

# JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

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## ARMENIANS IN ISRAEL

Arthur Hagopian

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Armenians Outside St. James / Four Groups of Armenians / Armenian Success Stories

*The Old City of Jerusalem is a mosaic of cultures and religions shaped into an intricate pattern within the ancient walls. The Armenian community forms one of these ethnic tiles; a small enclave which keeps to itself and receives little public attention. Three years ago, however, tensions began to seethe and simmer within the Armenian Quarter when Patriarch Yeshighe Derderian replaced Archbishop Shahe Ajamian. Violence erupted last month when a group of Patriarch Derderian's supporters attacked a family well known for its anti-Patriarch views. One man was killed and six others were injured in a street battle that church representatives dubbed "a fight between two families."*

*This month, Viewpoints presents an inside look at the Armenian community in*

*Israel, written by Armenian journalist Arthur Hagopian. Hagopian offers a rare glimpse into the world of a nation in exile that has found a safe haven in the Jewish homeland. — Editor's note.*

### Armenians in Exile

Tucked away in a corner of the Old City of Jerusalem lies the Armenian Patriarchate of St. James, a sprawling convent and monastery complex built on the site of Rome's vaunted 10th Legion encampment. Like the Jews, the Armenians have survived religious persecution, attempted genocide and exile from their historic homeland, currently divided between Turkey and the U.S.S.R.

Today, only 1500 Armenians remain in Jerusalem, and their future here is

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uncertain. According to their traditions, Armenians reached Eretz Israel between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE, when Tigranes the Great ruled an empire extending from the Caspian Sea to the shores of the Mediterranean. The first time the word *Armenia* was mentioned was in an inscription attributed to King Darius of Persia. Armenians arrived in the wake of the Roman legions, as traders, artisans, legionnaires and administrators. But it was Christianity that put the final stamp on the perpetual Armenian presence here.

Diaspora Armenians are descended primarily from ancestors who lived in historic Armenia. Many still have relatives in the disparate towns and villages of Turkish Armenia, although their roots may have disappeared from the pages of history following frequent family name changes, necessitated by political exigencies. Apkar, for example, has been changed to Ali, Misak into Murad, or even Mohammed.

Armenians have survived by challenging empires and by scuttling all attempts at assimilation. They believe in the eternity of their race, symbolized by their emblem — the soaring twin peaks of Mount Ararat, traditional site of Noah's stranded ark. The goldsmiths, jewelers, photographers, pharmacists, teachers and potters who pound the ancient cobblestones of the Old City — a place that is just another diaspora for most of them — are living proof of Armenian durability.

### The St. James Community

Israel's Armenian community is concentrated in the complex of St. James. In its heyday, the complex was home for nearly eight thousand people, sometimes crammed ten to a room. Today, there are hardly six hundred people left inside St. James' walls, with another eight to nine hundred scattered throughout Israel (mainly Jaffa and Haifa) and the West Bank (Bethlehem, Ramallah and Gaza), a far cry from the fifteen to twenty thousand who used to live here.

"Armenians have never taken kindly to attempts at assimilation," noted George Hintlian, a leading authority on Armenian culture and society and curator of the Armenian museum of art and culture, "however they adapt easily to changing circumstances because they are pliable and

pragmatic. Here, there is no threat involved. Being a mountain race, Armenians have always been a fighting people, fiercely jealous of their independence. But that has not made them ossified relics. On the contrary, the Armenians have merged with the stream, while retaining their own uniqueness, quite adroitly."

Their community spirit is pointed to by Itzhak Ya'acovi, Director General of the East Jerusalem Development Company, who recalls that while the Old City's Christian and Moslem residents opposed the municipality's plan to replace all TV antenna towers with a central one, the Armenians welcomed the idea and were the first to cooperate. Naomi Teasedale, Mayor Teddy Kollek's advisor on Christian affairs, adds that the Armenians are the only minority group in Jerusalem to teach their children Hebrew in their own school, the Tarkmanchatz.

Hintlian points out, "We hold a unique position in Jerusalem. We are not a parochial community. The Armenian Patriarchate has semi-diplomatic status. It is one of the three guardians of the Holy Places (The Holy Sepulchre, the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem, the Church of Ascension and the Tomb of the Virgin at Gethsemane). The importance of the Armenians in Jerusalem derives from the fact that our church is one of the custodians of the holy places: we rank second in importance after the Greek Orthodox and the Latin Patriarchate." Without this, the Armenians here would be no more than simple landholders.

