islamic Republic. He insisted in August that Washington is not pressuring Yerevan to curtail those ties.

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curtail those ties.

The Armenian leader went on to invite Iran's President Hassan Rouhani to a summit of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union held in Yerevan in October. Rouhani accepted the invitation.

Arrest of Imposter

In related news, Armenian authorities arrested a man over a Facebook post that claimed Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan congratulated US President Donald Trump for assassinating Iran's top military commander.

The National Security Service (SNB) on January 5 posted a video of the man being detained, saying the authorities had identified social-media users who had spread false information and harmed Armenia's national

security interests.

The claim was made on a Facebook page set up by a man who used the false identity of Diana Arutyunian, the SNB said.

The SNB said the claim was "aimed at inciting national, racial and religious hostility." It also said that the claim had been quoted by media in Azerbaijan and Iran.

The SNB said a criminal case had been launched. But the identity of the man arrested and held responsible for hosting the page was not revealed.

In the video released by the SNB, the man being detained admits that he created the page in 2018 and was responsible for the false claim about Pashinyan.

Pashinyan denied the claim in his own Facebook post, calling it "fake news."

Virabyan Making Armenia's National Archives More Accessible

ARCHIVES, from page 1

princes of Kashatagh. The archives contain documents from Tsarist Russian times, but the main materials originate from the Soviet period to the present.

The National Archives, in addition to its own materials, was expanded in recent times to include the Department of Sociopolitical Documents, which used to be the archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the Central National Archive of Films, Photographs and Sound-Recording Documents, which itself was created in 1943. It therefore contains thousands of movies.

According to a 2004 law of the Armenian National Assembly, the National Archives became a part of the Ministry of Culture, Youth Issues and Sports, which today is now the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport.

Virabyan stated last October that there were 325 employees at the archives. In addition, there were some 70 additional archivists at the Armenian presidential archive, the government and the ministries, so that the total staff comes to approximately 400. Of this total, only roughly 30 are researchers. He said, "I always joke that there are more employees in China's archives than inhabitants of Armenia. There are over 3 million archival personnel in China."

Collection and Preservation

There are always new materials being sorted through, Virabyan said. "Not everything is kept," he continued. "We take out the ones which have historical and scholarly value." They come from the presidential staff archive up to April 9, 2018, the date when Serzh Sargsyan's presidency ended. Material continues to be brought to the archives from the government, the ministries, from individuals and intellectuals.

What is decided as significant is transferred to storage. Virabyan said, "Whatever is open, all are free to study. Whatever is categorized as secret might remain as such for 10 or 30 years. One day, after sufficient time passes, these items will also be accessible. It appears that Armenia is the only country where the documents of the president until 2018 are found in the archives and researchers can study them."

As far as the Armenian Genocide is concerned, Virabyan said that the archives already possess whatever is possible on it, including copies of materials in other major archives except from Turkey, due to obvious difficulties of access. He noted that even Turkish citizens do not have full access to the Turkish General Staff's military archives. He also stated that the Iranian archives remain to be explored by Iranian language specialists, of whom there are not enough at present in Armenia.

He said that there may still be a certain amount of material in people's homes, but this is not that much. In 2004-5, for the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the archives carried out an oral history campaign in the Talin region among families from Moush and Sassoun, and recorded 50 hours of testimony.

Special measures have been taken to prevent

fire or flood from damaging the archive holdings. Virabyan said, "We have special systems in place for this. There is no electric current if people are not present and there is no water. We heat the storage area in winter with hot air and in the summer cool it with cold air."

Furthermore, there is a laboratory or restoration center, where 25 people work daily to repair damaged documents.



Amatuni Virabyan (photo Aram Arkun)

Digitization

Virabyan stated that one of the most important aspects of the work of the archives at present is the digitization of documents. It began in earnest in 2010, but, Virabyan said, "as there are around 400 million documents, and roughly 200,000 pages are scanned per year, you can imagine how much time is necessary to do everything."

Digitization solves two issues, he said. First, you can find information quickly, and secondly, you do not touch the original documents any longer. The document will not get damaged by users. The archive is different from libraries because each document is unique and an original, whereas books might have hundreds, or hundreds of thousands, of copies.

In the past, the Armenian archives would film certain documents and then the microfilm could be accessed through special machines but this has been replaced by digitization.

The policy has been adopted of first digitizing items that are the most in demand. At present, these are documents for people conducting genealogical research. They seek documents about births, marriages, deaths and censuses in order to prepare their family trees. Whatever is connected to the Armenian Genocide is also in demand and will be digitized.

The digitized materials at present can be used only in the internal network at the archives, but, Virabyan said, in time everything will also be posted on the internet for the pub-

lic. The legal basis for this has to be established so that problems will not be created. There are issues pertaining to individuals mentioned in documents.

A Historian's Career in the Archives

Born in Geghanist, a village of Shirak Province, Virabyan studied 20th century history at Kirovakan State Pedagogical Institute's

Faculty of History. His first doctoral thesis (candidate's) was on "Social-Political Life in Armenia Up to the War," and his second, full doctoral thesis was on post-World War II Armenia, "Armenia from Stalin to Khrushchev." When asked how he entered the field of archives, he replied, "Completely by chance." He said he did not even know what archives were when he was at the university.

However, the Communist Party at that time was looking for a historian, who had to be a Communist and had to be young, for its own archive. Virabyan said, "They kept looking and eventually found me. They called me, and I was amazed and asked what this was. They explained it to me and I found it interesting."

It has been 40 years that he has worked in the archives. He began working in 1990 as senior researcher and gradually rose through the ranks. In 2001, he became head of the archives agency department and in 2003 director of the National Archives. Basically, he said with a chuckle, he has directed the archives of Armenia for the entire 21st century.

Among other things, Virabyan prepares new generations of archivists. He is the director of Museum Studies, Library Sciences and Archival Studies at the Khachatur Abovyan Armenian State Pedagogical University. He works with students over the four years of the baccalaureate and the two years of master's degree studies, and often accepts graduates to positions at the archives. In 2018, he said, two of his stu-

dents became candidates of science, the first doctoral level, and in 2019, one more was expected to reach this level.

Virabyan said that usually he assembles the archive's staff during the winter to work with them further. A new direction that he wants to stress for the archives, he said, is to show how ordinary people lived in the past and look at individuals.

Exhibitions

The National Archives frequently publishes collections of documents in its own periodical and as separate volumes, when financing permits. Virabyan has edited a number of these volumes himself. It also prepares various exhibitions, often working together with other Armenian institutions and museums.

In November, the exhibition "The Rescue of the Armenians in the Middle East, 1915-1923: From National Unity to Revival" was inaugurated at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute. The National Archives contributed many materials. It continues to April 2020.

In spring 2019, the archives worked with the Hovhannes Tumanyan Museum to create an exhibition dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Tumanyan's birth. Tumanyan was not only a writer and poet but also was an activist interested in all developments in the life of the Armenian people. Virabyan said that he had a hobby of collecting maps, which allowed studying what was taking place in Western Armenia, including during World War I. These were rare maps sometimes not otherwise preserved, which now are in the National Archives. They were displayed at this exhibition.

A parallel exhibit was being prepared with the new Komitas Institute-Museum dedicated to the 150th anniversary of Komitas' birth. The National Archives, Virabyan explained, contain documents about Komitas's studies at the Gevorgian Seminary of Echmiadzin, and his later studies in Europe (he was continually in touch with the See of Holy Echmiadzin in order to receive money for his education and to present an accounting of how he spent that money). The archives of Echmiadzin until 1955 are preserved at the National Archives. They also contain further correspondence by Komitas as a vartabed and a teacher until 1911, when he went to Constantinople.

Finally, Virabyan said that a new exhibition was being prepared for 2020 on the World War II victory against Fascism by the Allies (the Soviet Union, United States, Great Britain and France), which Virabyan considers a victory for mankind. He said that the predecessor of the Armenian news agency Armenpress, which was called the Telegraphic Agency, would post caricatures of Germany and its allies, weekly on a wall. People would view Hitler with the visage of a pig or caricatures of Mussolini, Admiral Miklos Horthy of Hungary and other Fascist or Nazi leaders.

In all there were 103 images through 1943, and many were by noted artists. They will be exhibited along with satirical poems that were also printed and posted during that period.



INTERNATIONAL

International News

Russia, Syria Launch Joint Military Exercises

YEREVAN (Armenpress) – Russia and Syria have launched joint naval military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea, the Russian Navy said.

Russian ships, aircraft from the Hmeimim airbase, frigates and Syrian minesweepers will be engaged in the drills.

Rear Admiral Alexander Yuldashev, the commander of the military exercises, said the exercises are aimed at expanding partnership between Russian and Syrian militaries.

MFA Issues Statement on Occasion of Centennial Of Massacres in Agulis

YEREVAN (News.am) – The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia issued a statement on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian massacres in Agulis, on December 24.

“Today we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide in Agulis. On December 24-25, 1919, peaceful Armenian civilians were massacred, and the ancient Armenian settlement of Nakhichevan was left in ruins.

“It is worth remembering that, in response to these massacres, the government of the First Republic of Armenia addressed the international community and particularly the Entente with the call to prevent assaults in its territory and ensure safety of the Armenians in the region.

“Unfortunately, the crimes committed against the Armenians of Nakhichevan were not limited by the history of the 20th century. Azerbaijani authorities emptied Nakhichevan of the Armenians once and for all and perpetrated the massive and systematic eradication of Armenian cultural heritage. This led to the complete destruction of thousands of Christian monuments, including churches, monasteries and khachkars (cross-stones) in Julfa, Agulis and elsewhere. The eradication of thousands of *khachkars* of Julfa (considered masterpieces of medieval Christian art) by soldiers of the Azerbaijani army, documented in a video, will go down in world history as an unsurpassed manifestation of cultural atrocities.”

Mkhitaryan to Undergo Medical Exam

ROME (PanARMENIAN.Net) – Arsenal midfielder Henrikh Mkhitaryan, who is on loan with Roma has been feeling discomfort in his left thigh after an injury he suffered in the match against Torino on Sunday, December 5.

The attacking midfielder will have to undergo a medical examination in the next 48 hours to avoid serious problems, Corriere dello Sport reported on Tuesday, January 7.

Armenian Journalist Among Leaders of New Turkish Party

ISTANBUL (PanARMENIAN.Net) – Journalist, writer and columnist of Armenian descent Etyen Mahçupyan has been named among the leaders of Turkey's Future Party (“Gelecek Partisi” in Turkish), Ermenihaber.am reported in December.

The party was created recently by former Prime Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu, with Mahçupyan cited among its 154 co-founders and later elected a member of the Executive Board.

Now, Mahçupyan will head the party's research, development and information activity.

In October 2014, Mahçupyan was appointed as senior advisor to then-Prime Minister Davutoglu. It was the first time in modern Turkish history that a person of Armenian descent was appointed to such a position. He retired from this position in March 2015. The announcement came a day after he openly acknowledged the Armenian Genocide. However he stated that his departure had nothing to do with the row. He said he retired in March due to the mandatory retirement age for civil servants, and has kept advising Davutoglu afterwards informally.

Erdogan's Turkey Has a Serious Productivity Issue, MIT's Daron Acemoglu Says

ISTANBUL (Ahval) – Turkey has a serious productivity problem because its government has compromised the independence of key institutions and failed to encourage the development of new thought and technologies, said Daron Acemoglu, professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Rather than focus on measures to improve productivity, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) has sought to grow the economy through investments in construction and real estate, Acemoglu, who is among the ten most-cited economists in the world, said in an interview with *Karar* newspaper published on Tuesday, January 7.

“Turkey's economy has grown over the past 13 years but increases in productivity have been zero or negative,” Acemoglu said. “This is all about institutions. With better institutions, there will be a bigger space for the development of new and better ideas.”

Turkey's government is seeking to boost economic activity following a currency crisis that erupted in August 2018, shortly after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan assumed enhanced executive powers at nationwide elections. His administration has

announced a series of economic measures, including cheap lending by state-run banks and incentives to invest in production and property, to boost economic growth to 5 percent in 2020 from an estimated 0.5 percent

state, Acemoglu said.

“This reality is seen most in areas such as the courts and universities. More independence for judges and more autonomy for universities will mean their capacity increases,” he



Dr. Daron Acemoglu

last year.

Instead of increasing its supervision of society, the Turkish state needs to step back and allow the media, the judiciary and universities to operate without political interference, Acemoglu said. Turkey, under the new presidential system, is tightening the state's hold on society, he said.

“With better institutions there will also be more investment in technology,” he said. “We saw these kinds of institutional reforms at the start of the 2000s, right after the economic crisis of 2000-2001. In this short period, Turkey showed great potential for better quality economic growth.”

Acemoglu may join a new political movement led by former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, according to some Turkish pundits. Babacan ran Turkey's economy after the AKP assumed power in 2002 and is a close political ally of ex-President Abdullah Gül, also a former Erdogan loyalist.

The new presidential system creates a political system with fewer checks and balances and is detrimental to strengthening the capacity of the

said.

Acemoglu will take part in Babacan's new political initiative, Islam Özkan, a journalist for Duvar news website, said last month citing a meeting with the former minister. Babacan did not mention whether Acemoglu would join the party as a member or as an adviser, Özkan said.

Erdogan's government says it is focused on encouraging new technologies and has invested heavily in education. Last month, Erdogan revealed the first prototypes of a series of locally-made passenger cars that will start entering production in 2022. The Turkish president has criticized Babacan's record on the economy, saying he took instructions from the International Monetary Fund, which sponsored Turkey's economic reforms after the 2001 crisis, and is a fan of high interest rates.

Turkey-born Acemoglu is both a Turkish and U.S. citizen and is the Elizabeth and James Killian Professor of Economics at M.I.T. He was born in 1967 and earned his Ph.D. at the London School of Economics in 1992.

Turkish Court Rules To Keep Osman Kavala in jail

ISTANBUL (AFP) – A Turkish court on Tuesday, December 24 ignored calls to release a businessman charged with seeking to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, despite a ruling by Europe's top rights body.

Osman Kavala, a leading figure in Turkey's civil society who has funded projects across the country, has been in pre-trial detention since November 2017.

A respected figure in intellectual circles, Kavala is chairman of the Anatolian Culture Foundation, which promotes human rights through art, including with neighboring Armenia, with which Turkey has no diplomatic ties.

Turkish prosecutors accuse him and 15 other leading figures in civil society of involvement in anti-Erdogan protests in 2013 and the failed coup in 2016.

Kavala, who appeared in the dock wearing a dark jacket and a white shirt, dismissed the charges as “completely groundless”, according to an AFP correspondent in court.

“The 657-page indictment... proves I am innocent rather than guilty,” he told the court.

“I demand this unlawful and discriminatory practice that placed me in prison for two years come to an end,” he added.

The Turkish court in Silivri in the outskirts of Istanbul set the next hearing for January 28.

The crowd applauded Kavala as he was led from the courtroom, saluting his supporters.

Two weeks ago, the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) urged Turkey to “take every measure to put an end” to Kavala's detention and “to secure his immediate release.”

In a damning ruling, the ECHR said Kavala was being held “not only on acts that could not be reasonably considered as behavior criminalized under domestic law” but which were also protected by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Russian Gas Price for Armenia To Remain Unchanged in 2020

MOSCOW (RFE/RL) – Russia's Gazprom giant has decided not to raise, at least before the end of 2020, the wholesale price of its natural gas supplied to Armenia.

In a statement issued on New Year's Eve, Gazprom announced that the unchanged price is set in a new supply contract which it has signed with Armenia's national gas distribution network owned by it.

“The contract between Gazprom Export and Gazprom Armenia for the supplies of up to 2.5 billion cubic meters of Russian gas per year will be in effect until the end of 2020,” said the statement.

The announcement came after months of negotiations between Armenian and Russian government officials and Gazprom executives. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the issue when they met in Yerevan in October.

“We talked about a gas price for Armenia that will not break Armenia's economic dynamics,” Pashinyan said afterwards.

Gazprom raised the gas price by 10 percent, to \$165 per thousand cubic meters, following Russian-Armenian talks concluded in December 2017. Despite that price rise, the retail cost of gas supplied to Armenian households and corporate consumers has remained unchanged so far.

Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigorian said in late November that the domestic gas tariffs will not rise before April 2020.

Gazprom accounts for at least 80 percent of natural gas imported by Armenia.

The Russian gas price for Europe fell considerably, to around \$200 per thousand cubic meters, in the course of 2018.



Canadian Armenian Becomes UWC Dilijan's First Aznavour Scholar

DILIJAN, Armenia – Just over a year ago, Aurora Humanitarian Initiative announced the establishment of the Charles Aznavour Scholarship. Aznavour lent his name and his energy to Aurora from the beginning – he was an important part of the first two Aurora Prize ceremonies in 2016 and 2017. It was decided that the new scholarship launched in his memory would be awarded annually to students from France and Francophone countries who will have the opportunity to study at UWC Dilijan – an international boarding school in Armenia, part of the UWC movement. This scholarship was envisaged to bring together Aznavour's two worlds – France and Armenia – as a small way to memorialize those links and to continue to thank Charles Aznavour through the generations.

UWC Dilijan together with the Aznavour Foundation established specific criteria for the scholarship. The successful candidate was expected to demonstrate artistic skills – abili-

ties to compose or perform music, write, act in theatre, paint, etc. Nicolas Aznavour, Charles Aznavour's son and co-founder of the Aznavour Foundation, personally participated in reviewing the applications and choosing the nominee. Armen Erzingatzian was chosen as the first Charles Aznavour scholar.

Armen Erzingatzian, a 17-year-old first-year student at UWC Dilijan, is a Canadian-Armenian born in Montreal, Canada. Erzingatzian is a very curious, motivated person, fascinated by science and biology, and passionate about music – he has been playing the piano since a very young age. Also, for the past two years, Armen has been involved in many activities and volunteering opportunities related to his interests, such as working at hospitals, leading a green cooperative at his school, and tutoring young kids in French and Math at local kindergartens.

Erzingatzian first heard about UWC in the ninth grade, when the school's student coun-

selor visited their class and shortly mentioned UWC – where people from all over the world come, live, and study together for two years. The story about the movement fascinated the boy and he told himself that one day he would love to study at the UWC Dilijan College in Armenia. "I am very proud of my origins and the idea of coming back to my roots sounded fascinating," said Armen. In the fall of 2018, Armen applied through his national committee and became the candidate for the Charles Aznavour Scholarship.

