

LIVING MEMORIES

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THE FIRST ARMENIANS I ever came across were called Mashtots, Koriun, Eznik, Yeghishe, Vardan and Shushanik. Mashtots invented the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century and the story of his life, told by his pupil Koriun, is the oldest literary text written in Armenian on record. Eznik, his contemporary, wrote a treatise on religion. Yeghishe was a historian who chronicled the famous battle of Avarayr in 451, during which Prince Vardan Mamikonian lost his life. Shushanik was the daughter of Vardan. Georgian author Iakob Tsurtaveli (also known as Jacob of Tsurtavi or Jacob the Priest) wrote about her death in the first Georgian literary text on record from the fifth century. So my first Armenians lived in books, in texts written in ancient Armenian, Georgian and Greek. This was also my first encounter with Armenia.

In the late 1970s I was studying two parallel courses at the University of Louvain. The first was classical philology – the study of Greco-Roman antiquity through languages and texts – and the other, oriental philology and history. My lecturers advised me to study the different languages of the Christian East, in particular Byzantine Greek, ancient Armenian and ancient Georgian. I took their advice on board and this decision would guide my entire career and a large part of my life. I had no specific knowledge of Armenia at the time. Today's generations often have trouble comprehending the geopolitical, and thus cultural, partitioning we experienced at the time. In the 1970s and 1980s we still had the Cold War, the Berlin Wall and a confrontation between the Free World and the Communist Bloc. The USSR was the “great

Satan,” a world portrayed as closed, secret, far-off and dangerous. Armenia was part of this world, a country we knew nothing about unless we ourselves were Armenian or had contact with the Armenian diaspora. However, the reality was that until the early 80s I hadn’t met a single Armenian, I didn’t know there was a diaspora and I knew nothing about Armenia.

The Armenia of the books

ARMENIA WAS REVEALED to me through books and initially only indirectly. I began by studying the ancient language in a similar way to how I had approached Latin and Greek. These ancient tongues, testimonials of past cultures, are languages that no-one now speaks in the same way that I learned them. I loved the mind gymnastics of juggling roots, suffixes, endings, declensions and rules of syntax. Lessons in precision and rigour. A sentence in an ancient language is like a mathematical equation. Each element has its place and importance. And like a mathematical equation, it also serves as a coding system to help you master different scripts, i.e. the Greek, Armenian and Georgian alphabets. I also studied Sanskrit, the language of ancient India and considered to be the “mother tongue” of Indo-European languages, which gave me a better understanding of the links between Armenian and Greek, for example.

Armenian and Georgian translations of Greek texts would then become one of the main focuses of my academic research. To a non-specialist, this may seem anecdotal, but it is not. When Armenia converted to Christianity in 301 (the traditionally accepted date) the Armenians rapidly adopted a writing system and began to translate a large number of texts from Greek and Syriac into Armenian while at the same time writing original works in Armenian. They would continue to do this throughout their history. There is a strong, very topical message here: a culture does not come about in isolation or as a foil for others. It is based on its own unique characteristics and the way it incorporates external elements into a new coherent, harmonious

whole. Accepting influences without abandoning your heart and soul is a challenge for any group. The Armenians have managed this much better than many others and this is how the country's culture, carried by such a very small group, achieved universality. I believe the Armenian world is meaningless without the relationships it has with those around it. This was true in the past and still holds true today.

My Armenia is not a self-contained world; it is the convergence of what makes it and what surrounds it.

Latin, Greek, Armenian and Sanskrit are all Indo-European languages. At the time of my studies the overriding belief, no longer held today, was that the Armenian language could bridge the gap between the two main groups of Indo-European languages, the Western group (Greek and Latin, for instance) and the Eastern group, which includes Sanskrit. So gradually the idea of an Armenia sitting between East and West took root in my mind and would go on to influence any subsequent contact I had with the country.

Living Armenians

AFTER MY EARLY years of studying and researching Armenian, new encounters broadened my perspective. This was the first major turning point. There would be a second one, much later, which we will come back to.

I gradually began to meet Armenians living in Belgium who told me about the life and challenges of the Armenian community. Through them I discovered an Armenia that was there, so close to me: the Armenia of the diaspora, which was sustained by the history I had studied and was rooted in shared points of reference such as language, religion and the link, albeit often tenuous, with their homeland. At the same time I was taking part in scholarly conferences that were attended by colleagues from Armenia and, more significantly, I travelled to Armenia for conferences. Something quite extraordinary then happened. Little by little, the subject of my studies came to life and was made real. To the list of my first Armenians – Mashtots,

Koriun, Eznik, Yeghishe, Vardan and Shushanik – were now added new ones who were very much alive, or rather living differently, because Mashtots et al. were still alive in my eyes. The Armenia of today became superimposed onto the Armenia of my studies, the former supplementing my knowledge of the latter and the latter enabling me to better understand the former. From that point onwards the link between historical and modern-day Armenia occupied many of my thoughts and actions. However, even though I opened my mind to periods beyond antiquity, leaving behind fields strictly confined to the study of ancient languages and texts to venture into the whole of Armenia's history, culture, literature, artistic expressions, and the study of the genocide, my thinking still remained largely academic, linked to my research and teaching at the university.