For decades, the Armenian church properties along Jerusalem's Jaffa, Shlomzion Hamalka, Yannai, and Coresh streets, and in the towns of Ramallah, Jaffa and Bethlehem have provided the Patriarchate with the funds to help run its manifold educational, cultural and religious programs. Invariably, the Patriarchate's budget was in the red.

"Now, for the first time in sixty-five years, we have money in the bank," Archbishop Karekin Kazanjian, the naturalized Australian Grand Sacristan, said proudly. "We have settled our debts, and for two years we had no help from abroad," he added, referring to the massive infusion of funds sent regularly from rich Armenian contributors in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The Patriarchate runs a subsidized health

service, providing medical care and attention for all Armenians for a symbolic fee. The doctor does not call every day, but is usually available most afternoons of the week.

The St. James printing press, the first in the Holy City, was established in 1833. Although most of its output is in Armenian, it undertakes work in other languages, including Arabic and Hebrew. Patriarch Yeghishe Derderian, an acknowledged poet and writer, regularly patronizes the printing press.

### A Haven for Theology Students

The theological seminary is home for less than a score of young students, drawn chiefly from Turkey and Lebanon, who occupy a sprawling new building put up by the American-Armenian philanthropist Alex Manougian. They come from distant villages in the mountains of Turkish Armenia, bearing outlandish names that have no connection with their ancestors and hardly knowing a word of Armenian. They come seeking a refuge and a haven from the endless battles in and around Beirut, leaving behind friends and families, dreaming of the day they will be invested with the *veghar* (the unique, cone-shaped Armenian churchmen's headdress) and have the right to call themselves *Vartabed* (literally, teacher). They become the elite of the Armenian church. Now, with the borders sealed, the influx has shrunk to a trickle. Still, the Patriarchate is not worried. There will never be a shortage of priests in Jerusalem, which supplies the Armenian diaspora with an endless stream of parish priests and primates.

The former seminary — for many years a legend-wrapped, cloistered abbey — was transformed in 1979 into a museum, thanks to the tireless efforts of Archbishop Shahe Ajemian, the former chancellor who was ousted from office in 1982, and the generosity of another American Armenian, philanthropist Edward Mardigian. Priceless manuscripts illustrated by such artists as Toros Roslin and Pitzak easily stole the show at the grand opening. Even Mayor Teddy Kollek, a seasoned world-traveller, professed amazement when he viewed the display of Armenian treasures.

The 1920s were a watershed in the history of the Armenians in the Holy Land. It was during this brief epoch that the Armenian community

finally obtained a school of its own, the Tarkmanchatz, which has given the world more than its quota of luminaries, including Ohan Durian, the pianist and composer. The school is a college now, with Bishop Giuregh, the tireless principal, unabashedly importuning donors to help keep the Tarkmanchatz afloat. The fees paid by the handful of students (180 last year, compared with 700 at its peak a couple of decades ago) hardly pay the salaries of his teaching staff.

The late Armenian multi-millionaire philanthropist, Calouste Gulbenkian, provided the funds for the construction of a library that ranks as one of the most important in the Armenian diaspora. The Gulbenkian library boasts fifty thousand volumes, of which twenty thousand are in Armenian. The rest are mainly in English, French, and German, as well as quite a few dead languages, including hieroglyphics. Sahag Kalaydjian acts as librarian. Like the other officially appointed employees of the Patriarchate, Kalaydjian doubles as accountant-auditor, teacher and hymnology instructor, while running a thriving cassette vending business on the side.

Most Armenian youths prefer to work outside the Patriarchate, where they can earn better pay and garner fringe benefits. This leaves a dearth of qualified employees, which has necessitated doubling or tripling the work load of lay members of the community, like Kalaydjian and Hintlian.

The pay is low, but Hintlian would never dream of giving up his position of influence in the Patriarchate. He lives in a rent-free house, like all the Armenians who are domiciled within the Convent of St. James, but that is the only fringe benefit he ever expects to receive. He has been planning to write another book for years. But the pressure of work, particularly during the recent upheavals when he was required to field dozens of reporters every week, look after the reorganization of the museum (he is curator), and follow the court cases involving assaults on the premises of Archbishop Hazanjian, kept demanding all his time.

Not that any book written by a Jerusalemite Armenian is going to cause ripples among the community members. The library has over three hundred different newspapers and magazines on display, but hardly more than two or three people ever bother to drop in at the reading room.