"It was surreal. I couldn't imagine that I was being considered for this prestigious scholarship, it was a dream. I sent a video to the International Committee telling them who I was, what I did, why I wanted to go to UWC and why I should be the one getting the scholarship. After a while, they sent an email saying I would be going to UWC. I cannot describe what it felt like to be awarded a scholarship in the name of such a prominent

person for all Armenians and French-speakers and indeed globally. Someone whose music I had listened to my whole childhood, as in probably most Armenian homes. I cannot thank enough the Aurora and Aznavour Foundations for awarding me with this scholarship and for giving me the chance to come to UWC Dilijan, to live and learn in such a diversified and rich environment. It is truly a delight to be at UWC Dilijan and a huge opportunity for me to be in Armenia, my place of origin," said Armen.

"We are very excited to have the first Charles Aznavour Scholar. The Aznavour Foundation's mission is to support the field of education and young people in fulfilling their dreams and potential. This annual scholarship will open new opportunities for those who believe in the power of education and wish to become a member of the UWC family," remarked Nicolas Aznavour, co-founder of the Aznavour Foundation.

AUA and PicsArt Announce The Launch of the AI Lab

YEREVAN, Armenia – The American University of Armenia (AUA) and PicsArt in December announced the collaborative launch of an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Lab that will employ faculty and students to conduct cutting-edge research in machine learning and computer vision. This offers AUA students the unique opportunity to gain research experience in addition to applied software engineering skills greatly valued by companies in the IT field.

AUA and PicsArt have been working together to create a new model that will promote science and research while growing academic and professional capacity in the domain of AI.

"Artificial Intelligence is quickly evolving all over the world and I think it is the right time to set the scene here, in Armenia. We are very happy to launch the AI Lab in collaboration with PicsArt to enhance research in the field of AI. I am anticipating to see how this new initiative will take us a step forward into a center of excellence and surprise other countries," noted AUA President Dr. Karin Markides.

The AI Lab will employ two members of the AUA

dents and is excited to provide engineering students with the opportunity for continuous learning in an academic environment, while also solving real-world challenges, based on real data and collaboration with industry experts.

As AI is a fast-growing domain, it is extremely important that undergraduates studying in this or other related fields get a high-quality education and gain advanced research skills that will make them competitive in the job market.

The new AI Lab will allow students to explore immense opportunities in research; learn how to experiment with cutting-edge tools and technologies; receive advanced tailored training and mentorship from local and international faculty and industry experts. They will be able to apply their knowledge to real big data sets; and offer solutions for a globally leading application. The students will also get competitive compensation for work that enriches, deepens, and accelerates their learning experience at AUA.

Both PicsArt and AUA believe there is immense untapped potential for collaboration between academia and industry. The AI Lab is one example of



The audience at AUA listens to the panel.

faculty, lead researchers, and about 15 undergraduate students from AUA's Akian College of Science and Engineering (CSE) majoring in computer and data science. The students will be trained to conduct both applied and fundamental research in machine learning and computer vision. AUA professors and machine learning professionals from PicsArt will begin trainings in January 2020. After a six-week training course, the best performing students will be hired by the AI Lab.

"I am really excited about this project for three main reasons: my background in AI, deep connection to AUA, and prospects for Armenia. PicsArt is all about making awesome and I hope that together with AUA we can make AI awesome in Armenia. I believe this is just the first step of our collaboration and we can do much more together," noted Hovhannes Avoyan (M PSIA '95), Founder of PicsArt Inc. and AUA Corporation Trustee.

PicsArt believes in the potential of the AUA stu-

innovative models and processes that will increase mutual trust and greatly contribute to the value generation and human talent capacity development.

PicsArt is a creative platform and social editing app that's leading the visual storytelling revolution and is the 16th most downloaded app worldwide. With more than 130 million monthly active creators, the PicsArt community creates, remixes and shares nearly 1 billion images every month. The company has amassed one of the largest open-source collections of content in the world, including free-to-edit photos, stickers and more. PicsArt is available in 30 languages for free and as a subscription on iOS, Android and Windows devices. Headquartered in San Francisco with offices in Yerevan, Armenia; Moscow; Beijing; Tokyo; and Los Angeles, PicsArt is backed by Sequoia Capital, DCM Ventures, Insight Venture Partners, and Siguler Guff and Company.

Turkey May Send Allied Syrian Fighters to Libya: Sources

ANKARA (Reuters) – Turkey is considering sending allied Syrian fighters to Libya as part of planned military support for the besieged government in Tripoli, senior Turkish sources said on Monday, December 30, potentially bringing more foreign influence into the complex conflict.

President Tayyip Erdogan said last week Turkey would deploy troops to Libya after Fayez al-Serraj's internationally-recognized government requested support to fend off an offensive by General Khalifa Haftar's eastern forces.

By Orhan Coskun

The move is meant to protect Turkish private investment in Libya and bolster its energy claims in the Mediterranean, but could also put Ankara at odds with other foreign players in the war.

Two senior Turkish government officials and two security officials, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, said Ankara had not yet deployed any Syrian fighters to Libya.

"But evaluations are being made and meetings are being held on this issue, and there is a tendency to go in this direction," said one official, adding no decision had been made on numbers.

Turkey-backed Syrian fighters spearheaded a Turkish military incursion into northeast Syria in October targeting a Kurdish militia. Ankara, which opposes President Bashar al-Assad, also backs Syrian rebels in the northwest province of Idlib in Syria's nearly nine-year civil war.

It was unclear whether Ankara was mulling sending Syrian fighters as part of a first deployment into Libya.

Haftar's forces – supported by Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jordan – have failed to reach the center of Tripoli. But they have made small gains in recent weeks with the help of Russian and Sudanese fighters, as well as drones shipped by the UAE, diplomats say.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitor, cited sources saying 300 Turkey-backed Syrian fighters had been sent to Libya while others were training in Turkish camps.

However, a spokesman for the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) on Monday denied that Ankara had made a request to send FSA fighters to Libya.

A military source within the FSA said the FSA was not being deployed to Libya, but that Syrian fighters in Syria and Turkey had signed up on an individual basis, for a salary, to work as "bodyguards" for a Turkish security company to protect bases and headquarters which Turkish forces will use in Libya.

Business Interests

Turkey's military has been involved in Syria since 2016.

"The military's experience abroad will be very useful in Libya. However, there is the possibility of using the experience of Syrian fighters as well," said one of the security officials.

"After parliament accepts the mandate, a step may be taken in this direction," the person added.

Ankara signed two accords with Libya's government last month: one on security and military cooperation and another on boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean.

The maritime deal ends Turkey's isolation at sea as it ramps up offshore energy exploration that has alarmed Greece, Cyprus and others. The military deal would preserve its lone ally in the region, Tripoli, and protect investments by construction firms and other Turkish companies.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has said Turkey aims to prevent Libya sliding into chaos. Erdogan, who discussed the Libyan conflict with his Tunisian counterpart last week, has said a ceasefire in Libya must be set as soon as possible.

The deployment bill was sent to parliament on Monday, prompting the main opposition party to reject it on grounds it would exacerbate conflict.

The bill's text warned that Haftar's army has threatened Turkish companies in Libya and Turkish ships in the Mediterranean.

"Turkey's interests ... will be negatively impacted if attacks by the so-called Libyan National Army are not stopped and clashes become a severe civil war," it said.

Turkey exported \$1.5 billion in jewelry, furniture, poultry and other goods to Libya last year, more than quadruple the imports of mostly metals from the North African country. Slideshow (2 Images)

Construction firms including Ustay Yapı, Tekfen (TKFEN.IS) and Guris Insaat dominate the Turkish-Libya Business Council's board, highlighting the sector's interests there.

Mega-infrastructure projects have driven the Turkish economy's mostly booming 17 years under Erdogan.

Additional reporting by Ceyda Caglayan and Ali Kucukgocmen in Istanbul, Tuvan Gumrukcu in Ankara, Eric Knecht in Beirut and Khalil Ashawi in Syria; Writing and additional reporting by Jonathan Spicer; Editing by Andrew Cawthorne and Ed Osmond



Community News

Mom Whose Baby Was Born to Queens Woman In Shocking IVF Flub Reaches Settlement

By Nancy Dillon

LOS ANGELES (*New York Daily News*) – The California couple whose baby was mistakenly born to a Queens woman in a stunning IVF fiasco has settled a lawsuit against the fertility clinic.

Anni and Ashot Manukyan sued the clinic in July after their son was born March 31 to the Flushing woman alongside yet another baby from yet another couple.

No one comprehended the monumental mistake until the Queens woman saw the infant boys and realized they didn't match either her Korean-American background or the two female embryos she created with her husband and agreed to have implanted.

The Manukyans previously said they had to wage an agonizing court battle in New York to get custody of their newborn son because the Queens mom who carried and delivered him through no fault of her own wanted to keep him.

The couple then sued CHA Fertility over the harrowing ordeal, entered mediation and reached a settlement with a "strict confidentiality provision," paperwork obtained by the *News* states.

In a filing this week, the Manukyans asked the judge to approve the settlement's "minor's compromise," where an adult signs on behalf of a child so the child can receive money.

A hearing on the matter took place on January 3.

Speaking in July, Anni Manukyan said she felt nothing but gratitude and sympathy for the Queens mom – a woman she was forced to battle in court because of CHA's negligence.

"We had to fight for him, and she was fighting for him on the other end," she said, speaking alongside her California lawyer Adam Wolf.

"She fought hard for him," she said of the Flushing woman. "They were saying anything to keep him."

Anni praised her New York lawyer Eric Wrubel for helping them win the landmark custody case in a matter of weeks.

Speaking at a press conference in July, Anni said it was "tense and heartbreaking" meeting the Flushing woman for the first time.

"She raised my baby inside of her womb, you know, and she took care of him even after he was born, and I'm eternally grateful to her. She's a lovely woman, and we were just all victims together, we're not against each other, none of us," she said.

Anni blasted CHA for its lax oversight, saying the clinic "robbed me of my ability to carry my own child, my baby boy, to be with him in the first couple moments of his life, to nurse him."

The Manukyans said the nightmare began soon after CHA told them a semi-successful "thaw" of their three frozen embryos left them with two.

She was implanted with what she thought were her two viable embryos on August 20, 2018, the same day she believes the Flushing woman visited CHA for implantation.

One of Anni's embryos obviously went to the New York couple, and she's not sure if the other one was among the two she received.

"We live with the uncertainty that another embryo of ours may be born to someone else. I don't understand (how) CHA could have done this to us. This is the most important thing in our life, our family," she said.

Ashot, a soft-spoken man who called his kids "the love of my life," said the experience left them feeling like "zombies."

This case is believed to be the first time in U.S. history that a family had to go to court to recover their offspring from a mother who unwittingly bore a child as a result of a fertility center error, Wolf said.



A stretch of Artsakh Avenue in Glendale (Los Angeles Times photo)

Plans to Transform Glendale's Art and Entertainment District Move Forward

GLENDALÉ (*Los Angeles Times*) – In a little over two years, visitors to Glendale's art and entertainment district might find a bustling pedestrian haven with outdoor dining, an interactive play zone for kids, planned and spontaneous performances, and art everywhere from overhead to eye level to underfoot.

By Lila Seidman

At least that's the intention of Glendale officials who are forging ahead with a redesign of Artsakh Avenue, which makes up the heart of the district and is sometimes overlooked in the city's downtown area. It runs from Wilson Avenue to Harvard Street.

Last month, the project moved one step closer to realization when Glendale City Council members approved the design and technical development of the two-block area into a one-way street with an extended sidewalk and ample pedestrian space, with several conditions.

"What we're trying to do is make this an attractive place, and, specifically, I think we're trying to make it an attractive place for younger people," Councilman Frank Quintero said during a special council meeting December 17, adding that he would like to see digital art incorporated.

Slated to be completed by spring or summer of 2022, the overhaul – which includes a year of cultural programming and public art – is pegged at a price of nearly \$8.3 million.

It's a rough estimate that could change, Glendale spokeswoman Eliza Papazian said.

When the project came before the council in late August, it was projected to be completed a year earlier and cost about \$1 million less.

Maryland Avenue, which was developed about 30 years ago and renamed Artsakh in 2018, was envisioned as a vibrant area adjacent to Brand Boulevard, "but it never lived up to those expectations," Mayor Ara Najarian has said.

The hope is that this project will finally breathe life into what the city designated as its art and entertainment district in 2012.

Both the north and south stretches of Artsakh, as well as a public alley, will see significant renovations, according to the latest plans conceived by city staff and consultant Studio One Eleven.

On the north portion, an outdoor plaza is expected to include games and seating, and an overhead shade element.

The plaza could be temporarily cordoned off for events and is designed to accommodate pop-up booths, a food truck, communal tables and a deejay booth.

It could also be used to host classes and events such as outdoor yoga, said Bradley Calvert, Glendale's assistant director of community development.

A plaza planned for the south portion would include a modular stage made from movable furniture, rotating wall art, a large sculptural piece and overhead art, as well as a play area for children.

A large gateway sign is planned near the intersection of Broadway and Artsakh to brand and identify the district, Calvert said.

Concentration of the most visually stimulating aspects of the plan in the southern stretch is by design.

Besides providing more space than the northern area, "the southern portion is also absent of things to really activate it right now," Calvert said.

Meanwhile, the north section already has activity tied to restaurants, stores and a nearby theater, he said.

"We felt it would be important and necessary to really put a lot of emphasis on the southern block and use these three kind of large art moves to really gravitate people to the area," Calvert said.

see GLENDALÉ, page 11

Elen Asatryan Announces Candidacy for Democratic County Central Committee in Calif.

LOS ANGELES – In December, community activist, and advocate for human and civil rights, Elen Asatryan announced her candidacy for the Democratic County Central Committee representing the 43rd State Assembly district – the official governing body of the Democratic Party in the County of Los Angeles and the largest local entity in the United States, representing nearly 2.7 million registered Democrats.

In formally announcing her candidacy, Asatryan stated: "My purpose has always been clear – to leave a positive footprint for future generations, fight for social justice, human rights and equity, empower and protect the rights of women, minorities, the working class and small businesses – values that we share."

"In these alarming times, when a woman's right to choose is in jeopardy, families are being torn apart, our children no longer feel safe in school, homelessness is at an all-time high, and people with full-time jobs can't afford to get sick, we need leaders who will roll up their sleeves and fight vigorously to uphold our democratic values. I want to be that person to lead this fight and represent you."

Spanning over two decades, Asatryan's activism dates back to her middle school days when she took to her Board of Education and City Council to address discrimination issues at her school and in her city.

Committed to community education and empowerment, Asatryan has served and continues to serve on various committees and boards of local and regional organizations, including the City of Glendale Parks, Recreation, and Community Services Commission, where she served as Chair, the Glendale Youth Alliance, the Glendale Community Police Partnership Advisory Committee, the Census Complete Count Committee, and the Los Angeles County Voter Outreach Committee. She is currently a delegate for the California Democratic Party, where she continues to be involved in shaping the party platform and advocates for the issues closest to her heart.

An advocate for women's rights, Asatryan founded the Glendale Domestic Violence Task Force – bringing together Glendale based non-



Elen Asatryan

profits to help identify areas of mutual cooperation and assistance in matters relating to domestic violence.

Dedicated to empowering youth, Asatryan founded and led internship and public policy fellowship programs for high school and college students as well as recent college graduates. She also spearheaded the Path to College Program to help non-English speaking parents navigate the school system and provide a

see ASATRYAN, page 9



COMMUNITY NEWS

Making the Frozen Foods Section Ground Zero For Retail Reinvention

CHICAGO — As most people who found themselves in a grocery store during the chaotic pre-Thanksgiving period will probably recall: some days shopping in a store, even for relatively simple things, can be a pretty atrocious experience. Nothing seems to be in the right place, the signs advertise all kinds of sales — even ones that appear to have expired a day or two ago — and figuring out even basic product information seems to be a major uphill climb.

It was a situation that Arsen Avakian became intimately aware of in his previous job as CEO of Argo Tea, as he found himself spending much time in grocery store aisles trying to figure out how to sell more product. He found his mind was quickly drawn to a different set of questions: why was the experience in the aisles so chaotic and confusing most of the time and what could he do to fix it?

The solution became Avakian's next entrepreneurial effort: Cooler Screens — a firm that has aims to replace the glass doors in the frozen foods aisle with large digital doors that are, in Avakian's description, "big giant iPads" programmed to display relevant information and offers to consumers when they stop to look at them.

What kind of relevant information, he noted, will depend on a host of factors. The digital doors, he said, are the consumer touchpoint of the digital merchandising platform that Cooler Screens have built. Depending on what the cus-

tomers is doing, plus a host of other contextual factors, all kinds of things could appear on that display. It might be a relevant offer from one of Cooler Screens brand partners, or it might even be nutritional information or dietary data.



Arsen Avakian

"The foundational core of the idea was to bring the consumer experience in-store into line with something better and more akin to the online shopping experience by making it easy for them to make better buying decisions, better budgeting decisions or just have a better path to the relevant information they want."

And while the frozen foods aisle is the

brand's starting point, he noted, the goals are much bigger. Because all kinds of retail areas could use cooler screens — even the screens aren't literally going onto a cooling case.

The idea to change the face of in-store retail with IoT enabled smart screen capable of scanning consumer intention and context to push the right purchase at them at the right moment, Avakian said, is a big job. Too big a job, in fact, for a start-up like Cooler Screens to take on completely solo.

"We are looking to build an ecosystem around this, and we know that is a very large vision that bringing this experience to life is going to be a cooperative project. It's why we've formed relation-

ships with global retail leaders like Walgreens, and among the top 20 CPG brands in the world — the Cokes, Pepsi's, Nestles and the like. What we offer them, in a right point, to tell consumers their brand stories [and] reach out with relevant offers."

And the relevance to the moment at hand in retail is an often-underestimated thing, he

noted. When one looks at consumer behavior studies, one of the more consistent findings is that over two-thirds of consumer purchases are spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment choices. That means the challenge for brands and retailers looking to make conversions, he noted, is in properly being in and capturing that moment.

He gave the example of a customer in the frozen foods aisle around 7 or 8 a.m. looking at frozen breakfast items is not an ideal person to whom to show a beer promotion. But that same customer picking up a frozen pizza around game time on a Sunday afternoon? The beer promotion is much more useful to the customer.

And, he noted, it's much more informative promotion for the brand. One of the main challenges he faced at Argo Tea, and the endemic problem for brands is how to know if the promotion is yielding conversions. Because of the placement of the Cooler Screens, that answer has become much more apparent because one can see whether the information pushed actually led to a conversion shortly after that at the point of sale (POS).