Visiting Armenia

SOMETHING ELSE OCCURRED that consolidated this approach. This was the second turning point.

In 2010 the Olivaint Conference of Belgium asked me to take part in its annual study trip, which that year was to Armenia. The Olivaint Conference is an organisation that helps young people take an interest in public affairs, and the broader political situation, by offering them tools for analysis and reflection, introducing them to political players and giving them the benefit of the experience of university lecturers. I was asked to accompany a group of around twenty students from various Belgian universities and both French- and Flemish-speaking backgrounds and help them to understand modern-day Armenia. This was also my first trip to the Karabakh region. It was fascinating to be able to talk with these young students, share the little knowledge I had, try to answer their questions and observe their reactions of surprise, delight and shock. Discovering the country through their eyes, I saw a different Armenia, one that was even more alive in my mind than before. Quite simply, their enthusiasm made me fall in love with Armenia even more. They don't know it but I owe so much to those 2010 Olivaint students.

This experience was the first of many. It wasn't long before different groups were asking me to travel with them to Armenia. That was when I decided to organise guided trips to the country, and sometimes also to Artsakh, for various associations, clubs or groups of friends. Armenia intrigued and attracted people, so bookings came flooding in. Through these trips I myself was able to learn more about the sites we visited and the situation in Armenia in general. I also began to read a large number of documents, articles and books and to leave my "ancient Armenia" comfort zone. I now had to be able to talk about the entire history of Armenia, from its remotest origins to the most recent political events. I also took the opportunity to seek out lesser-known monasteries and churches, which were often inaccessible with groups and were not normally included in tourist itineraries. My associate, and now friend, Smbat Petrosyan, whose agency took care of all the logistics for my trips, came with me and sometimes discovered places he had never been to before. Travelling in Armenia can be quite an adventure, as we were to find out during some of our trips: in blazing sunshine, driving rain or freezing snow, we would see open up before us magnificent wild landscapes criss-crossed by impassable roads on which ancient vehicles – dating back, in fact, to the Soviet era – were forever breaking down. This was when the incredible ingenuity of the drivers became apparent as they managed to repair everything with whatever they had to hand. Admittedly, often all they had to do was take a few steps along the road before they found the wire or the spare part they needed for a repair – yes, this did happen to us! And at the end of the road, our perseverance paid off, when we would come across the ruins of a church with a collapsed roof and sometimes even a few frescoes still discernible on the walls battered by sun, rain and wind. Around us would stand Armenian cross-stones, or khachkars, a living memorial to Armenia. And in the most out-of-the-way spots, where we would have expected nobody to venture, we would find remains of the ubiquitous yellow candles because, yes even here, there is always someone to keep the flame alight. Armenians are also incredibly hospitable. Their faces light up – albeit after a brief moment of surprise –

when they encounter this stranger from Belgium who is so interested in them, and out comes the coffee and cognac.

Everyone knows Haghpat, Sanahin, Tatev, Noravank and Garni, but very few people have ventured as far as Tanahat, Kirants, Smbataberd, Aghjots Vank, Vorotnavank, Tsakhats Kar and a whole host of other places whose names, for me, bring to mind monasteries, writers, frescoes and the libraries of manuscripts that the monks strove to save from the invaders who have ravaged Armenia throughout its history. There, far away from visitors and tourists, known only to locals and a few enthusiasts like me, the stones of churches sitting on the banks of murmuring streams whisper their history to those who know how to listen to them.

This is the beating heart of my Armenia. Such memories I shared with my friend Smbat.

On the road

WE WERE ON our way to Kirants monastery in north-eastern Armenia. The road – or rather track – had a well-deserved reputation for being impassable. Winding its way through a dense forest, the dirt track was deeply rutted and military trucks, the only vehicles able to get through, kept making it worse and worse. A few drops of rain and the road became a quagmire. Our vehicle, straight out of the Soviet era, was struggling to make progress and the driver, a hardy local named Ghoukas, had to summon all his strength to keep control of the steering wheel. In the back seat, Smbat and I were being thrown about like ragdolls. Our ribs and knees were getting banged against the sides of the jeep because the seat springs had long since ceased to do their job. There was not another living soul about. After several hours of this torture, and a number of stops to repair the jeep, we rounded a hairpin bend and started to catch intermittent glimpses of the glazed green tiles of a steeple through the treetops. Here nestled the remains of Kirants monastery, a complex dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. All that remained was the church and the ves-



The road to Kirants. Our driver Ghoukas repairing the jeep,
Armenian way. October 2016.

tiges of some adjacent buildings with, inside, graffiti and traces of ancient frescoes. This place must have been splendid in its time with its magnificent décor and grandiose setting. Sheltered by the age-old walls and the trees that protect them, this was the perfect spot to enjoy some Armenian cognac or a local brandy.