### Armenians Outside St. James

The Armenians of Jerusalem do not all live within the walls of the complex and some share common borders with the Jews in the renovated Jewish Quarter. The houses are all the property of the Patriarchate, and the residents pay virtually no rent, although, unlike St. James residents, they do pay municipal taxes.

Several Armenian Quarter inhabitants have resorted to taking in lodgers. The Convent authorities close their eyes to the practice. They benefit substantially only when an Armenian resident wants to "sell" his home and move on to America or elsewhere. The key-money is quite stiff: an apartment in the Gulbenkian Building (put up with the help of the Gulbenkian Foundation for the express purpose of housing Armenians made homeless as a result of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence) can easily fetch \$20,000 unfurnished, and \$25,000 furnished. The Patriarchate is entitled to one third of that amount, in cash.

Some of the houses in the Armenian Quarter have been inhabited by the same family for generations. A cursory glance at the architecture yields telltale evidence of the slipshod Ottoman "art" of masonry. Walls are sometimes three feet thick. Foundations are pure earth. Sunlight and ventilation are unheard of luxuries. The plaster cakes continually as the walls shed their whitewash under the ravages of humidity. The houses may be nothing more than dank dungeons in some cases, but for over a hundred years, Armenians have been born and bred here. The Quarter residents are called *Kaghakatzi*, city dwellers, and are looked down upon by the *Venketzi* or convent/monastery dwellers.

"Perhaps the fact that the houses are blessed twice every year (at Christmas and Easter) by the parish priest, helps to make them habitable," quips one resident. The priest may come to bless, but that is the only connection he will have with his parish, except when officiating at a funeral, baptism or marriage ceremony. What respect priests may have once enjoyed in the community has simply evaporated over the years.

### Four Groups of Armenians

Israeli Armenians generally fall into four different groupings. Those who live in the

Armenian Quarter speak Arabic like the natives and have a club of their own, the Paresiratz (benevolent union). At one time the Paresiratz was the guiding spirit of the Armenian community, but it has become a mere shadow of its former self. The club premises have virtually been abandoned; the beautiful, expansive hall where banquets were once held and the grand stage where Julius Caesar used to strut have been claimed by ghosts.

Within St. James, residents are divided into two distinct groupings. The Hoyetchmen is the bigger, more active and more influential faction. It calls for return to its Armenian (Soviet) homeland, while the Homentmen pines for a free, independent Armenia. The Homentmen cultivates the Hai Tad (Armenian cause) organization, set up to revive the memory of the Armenian genocide\* and to spur Turkey to admit responsibility. The two are reportedly youth clubs and have their own private premises within the St. James walls.

The fourth Armenian grouping revolves around the Catholic church. They have their own Bishop and complex and were traditionally considered outcasts by mainstream Armenians who pride themselves on being sons of the Lousavoritch, Gregory the Illuminator, patron of the Orthodox Church. However, in recent years, they have joined ranks, particularly during the April 24 genocide commemoration.

One is struck by the enormous influence their Arab neighbors have had on the Armenian mentality. It is only in recent years, with the advent of the Jews, that the Armenians have finally begun to wake up to the unlimited possibilities available to them from a different, more advanced perspective. The Israeli influence has been salubrious, and the affluence made possible by the higher standard of living is appreciated by the Armenians. But they still find it difficult to make Jewish friends. For many, it is easier to communicate with the Arabs. Perhaps this is the result of the Arab conditioning process. Perhaps they find Israelis "cold." Even so, the

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\*Armenians claim that the Turks massacred 1,500,000 men, women and children in 1915, but no Turkish regime has admitted that such an event actually transpired.

Armenians cannot help feeling a begrudging admiration and sympathy for Israelis. They share a similar history of persecution, if nothing else. Israel's superior technology and the sheer endurance of its people never stops acting as an incentive for Armenians.

For many Armenians, the sojourn in Jerusalem is considered a temporary one. They believe that this is merely a way station; that their future, or that of their offspring lies either in America or Australia, or perhaps Armenia.

Yeghya Dickranian, for example, is a popular teacher of English who believes his mission in life is to provide a sound education for his two children and help make their future secure, a feeling shared by most Armenian householders. (Family ties are very strong among them, and generally there is no talk of a son or daughter leaving home when he or she turns eighteen.) "What do I work for, if not my children?" Dickranian asked. His daughter is studying in the United States where she has an uncle to care for her. The son will soon follow suit. What will happen when they graduate? Remain in America, of course. "What future do they have here in Jerusalem?" Dickranian ponders. Why doesn't he send his children to Hebrew University? Although they study Hebrew as a second language at school, they would still have difficulty coping with Hebrew lectures and textbooks.