And yet, he noted, it is a transaction that also preserves the consumer's privacy while it is happening.

Privacy isn't just an afterthought for Cooler Screens Avakian told PYMNTS — the idea that its service should protect individual shoppers was baked in from day one of design with standards developed by consumer privacy advocates. As far as they know, Avakian noted, they are one of the first retail firms to implement these standards.

And they do this, he notes for two reasons. The first is that it is the right thing to do.

"Consumers in a traditional retail context want privacy in the store, they don't want to feel spied on, and they shouldn't have to get strong digital services."

Because the old school method of data scraping every demographic detail about a consumer to show them fully relevant offers that has become common among digital retailers is, he said, unnecessarily invasive without producing a really good result.

More than a retailer needing to know every detail about a customer to make good recommendations, show good information or push the right promotion, he said, they are better served knowing where the customer is, what they seem to be doing and looking at in the moment, and other contextual details like what the weather is in their ZIP code that day.

"We use a combination of IoT tech and digital sensors we have in front of the doors we are able to analyze consumer behavior in the moment — dwell time, what they are interested in, etc. We think that actually provides far more relevant signals when it comes to providing consumers a contextually relevant message or promotion. Who they are, where they came from and their favorite movie? We don't need to know any of that."

Consumers like getting relevant offers, he noted, but no one likes them so much they want to be spied on. So, he said, the solution is obvious: look at where they are and what they are doing, instead of trying to figure out personal details.

What's Next

Cooler Screens started in the frozen foods section for two reasons — it was the section most in need of improvement and it is the fastest-growing part of the grocery store. But, he noted, the bigger goal will leave the frozen food section behind someday — because with adaptation, it could be an appropriate tool for all kinds of retail experience: in the pharmacy, buying fresh foods and the like. It could even find applications outside of the retail vertical entirely in healthcare applications for patients.

This is why he noted, expansion will be the big goal in 2020 — and though they couldn't quite spill any of their big partnership announcements yet, Avakian said to pay attention in January 2020, because big news is on the horizon.

Because what is clear to the team at Cooler Screens, he noted, is that physical retail is not dying, nor is it likely to anytime soon given that 90 percent of commerce happens in physical stores today. It just needs improvement — and a digital upgrade to make the experience pleasant, instead of onerous.



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OBITUARY

Rubik Kocharian

Prolific Artist

CLOVIS, Calif. — The Armenian Museum of Fresno announced that Artist Rubik Kocharian died on Friday, November 29, 2019. He was 79.

Born in Yerevan, Armenia in 1940, like many Armenian families during the Soviet years, Kocharian was exiled with his parents to Siberia (1946-1953). They landed in Bashkiria, where under very difficult living conditions, young Rubik decided to become a painter. Here, an exiled Russian painter Ivan Pavlov became his art teacher. The family was allowed to return to Armenia in 1953.

An avid student of history and ancient civilizations, Kocharian, has merged several styles of the Masters while preparing his own paints and colors to express his artistry.

According to critics, while in New York he was known as major exponent of a new art movement called "Magic Realism." Upon his move to Los Angeles from New York, Kocharian's subject matters has changed from depicting urban squalor to nature studies and still lifes, preserving the spirit, joy and bright colors.

In 1987, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "His meticulously rendered nature studies and still lifes reflects his interest in Italian Renaissance art. Technically advanced almost Pre-Raphaelite in their obsessive attention to detail, Kocharian's repetitious array of flowers, fruit and gnarled tree trunks exalt representational realism as if the 20th-Century Modernist experiment had never existed."

In another story in 1989, the publication wrote, "Ruben Kocharian's paintings are dense, detail-packed still lifes and pictures of everyday



Rubik Kocharian with the artist Rubik Kocharian, "Mona-Lisa" and Rubik Kocharian Self Portrait, 12"x16" (2011) - "La Giaconda Print with Broken Glass, 54"x45" (1989) - Self Portrait, 9"x11" (2003)

Kocharian migrated to the United States in 1974. He came here with no money, having to leave behind all of his paintings in the Soviet Union. During the early years in the United States the artist's life was very challenging to say the least. He established his studio called Rabutwo Gallery on 126 Madison Avenue (between 30th and 31st St) in NY, NY. In a short time he came up with a completely new series of artwork that were exhibited in well-known galleries in New York and Washington,

of ancient Armenia.

In his words: "I was working on a composition 'King Argishti visiting the temple of God Teishebaini' That temple was in Yerevan region and Boris Borisovich was conducting archaeological work there too. His answers to all my questions stood in my mind since then and my first historical composition 'King Argishti visiting the temple of God Teishebaini' was accepted to the juried exhibition at Artist Union of Armenia and was bought by Ministry of Culture of Arm SSR. Since then I dedicated to painting compositions presenting Armenian history."

The year 1984 was the second crucial point in his profession and life. He married Anahit Yesayan, who was once his art student in Yerevan, Armenia. Rubik found the support, comfort and motivation to flourish. Anahit brought stability to his life, providing him the opportunity to further develop himself and his creative, artistic talent. In 1986, he moved to Los Angeles where he exhibited his work at the Heritage Gallery and other exhibition halls. In 1996, the artist and his family moved to Fresno /Clovis, California where he was active in art circles and had held numerous exhibitions over the years.

His last three solo exhibitions were held at the

Armenian Museum of Fresno. The opening night reception of his world premier exhibition titled Armenia: From BC to Christianity was on Friday, September 2, 2016 on the 25th anniversary celebration of Independence of Artsakh. The following year his exhibited was opened on September 21, 2017 titled All Things Pomegranate - a symbol of fertility and rebirth dedicated to the independence of Armenia from then Soviet system. In 2018 his series on Conceptual Still Lifes depicting ever changing traditions and values of our lifestyle dominated the show.

Kocharian's art are based on his lifetime devotion in studying the history, traditions and culture of the Armenian people and other ancient civilizations. During the past few years he had created several new paintings that the Armenian Museum of Fresno was in the process of compiling in an upcoming 122 pages 12x12 monograph, composed of some 40 original oil-on-linen paintings, which will be accompanied with bilingual captions providing their historic significance in the Armenian heritage and culture. Kocharian was working on a new composition when he unexpectedly passed, on November 29.

In addition to his wife, he also leaves a son, Mourad.



Once exiled with his parents to Siberia (1946-1953) Rubik Kocharian, pictured lower right at renowned artist Ivan Pavlov's art class, became a prolific artist creating more than 1,000 artworks in different genres that are part of private collections worldwide.

life. Rich with the descriptive texture of blistered paint, papery onion skins and crisply folded cloth, these genre scenes have a closely observed intensity."

Kocharian is one of the few Armenian artists who have taken on the challenge of creating some of the significant traditional historical events of Armenian history through his paintings. An avid student of history and ancient civilizations, Kocharian, may be considered a classical-naturalist in his style of painting and has merged several styles of the masters to express his artistry.

D.C. In 1980, he was invited to Greece where he created a series of paintings and drawings of "Armenian Village" on Greek island Crete.

Two significant events in his life provided direction to Kocharian's artistry and talent. The first was in 1967 when he was introduced to Boris Borisovich Piotrovskiy (director of Hermitage museum of Leningrad at the time) who was conducting archaeological work in Armenia. Piotrovskiy visited his studio in Yerevan, Armenia and was very pleased to see his paintings. He posed for his portrait, during which Kocharian asked questions about history

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COMMUNITY NEWS

AGBU/NAASR Panel Wrestles with Genocide, Free Speech and Social Media

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Hate speech is protected in the US but there are in fact limits to free speech. Hate speech that incites violence is considered a crime. The tremendous growth in social media has complicated the situation. Social media multiplies the effects of hate speech, and because social media is an anarchic space, it is almost impossible to police.

On December 8, 2019, at Harvard University, the Armenian General Benevolent Union New England District and the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR)/Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Contemporary Armenian Issues Lecture Series jointly sponsored a panel discussion titled “Incitement to Genocide, Freedom of Expression, and Social Media.”

The panel featured Dr. Henry Theriault, associate vice president for Academic Affairs, Worcester State University, who also serves as the president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars; Dr. Jermaine McCalpin, assistant professor and chair of the African and African-American Studies Program at New Jersey City University, an internationally recognized expert and consultant on transitional justice, genocides and reparations; and Dr. Ohannes Kılıçdagı, who recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University and currently serves as the coordinator of the Krikor Guergerian Online Archive Project at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University. The panel was introduced and moderated by Marc Mamigonian, director of Academic Affairs at NAASR.

Ara Balikian, chairman of the AGBU New England District, opened the evening by explaining that the program was an initiative of the AGBU to mark the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime on December 9. He turned things over to Mamigonian who introduced the speakers and outlined the parameters of the discussion.

The first speaker, Theriault, focused on the direct connection between hate speech and genocide. Noting that genocide denial is itself a form of hate speech, Theriault invoked Israel Charny who has written that denial mocks victims and celebrates their destruction. Incitement is an action through hate speech. Often incitement is subtle and seen as protected speech. Hate speech changes the ethical standards by which decisions to act are made, making violence more likely.

Theriault explained that hate speech in liber-

al democracies is usually considered protected speech, based on the “Harm Principle.” This principle holds that speech can only be punished if it directly causes material damage and can only be prevented if it will be directly responsible for violence. However, he observed, those using hate speech but not doing direct violence are still part of the process resulting in genocidal violence and should be held accountable. Furthermore, even after genocidal violence ends, denial as a form of hate speech still does material harm.

Instead of recommending criminalization of

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and his freedom of expression had been breached by Swiss authorities.

Kılıçdagı explained that the ECHR in its decision expressed the view that there was no tense political environment about the Armenian Genocide and no serious possibility of a clash between Turks and Armenians in Switzerland, and therefore that Perinçek’s statements were not incitement to violence. Additionally, since Perinçek had made his speeches “only” in three public events, their impact was limited — a remarkable view in the age of the internet and



From left, Henry Theriault, Jermaine McCalpin and Ohannes Kılıçdagı

hate speech, Theriault believes that punishment should concentrate on repairing the damage caused by hate speech such as correcting the historical record. Legal sanctions are not only justified for hate speech that incites violence but are also justified for genocide denial which is a growing form of hate speech on the internet.

Kılıçdagı focused his remarks on the case of Dogu Perinçek, the president of the Fatherland Party in Turkey, who made three public speeches in Switzerland in 2005 and said that the Armenian Genocide is an “imperialist lie.” The Switzerland-Armenian Association lodged a criminal complaint against him, at the end of which he was convicted on the Swiss Criminal Code’s prohibition of hate speech and justification of genocide. Following various appeals, the European Court of Human Rights decided that Perinçek was protected by Article 10 of the

social media.

However, in Kılıçdagı’s assessment, the ECHR, which claims to protect universal norms and values pertaining to human rights, adopted a parochial approach in this case. In the era of global social media and communication technology, the effects of Perinçek’s speeches could not remain limited to Switzerland. Social media multiplies the impact of genocide denialism, hate speech, and racism. Kılıçdagı advocated that international political and judicial bodies adopt a global outlook against the global rise of discriminatory populism if they want to prevent the repetition of mass atrocities anywhere in the world.

The final speaker, McCalpin, observed that we often create a false dichotomy between speech and action, perhaps in part due to the aphorism *facta non verba*: action not words. That is, people create a separation between

words and deeds even though speech is of critical causal importance in the cascading into genocide or xenophobic violence. “One cannot separate what is said from what happens primarily because genocidal violence is not spontaneous combustion and those speaking are not lone wolves with no listeners,” noted McCalpin, and when thought leaders and demagogues speak people listen and in listening, they act.

McCalpin emphasized that those who are influencers and inciters cannot be absolved by declarations that they didn’t kill anyone or ordered killings. Words have consequences; hate speech proceeds from hateful persons, and while freedoms of speech and expression are protected rights, they are not limitless rights.

Following the three speakers’ prepared comments they engaged in a lengthy discussion with audience members, rounding out an impressive and substantive evening. There was general agreement among the speakers and event organizers that the discussion served as an important starting point and that the topic will be taken up in future programs. Video from the evening has been posted on NAASR’s youtube page.

Elen Asatryan Announces Candidacy for Democratic County Central Committee in Calif.

ASATRYAN, from page 6

pipeline of support for students to successfully graduate high school and complete the college admissions process.

In her mission to ensure that all voters have equal access to the democratic process, Asatryan developed and implemented voter registration and ‘Get Out the Vote’ initiatives resulting in over 50,000 newly registered voters and record-breaking voter turnout in some of the most competitive and heated local, state, and national elections.

A firm believer in the power of grassroots, the greater portion of Asatryan’s professional tenure before starting her consulting firm, the Stark Group, included serving as Executive Director of the Armenian National Committee of America - Glendale, then the Western Region (ANCA-WR) — a grassroots public affairs organization devoted to advancing issues of concern to the Armenian-American community in 19 western U.S. States. Some of her proudest accomplishments include leading the struggle to achieve equal representation in government entities, Armenian Genocide recognition in every state in the region, mandating Genocide education in the CA high school curriculum, mobilizing 166,000 participants in the historic March for Justice for the 100th anniversary commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, and championing to gain recognition for Artsakh’s right to self-determination for which she was presented the Artsakh “Gratitude” Award by the President of the Republic of Artsakh.

A first-generation immigrant, Asatryan, with her family, moved from Armenia to Glendale at the age of 10, where she attended Columbus Elementary School, Toll Middle School, and Hoover High School. She is a graduate of the University of California Los Angeles, where she studied Political Science with concentrations in American Politics and International Relations.

The 43rd State Assembly district encompasses the cities of Burbank, Glendale, La Cañada Flintridge, La Crescenta-Montrose, and parts of Los Angeles including Hollywood Hills, East Hollywood, Little Armenia, Franklin Hills, Los Feliz, Silver Lake, and Atwater Village.

The election for the Democratic County Central Committee will take place on Tuesday, March 3. Registered Democrats — and those who have declined to state a political party, but have requested a Democratic ballot — residing in Assembly District 43 will see Asatryan’s name on their ballot. To register to vote or update voter information visit lavote.net.

To learn more about, get involved in, and contribute to Asatryan’s campaign visit www.electelen.com.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

The Aranosian Family, Concord, NH \$5000

Armand and Marilyn Norehad, Norehad Charitable, Northfield, IL, \$500

Raffi A. Hagopian Dorian, Fresno, CA \$120

Dorothy D. Martiesian, Providence, RI, \$100

Gayane K. Merguerian, Woburn, MA \$40





COMMUNITY NEWS

Ordinary Origins

From Immigrants, A Foundation Grew

ARLINGTON, Mass. (*Arlington Advocate*) – What's the story behind the magnificent building with the stately, white columns overlooking Mystic Lake near the town's border with Winchester?

The magisterial aura that the Armenian Cultural Foundation projects has its origins among two people with ordinary beginnings – Vahan Topalian and John Mirak.

Let's take a look inside one of Arlington's best-kept secrets.

Common Beginnings

Based on foundation records and interviews, the story began with two immigrants. The first one, Topalian, emigrated here from western (Turkish) Armenia in 1905 at age 18. He assisted an Armenian tailor while receiving his education and later moved to Boston, where he worked at the Copley Plaza Hotel as a tailor and valet.

Daily, his hands worked with cloth, but his mind was on books and art – and not just any that passed his fancy, but treasures, including volumes by authors who shaped Western civilization from the mid-18th century on.

Over his quarter century in downtown Boston, Topalian appears to have haunted every area book shop and auction in pursuit of rare finds. His collector's trove amounted to an estimated 25,000 volumes before he died in 1983 at age 97.

Those works are part of a collection estimated at twice that size housed at the cultural foundation, at 441 Mystic St.

Make an appointment, and there you see 52 volumes by French philosopher Voltaire and the complete works of American poet Edgar Allen Poe. In concert with the foundation's mission – to preserve and venerate Armenian culture – you will also find the world's broadest collection of Armenian newspapers as well as the largest collection of musical scores and other materials of the renown Armenian composer Alan Hovhanness, a 1927 Arlington High graduate, and displays focusing on women's issues.

From Tailor to Curator

How did an ordinary tailor with an extraordinary passion for the life of the mind become a cultural curator?

Some history: The foundation's first home was 18 Somerset St., on Beacon Hill. The handsome five-story

brownstone, on the site of a college dorm, was remodeled as a library and opened in 1947, where it remained for 14 years. Then the state took over the address via eminent domain.

Enter the “other orphan,” John Mirak. His name is known to generations in town for selling cars and developing real estate. The family name likely should be equally known for works of generosity.

A child survivor of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, Mirak settled in Arlington and began building his businesses in the mid-1930s. By 1961, Topalian and his trustees, “babes in the woods” in business matters, approached him for help.

“My father,” Bob Mirak, John's eldest son, said in an interview, “was no babe in the woods and was willing to listen to Topalian. However, when the elder gentleman asked my father to become president of the foundation and help with the lawsuit, my father resisted,” pleading family and business demands.

An Election Surprise

Resolved not to take the post, John Mirak was told a few days later by Topalian's lawyer that he had been elected unanimously as president of the Armenian Cultural Foundation and needed to appear in court against the Commonwealth. Thus began nearly 40 years of devotion to



The exterior of the Armenian Cultural Foundation on Mystic Avenue in Arlington

the foundation and to Topalian.

John Mirak helped Topalian put the foundation's contents into storage and search for a new location. In a few years he settled on 441 Mystic, a family residence. According to local historian Richard Duffy, the building was constructed in 1895 as a Queen Anne Revival. It remained as such until the mid-1920s, when its new owner, a prominent real estate developer, transformed it by removing its Queen Anne turret and adding four massive columns to its facade. The building remained that way until the 1960s, when the foundation moved in.

For John Mirak, the building needed a grand way to

showcase its literary and artistic treasures. Thus, he hired noted local architect Jerome Bailey Foster to design what has become a Great Hall at the rear of the building. Measuring 33 feet wide, 62 feet long and 12 feet high, the voluminous room encompasses original elements: 22 stained-glass windows and 50 oak barrister bookcases. Portraits of famous literary figures peer from the walls. Across the floor spreads a massive Khorassan Persian rug.

Tour of Wonder

On a recent tour, led by curator Ara Gharazaians, the viewer's eye explored the hall with wonder, falling at last on Mystic Lake beyond.