At the foot of a sunny valley, a series of small churches dotted along a stream awaited us. As we were admiring our surroundings a van arrived, driven by an old man with a white beard. He was the local priest and was quite taken aback to come across visitors. It wasn't an everyday occurrence. The van, which he used to visit his flock, could only have been found in Armenia. It was given to him by his son, who had it shipped over from Marseille after buying it second-hand in Germany. It still bore the mark of its origins, the words "Die Roten Teufel" in red letters, no doubt the name of a company or shop. My eyes were drawn to it because the "Red Devils" is also the nickname of the Belgian national football team. I told the priest and, on learning his van carried the name of the devil, he crossed himself, rummaged



No way this holy man could be carting the devil around with him everywhere he went! Vanevan, June 2018.

about inside and brought out a knife with which he furiously tried to scrape away the painted letters. There was no way this holy man could be carting the devil around with him everywhere he went!

When you travel to Armenia you enter a former Soviet republic, a country bordering Iran and Turkey located in the heart of the South Caucasus region (or Transcaucasia) and a gateway to the Middle East. Not only is there history but also evidence of the geopolitical situation for those who know where to look for it. Along the border marked by the Aras River, at the foot of Khor Virap monastery and the majestic Mount Ararat, Armenian watchtowers, actually occupied by Russian soldiers, sit opposite Turkish watchtowers. European tourists, often overcome by a pro-Armenian sentiment, have a somewhat negative opinion of the other side, forgetting that this other side is NATO's and that they are in fact standing on what was once Warsaw Pact land. This is the perfect moment to tell them the story of *Night Flight from Moscow*, a film directed by Henri Verneuil, born Ashot Malakian, because Mount Ararat plays a central role between the CIA and the

KGB. In Gyumri, at a fish farm and restaurant right beside a Russian military base, diners can enjoy a succulent grilled sturgeon as they watch Russian soldiers patrol the land behind the barbed wire fence. Between Ijevan and Noyemberyan, the road follows the border with Azerbaijan. Once past the beautiful little Voskepar church, a marvel of the seventh century currently closed to visitors, the bus suddenly speeds up to avoid being shot at by Azeri snipers. The cue to mention *Babel*, a film starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett: in the opening scene, while the bus they are travelling in cruises through the Moroccan desert, the figure played by the actress is wounded by a bullet fired from a gun by a young boy hidden behind the rocks. Thankfully, to keep tourists and locals safe, a new, more sheltered road has recently been opened. Further south, the road that stretches from Yerevan over the Aras plain passes Artashat and Khor Virap before reaching a roundabout: straight ahead is Azerbaijan, or rather Nakhchivan. We are at the crossroads of four countries here: Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran. Time to explain the role of the Armenians from Julfa, who were exiled to Isfahan by Shah Abbas in the early seventeenth century. They would go on to set up incredible ventures trading between East and West, which competed with major British companies. The wealth of these Armenians from Iran is evident from the splendour of Vank Cathedral in Isfahan. The paintings on its interior walls, which were directly influenced by European trends at the time, reveal the international network of these Armenians. An important symbol of the country's history.

This, too, is my Armenia. We spend hours and hours travelling on twisting, bumpy roads. It's difficult to tell whether it's the bends or the potholes that slow us down the most. Or is it the condition of the bus itself, which has been repurposed after an already full former life in a European country? I take advantage of the long journeys to explain some of the ins and outs of Armenia's situation to my fellow passengers. This gives them a better understanding of Armenian politics per se: a host of grandiose declarations about the greatness of the Armenian people coupled with decisions closely tied to the direction

adopted by Moscow. This little landlocked country where half the borders are closed, embroiled in Nagorno-Karabakh's frozen conflict and torn between its population and its diaspora, is far from holding its future in its own hands. Armenia is not entirely blameless for the situation it finds itself in, but that does not make me love its people any less.

My Armenia

THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL situation is rooted in history. Today's conflicts are in many ways the resurgence of age-old tensions. The rivalries between Tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia left an indelible mark on the situation in the South Caucasus and are barely concealed in modern-day relations between Russia, Turkey and Iran. Each country's response to the situation bears the mark of its history. Armenia's difficulty in defining its position, and finding a position shared by all Armenians, is linked to the tribal social structure it inherited from the time of the Iranian occupation more than 2,500 years ago.