Almost all the young Armenians who graduate from the Trakmanchatz polish up their Hebrew at an ulpan. They know that without Hebrew their options here are limited. Many succeed in finding employment in the Israeli sector where the pay is good and the treatment satisfactory.

#### Armenian Success Stories

Aram Belian was wounded by shrapnel on the second day of the June 1967 war. The next day, he says, he picked up a Hebrew primer from a hospital tray and began learning the language. Today he has reached a top position in Israel's Arabic TV service. Without any formal journalistic qualifications (he helped edit the defunct *Jerusalem Times*, owned by *Al Quds* publisher Mahmoud Abu Zuluf and completed his apprenticeship there), he graduated to the news editing slot following a stint at the government-run Arabic language paper, *Al Anba*.

Another legendary Armenian success story is that of the Ohannessian empire (tissue factory, printing press) which began as a one-man operation, run by Takvor Ohanness. He used to buy sheets of brown paper, cut them down to size, glue the edges together and sell them to Arab merchants in the Old City. His parents pitched in with the glue work. Now the well-known TAKO trademark heralds a million dollar enterprise. He is the only West Bank manufacturer to penetrate the Israeli market, "exporting" (the ultimate accolade) to Israeli supermarkets.

In addition, the TAKO establishment has set a unique precedent. Without prompting, it has turned itself into the leading philanthropic Armenian organization in the country, thanks mainly to Serope, one of Takvor's four sons, who acts as sales manager. Among the recipients of its munificence: Jerusalem's Armenian clubs, Palestinian refugees, universities, and the St. John Ophthalmic hospital in Jerusalem.

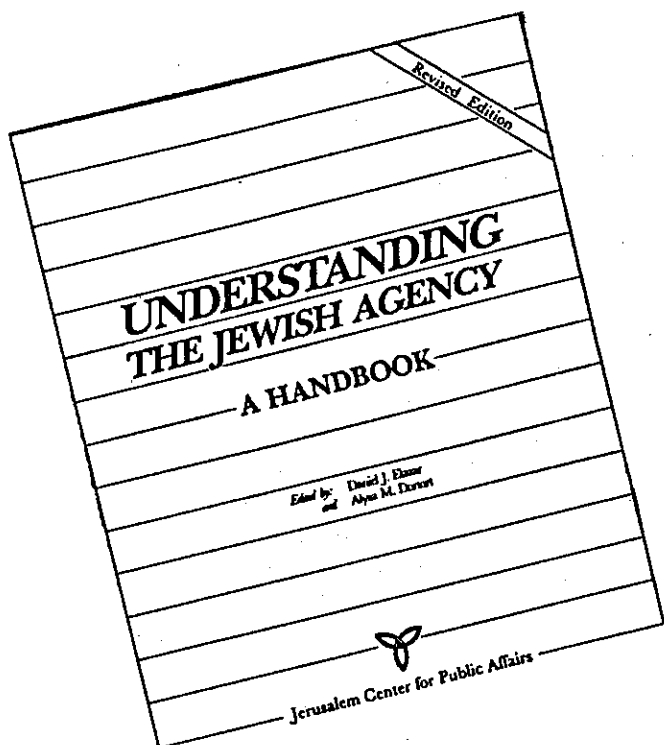
Most of the Old City's jewelers and goldsmiths are Armenian. When the Islamic museum wants a master watchmaker to tune its priceless collection of watches and clocks, it calls in Ohannes Markarian: it will trust no one else but the gangling, stoop-shouldered expert whose clients have included many of Israel's elite.

The Armenians will always remain a paradox. At one end of the spectrum, are Armenians reaching to the heights of power, influence, and wealth — emulating their "mascot," the twin-peaked Mount Ararat, which symbolizes their eternal aspiration and longing for a home that would put an end to their ceaseless peregrinations around the globe. At the other end, are the elements that have sought to opt out, indifferent to their heritage, experimenting with various shades of despair and frustration.

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*Arthur Hagopain is an Armenian, born in East Jerusalem, who immigrated to Australia at an early age. Today he is a freelance journalist and the Jerusalem correspondent for The Canberra Times, an Australian newspaper.*

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