Affixed to the foyer wall, a marble plaque rededicates the library to one of Topalian's heroes – Eghia Demirjibashian. Like that late-19th-century Armenian mystic, writer, editor and poet, Topalian mixed scholarship and eccentricity. A freethinker, he held radical ideas – he knew socialists Emma Goldman and Alexander Beekman – and he wore a cross in his lapel upside-down, to proclaim that God was dead.

Apart from his foundation benefactors, Bob Mirak reported, he gave short shrift to wealthy Armenians. Once, when two Armenians of means questioned why he spent his time with books and the classics, Topalian retorted: “I would rather ride in a chariot with Aristotle and Plato than in a Cadillac with jackasses like you.”

That salty language was not directed at his chief donor, John Mirak. Concerned about the safety of its treasures, the two former orphans shielded the foundation from the general public throughout their lives.

Expanding the mission

In 1997, John Mirak, then 90, turned the foundation over to his son, Bob, and a highly qualified board. The new board adhered to the foundation's original mission – fostering advancement of culture in general and Armenian culture in particular. But it soon branched out in two directions – the promotion of Armenian music and the advancement of Armenian women's issues, especially in the Armenian diaspora.

In keeping with the new initiatives, the board dedicated a sumptuous second-floor room to Armenian music. Named for the great 20th-century musicologist and priest, Gomidas Vartabed (1869-1935). It featured a photo of the Persian-born composer and conductor Ruben Gregorian (1915-1991) shaking hands with the Shah of Iran. Armenian women's issues were also recognized by collaborating with

the Armenian International Women's Association.

The board also continued the foundation's original mission by sponsoring lectures and exhibits on Armenian history. Among these were a 2004 exhibit devoted to the career of Diana Agabeg Apcar (1859-1927), Armenia's first female diplomat, and a 2018 celebration of the life of illustrious Armenian-American poet Diana Der Hovannessian.

Notable books numbering an even dozen were also edited and published, including most recently, *President Calvin Coolidge and the Armenian Orphan Rug* (2013) by Dr. Martin Deranian. Scholarly receptions for dignitaries from Armenia and elsewhere were also held in the Great Hall.

Tutunjian Interim CEO at Fresno EOC until Arrival of New CEO Reyes

FRESNO (*Business Journal*) – The Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission (Fresno EOC) board of commissioners has announced Emilia Reyes as the organization's new CEO.

Beginning January 20, Reyes will helm the Central Valley's largest nonprofit organization. She was previously director of First 5 Fresno County.

“I am delighted to welcome Emilia Reyes as our new CEO. She is a proven leader, has a heart for those less fortunate, and strong connection to our community, which were all factors considered by our Board's search committee,” said Linda Hayes, Fresno EOC board chair. “We are confident that we have identified the best leader to take Fresno EOC forward.”

Reyes will be replacing Brian Angus, who is retiring after serving as CEO for nine years.

The board has appointed Fresno EOC's Enterprise Officer Michelle L. Tutunjian as interim CEO until Reyes joins.

For the past 22 years at Fresno EOC, she has developed a record of innovative projects and strategic partnerships. In 2018, Tutunjian launched the Enterprise Division and is respon-

sible for the oversight of six diverse programs with a combined annual budget of over \$27 million. Enterprise programs under her leadership include: Energy Services, Employment and Training, Food Services, Local Conservation Corps, Transit Systems, and Valley Apprenticeship Connections. She is an active contributor to regional and national organizations, currently serving on the board of directors for the National Safe Place Network, Fresno Madera Continuum of Care, and the Cultural Arts Rotary Club Foundation where she is the immediate Past President of the Club. Additionally, she is a member of the Fresno Regional Workforce Development Board Youth Council. Ms. Tutunjian was named “Administrator of the Year” from National Safe Place Network in 2012 and was awarded the Fresno EOC “CEO's Excellence Award” in 2019.

Reyes first joined First 5 Fresno County in 2003. As executive director she was highly involved in community efforts to combat the region's preterm birth and black infant mortality rates.

A Mendota native, Reyes earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a Master of Business Administration degree from California State University, Dominguez Hills.

Reyes is the first woman to lead Fresno EOC and is the 5th leader in its 54 years of operation.

“What we have accomplished over the last several years in Fresno County has fundamentally improved the way young children and families are served,” Reyes said. “Not only has it been gratifying and enjoyable, most importantly it has resulted in better services for our families. Now it is my goal to build on these rich experiences while serving as the CEO of Fresno EOC.”

Fresno EOC is the largest nonprofit organization in the Central Valley, according to The Business Journal's research. In 2019, Fresno EOC had an operational budget of \$132 million and nearly 1,000 full-time employees. It administers more than 35 community programs in areas including education, health, food, energy, transportation, employment training and youth



Michelle L. Tutunjian

and senior services.

Its funding sources including the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, as well as the Central Valley Regional C



COMMUNITY NEWS

Home Automation Is Taking Control On The Upper Cape

By Steven Withrow

FALMOUTH, Mass. (*Falmouth Enterprise*) — Technology over the past decade has become more easily controllable and automatic, responding to the touch of a finger or the sound of a voice.

This extends from our smartphones and tablets to our cars and homes. Some technology for control and automation is relatively simple to install and use; some of it is so complex it requires the expertise of a professional electronics integrator.

Homeowners on the Upper Cape who are looking for an integrated system to control lighting, thermostat, entertainment, security and other technologies have many options, whether they are building a new house or renovating an existing one.

Two Upper Cape-based home automation integrators are New England Home Automation in Falmouth and Technical Operations And Development, or TOAD, in Bourne.

New England Home Automation, formed in Hyannis in 2016, will open a showroom with its partner, Vineyard Home, at 587 Main Street in Falmouth next month.

“We’re planning to open our showroom February 1,” said Jacob D. Avakian, a Bourne resident and owner of Vineyard Home since 2018. “We focus on gas fireplaces, audio and video, custom closets, outdoor living and home automation.”

His partners are Addison Alder and Thomas Crabtree, both Barnstable residents, of New England Home Automation.

“Home automation is definitely the way things are going and the customer have gotten accustomed to smart technology and are coming to these in their homes,” Mr. Avakian said, noting that builders, architects and homeowners sometimes shy away from “smart home tech” because they do not understand it.

“A smart home is really just a connected home, and though it sounds complicated to

them, we can provide the knowledge and education,” he said.

A customer testimonial on the company’s website says, “They installed a complete audio/video system, security, including cameras, alarm and remote, keyless door access, lighting control, HVAC monitoring and swimming pool electronics and provide monthly equipment monitoring.”



Jacob Avakian, owner of Vineyard Home (left) is opening a Falmouth showroom with Addison Alder and Thomas Crabtree of New England Home Automation.

A decade ago, there was great demand for a universal remote to control multiple devices in one device, Crabtree said.

“It’s the same with home automation. You can take a few devices and integrate them together, like individual musical instruments, to create a symphony orchestra,” he said.

“Rather than having multiple apps on your phone, you have a single interface to learn, and that’s where the convenience comes in,” Alder added.

The company has recently worked on new and existing construction projects with Longfellow Design Build and Pinsonneault Builders in Falmouth, along with builders and architects throughout the Cape, Crabtree said.

Developer Mark Bogosian, owner of

Longfellow Design Build, said his company “is seeing an absolute increase in demand for home automation, everything from a smart thermostat to a total integrated home system. Vineyard Home and New England Home Automation have taken care of everything we need, and the partnership has been fantastic. They can coordinate directly with our clients.”

“In the Cape Cod market, we have clients, builders mostly, who are approaching us, and for some reason we find that builders are somewhat afraid of technology,” Crabtree said. “What we like to do is be that bridge to bring the mysterious world of technology to their clients, the homeowners. There’s an information gap.”

Providing dependable customer service is a huge priority for the company, Alder said.

“A lot of big Boston companies have satellite offices on the Cape. They’ll come in and sell the system, but if something needs to get fixed, you might need to

make an appointment weeks out, but that’s not what these clients deserve or need. We’re that local, full-service company that can meet their expectation quickly,” he said.

The company primarily works with the Control4 home automation platform and also uses individual products such as the Google Nest hub, Crabtree said.

Control4 “has the best third-party integration” and is modular and expandable in design, Alder said.

“A basic system is between \$1,000 and \$2,000 and can expand to hundreds of thousands of dollars,” he said.

In addition to whole-house systems, the company installs one-room systems, such as dedicated home theaters and media rooms with projectors and surround sound.

When working on new construction or major renovation projects, the partners recommend “future-proofing” a home by installing structured wiring before the interior walls are completed, Crabtree said.

“Everyone seems to think that WiFi or wireless is the way everything’s moving, but a hard line is always better for reliability,” he said. “Even in today’s world, we still want to run a wire to everything. When you’re building a new home or renovating, a prewire is relatively inexpensive, and it gives you options, even for resale. It gets much more expensive later on, when you’re ripping out walls.”

Builders sometimes overlook prewiring because they do not understand the benefits, Alder said.

“You might not want to install something now, but in the future, when you do want those components, the wire is there, and that is a cost saver in the future,” he said.

Homeowners often ask the partners why they should install a certain technology when it will likely become obsolete in a matter of years, and this is where future-proofing makes the most difference, Avakian said.

“A lot of the cabling we use is a universal cable. In 10 years, most likely that cable can still be used for whatever they’re trying to accomplish. You might ask, ‘Why would I put a touchscreen on my wall if in five years there’s going to be a new touchscreen?’ But it’s the same wire that runs to the touchscreen,” he said.

Alder added that, while the end-user experience is often WiFi-based, “what gives you that connectivity is that solid wire.”

“We’re working with a relatively large Falmouth company, and we have done the structured wiring in their corporate office. We’re now in the design phase of a restaurant and store they’re opening off-Cape,” Mr. Avakian said.

The company mainly uses social media to market its services. Once the showroom is open, it will offer consultations and education sessions for homeowners, builders, architects and real estate agents, Mr. Avakian said.

At TOAD, which is headquartered in Buzzards Bay, Mark Hooper, a Bourne resident and former US Navy SEAL, formed his company in 2000 and now has clients across the Cape and Islands as well as along the Route 3 and Route 128 corridors. His business is 80 percent residential and 20 percent commercial, he said.

“We began only with audiovisual technology, but as home control and automation technology evolved, I came to offer a full suite of services,” he said. “This trade mirrors a little bit of the complexities of being a SEAL. There are a lot of elements to master, and you have to be a hybrid electrician and switch specialist.”

Recent Upper Cape projects have involved working with Jill Neubauer Architects, Hutker Architects and C.H. Newton Builders in Falmouth, as well as Archia Homes in Duxbury.

“Not everybody gets a full-scale smart home. Some only do an aspect of it,” Mr. Hooper said. “The demand is growing because a lot of companies—Apple, for instance—are advancing, teaching people how to use their devices, with the idea of how to streamline that process.”

In the past TOAD installed systems from Crestron, RTI and Control4, but its go-to system is now from Savant, based in Hyannis.

“Savant is the first Apple-based system, and it is simple to program,” Mr. Hooper said. “Being part of that hometown team helps with clients, and having Savant here on the Cape has been a great resource.”

To future-proof a home, Mr. Hooper recommends installing a system of interlocking copper tubes as an in-wall infrastructure for structured wiring, with access points to allow for upgrades and expansion.

“If you do nothing else, let us put in the tubes. It allows customers to take advantage of new technologies and will save them hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years,” he said, noting that TOAD installs state-of-the-art Cat8 wiring and fiber optic cable in certain projects.

Plans to Transform Glendale’s Art and Entertainment District Move Forward

GLENDAL, from page 6

A call for will be issued for local artists interested in designing public artwork, as well as several monument signs that will be located along the street.

An alley abutting the Exchange parking garage will also be tentatively rebranded as “the Artery” and will have new signage, landscaping and adjacent rooftop amenities, according to the plan.

Council members overall were enthused by the vision, but they expressed concerns that the single-direction street design could cause a problem for traffic flow out of a parking garage located on the southern portion of the street.

“If it’s one lane — I assume there will be some times when people, they go to movies and other places, and they get out together — there will be [so much] traffic here that causes the [traffic] to stop and create some problems,” Councilman

Vrej Agajanian said, echoing several other council members.

A traffic consultant assured council members that the changes would not cause a major issue.

A majority of council members also requested that the final design incorporate references to the region the street was named after. The Republic of Artsakh is a contested region in the South Caucasus, internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but home to a large Armenian population.

Construction documents for the project will be prepared beginning next month, based on an estimated timeline.

In March, the council will tentatively determine how to move forward with eight city-owned retail units located in the area, Papazian said.

Construction is scheduled to begin in March 2021.

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 Սեծագոյն Լոս Անջելեսի Մասնաճիւղերուն
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 Նոյիրում՝ գրականագէտ, հրապարակագիր

ԵՐՈՒԱՆԴ ԱԶԱՏԵԱՆԻ

2018-19թթ լոյս ընծայուած գոյգ՝ «Ժամանակի եւ Ժամանակակիցներու հետ»
 եւ «Էջեր կորուսեալ եւ անկորուստ» հատորներուն

Բանախօսներ՝
 Գլխաւոր լրագրողներու «Ասպարէզ» ակումբի հիմնադիր նախագահ,
 գրող, հրապարակախօս, հասարակական գործիչ՝
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Գրականագէտ՝
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Գեղարուեստական յայրագիր
ՍՈՒՐԵՆ ՄԿՐՏԻՉԵԱՆ – քննոր
ԱՐՄԻՆԵ ՂԱԶԱՐԵԱՆ – դաշնամուր

ՈՒՐԲԱԾ, ՀՈՒՆՈՒԱՐ 17, 2020
 Երեկոյեան 7:30-ին

ԿԼԵՆՏԵՅԼԻ ԿԵԴՐՈՆԱԿԱՆ ԳՐԱԴԱՐԱՆԻ ՍՐԱԶ
 222 E. Harvard Street - Glendale
 Validated parking at Marketplace parking structure Harvard & Maryland

ՀԻՒՐԱՍԵՐՈՒԹԻՒՆ / ՄՈՒՏՔԸ ԱԶԱՏ

ԵՐՈՒԱՆԴ ԱԶԱՏԵԱՆ

Կազմակերպությանը թեթեւեւ սեպտեմբերի 11-ին ՄԻՈՒԹԵԱՆ
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ԳՐԱԿԱՆ ԵՐԵԿՈՅ
 Նոյիրում՝ գրականագէտ, հրապարակագիր

ԵՐՈՒԱՆԴ ԱԶԱՏԵԱՆԻ

2018-19թթ լոյս ընծայուած գոյգ՝ «Ժամանակի եւ Ժամանակակիցներու հետ»
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Բանախօսներ՝
 Գլխաւոր լրագրողներու «Ասպարէզ» ակումբի հիմնադիր նախագահ,
 գրող, հրապարակախօս, հասարակական գործիչ՝
ԼԵՒՈՆ ԲԱՐՍԵՂԵԱՆ

Գրականագէտ՝
ԼԻԼԻԹ ԲԵՅԵԱՆ

Գեղարուեստական յայրագիր
ՍՈՒՐԵՆ ՄԿՐՏԻՉԵԱՆ – քննոր
ԱՐՄԻՆԵ ՂԱԶԱՐԵԱՆ – դաշնամուր

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Armenian Flatbreads Stuffed With Greens Are The Perfect Snack

By Tejal Rao

LOS ANGELES (*New York Times*) – Rusana Sayadyan threw down a ball of dough the size of a tangerine and rolled it out into a big, floppy disc, lifting the edges to spin it around. Thirteen years ago, she was an apprentice at a bakery in Armenia, learning to make *jingalov hats* – the football-shaped flatbreads stuffed with a dozen varieties of herbs and green leaves. Now she was here, in Los Angeles – an expert – teaching someone else. She pushed back her puffy white bonnet with the back of her arm and mixed a handful of greens with salt, oil and paprika. After she scooped the mixture onto the dough, she used her fingers to pinch it shut, sealing the greens inside, then flipped the disc onto a hot griddle.

Zhengyalov Hatz, where Sayadyan works, opened in November. It has a few locations in Armenia, but this is its first in America. The bakery doesn’t bother with a food menu. What would be the point, when it sells only one thing? Everyone who walks in is there for hot *jingalov hats* the size of a newborn, and they’re likely to be greeted with the only question that matters: “How many?” Sayadyan makes more than 100 each day, chopping sorrel and spinach, beet leaves and dill, cilantro and scallions, with a sharp knife that makes clean cuts, so the greens stay green. The key to a good *jingalov* isn’t just the dough, she told me, which is nothing but flour, water and a little salt, kneaded until it’s smooth. The key is the



greens – washed, thoroughly dried and mixed together in the right kind of ratio, so that sour leaves creep up on the sweet ones, and so that the final bread is tangy and juicy.

In *Lavash*, an Armenian cookbook written by Kate Leahy, John Lee and Ara Zada, the *jingalov* recipe suggests pomegranate seeds to add more tang, and some home cooks add finely chopped fruit leather made from sour plums to create the same effect. When the authors were in Armenia, researching the book, they learned that some resourceful *jingalov* vendors will even add citric acid to mimic sour greens, when wild sorrel and other key leaves are out of season.

When she was growing up in Los Angeles, the journalist Liana Aghajanian ate her grandmother’s version of *jingalov*, in which the greens were dressed with melted butter instead of oil. And later, she went to Nagorno-Karabakh, in the mountains of the South Caucasus, a region famous for its *jingalov*, and where women set up stalls to make it fresh on the streets. They work so fast, they make it look it easy – pinching the dough together in just a few seconds and flipping it confidently. The bread is filled with a number of herbs and wild greens, Aghajanian explained, as many as 10 to 20 kinds. Earthy, tender greens like chard, spinach and purslane might be the bulk of the mix, but tarter leaves like sorrel, radish and dandelion mess with the flavor, adding dimension and acidity. Herbs like dill, chervil, cilantro and tarragon can change its direction, too. Many of the greens used in Nagorno-Karabakh are indigenous to the area and impossible to find in Los Angeles. But Armenians from the diaspora make their own ver-

sions, wherever they are in the world, subbing in what greens are available at grocery stores, window boxes and backyards. “Food isn’t a static thing,” Aghajanian told me. “We take it and we change and that’s one way diasporans have connected with that region.”

If you can bring yourself to wash, dry and finely chop a few pounds of greens – whatever’s available where you are – the work of making *jingalov hats* is mostly done. Prepping the greens is a small project, but the dough itself comes together in a few minutes. Pinch it shut – messily is fine – and the flatbread cooks with no oil, on a hot griddle, until it’s lightly speckled with brown char. Then eat the bread plain, before it’s cooled all the way down, and the insides are still steamy. It doesn’t need anything on the side.