Urartian origins, Iranian, Greek and Roman societies, conversion to Christianity, the presence of Islam, Seljuk and Mongolian invasions, Ottoman, Persian and Russian conquests, sovietisation, independence and opening up to the West: Armenian history is the history of a people, now a nation, that has survived both against and with its neighbours and invaders. Against them, because they had to withstand, to fight, and defend Armenian identity, which traditionally finds its roots in religion, language, writing and remembrance of illustrious ancestors. With them, because this small population will only survive if it finally manages to negotiate agreements with its more powerful neighbours.

That Armenia is also my Armenia. A nation that exists alone and with others, regardless of the threat they pose. A people that could have disappeared a hundred times over but is still alive. To the astute observer, each stone recounts this varied and eventful history. Most

Armenian churches are built in the shape of a cross. The dome represents the ascension to Heaven from Earth and the painted décor, if it has survived, is always a commentary on this ascension. Both inner and outer walls are covered in inscriptions that tell the story of the church's construction, the various donations made, the princely protection bestowed, the deeds of the monastery superiors and the names of the sovereigns. In Armenian culture, writing is not simply a means of communication. Because the Armenian alphabet was revealed to Mashtots by God, in the same way as Moses received the Commandments, Armenian writing embodies the destiny – and carries the memory – of the Armenian people. But Armenian churches tell many more stories: Iranian-inspired motifs such as animals face-to-face in the bas-reliefs, Byzantine models in the frescoes and elements of Seljuk architecture such as stone stalactites; what's more, a church on the Sevan Lake peninsula still has a khachkar on which the figures, including Christ himself, have Mongolian features. And so neighbours and invaders have left their mark, embedded in the most iconic building of Armenian culture, a church. Many of these monuments, damaged by invasions and earthquakes, were restored and rebuilt in Soviet times. Some still have a metal plaque written in Armenian and Russian, bearing witness to this era and preceding the recent renovations funded by the Armenian Church or by the diaspora. Each church is a book that tells the entire history of the Armenian people to those who know how to read it.

This strikes a chord with me because books are in fact the main focus of my research as a philologist: manuscripts transcribed by erudite scribes working in medieval monasteries. Visitors to Haghpat, Sanahin, Geghard and Noravank admire the buildings in their sumptuous natural surroundings. When I go there, I catch a fleeting glimpse – in the narrow passageways, round a corner, in the small dark angular chapel of a church – of the tail end of a monk's habit. In what remains of the libraries, I hear quill pens scraping over parchment or paper. I know these scribes because I read what they wrote, the texts they transcribed to distribute for study purposes and

also those little bits of text they added at the end of their work, known as colophons. These contain their name and the names of their family members, the monastery superior, the bishop, the Catholicos, the prince or sovereign, and the date and place. Often information is added about the circumstances in which they had to work: few resources, cold, hunger, fear of an invasion, for instance. These colophons serve the same purpose as inscriptions in churches: they inform, inject life and, most importantly, situate the object in its time. Inscriptions and colophons almost always end with the same phrase: “Remember” me, us, my family, and what we are living and enduring. Armenian culture is obsessed with oblivion. To be forgotten is to be truly dead and as long as someone is remembered they are not gone forever.

To visit Armenia is to remember the Armenians who have lived there and thus keep them alive.

My Armenia is also that Armenia, the one that remembers. Nothing expresses this better than the commemoration of the victims of the genocide.

I have attended several 24 April ceremonies in Yerevan, including the one to mark the centenary in 2015. Each year, whatever the weather, thousands of Armenians from home and abroad embark on the long walk to the top of Tsitsernakaberd (Armenian for “swallow’s fortress”), overlooking Yerevan. There, on the windswept esplanade, the click-clack of the flapping flags mingles with the scuffle of feet on stone. These are the only sounds to be heard; the atmosphere is one of contemplation. Led by officials, the Armenians then make their way along the wall that stands as a reminder of where the deportation and massacres took place, from Constantinople to the Syrian Desert. In doing so, each year they retrace the footsteps of their ancestors who were removed forcibly from their homes, marched in convoys, robbed, beaten, tortured and killed. Once they reach the end they go down a few steps and enter a circular area covered in stone slabs inclined like weeping mothers huddled over their dead children. In the centre burns the flame of remembrance, around which each person lays a flower. Eventually, a whole wall of flowers is formed, symbolis-



24 April 2015, Tsiternakaberd.

ing the Armenian people's solidarity with the genocide victims. These flowers are like the colophons in manuscripts and the inscriptions on church walls. They are the weapon of memory, the most powerful weapon the Armenian people have ever had.

This is my Armenia. The Armenia of a memory that lives on, of a memory that keeps the past alive. My Armenia is where books meet reality, words meet action, the past meets the present and knowledge meets experience.