Sayadyan forms the bread into perfect almond shapes, huge and precisely symmetrical, with no holes, evenly thin all the way across. Each one is indistinguishable from the next. It’s very unlikely you’ll do the same on your first try, but as long as it’s stuffed full of generously seasoned greens, even a wonky, lopsided *jingalov* is a joy to eat.

Jingalov Hats:

Ingredients (for the dough)

- 1 ½ cups all-purpose flour, plus more for dusting
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- cup lukewarm water
- Sunflower oil or other neutral oil, for greasing

(For the filling)

- 2 pounds chard, tough stems discarded
- 4 packed cups fresh cilantro, chervil and dill leaves and tender stems
- 4 packed cups radish greens and sorrel
- 6 spring onions (or 10 scallions), thinly sliced
- 3 tablespoons sunflower oil or other neutral oil

- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons sweet paprika
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 2 handfuls pomegranate seeds (optional)

Preparation:

Prepare the dough: In a medium bowl, combine 1 1/2 cups flour and the salt. Pour the lukewarm water into a large bowl, then gradually add the flour mixture, using your hands to incorporate. The dough will be sticky.

Dust the counter with flour, turn dough onto it and knead gently until the surface becomes smooth and the dough stops sticking to your hands and counter, about 5 minutes. Roll the dough into a ball, place it in a lightly oiled bowl, turn it to coat, then cover it with a kitchen towel. Let it rest at room temperature for 20 minutes to 1 hour.

Prepare the filling: Wash the greens, and use a salad spinner to dry them well. Chop the greens finely. Mix with spring onions, oil, lemon juice, paprika, salt and pomegranate seeds (if using), and set aside. Divide the rested dough into 4 portions, about 3 ounces each, and form each into a ball.

On a lightly floured work surface, roll a ball into a very thin circle, about 8 inches wide, adding more flour as needed to prevent the dough from sticking. Place about 2 cups of filling in the center, then use your hands to pat it down into a round, leaving about a 1-inch border of dough. Pick up two opposite sides of the dough, and pinch them together over the center of the filling, from top to bottom, so the middle is wide and the ends form points.

Firmly pinch the seam to make sure it’s sealed, then turn the dough over, and gently flatten it out with the palm of your hand so it resembles a deflated football, sealing any holes in the dough. It should be about 1/4- to 1/2-inch thick. If it’s thicker, use a rolling pin to smooth it out a little. Pinch shut any holes in the dough, then place on parchment or a lightly floured surface. Repeat with the remaining balls of dough.

Heat a large cast-iron pan over medium-high. Working with one dough portion at a time, place the dough seam-side down in the center of the pan. Lower the heat to medium, and cook for about 3 minutes, until cooked and lightly browned in places. Flip, and cook the other side for 2 minutes. If the dough seems raw in places, flip and cook evenly. Repeat for the rest of the *jingalov hats*, and serve warm or at room temperature.



Arts & Living

Anissa Markarian, Former Albanian Film Star

By Artsvi Bakhchinyan

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

PARIS/YEREVAN – The name of Anissa Markarian was one familiar to me; I have mentioned her as an actress and screenwriter of Albanian cinema in my book *Armenians in World Cinema* (2004) and in a small study on history of Albania's Armenian community. At that time I knew very little about her, but now, due to social networks, barriers are broken. So Anissa Markarian accepted to give an interview to the Armenian press, noting that she deeply appreciates the honor of this invitation. "It means a lot to me as the daughter of a survivor of the Armenian Genocide," she wrote.

Anissa Markarian was born on July 4, 1962, in Albania's capital, Tirana, to an Armenian father and Albanian mother. Despite her artistic tendencies, especially for acting and literature, she decided to study medicine. After graduation, she practiced as anesthesiologist



Anissa Markarian

at Tirana University Hospital. At the end of 1990 she emigrated to France where she lives and works as an emergency doctor and lecturer in physiopathology and dietetics-nutrition.

Anissa Markarian landed her first movie role at the age of 16. Two years later, at the age of 18, she won the best actress award in a leading role. In her last two Albanian films (1988 and 1990) she was not only the leading actress, but also the screenwriter. After moving to France, she participated in two other films playing episodic roles: "Far from the Barbarians" (1993, a French-Belgian-Italian production) and "Lie Down with Lions" (1994, an English production).

In 2017, Markarian received from the President of the Republic of Albania, Bujar Nishani, the title of Grand Master with the following citation: "In recognition and appreciation of the peculiar and talented artist who, through her memorable cinematographic roles and interpretations, as well as her literary stories written in accurate Albanian, became one of the most prominent figures of the Albanian artistic and intellectual elite."

Dear Anissa, please tell us about your Armenian roots.

My father, Agop Markarian, was born in 1898 in Afyonkarahisar, an Armenian-populated town in Ottoman Empire. In August 1915, at the age of just 17, the Ottoman government forced him and his family (as well as millions of Armenians) out of their home and head for the Syrian desert of Deir ez-Zor. His parents and paternal grandmother died during that infamous death march. Thank God, Agop, his two sisters and the brother survived

see MARKARIAN, page 16



"Untitled" aquarelle and aquatint on paper by Roberto Sebastian Matta (Chilean, 1911-2002), 18 inches by 22 inches (sheet), signed in pencil, with publisher's ink stamp (est. \$2,000-\$3,000).

Collection of Gerard Cafesjian to Be Auctioned By Andrew Jones Auctions

LOS ANGELES – Andrew Jones Auctions will kick off the new year and the new decade on Saturday, January 11, with a very special sale dedicated to fine art from the collection of Gerard Leon Cafesjian (1925-2013), the legal publishing legend, art connoisseur and philanthropist who collected with a discerning eye and an adventurous spirit.

The auction will be held online and in the Andrew Jones Auctions gallery located at 2221 South Main Street, Los Angeles, starting promptly at 10:30 a.m. Pacific time. Internet bidding will be facilitated by LiveAuctioneers.com and Invaluable.com. In all, 140 lots will come up for bid, to include contemporary paintings, sculptures, prints and mixed media works.

"In six decades of collecting, Gerard Cafesjian broadened his vision and honed his eye to bring together international avant-garde works that make statements, reveal beauty, display whimsy and challenge the viewer," said company president and CEO Andrew Jones. We're honored to offer this segment of his collection, which features international artists in a variety of media."

Two works by Vesna Kittelson (Croatian/American, b. 1947), from the artist's War Painting Series (est. \$2,000-\$3,000) reveal Cafesjian's concern with crimes against humanity and social injustice. His eye for color and playfulness are evident in pieces like Yvonne Canu's (French, 1921-2008) "Fleur sous les fleurs" (est. \$2,000-\$3,000) and Roberto Sebastian Matta's (Chilean, 1911-2002) "Untitled," 1970 (est. \$2,000-\$3,000) as well as irreverent works like Igor Gusev's (Ukrainian, born 1970) large-scale oil on canvas titled "Elvis Returns," 2010 (est. \$6,000-\$8,000).

An admiration for the intimacies that can be found in world localities is revealed in Margaret Leahy's (American, 20th century) acrylic "Brooklyn Backyard," 1981, which depicts a window's view of his childhood neighborhood (est. \$600-\$800). Further afield locations are seen in the Virgilio Raposo (Portuguese, born 1955) painting titled "Lisbon," 2003 (est. \$800-\$1,200) and Jyothi Basu's (Indian, born 1960) pastel work titled "The Chosen One," 2004 (est. \$3,000-\$5,000).

Gerard Cafesjian was born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn to Armenian refugees fleeing genocide in 1915. Raised in New York City, Cafesjian immersed himself in the art culture that surrounded him, spending time at museums and art galleries. After serving in the Pacific during World War II, he returned to New York to pursue studies in economics and law at St. John's University Law School, Cornell University and earned a Doctorate of Jurisprudence from Columbia Law School.

Cafesjian also made time to study painting and sculpture at the Art Student's League. After graduation, Cafesjian became an editor with the innovative Minnesota-based legal publishing firm of West Publishing and ascended the ranks to executive vice president. He developed the West Legal Directory and the groundbreaking exhibition program titled Art and the Law in 1975.

Cafesjian retired in 1996 and focused his resources and time on philanthropic pursuits, mostly in his ancestral home of Armenia. He founded the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in 1999 and in 2001 he created the Cafesjian Family Foundation, which developed infrastructure for cultural enrichment, financial services, media and renewable energy in Armenia.

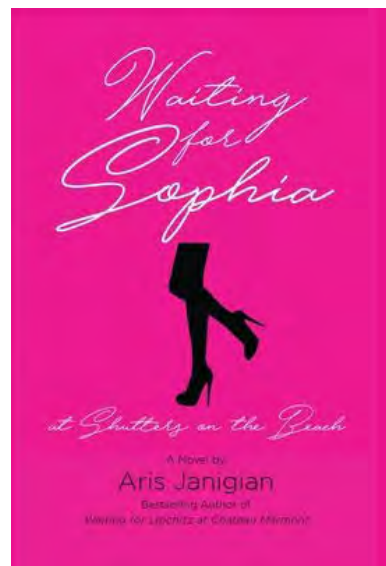
One of his proudest achievements was the establishment of the Cafesjian Museum Foundation and the Cafesjian Center for the Arts, which opened in Yerevan in 2009. The museum holdings boast over 5,000 works derived primarily from his own vast and varied collection. Cafesjian wanted the center to promote and support historic and contemporary Armenian artists and to bring the best of international contemporary art to Armenia.

BOOKS

What Is Fiction? How Did It Start? Why Is It Useful?

A review article and conversation by James R. Russell

Let me begin with a myth. Myths are stories that convey truths too powerful and deep for mere facts. If you like, they are truthful lies. But we'll come to that, too, shortly. So, beyond the nonexistent river Sambatyon – which is impassable for every day but the Sabbath since it throws rocks in the air! – in a deep cave in the Mountains of Darkness – not on any map, and at the edge of the world! – live the two fallen angels Harut and Marut. In the Zoroastrian faith the rhyming pair are the divinities who preside over the plants and the waters; and in Armenian folklore they give their name to a flower used in a rite on the eve of Ascension day. But in this story they are teachers of magic, and anyone interested in learning the black arts for fifty days free, no money down, need only agitate a chain at the mouth of their bottomless pit to summon their secretary, who is a sort of talking cat. Since God's rules control the world, even in myth, they are required to offer this disclaimer at the beginning of every course of study: "Everything we are about to tell you is a lie. Now listen carefully..." There is no record of any



Aris Janigian, *Waiting for Sophia at Shutters on the Beach*, Berkeley, CA: Regent Press, 2019, 197 pp., \$24.95

pupil, in the nearly six thousand years of the history of the world, who has made it to the demonic tutorial, ever getting up and leaving after that warning. And as we shall see, a boilerplate form of Harut and Marut's small print still survives and thrives, on the verso side of the title page of books throughout the English-speaking world.

Kurt Vonnegut, the great American writer, wrote the novel *Cat's Cradle*, in which there is a religion – a kind of vehicle for his own convictions – invented by a Black castaway in the Caribbean named Bokonon. Most of its scripture is presented in a series of Calypsos, which Bokonon affably invites us to sing along with him. (Songs as religious teaching? Have you ever read the *Psalms*?) But at the beginning of the Book of Bokonon, which doesn't exist, is a disclaimer: "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." Shocking? But isn't it just what we read a few lines ago? And

see FICTION, page 14



What Is Fiction? How Did It Start? Why Is It Useful?

FICTION, from page 13

Vonnegut's narrator adds, "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either." That is the Aha! moment. The novel under review, which we'll call *Sophia* for short, is fiction and begins, thus, with the standard disclaimer (and I'll bet you my bottom dollar that no lawyer alive knows it was first crafted by the Master of the Universe, the Holy One, Blessed be He, for two of His fallen angels): "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events are unintended and entirely coincidental." Some fictions are clearly pure invention: spaceships fly to other planets, heroes battle dragons. Such fictions take particular aspects of reality and infuse them with extra imaginative energy, to entertain, to spark new creativity and endeavor. *Sophia* is a novel that does not stretch the boundaries of reality, of possibility, in any way. Everything in it has happened, does happen, to people working on college campuses all over this country. Those of us who work in academia have very likely either witnessed or experienced one or another aspect of the fictional tale Aris Janigian has constructed. He has heightened, intensified a wholly plausible story that requires no suspension of disbelief. Quite to the contrary, this fictional tale cries out in its very exaggeration and intensity for credibility: this is how bad, how ridiculous, reality really is, ladies and gentlemen. It's thus a call to arms, a wake-up call, a plea to confront reality and change it. This hyper-realism about the mores of society, this reality-beyond-fiction, is satire.

Here's the basic plot: An aging, old-fashioned scholar at a posh American university engages in lively discourse with his students, some of whom he often entertains at his home, preparing food and drink and continuing the conversation about literature, thought, and life late into the evening. He's been doing that all his life: it's how he was taught, nurtured, by his own teachers. Plenty of colleagues have had affairs with their students but he has not. He publishes voluminously — in readable English, focusing on the evidence and eschewing the more-and-more fashionable theory and impenetrable academese. His colleagues, better attuned to new political realities and academic fashions than he is — or just more conformist — avoid both his antiquated scholarship and him. American academia, long known for malevolent intrigue, has now embraced the ideology of political correctness, identity and gender politics, safe spaces, intersectionality, and so on. The hero is called to sit on a panel adjudicating a charge of rape by a female student against a male student. He thinks the boy is innocent, and a lively discussion of the case ensues in one of his graduate seminars. A few disgruntled students file formal complaints against him because of his refusal to condemn the accused out of hand: his attitude makes them feel unsafe, microaggressed against, etc. Nothing illegal or immoral, but enough to stigmatize him as an outsider. He is summoned to the office of a dean for an ostensibly friendly discussion, but its deadly purpose soon becomes clear. They want him out. Our hero responds articulately, with reason, humor, passion — but to no avail. The powers that be have decided his fate already. In plain English, it's a set up. He had hoped to continue teaching, but confronted with an attractive offer he cannot refuse, he retires. Now he's at a bar in Santa Monica thinking back on it all, waiting for a friend.

Reading *Sophia*

That's the story, and aspects of it will be wearily familiar to anybody who labors in the academy. But what makes the book a masterpiece is its literary style, which is as sharp, brilliant, and limpid as a cut diamond. It satirizes the state of the academy in America — you have just read a rough synopsis of the plight of its narrator — and the satire is as hard and sharp as the edge of a diamond. The various registers and nuances of speech, of conversation, even of bureaucratic cliché, are conveyed with a lively, imaginative precision, and they connect even as

the facets of a brilliantly cut diamond do. It is the best satirical writing, a professor of English back east has said, since Swift or Pope, and I agree. The subject itself is deadly serious, to the point of tragedy — the perversion of the gifts of the intellect in the brave new world of America in the 21st century, and the persecution and destruction of an innocent man by a left-fascist establishment that stands fair to destroy what is left of liberty in this country. But as satire must be, even as it delivers its death blows to a social evil, *Sophia* is also extremely funny. A book should be a pleasure. When Aris was writing the book, several of his friends gathered at the home of John Hirschmann in the Tower district here to read aloud the final drafts. We ate and drank and laughed ourselves silly. *Sophia* is the second volume in a trilogy about the culture, by the way, and the hero of the first novel of the series, *Waiting for Lipchitz at Chateau Marmont*, is a completely fictional character who happens to be named John Hirschmann, and who dies in the course of the book. The real John is alive and well, and joined in the laughter. Ridicule is a weapon against tyranny, against its fundamental, irreducible, idiotic absurdity.

The present novel, an extended reverie complete with long dialogues, terrifying hilarious classroom scenes and meetings with deans, exquisite holiday feasts possible only in California, and lubricious musings on sexuality and seduction, unfurls in the mind of the narrator as he waits for his grad student, Sophia, to join him for a drink. The venue is the luxurious, beautiful bar of an iconic seaside hotel in LA, which, unlike the characters, is real. If you would like to stay there to soak up atmosphere as you read the novel, be prepared to fork over \$700 a night. I've given you the armature, the skeleton, of the plot involving the narrator — the brutalized professor — but the beautiful woman he's waiting for on a gorgeous afternoon at Shuttlers on the Beach is Sophia herself, the novel's flesh and blood, its living energy. She is much larger than life, a sort of goddess; and just as the gods must dwell elsewhere, on mount Olympus, the goddess of this novel has to come from a place that is far from America and culturally different from it. Sophia comes from Poland. She looks down disdainfully from her Parnassian aerie of European culture at the degeneracy of American academia: Sophia is not cowed by political correctness and refuses to allow her sexuality or her feelings about men to be warped by feminist fanatics or controlled by censorious officials. After all, she grew up in a country that earned its moniker, the Christ of Europe. Poland has never willingly succumbed to invaders from east or west, invaders that professed much the same ideologies as the left-fascists do here today, but had much more powerful and far deadlier cadres and weapons to enforce them. Think the Gestapo and Auschwitz-Birkenau; the KGB and the Stalinist Gulag. Poland, alone among the countries the Germans conquered, had no collaborationist government.

Sophia is a goddess, but also a kind of icon, an image surrounded by a golden sky and wreathed in incense. Her name means "wisdom" in Greek, and the pagan goddess was the only pre-Christian divinity re-christened as a saint of the Orthodox church with original name intact. Janigian's character is indeed a purling fount of wisdom, discoursing upon the wonders and mysteries of nature, science, Areni wine purchased in Glendale, the Armenian landscape, the archetypes of the duality of the sexes, the arcana of astronomy and the beauty of the honesty of hard science. Hers is mental clarity in the midst of the muddled thought and shoddy mendacity that have ruined the Humanities.

Sophia is very beautiful and wealthy (specifying her profession would be a spoiler, but it works, in both narrative and Gnostic terms), as goddesses should be, both pagan in her enjoyment of sensual, earthly delights and Christian in her steadfast adherence to the traditions and values of Catholicism and the authentic civilization of the West. That helps to frame the expensive, tasteful meals and sophisticated, courteous conversations that afford the reader pleasurable breaks from the rapier cuts of

Janigian's grim satire. She is dazzlingly multicultural in her artistic taste, but immune to the grim, homogenizing strictures, the solemn foolery of what is called "diversity." She and the narrator are pupil and teacher, and also younger and older friend — that has been the foundation of paideia, of true education, since the time of Socrates. But now, in a country that has commodified every aspect of human sexuality, and is now in the process of prohibiting love and sex themselves as the ultimate means of repression and control (what happened to the California of our youth, where is the vengeful, playful ghost of Herbert Marcuse?), here and now, the narrator's relationship with Sophia is itself fraught with danger, an actionable thought crime. Sophia understands and appreciates that a good part of what makes seduction and sex interesting is activity and passivity, the inherent power relationship of man and woman, yin and yang. Frenchmen in praise of women say Vive la différence! She celebrates the difference of maleness, the imperatives of strength, courage, and individualism that go with being a man — and in this, too, she is an avatar of Alien Wisdom in the dark morass of #MeToo and of "(white) male privilege." The narrator and Sophia, male and female, each character with his and her full and separate integrity, join to bring the novel to life.

Meet the Author

I interviewed Aris at my home here on North Palm Ave. in Fresno in mid-December 2019 about the novel. What follows is a rough synopsis of our conversation. I do not mean this conversation to impede your direct experience of the novel, or even to influence it. The experience of reading, rather like love-making, involves two people, not one, or three. There is the author, with his work, his intentionality. And the reader, with his reception, his understanding of the book. The work of the critic or literary scholar can enhance the experience of reading, perhaps, or help one to reflect more richly on the memory of it. But it does not replace the direct encounter with the printed page. And yet, and yet, wouldn't one like to interview Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, to talk with them about questions that came to mind when one was reading *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* or *Crime and Punishment*? That's what's good about living authors. You can talk with them. So I seized the chance.

I first asked him to describe the overall themes and concerns of his trilogy. He is now writing the third volume, bits of which I've seen. The theme, says Aris, is "hypocrisy and decadence, the disintegration of American culture under the weight of its own lies." (I'll use quotation marks when citing Aris directly; the rest of the time I'm paraphrasing him.) The "soft fascism of the left," he adds, came upon us unexpectedly and poses a greater threat than the fascism of the right, since the ethos of the left is supposed to be enlightenment and self-reflection. Why, I wondered, do the first two novels end with a meditation on the ocean? It's as though the situation on land is so hopeless one may as well turn one's gaze westward into the infinite. Oceans are where mystic voyages start, says Aris. The ocean is both order and chaos, sheer power and the nurturer of a plethora of life forms beneath the surface. But for us Americans, I object, the ocean is an ending, not a beginning. We (well, Jews and Armenians, at least) crossed the Atlantic to get here, and the Pacific is as far as you can go. (And as far as I went.) Yes, he says, the ocean can kill you and it doesn't take you into account, and that's exciting, alluring — to be in proximity to something that can destroy us.

You published recently an angry, sarcastic blog on so-called "white privilege" in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. It got a lot of hits; when it was reprinted by an Armenian paper on line, it received a thousand hits there, too. It was autobiographical, and described the sufferings and struggles of your parents, the roughness and violence of your impoverished youth. How does it relate to the academic ideological war in *Sophia*? One can't compromise what one feels, but the energy is there and can burst forth, Aris replies. He cites Lukács on how ideologies are written into law, bred into con-

sciousness, how they become a second nature, and this must be resisted. The arrogant, demeaning categories of "white" or "male" privilege, I suggest, retroactively negate the dignity of our ancestors, much in the way the Soviet regime sought to eradicate both the surviving aristocracy and the long record of their past contributions to Russian culture by labeling them as "former people".

How did you come up with Sophia? Is she a former girlfriend? No, says Aris, she's modeled in part on my wife, Insun. (Thinking about Insun, I can see this.) But the book is a satire, so Sophia is exaggerated. She draws on archetypal energies. Women I know who have read the book, Aris adds, find her enjoyable; her image, progressive. I think he's being defensive here, because in my view the book is a ferocious attack on radical feminism and the pillorying of men by making the definition of sexual harassment so vague as to implicate anyone who has ever looked lustfully, or admiringly, or even wistfully, at somebody else. I think this is a provocative and dangerous book. Satires have helped start revolutions.

Identity politics is a big component of a calculated assault on American liberty that has many other moving parts. Let's talk about authentic identity. Why do Armenian artists get sidelined in this country? Aris answers: You know that one better than I do and the explanations you've offered in the past answer the question. (I won't go into my explanation here in detail. Briefly, it's that Armenian writers are not pessimistic cynics, so they seem naïve to those who can't or won't trouble to enter into the different world of their art. And the world has shoved the Armenian Genocide under the rug, under a blanket of silence.) So I move on: How do you see yourself as a West Coast writer who is, in my view, under-appreciated by the East Coast establishment? That one, Aris says, I can answer. Our architecture here employs serious materials and design to admit light, in affirmation of what we see outside our windows. One has to be cynical not to step outside on any given day in California and not feel awe. The mountains, the ocean, the desert, the high desert, the high mountains. Even as a child, he adds, I felt the enormity and muscularity of California. There is a California mythos of this perception, well expressed by the poet William Everson, for example; but the East Coast establishment doesn't get it and thinks it's a dreamy concoction. They look to Europe still for validation. They are — I add — perhaps afraid not to be cynical, afraid of being dismissed as naïve.

Several of your novels feature older men, sometimes gay and sometimes heterosexual, often with Jewish names, who are mentor figures to young men or women. You had such a gay, Jewish mentor. The present mentor figure, the narrator in *Sophia*, has been an Angeleno for decades, maybe a Jew (he has that edge of sarcasm to his voice), maybe a transplant originally from back east (his inflections below the surface). He's older, on the cusp of old age but not fully there yet, still a sexual being but having to come to terms with both his age and the new world he's stumbled into: neo-Puritan, ideologized, humorless and unkind. You're pushing 60 yourself. How do you see your work and its focus evolving as you become an old man in a world that has changed? I'm like other writers, Aris replies: by twelve or thirteen I formed a view of the world that is romantic both sexually and spiritually. I can't leave it behind, and I won't embrace cynicism and skepticism. When I was a child I felt that there was something beautiful and redemptive just around the bend. That's why there is levity in my writing. Walt Whitman saw multiplicity in human nature. Throttling every voice into one homogeneous yell, which is happening now, terrifies me. Living here in Fresno, I've recognized the multiplicity of my own person, a surprise it's taken years to come to terms with. My way of coming to terms: to work as a writer.

Do you consider yourself an Armenian writer? Yes, Aris replies, an Armenian-American writer. I would like to go back to Yerevan and get into the middle of the most interesting conversation going on and just listen. I'm interested, not in some Fresno State professor's



ARTS & LIVING

AGBU Young Professionals, Northern California (AGBU-YPNC) to Hold 20th Annual San Francisco Winter Gala

SAN FRANCISCO — AGBU Young Professionals of Northern California (AGBU-YPNC) will host the 20th annual AGBU San Francisco Winter Gala, celebrating the weekend's 20th anniversary, on February 14-16. YPNC will donate a portion of the weekend's proceeds to the AGBU Women's Empowerment Program in Armenia.

"Twenty years of Winter Gala is a milestone that we are truly proud of, and we're grateful to our founding members for starting this incredible event," said David Ojakian, AGBU-YPNC Chairman and Gala Co-Chair. "The weekend has really grown, and is becoming a global YP event supporting important AGBU projects each year," he continued.

Gala's 20th anniversary weekend kicks off Friday, February 14 with a welcome reception at the Clock Bar inside Union Square's Westin St. Francis hotel, where attendees will mingle to start the weekend. Following the reception, guests will head to lounge night at Executive Order Bar & Lounge with DJ Mikey Tan playing dance music at this upscale lounge, and new venue for Winter Gala.

Saturday, February 15 brings Connect @ Gala 20/20, an all-new event where professional discussion and networking meet Winter Gala for the first time, as professionals from around the world collaborate for panel discussions, team breakouts, and hear from special guests. Saturday night features the weekend's signature event: the 20th Anniversary Gala dinner/dance aboard the Hornblower San Francisco Sprit luxury yacht. The evening will feature an elegant three course dinner, three decks of open bar,

and dancing to Armenian, international, and popular music courtesy of weekend favorite DJ Raffy.

Sunday, February 16 starts off with a weekend favorite: the Wine Tour. This year's trip returns to Sonoma Valley, featuring an all-inclusive experience at Jacuzzi Family Winery, including tours, tastings, and a private lunch on the winery's Tuscan style property. Sunday night features the return of last year's hit new event, Salsa Night at the Cigar Bar and Grill. Attendees will once again enjoy all-inclusive salsa lessons and dancing with a full menu, craft cocktails, a Winter Gala specialty cocktail, and cigars available for purchase. Salsa Night will provide a final opportunity to celebrate Winter Gala's 20th Anniversary and a reason for locals and guests alike to take Monday off.

For more information, visit www.agbusfwin-tergala.org.



Salsa night

Recipe Corner

Guest Recipe

by Christine Vartanian Datian



What Is Fiction?

JANIGIAN, from page 14

conversation, but in asking the postman about what he does. Does he have a dog? When he gets up in the morning, does he drink coffee, or what? I then suggest to Aris that happy affirmation of the simple realia of life— one's dog's greeting, a cup of coffee— seems to me a marker of Armenian culture that maybe the larger culture dismisses as unfashionably optimistic (cf. its attitude to the West Coast, supra).

Finally I ask Aris whether he has any advice for budding writers out there. I had a pupil at Harvard with real talent who now works in Silicon Valley, hates it, and wants to go back east for an MFA. Please dissuade him. Aris answers at once: Avoid academia, it is (or was) fine for a scholar but it's the death of any writer. Hold down a job. "Scour the streets looking for scabrous material!" Above all, write. And find a mentor, and good friends.

A pupil of mine got a job out here teaching Armenology some years ago and invited me a few times to lecture. I liked the place: California, but without the traffic jams of LA or the self-righteous, wacko pretense of the Bay Area. It's more affordable than the Coast; and when the big one hits, my pupil observed sardonically, we'll be beachfront property. But what really sold me on Fresno was that it has a living writer, one of the very few great writers in America and the only true heir to William Saroyan. His name is Aris Janigian. I like constructing chains of tradition and fertilization: so I also see Whitman and Melville in Aris' writing. I hope he and I both survive, with our families, into old age so he keeps on writing books for me to read and I keep on producing insightful scholarship about the Caucasus and Persia for him to enjoy, over many a bottle of California wine.

Buy the book. Where they begin by burning books, they will end by burning people, Heinrich Heine warned. Buy the book before the latter-day Hitler Youth of political correctness consign it to the bonfire with the classics of other dead (and living) "white" men and it becomes a rarity. Better still, buy two copies and give one to a college-age child or relative, so that the book burners can be stopped before they can kindle the fires.

(James Robert Russell is a scholar and professor in Ancient Near Eastern, Iranian and Armenian Studies. He has published extensively in journals, and has written several books.)

Wild Nettle Imam Bayaldi

Launched in 2016, The 1000 Leaf Project (<https://1000leaf.aua.am/>) is a citizen-driven website that allows anyone in Armenia to register a wild plant, providing details on where they found it, how to harvest it and what recipes to try. It focuses on empowering people for an end result that promotes and protects the rich biodiversity found in Armenia.

Contributed by Serda Ozbenian, the Executive Director of the Earth Island Institute's Armenian Environmental Network (AEN), www.armenia-environment.org, this recipe calls for using wild stinging nettle. Stinging nettle is on the list of Armenia's more than 3,600 wild plant species—a list that includes hundreds of edible varieties ranging from wild asparagus, mint and oregano to tart sea buckthorn and sweet mallow, an herb that formed the original basis for marshmallows. Ozbenian, Armine Sargsyan, AEN's former In-Country Director, and Lena Tachdjian, an environmental writer, collaborated with colleagues at the American University of Armenia's Acopian Center for the Environment (AUA), a group that promotes environmental conservation through research, to catalogue these edible species with help from the community. Ozbenian incorporates stinging nettle in her imam bayildi recipe. "Typically, you fill eggplant with onions and tomatoes, but I made this version with nettle," she said. "Sharing this recipe is another way The 1000 Leaf Project hopes to encourage users to interact with Armenia's varied environment," she added.

This recipe calls for Armenia's wild stinging nettle, but Ozbenian says substituting American wild nettle will work as well in a pinch.



INGREDIENTS:

2 large eggplants, long and skinny kind
4 cups stinging nettle, stems removed, chopped
2 medium tomatoes, chopped and sliced
2 small onions, chopped
3 cloves garlic, pressed
2 tablespoons lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon sugar
Salt, to taste
1/2 tablespoon coconut oil, to taste
2 tablespoons olive oil

PREPARATION

First, cut off the ends of the eggplant, peel them in strips (one white strip, one purple). Cut them in half lengthwise and then in half again. Scoop out some of the insides to make a boat (set aside). Soak eggplant pieces in a bowl of salted water (this softens them and reduces bitterness), and set them aside while you prepare the other ingredients. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F.

Chop onions and one tomato and press the garlic. Heat a 1/2 tablespoon of coconut oil in a pot and add ingredients to the pot. Sauté for 2 minutes on medium heat. Chop the nettle roughly and add it to the pot along with the sugar, salt and the eggplant insides you set aside. Stir well, cover, and cook on medium heat for 10 minutes.

While the nettle mixture is cooking, remove the eggplant pieces from the water, squeeze out any excess water and place them on an oven safe pan. Drizzle with lemon juice and olive oil. Add 1/4 cup water to bottom of the pan. Cover the pan with foil and place it in the oven for 20 minutes (the eggplant should be soft but not cooked thoroughly).

Fill each eggplant with nettle mixture, cover again, and put back in the oven for 10-15 minutes. Remove the foil, add thin slices of tomato to each eggplant boat, and sprinkle with a touch of salt and sugar. Place back in the oven uncovered until the water has evaporated and the eggplant is cooked thoroughly, about 10 minutes.

*This recipe appeared in Smithsonian on September 27, 2018, go to: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/armenias-edible-landscape-1000-leaf-project-180970426/#xhpkscq7Gx7zbGzV.99>. For information and recipes: <http://1000leaf.aua.am/>. To contribute: <https://www.armenia-environment.org/blog/thousand-leaf-announcement>. The AEN is a project of Earth Island Institute, based in Berkeley, California. AEN's mission is to facilitate tangible contributions to Armenia's sustainable development by increasing awareness of and supporting solutions to environmental issues in Armenia.



ARTS & LIVING

Anissa Markarian, Former Albanian Film Star

MARKARIAN, from page 13

the horrors of genocide. In 1921, my father escaped from Aleppo and returned to Constantinople (present day Istanbul) where he was hired as an apprentice in the clinic of an Armenian dentist. Five years later, he moved to Marseille, France, to study odontology. Because of a strange coincidence, in March 1931, the barely graduated student who was traveling to Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), where he planned to settle down as a dentist, changed his destination and took the ferry boat to Albania. Initially he worked in Korça, a city in south-east Albania, hired by the Red Cross. In February 1932 he opened his own dental clinic in Tirana, where he worked until 1948 - the year of the nationalization of private enterprises by the Albanian Communist government. From that year until his retirement at the age of 75, he practiced dentistry at the Tirana Public Central Dental Clinic.

My father married twice, the first time in 1934 to an Armenian, Evgenia Goganian. After his wife passed away in 1961, he married my mother, Evdhoqia Mima, an Albanian, who gave him two children: me and my younger brother. Both of us bear the names of our paternal grandparents: Anissa and Markar.

My father passed away in Tirana, on August 15, 1980, at the age of 82.

While studying the history of Armenians in Albania, I found out that in 1938 dentist Agop Markarian and the physician/colonel Mokin Potourlian in the service of Albanian court received the Iskender Beg medal from the King of Albania Zog I on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the monarchy. How would you describe your father's role in the history of Albanian medicine?

This is the very first time I hear about this medal and I thank you for letting me know. My father never mentioned it. Perhaps for fear of reprisals from the regime or because the high distinctions granted by former King Zog I were declared void by the communist government.

Regarding his role in the history of Albanian medicine, my father is considered the founder of Albanian orthodontics. In 1952, he opened the first orthodontic treatment laboratory in Albania, where thousands of patients were cared for and generations of young Albanian orthodontists were trained too.

Did your father teach you and your brother some Armenian?

I feel very lucky that my mother learned Armenian before I was born, out of love for my father. So I learned to speak and write Armenian by both my parents. It was the same for my brother.

Among the most precious memories I have with my dad are our long conversations in Armenian, one-on-one. The last years of his life, for him the time had stopped. The past and the present had merged into one. He used to tell me

The small Armenian community in Albania was mainly composed of craftsmen, merchants, and doctors. After Communist regime most of Armenians left Albania. What do you remember from Tirana's Armenian community life?

I especially remember the endless visits to each other, the picnics at the beach or in the villages around Tirana with Armenian family friends, the very discreet celebration of Armenian Christmas and Saint Vartan's Day

the maternal side. The Mimas, of which Prokop was the eldest son, formed a family of artists in the true sense of the word. In her youth, my mother was part of the Albanian State Folk Ensemble as a singer and dancer. Her older sister was one of the alto voices of the Opera choir and later a voice teacher. Of course, the most famous member of the family was my great-uncle, Prokop Mima (1920-1986). A huge theater actor and acting teacher posthumously

My participation in Albanian cinema as an actress and screenwriter is now well behind me, but I continue to write. After acting, literature is my other great passion. I started publishing poetry at the age of 20. After writing my first screenplay, I definitely abandoned poetry while favoring prose. My favorite literary genre is the short story. My first stories have been published in Albanian literary journals. Some of them appear and are published in two anthologies, one dedicated to young Albanian talents, the other to Albanian physician writers. In 1999, I published my first book, *The Coffin of Memories*, a collection of short stories in Albanian. The book takes the title of an autobiographical narrative, a brief recite on my father's sad experience.

My second book, the novel *15 days in April*, has just been published in Albania. It is a literary chronicle of the last 15 days of a totalitarian regime told in the style of magical realism. The book is largely inspired by facts that I really experienced under the dictatorship of the proletariat in Albania.

I would say that my writing explores and reflects my own memories. The preservation and transmission of family and collective memory from generation to generation is very important to me. We must never forget our origins, our language and our tradition. Our past represents the foundation on which we build our present and future.

Have you any connection with French-Armenian community?

When I arrived in France, I naturally got close to the local Armenian community, which helped me a lot in my administrative procedures for obtaining a residence permit. I will be eternally grateful to them. My marriage witnesses are two Armenian friends who have become like real family to me. I participate as much as I can in the cultural and religious events of the local Armenian community and especially in the commemorations of the genocide every April 24.

The current cover photo of your Facebook profile shows a group of Armenian children in the courtyard of an orphanage in Aleppo. Do you use social media to make people aware of the Armenian Genocide?

My Facebook profile is a reflection of two causes dear to me: remembering and honoring the sacrifice of my ancestors and all Armenian victims of the 1915-1920 genocide and the respect, safeguarding and development of my mother language, Albanian.

Every year, at the beginning of April, I renew the cover photo of my Facebook profile in order to draw the attention of my friends to the Ottoman massacres against the Armenian population, and every 24th of April I made it a habit to publish a story about my father's life as a survivor of that genocide.

Could you tell us about your current artistic projects?

Actually, I am working on three projects. I am preparing a book with autobiographical stories that tell the daily life of an Armenian-Albanian family in Tirana during the years of the Cold War. I have already started writing my second novel, still in the style of magical realism and finally, I keep writing the screenplay for "In Any Season 2," in which we will meet the former students of the university campus, in their 60s.

I would like to point out and emphasize once again my mixed origin: Armenian and Albanian. Usually a hybrid takes on and represents in a better version, if it is possible, the best virtues and attributes of his or her parents.

I have relentlessly and incessantly tried all my life to make both my parents proud, and to reflect as best as I could, their unique humanity, immense wisdom, uncovered talents, unfulfilled dreams, and what is most important: their immortal memory engraved in my heart and soul, while hoping and praying to pass this precious parental heritage onto my children Noémie and Garbis Junior.

As 2016 Literature Nobel Laureate, Bob Dylan once wrote: "Life is an ocean, but it ends at the shore," that is how I would like to ride the never ending waves of my artistic performances and creativity, enjoying them as long as they last...



Anissa Markarian on the cover of a magazine

and the commemoration of April 24. There has never been an official ceremony in memory of the Armenian martyrs of the genocide. Although the Albanian government had an empathic attitude toward the Armenian community, it never acknowledged or condemned the Turkish genocide of 1915. The only genocide we were talking about in Albania was that of the Jews by the Nazis during the Second World War. That's why I was often believed to be of Jewish origin.

You started your acting career early. How did it happen?

That's right; I played my first movie role when I was only 16 years old. But I have been on stage since the age of 8-9 with the school's theater troupe. I also participated in literary contests reciting poems and presented artistic spectacles.

I was spotted and discovered by the well-known Albanian film director Gëzim Erebara in March 1978. He was touring Tirana's high schools accompanied by his cinematographer, looking for actresses for his next film, "The Girls with Red Ribbons." One day, they came to my classroom. The film director asked me to read a text, and the cinematographer took some pictures of me. A week later, I was invited to Kinostudio for my first filmed casting which I succeeded. In the second filmed casting, three days later, I was tested for the second most important role of the movie, that of Dhurata, and I won it.

I assume you inherited your acting skills from your maternal uncle, famous stage actor Prokop Mima.

Yes, I think I inherited my artistic skills from

decorated with the high distinction "Honor of the Nation."

Albania was an isolated country for decades and the same we can say about the Albanian cinema. Unfortunately, I have not seen any Albanian film - the only exception is the Soviet-Albanian production of 1954, Luftëtari i madh i Shqipërisë Skënderbeu (Skanderbeg, the Great Albanian Warrior), by the way, with eminent Armenian stage actor Vahram Papazian in the role of Ottoman sultan. Could you, please, tell us about your roles in films?

My first film, "Girls with Red Ribbons," tells the story of a group of Albanian schoolgirls during World War II who refused to sing the fascist anthem at school and rebelled against the invader for the liberation of the country.

In 1980, I was chosen by Viktor Gjika, one of the two greatest Albanian directors, a graduate of the Higher Institute of Cinematography of Moscow, to play the lead role, that of Zana, in his movie "In Any Season." The film's plot takes place in a university campus and tells the love story of two students, a volleyball player and a cellist.

The film "Spring Did Not Come Alone," which I co-wrote, was directed in 1988 by Piro Milkani, another great Albanian director, a graduate from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. My character, Irena, is a young physician who discovers that she is stricken by an incurable disease. The film develops the spiritual, philosophical and human aspects of the confrontation with impending death. The movie won the Best Feature Award at the 8th Albanian Film Festival.

In 1990, Piro Milkani directed me in the film "Youth's Colors." I was also the screenwriter. It is the story of a group of schoolmates who meet after 20 years. In the same hotel where their meeting is held, another party is in full swing: a group of young graduates are celebrating the end of high school. The film tells the concerns and aspirations of two different generations in the context of the end of the totalitarian regime in Albania.

You are also a writer, author of poetry and prose.



Young Anissa with her parents

about his happy childhood. But strangely, while his brothers and sisters had stayed at the age they had before leaving home forced by the Turkish soldiers, Agop had grown up and started his family in Albania. All this was very painful to me. In a sense, it was as if he had brought me back to Afyonkarahisar and I was playing with my aunts and my uncle in the backyard of the house where, if I remember correctly, there was an apricot and a pomegranate tree.



ARTS & LIVING

CALENDAR

CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 17 — Literary evening, Friday, Levon Barseghian, president of the Asbarez Club, Gyumri, and Lilit Keheyen, will speak on two volumes by Edmond Yervant Azadian, will speak on his two collections of essays, book on With My Time and Contemporaries [Zhamanagi yev zhamanagagitsneru hed] Echer goruseal yev angorusd [Lost and Unlost Pages] 7.30 p.m., Glendale, Central Library Hall, Reception to follow. Free. Musical interlude by tenor Suren Mkerdichyan and pianist Armine Ghazaryan. Sponsored by the three Tekeyan Chapters in California, Tekeyan Los Angeles, Glendale and Metro LA Chapters, and Abril Bookstore.

FLORIDA

FEBRUARY 2 — Banquet Celebration welcoming our newly consecrated Primate Bishop Daniel Findikyan for his first pastoral visit, in conjunction with the 32nd Anniversary of consecration of St. David Armenian Apostolic Church on Sunday following the Holy Badarak at the Mardigian Hall – 12:30pm. For further information, please call St. David Church office – Christine 561-994-2335 Or Sonig Kradjian 607-727-8786”

MASSACHUSETTS

JANUARY 12 — Sunday Cultural Series, 2-4 p.m., Armenian Museum of America, 65 Main Street, Watertown, Adele & Haig Der Manuelian galleries, 3rd floor. On the second Sunday of every month, join experts Gary and Susan Lind-Sinianian for a workshop on Armenian dance! Gary and Susan have collected more than 100 village dances and shared these with the community for the last 42 years. Learn Armenian dances performed at American picnics and traditional dances from



On January 11, the Tekeyan Cultural Association of Greater New York will present a children’s concert, “A Children’s Song and Dance Show,” featuring Canadian-Armenian singer Joelle. The program will be at the Hovnanian School, 817 River Road, Milford, NJ, 2-4 p.m. A light reception will follow. For tickets see calendar entry at right.

the old country. Members FREE. Non-members \$12. NOTE: The Museum’s elevator is in the process of being upgraded and is currently out of service. Register online (<https://www.armenianmuseum.org/classes>) or call Education Coordinator, Garin Habeshian at 617.926.2562 ext. 103.

JANUARY 18 — (Birds)squared Enamel Birds/Origami Birds. Mary Aroian enamel birds/ origami bird demonstration (plus make your own!) 12 pm – 2 pm, Gallery of Enamel Art, 340 Main Street, Suite 505,

Worcester, www.enamelgallery.org Free entry, coffee, hot cocoa, and cookies

FEBRUARY 9 — A cappella concert by Boston Jazz Voices to Benefit the Armenia Tree Project. 5 pm at the Jenks Center, 109 Skillings Road, Winchester, MA. The venue has plenty of free parking. Event will feature an a cappella performance, refreshments, raffle, and silent auction. Tickets are \$30 each and a family four-pack of tickets is available for \$100. Tickets available via Eventbrite at www.armeniatree.org/acappella

NEW JERSEY

JANUARY 11 — Tekeyan Cultural Association of Greater New York presents “A Children’s Song and Dance Show,” starring Joelle. 2-4 p.m., Saturday, the Hovnanian School, 817 River Road, New Milford. Tickets \$25 in advance, \$30 at the door. Children 2 and under free. Joelle of Montreal will perform her first children’s show in New Jersey. Light reception to follow. For tickets text or email Talia, 917-238-3970, rsvptaliab@gmail.com or Salpie 516-413-4178, Salpimegerian@gmail.com.

RHODE ISLAND

JANUARY 26 — The Armenian Historical Association of Rhode Island presents “Not in Our Backyard,” The amazing clean-up and restoration project at Oakland Cemetery, a roundtable discussion by the Sts. Vartanantz Men’s Club, Sunday, 1 p.m. Learn why the Men’s Club took on the task of cleaning up an abandoned cemetery. 245 Waterman St., fifth floor conference room, Providence. Refreshments at 12.30 p.m.

Calendar items are free. Entries should not be longer than 5 lines. Listings should include contact information. Items will be edited to fit the space, if need be.

In This Corner, an Armenian Pro Wrestler. In That Corner, Genocidal History.

By John Williams

Chris McCormick’s new novel, *The Gimmicks*, contains what might seem like a few gimmicks of its own, including forays into the worlds of competitive backgammon and professional wrestling. But those subcultures, emphasized in the book’s eye-catching cover design and promotional copy, are not what fuel it. It’s really about history – personal and collective – and it’s rooted in horrors from more than a century ago that are still making news today.

McCormick’s novel begins in the early 1970s, nearly 60 years after the Armenian Genocide conducted by the Ottoman Empire, during which one and a half million Armenians were killed. Ruben Petrosian is a teenager living in Soviet Armenia who is obsessed with the fact that Turkey has not yet acknowledged or apologized for the crimes.

“Alliances with Turkey were growing around the world, not shrinking,” McCormick writes, “and even sympathetic governments were willing to ignore its denial for the right price.” (Earlier this month, the United States Senate voted unanimously to officially acknowledge the genocide as such. The Trump administration balked, calling the crimes “mass atrocities” as opposed to orchestrated genocide.)

Ruben is a promising backgammon player – but not as promising as his friend and rival Mina. She finds Ruben dour, and his fixation on the Turks and history boring. (“I was going to say male,” she declares, “but boring works, too.”) She compares constant focus on the past to lemon trees: “Imagine if they never dropped the dead lemons from last year, or the year before that. Just went on carrying all their old shriveled lemons until the branches sagged so low that no new fruit could grow.”

After an orphan named Avo Gregoryan arrives to live with Ruben and his family, the two boys come to think of themselves as brothers, though they are really cousins of cousins. Ruben is scowling and bespectacled, with “the look of an old man cursed to live in a child’s body.” Avo, 6-foot-6, is “an enormous but entirely sweet-hearted boy.”

When Mina is chosen to compete at a backgammon tournament in Paris, Ruben schemes to be sent in her place, seeing the trip as a chance to escape his country and expand the

scope of his political activities. “We’re better than hurting a girl, yes,” Ruben tells Avo while they conspire against Mina, “but we’re also better than spending our lives in a drunken village in the corner of a dying empire, aren’t we?”

From afar, Ruben convinces Avo, then 19, to move to Los Angeles and join members of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), a group intent on securing

es in his gentler cousin, who daydreams about returning to Armenia and Mina.

Instead, Avo is recruited to become a wrestler (named The Brow Beater, for his prominent unibrow) by Terry “Angel Hair” Krill, a washed-up manager who narrates sections of the novel set in the late 1980s.

A thumbnail sketch inevitably makes this novel sound overcrowded and jumbled, but McCormick keeps things admirably nimble, moving the stories forward while shuttling back and forth through time and across perspectives. Raised in California and Armenian on his mother’s side, he leans on real history, like Asala and its tactics, for his novel’s bones.

At a time when plot and contrivance in literary fiction are not the most fashionable things, McCormick, in his early 30s, proves adept at old-fashioned skills that one hopes will never go entirely unpracticed. With a minimum amount of soapiness, he keeps the pages turning on his love triangles and nostalgic wrestlers and brothers at peace and war. And he allows his larger themes to resonate without pushing them on us too hard.

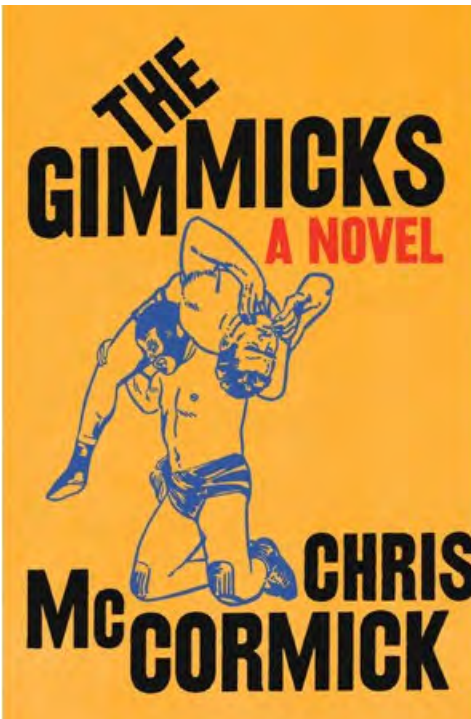
One of those themes is the tides of history, and whether one can ever really decide to avoid them. “I want no trouble. I only want to be provincial,” Mina writes at one point in a journal, willing herself to believe that “the past is the past is the past.” Others include the line between justice and petty vengeance, in matters both large and small; the power (or lack thereof) in apologies; and the appeals and hazards of “pretending so well that we forgot we were pretending.”

McCormick only loses his footing on occasion. Avo speaks some jarringly (for him) profound and “written” observations, like this one about America: “Everything that makes sense in that country is terrible, and everything that’s nonsense has a kind of grace to it.” And Ruben is not quite as vivid on the page as his cousin – his fundamentalism is believable up to a point, but not conveyed with quite enough psychological detail to sell his most brutal decisions.

The novel draws to a close around one last devastating event from history, the 1988 earthquake in Armenia that killed tens of thousands. “We lost everything,” Mina says of relocating to America after the disaster. “We’re being careful not to lose anything else in the moving, you understand?”

(This review originally appeared in the *New York Times* on December 31, 2019.)

BOOKS



The Gimmicks
By Chris McCormick
354 pages. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers.
\$27.99.

“global acknowledgment, apologies and reparations” for the Genocide. The operatives in California make plans for an airport bombing and the assassination of a genocide-denying professor. But Avo’s heart is not in it. Ruben’s fervor never catch-



COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY

While Middle East Is Embroiled in Crisis, Turkey Seeks Mischief

By Edmond Y. Azadian

Pundits and politicians this week have been holding their breaths and trying to guess what will happen next, after the assassination of Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian elite Quds forces and a national icon.

Questions abound in the world media: how could Iraq's sovereignty be compromised by a strike on its territory? Will the tensions escalate further or is there a diplomatic solution? How and when will the revenge strikes from Iran come? There are many other questions circulating in the diplomatic circles and the media.

As the three-day mourning period ends, the Iranian leadership is exploiting the funeral procession of their national icon.

There are no easy — or accurate — answers to any of those questions as the situation remains fluid.

To begin with, the US and in particular, in Washington, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has taken over the White House. Crossing the Rubicon is not in President Trump's style and strategy. Thus far, he has kept politicians and the media guessing while he teases his enemies with the illusion of brinkmanship.

It was not a Freudian slip when Pompeo answered in public that the president was in it [the decision] "reluctantly." Today, Pompeo is replicating the role of Vice President Dick Cheney in the George W. Bush administration, who thirsted for the invasion of Iraq.

The US Congress, predictably, reacted along partisan lines. There was no questions in the minds of legislators that Soleimani was "evil incarnate," but taking him out required a congressional resolution. This argument was, of course, cited by Democrats, even invoking the War Powers Act, while Republicans were lock step with the president.

The most ardent supporter of Mr. Trump's action was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; scant attention has been paid to the fact that Washington's move was a preventative one to divert the potential for another Middle East war. Indeed, Netanyahu has been caught up in scandals. There is an indictment against him, while his election campaign is in a dead heat with his adversary, Benny Gantz. It is very plausible that Netanyahu was ready to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, igniting a regional war, because for Tehran, Israel is a relatively easier target than Washington. Therefore, the war planners in the US took the onus on themselves for damage control. Of course, this view does not enjoy much popularity in the media.

The reaction of the international community was mixed. Even the US's closest ally, Britain, while trying to maintain the appearance of solidarity with Washington, expressed concerns about the consequences. Spokesperson of Russia's Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova characterized the act as a cynical ploy, while advising restraint.

The UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres issued a statement advising the parties to avoid an escalation.

China's reaction was muted. Its Foreign Ministry echoed mostly the UN's cautious approach.

Similar voices were also heard in Yerevan, and Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenia has friendly relations with the US and Iran. Armenia's top brass held a special meeting and placed the armed forces on alert.

Angela Merkel of Germany decided to take a trip to Moscow, most probably seeking President Vladimir Putin's mediation as Russia enjoys relatively good relations with Iran and its enemies in the Middle East, i.e. the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

It is under the cover of such troubled times that unexpected mischievous acts are often committed. And indeed, Turkey is out seeking international adventures, trying to add building blocks to its Ottomanist schemes.

As much as Turkey and Russia are cooperating in Syria and Ankara has dared to buy Russian S-400 missile defense systems to Washington's chagrin, the two have been historical competitors for Iran in the region and that trend continues to date, albeit latently, when Turkey builds up its forces in Azerbaijan and in particular in Nakhichevan, that has a number of ramifications in different directions.

Any observer can see that Turkey's move is primarily a self-serving one. But from the Russian perspective, Ankara's action is viewed through a historic context. For NATO planners, it remains a double game, since Turkish military presence brings NATO assets to Iran's doorsteps while adding another dimen-

sion to Russia's containment.

In light of these moves, the Kremlin's assurances that it will double the forces of its military base in Gyumri cannot be cause for jubilation because the significance of that base goes beyond the parameters of Armenia's defense to become a pawn in regional power play and as such it becomes a prime target in a conflagration.

While world attention is focused on the standoff between Washington and Tehran, Turkey's next mischievous move is in Cyprus.

It is not enough that Turkey has trampled the sovereignty of another country by occupying 38 percent of Cyprus; it claims legal rights for illegally occupied portion of Cyprus in the littoral reserves of oil and gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. As well, Turkey is contemplating constructing a military base in Cyprus.

Since NATO destroyed Libya's stable government, the country has become a victim of warlords and the Islamist forces have taken refuge in that war-torn country.

Libya was part of the Ottoman Empire and it was lost to Italy in 1912. Now, within the scope of Ottomanist revival and the lure of oil and gas deposits, Ankara has decided to send troops to support one of the rival factions in Libya, namely to Tripoli. Ankara has been fishing in murky waters by signing treaties with one of the factions in Libya before that country recovers from its current fragmentation.

Seth J. Franzman, writing in the January 1 issue of the *Jerusalem Post*, states, "The play by Turkey has muscle behind it. Ankara has been sending its navy out to conduct drills around Cyprus, showing the flag and its power. Turkey has new sea-based missiles. It is buying new drilling ships. Cyprus thought it was ahead of the curve, signing deals with Egypt in 2003, Lebanon in 2007 and Israel in 2010. But Turkey has thrown



down the gauntlet."

Turkey has also been intimidating Greece by claiming that its littoral rights to drill supercede those of the Greek islands.

President Trump has warned Turkey against sending troops to Libya. But his warnings are not worth any more than his earlier warnings to Ankara not to slaughter Kurds. Egypt has put its naval forces on alert, but the Egyptian army is no match for Turkey. The US arms its allies, like Egypt, to the extent of scaring away their regional enemies but falling short of undermining Israeli military supremacy in the Middle East.

Mr. Erdogan is on another gamble with international implications. While trying to revive the Ottoman dream, he seems to be striving to best Ataturk's legacy, to endow Turkey with world-class achievements. After the impressive international airport in Istanbul and a new bridge, he is planning to dig a parallel canal to the Strait of Bosphorus reportedly to relieve traffic. The "Istanbul Canal" is estimated to cost anywhere from \$20 to \$75 billion and is strongly criticized by the opposition. Besides that domestic hurdle, the project has also international implications. The shipping lanes of the Bosphorus are regulated by the Treaty of Montreux of 1936. Should a parallel canal be built, it will call for the revision of that treaty, which in turn will affect all of its signatories. Some observers also believe that the move will exacerbate Russian-Turkish relations and push the parties towards a confrontation.

The former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu believes that the subject nations of the Ottoman Empire were in idyllic relations with their tormentors. Mr. Erdogan shares that view, too. That bloody rule has been anything but idyllic. It has been a dirty curse for the peoples in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Its resurgence cannot promise anything better.

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COMMENTARY



My Turn

By Harut Sassounian

Senate's Adoption of Genocide Resolution Upsets Newly-Elected Patriarch of Turkey Patriarch Sahak II, Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople

I responded last month to the interview given by the newly-elected Patriarch of Turkey, Bishop Sahak II Mashalyan, to a Turkish newspaper in which he had criticized the adoption of the Armenian Genocide Resolution by the U.S. Senate.

Since then, the Armenian world was disturbed that the Patriarch has continued giving interviews to the Turkish media, making pro-Turkish and anti-Armenian comments. As I have written before, it is understandable that the remnants of the Armenian community in Istanbul are hostages in the brutal hands of the Turkish regime. Consequently, we should express some understanding for their questionable pronouncements. Nevertheless, not every statement is made under duress. Some of their negative statements are made of their own free will, without any pressure from the Turkish government. Sometimes, certain Armenians in Turkey make anti-Armenian statements either to protect their own business arrangements with Turkish officials or to preserve their seats by endearing themselves to the Turkish authorities. Therefore, one should not automatically jump to the conclusion that we should refrain from criticizing their pro-Turkish statements just because they live in Turkey. It all depends on the circumstances of the statement and the extent to which an Istanbul Armenian attacks Armenians and their political demands.

After giving interviews to two Turkish newspapers – *Milliyet* and *Sabah* – Patriarch Mashalyan continued to be the center of attention of the Turkish media. He told the *Aksham* newspaper on January 2, 2020, that Diaspora Armenians and Istanbul Armenians have no connection with each other and that the Diaspora has remained 100 years behind.

Patriarch Mashalyan added: “All minorities in Turkey agree that we live in our most comfortable period under the reign of President Erdogan.” The Patriarch seems to have forgotten that for the last 12 years the Armenian community was not allowed to elect a replacement Patriarch after the comatose state of the previous Patriarch. Erdogan’s government was also the one that banned the participation of several Turkish Armenian clergymen in the patriarchal election simply because they were serving in parishes outside of Turkey. Patriarch Mashalyan most probably would not have been chosen if the other candidates were allowed to participate in the election.

“Ever since the period of the Ottoman Empire, the problems of minorities have been exploited to interfere in the internal affairs of Turkey. We do not want this issue to be the reason why Turkey suffers losses in international politics. We are the citizens of this country. Any word against this country hurts us too,” the Patriarch told *Aksham* newspaper.

Furthermore, the Patriarch of Turkey stated that “the Armenian Diaspora has no connection with us. 1915 and its subsequent memories have been transmitted through generations. They have seen that this issue at least preserves their unity and creates a negative collective consciousness. A collective consciousness has been created based on a tragedy. They do not wish to lose it. But we remained on these lands after those events. We chose to live together with the other elements. The Diaspora has remained 100 years behind.... There is a difference between the way we understand Islam and the way the Diaspora understands it. In reality, the people are much softer. They remember on April 24, and forget it until the next April 24.

Continuing his anti-Armenian crusade, Patriarch Sahak II told the Turkish NTV on January 2, 2020 that the decision of the U.S. Senate approving the Armenian Genocide Resolution “hurt me.” The Patriarch also stated: “We are not

the Diaspora. We have always been here and stayed in this country. After the bitter events of 1915, we chose to stay here. We lived for 105 years differently from the Diaspora Armenians. They existed with the 1915 trauma with bitter memories which they passed from generation to generation. We survived that trauma. We did not forget it, but we survived it. The magic of living together has taken place.”

Patriarch Sahak II has had a controversial past with various odd incidents. But I prefer not to dwell on those issues right now. It is not pleasant to attack a high-ranking Armenian clergyman. I just want to quote briefly from the Patriarch’s 2017 writing: “I gave the church my life, my youth and my masculinity. I do not have a family. For six years, I lived in a 20 meter square room in the Patriarchate.”

The statements made by Patriarch Sahak II to the Turkish media, at the very beginning of his term in office, even prior to his ordination, are not a good sign. Many Armenians, both inside and outside Turkey, were complaining that his rival, Archbishop Aram Ateshyan, was too subservient to the Turkish authorities. While that kind of behavior is somewhat understandable, given the oppressive nature of the Turkish authorities, the newly-elected Patriarch has far exceeded his rival’s submissive conduct.

Patriarch Sahak II’s self-demeaning words to the Turkish media are simply the repetition of the Turkish denials of the Armenian Genocide and rejection of the recent recognition by the US Senate. Furthermore, by aligning himself with the Turkish government, the Patriarch is distancing himself and the Turkish Armenian community from the Diaspora just as Turkish officials have banned Turkish Armenian clergymen serving in the Diaspora from participating in the patriarchal election.

Patriarch Sahak II is living in the honeymoon stage of his new position. However, as we have seen in the past, the Turkish government can at any moment tighten the screws on the local Armenian community. When that happens, it is the Armenian Diaspora that will come to the rescue of the Turkish Armenian community, ignoring the Patriarch’s unwelcome words against the Diaspora.

Furthermore, I am mindful that the Patriarch will use the Diaspora’s critical statements to score points with the Turkish authorities.

Geopolitics, or just business?

Since the new government came to power, the railway and other Russian companies in Armenia have been subjected to a series of investigations and controversies. These are often interpreted in geopolitical terms, as manifestations of a West-Russia clash. In spite of the occasional tensions, however, both sides appear committed to making their economic relationship work.

In 2008, Russian Railways won an Armenian government tender, for which it was the only bidder, to operate Armenia’s railways. The contract was granted for 30 years, with the possibility of a 10-year extension on top of that.

Under Armenia’s previous leadership, the railway and other Russian economic assets were plainly acknowledged as having as much strategic significance as business logic. At a 2016 meeting with Russian Railways director Oleg Belozorov, then-president Serzh Sargsyan said that “Armenia considers cooperation in the field of transportation to be an important component of Armenian-Russian strategic relations.” Accordingly, Russian businesses were given a relatively free hand to operate.

Following the new government’s rise to power, that has changed, and South Caucasus Railways has been subjected to a number of investigations. In August 2018, the Armenian State Revenue Service conducted raids on the company’s offices as part of an investigation into allegations it had evaded \$19,000 in taxes. As yet, there have been no charges filed.

In December of that year, another Armenian law enforcement body, the Investigative Committee, announced that it was looking into “alleged abuses” at the railway company, in particular that it had not carried out investments in the country’s rail system that were stipulated in the original tender. The company responded that the committee was “biased.”

The railway investigations have been paralleled by similar inquiries into the books of the Armenian affiliate of the Russian state gas company, Gazprom.

A September report on the international Russian-language TV network RTVI cited an unnamed source as saying that Russia was considering suspending its operation of the railway because of the investigations. The report was widely spread across Armenian and Russian media.

“Armenia created a situation in which South Caucasus Railways is unable to function properly,” Russian Deputy Minister of Transportation Vladimir Tokarev told RTVI. “All documents for 10 years have been confiscated, unconfirmed charges have been filed, and no guarantees have been given. Our arguments are that inspections previously have not revealed any violations, and that terms of the concession are being ignored.” (That was not entirely true:

in 2016, Armenian investigators also found irregularities in tenders conducted by the company.)

Armenia dismissed the report. “There is no question of early termination of the agreement,” Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan told RFE/RL’s Armenian service. But he added that Yerevan was not entirely happy with the company’s work. “We have only two trains that meet European standards of transportation,” he said, referring to a recently introduced electric train between Gyumri and Yerevan. “Yes, that issue has also been discussed, and some of our positions have become demands,” he said, without further elaborating.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also said that there was no reason for Russia to terminate its contract. “Armenia does not want it, and Russia does not want it. Why should it happen?” Pashinyan said in an interview with Russian newspaper Kommersant. He also denied that there was any political subtext to the investigations, calling the railroad “a purely economic issue” that the media was politicizing.

“The logic has changed from before the revolution, when the state acknowledged the political side of this deal,” Daniel Ioannisyan, a member of Armenia’s Public Council, a body intended to coordinate between the government and civil society, told Eurasianet.

To some in Armenia, the tussling over the railroad is evidence that Yerevan needs to make greater efforts to reduce its ties with Moscow. “We can state as a fact that the revolution hasn’t affected Russian-Armenian relations. This isn’t acceptable,” said Artur Sakunts, the chairman of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly in Vanadzor, a human rights organization that recently prepared a report on Russia’s military presence in Armenia.

Sakunts said the railway contract should be terminated. “If we stay like this, we will never have our own resources, the contract we have now isn’t aimed at developing Armenia,” he told Eurasianet. “Colonization by Russia isn’t just about creating dependency, but also sucking out our resources.”

On December 8, Belozorov, the director of Russian Railways, met with Armenian Minister of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure Suren Papikyan in Moscow and agreed to establish a joint working group on “improving the activity of South Caucasus Railways, including the possibility of modernizing the concession,” the ministry announced. The ministry did not respond to Eurasianet’s queries under the Freedom of Information Act about what new investments might be under consideration.

(Ani Mejlumyan is a reporter based in Yerevan. This column originally appeared on the Eurasianet website on January 7.)

Armenia and Russia Keep Ties on Track

By Ani Mejlumyan

ONE DAY in November, railway employees in Gyumri, Armenia’s second city, went to work and found they had been replaced by Russians. Russian conductors were already at the rail yard operating the trains, and the Armenian employees were told they were put on leave.

The Armenian employees believed their replacement was the result of a strike a month earlier where they had demanded higher wages. “We put them in a difficult position and this is how they answer us,” one conductor, Gor Ghazaryan, told a local TV station. “Instead of me there is a Russian operating the train and ruining our equipment.”

The news quickly spread through Armenia, prompting discussions in parliament and meetings between senior government officials and the railway management.

But it turned out that it was only a misunderstanding: the Russians were just on a work exchange, which also sent Armenian railway employees to work in Russia. Vahagn Hareyan, a conductor based in Yerevan, went to the Urals city of Ufa. “We learned a lot,” he told Eurasianet. “Of course Russian trains are more advanced, the procedures are more complex and precise.” Ruben Grdzelyan, a spokesman for the Russian-operated Armenian rail company, South Caucasus Railways, told Eurasianet that workers were notified ahead of time that the Russian workers would be coming and said he doesn’t know why the controversy erupted.

The misunderstanding, however, highlighted the tensions that have emerged between Yerevan and Moscow as a result of Armenia’s 2018 “Velvet Revolution.” The new regime is filled with pro-Western figures, raising questions about how durable the longstanding strategic partnership between Armenia and Russia can be.



Manhattan Property Decline Worsened as Wall Street Boomed

By Lindsay Fortado

NEW YORK (*Financial Times*) — Manhattan’s property decline deepened in the last three months of 2019, with sales falling for the eighth time in nine quarters and the average price dropping 7.5 percent from a year earlier.

Average prices of Manhattan co-ops and condos fell to \$1.8 million in the fourth quarter, according to Douglas Elliman, the largest real estate brokerage in the New York City area.

The price per square foot — a key metric — declined 6.1 percent to \$1,581, and the number of sales dropped 1.2 percent, the brokerage said. The Manhattan property drop is in sharp contrast to the rally on Wall Street, where stock markets have hit new records.

Steven James, chief executive of Douglas Elliman, likened 2019 to “a tale of two cities”, with the newly introduced New York mansion tax and President Donald Trump’s federal tax law changes putting a damper on the luxury market while apartments marketed for less than \$5 million were quicker to sell. The mansion tax, which took effect halfway through the year, levied a sliding scale of charges on apartments selling for more than \$1 million.

Trump’s tax law limited the amount of state and local taxes households could deduct from their federal taxes. The latter has been blamed for spurring a flight by wealthy New Yorkers to Florida, which has no personal income tax.

The new taxes, coupled with historically low interest rates, have also scared off cash buyers. Douglas Elliman reported the lowest overall share of cash buyers in the quarter since they started recording that data five years ago.

Properties also sat on the market for the longest time since 2011, according to the real estate broker Compass, as

buyers waited for prices to fall further. New developments fared the worst, spending an average of 377 days up for sale, 102 percent more than the rest of the market, according to Garrett Derderian, the managing director for market analysis at Core, a New York real estate brokerage.

Developers have responded by offering more concessions recently.

Derderian said a pull-back by foreign investors and the growing supply of luxury inventory, which has flooded the market in recent years, have also hit apartment prices. Sellers sold for an average discount from the asking price of 9 percent, according to Core data. “It is a positive sign sellers are adjusting their prices to meet the market, and buyers are re-engaging,” Derderian said. “Still, the upcoming presidential election puts a cloud of uncertainty over the market, which will probably result in a sales slowdown as we near the election.”

As building costs have risen, real estate developers in recent years have focused almost entirely on the luxury end in hopes of making the biggest profit. Instead, a glut of properties has flooded the market and many of the high-end buyers they hope to attract have pulled back. Brokers say that while the market is still competitive for lower-priced apart-

ments, many buyers are waiting for prices to fall further.

The property market at the lower end was less affected in 2019, with buyers flooding into the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, or seeking out studios and one-bedrooms in Manhattan.

That split was evident in the differing fortunes of condo



Garrett Derderian

sales and those of co-ops, which tend to be lower-priced. The number of condo sales in Manhattan in the fourth quarter was down 3 percent from the previous year, while co-op sales were up 18 percent, according to Core data. Ninety-five percent of all co-op sales in Manhattan in the fourth quarter were priced under \$3 million.

AAF Shipped \$71 Million of Aid to Armenia and Artsakh During 2019

GLENDALÉ — The Armenia Artsakh Fund (AAF) delivered \$6.4 million in humanitarian assistance to Armenia and Artsakh during the fourth quarter of 2019. Of this amount, the AAF collected \$5.9 million of medicines and other supplies donated by Americares (\$4 million); Direct Relief (\$1.6 million); Catholic Medical Mission Board (\$199,000); Health Partners International of Canada (\$81,000) and MAP International (\$9,000).

Other organizations which contributed valuable goods during this period were Armenian Missionary Association of America (\$282,000) and Project Agape (\$223,000).

The medicines, medical supplies and hygiene products donated during this period were sent to the AGBU Claudia Nazarian Medical Center for Syrian Armenian Refugees in Yerevan, Aleppo Compatriotic Charity Organization, Arabkir United Children’s Foundation, Armenian Eyecare Project, Armenian Missionary Association of America, City of Smile Foundation, Fund for Armenian Relief, Institute of Perinatology, Obstetrics and

Gynecology Center, Metsn Nerces Charitable Organization, Muratsan Children’s Endocrinology Center, National Hematology Center, St. Grigor Lusavorich Medical Center, and the health ministries of Armenia and Artsakh.

During the twelve months of 2019 AAF shipped to Armenia and Artsakh the phenomenal amount of \$71 million of medicines, medical supplies and other relief products. In the past 30 years, including the shipments under its predecessor, the United Armenian Fund, the AAF has delivered to Armenia and Artsakh a grand total of \$891 million worth of relief supplies on board 158 airlifts and 2,456 sea containers.

“The Armenia Artsakh Fund is regularly offered free of charge millions of dollars of life-saving medicines and medical supplies. All we have to do is pay for the shipping expenses. We welcome your generous donations to be able to continue delivering this valuable assistance to all medical centers in Armenia and Artsakh,” stated Harut Sassounian, the President of AAF.

Georgian Doctor Tried by South Ossetia after Crossing Border

TSKHINVALI, Georgia (RFE/RL) — A Georgian physician who was arrested by Russian border guards in Georgia’s breakaway region of South Ossetia in November has gone on trial for “illegally crossing the border” to treat a patient.

A court in the separatist-controlled region started a preliminary hearing into the case against Vazha Gaprindashvili, on December 12.

Gaprindashvili was detained on November 9 when he crossed the administrative boundary with the breakaway region to provide a patient with medical assistance.

His lawyer, Vladimir Fidarov, said that the court in the town of Alkhagori, which the separatist government calls Leninogorsk, has refused to satisfy a

defense request to release Gaprindashvili on his own recognizance.

The doctor insists that he did not break any laws, as South Ossetia is Georgian territory. According to the separatist government-imposed regulations, Gaprindashvili faces up to two years in prison.

Moscow has recognized South Ossetia and Georgia’s other separatist region, Abkhazia, as independent states after the five-day Georgian-Russian War in August 2008.

Russian troops are now stationed in the two regions, while Georgia and most of the international community consider both regions to be occupied territories.



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