

THE "MYTH" OF THE INDIAN ARMENIAN WILLS and THE ARMENIAN CHURCHES IN THE FAR EAST*

(*The term "Far East" refers to following countries; India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, China)

Hagop Mikayelian's article, entitled "The Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy of Calcutta" was published in the 5th November 2022 issue of "Yerepouni" newspaper. In his article the author also refers to the wills of wealthy Indian Armenian merchants.

At the end of World War I, information started circulating in the Armenian press stating that wills valuing tens of millions of sterling of wealthy Indian Armenian merchants had been discovered in India, which had been kept in British banks for a long time.

In the 1950s, the discovery of the will of an Indian-Armenian merchant named Bulbulian caused a great stir, especially in the Armenian communities in the Middle East.

Referring to those wills, Mikayelian writes;

"Here again, the question arises; who inherited the fortunes of those merchants, which were kept in English banks? Or did those astronomical funds, having no heirs, go to foreigners? Who knows?"

In another paragraph he observes;

"Years ago, a foreign law firm tried to find the heirs of a wealthy Indian-Armenian merchant, whose wealth, after 200 years in an English bank, had reached astronomical sums. Heirs began to appear, but after a few weeks, the matter was closed, as the person pursuing the matter, along with the law firm involved, vanished. Who knows what great morsel was offered to the law firm?"

In the 1930s, the Armenian Holy Church of Nazareth, having received a significant number of letters from so-called heirs of newly discovered wills, requested that Mesrob Seth (Setian) prepare a report about them for the church committee.

Later, I will give a brief biographical information about Mesrob Seth and the report he prepared for the church committee.

Returning to Mikayelian's article, I can confirm with certainty that no one put any "great morsel" in "that company's mouth", because that fictitious "law firm" existed only on the business card of a self-proclaimed "lawyer"!

No doubt, Mikayelian's remark is about the "Bulbulian will."

Who was this "self-proclaimed lawyer"?

In the 1950s, an adventurer named Setrak Apkarian came from the Middle East and settled in Bombay. He gave himself the self-proclaimed title of "lawyer" in order to facilitate his devious plans!

Following the example of his predecessors, Apkarian after inventing the "Myth of the Bulbulian will", discovered a number of "Bulbulians" in different parts of the world and conveyed to them the good news about "their relative", a wealthy merchant from Madras, who many years ago had left a will in their favour. The current value of the will was estimated to be tens of millions of pounds sterling. "Apkarian Law Firm" only recently learned about the will from a communique published by the Indian government. Apkarian expressed his willingness to undertake the necessary legal work through "his law firm" to prove that they were the authentic heirs of the will. Naturally, to undertake such an important task, it was necessary to "gift" the officials in charge of the case a sizable amount of money. In other words, to bribe them!

I had the opportunity of meeting two of the "Bulbulian heirs" in Aleppo in 1960, when I had gone there from Calcutta to visit my parents. In those years (1957-1964) I was teaching at the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy, Calcutta.

The Bulbulians requested me to help them to deal with the formalities related to the will, for which they promised to pay me a large sum of money when the case was successfully concluded.

During our meeting, it became apparent that the Aleppo Bulbulians had already sent a down payment to Apkarian. I tried to convince them that no such will existed and that they should not spend any more money in pursuit of a non-existent "will".

Probably, Apkarian had also collected "advance payments" from other "Bulbulian heirs" living in different countries!

As previously mentioned, here are some biographical notes on Mesrob Seth.

Seth was born 1871 in New Julfa and received his education at the Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy, Calcutta. A renowned historian, antiquarian, classical Armenian scholar and author of many historical and philological works, Mesrob Seth's masterpiece is "Armenians in India", a voluminous book, which is the most valuable source for the study of history of the Armenians in India. He personally visited all the Armenian communities in India, as well as the regions where Armenian communities had existed in the past. He worked on "Armenians in India" for over forty years. Seth painstakingly studied all the archives of the Armenian churches and institutions, as well as Indian and British documents on the subject. He also collected and studied cultural fragments from Armenian communities in different parts of India and wrote down and studied epitaphs of all the Armenian tombstones.

As a renowned historian, Seth was elected honorary member to a number of prestigious international academies and institutions.

His report on the Indian Armenian "Wills" concluded with the following paragraph;

"For fifty years I have studied the history of Armenians in India, the Armenian graves and monuments, archives of Armenian churches and institutions, including Indian and British documents about Armenians in India, **but not only have not discovered any such "wills", but I have not even read any reference to them.**"

So much for non-existent wills!!

A SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE FAR EAST

INTRODUCTION

Due to invasions, wars and historical upheavals, hundreds of thousands of Armenians fled or were forcibly deported from Armenia for centuries to different places during different periods.

From the end of the 4th century AD, a large number of Armenians settled in different parts of the Byzantine Empire. That stream of emigration continued without a break until the 13th century. During the period mentioned there were thirty emperors of Armenian origin in the Byzantine Empire and hundreds of military commanders, as well as other outstanding representatives in various

other fields. After the Greeks, Armenians were the largest population of the Empire.

In the 11th century, Armenians established the Kingdom of Cilicia in the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire, which lasted until 1375.

Armeno-Iranian relations began during the period of the formation of the Persian state in 6th century B.C. At the time, the Armenians living in Persia were military units serving in the Achaemenid army.

Later a large number of Armenian merchants were deported to Persia. During the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D., according to some Armenian historians, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were sent to Persia.

At the beginning of the 7th century, when the Arabs conquered Persia both the Persians and Armenians living in Persia adopted Islam.

Forced deportations continued during the Temur Lang's raids (1386-1399), when a large number of Armenians were exiled to Khorasan.

During the war between the Ottoman Empire and Persia (1603-1612), the latter reasserted its dominance over the Caucasus and Western Persia, which in 1590 were surrendered to the Ottomans by the Treaty of Constantinople.

At the end of 1604, after the capture of Yerevan by the Persians, the Turkish army launched a counter-attack. Shah Abbas sensing the superior strength of the enemy, decided temporarily to withdraw from Armenia. Being aware of the international fame of the Armenians of Nakhichevan, especially the city of Julfa (Jugha) in trade and crafts, he forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of Armenians to Persia and made them settle near Isfahan, where the newcomers built a new city and called it New Jugha (New Julfa).

According to the historian Arakel Davrizhetsi, there already existed a small Armenian community in Isfahan, which was referred to by European travellers of the 16th century in their journals.

Shah Abbas' intention was to make Isfahan an important trade and craft centre with the help of the Nakhichevan Armenians. In order to realise his goal, he gave Armenians many monopolies and privileges. In 1617, he cancelled the agreement with the British and gave the monopoly of silk trade to the Armenians.

New Julfa soon became a centre of international trade, crafts, as well as Armenian culture.

Many of the Armenian merchants of New Julfa (Nor Jugha) who already had trade relations with the Far East began settling in India, Burma, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and China. During the 17th and 18th centuries they formed communities, built churches, schools, founded printing presses and published books and newspapers in Armenian and other languages.

Presently, with the exception of the relatively new Armenian communities of Australia and New Zealand, there exists only a small Armenian community in Calcutta.

In addition to receiving money from income-bearing properties The Armenian Holy Church of Nazareth of Calcutta, receives a large income from various bequests, one being Sir Paul Chater (Poghos Khachik Astvatsaturian), which consists of HSBC shares and gives USD 2-3 million worth of dividends per annum.

With its huge wealth the church takes care of the Sir Paul Chater Home, the Armenian College & Philanthropic Academy, maintenance of Armenian Churches, cemeteries, properties and the financing of various community projects.

When diplomatic relations were established between Armenia and India, the Calcutta Armenian church built the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia in Delhi at a cost of about 4-million-pound sterling.

INDIA

The oldest reference to Indo-Armenian ties is found in Xenophon's (430-350 B.C.) book *Cytopenia*, which confirms that Armenians, having often travelled to India, were well-aware of the land routes, country's geography, socio-cultural environment and economic life.

Zenob Klag, the 4th century historian who was a disciple of St Gregory the Illuminator, in his book *History of Taron* refers to two Indian princes, who after a failed rebellion against their king (2nd centuries B.C), fled India with their families and armies and came to Armenia to settle in the province of Taron with the Armenian king's permission.

Although Indo-Armenian relations are centuries old, the first Armenian community in India was formed in Agra during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great. *

** The Mughal Empire of India was founded when Babur, the ruler of Kabul took advantage of the political instability by invading Northern India in 1526. He founded the Great Mughal Empire (1526-1858).*

After Agra, Armenian communities were formed in various other cities of India, such as Surat, Bombay, Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow, Hyderabad, Madras, Calcutta, Saidabad, Chinsurah, Dhaka.

Akbar the Great and other Mughal emperors granted special privileges and monopolies to the Armenian merchants and artisans.

AGRA

Agra was the capital of India during the Mughal Empire (not to be confused with the *Mongol Empire*), which for about 200 years (16-19th centuries) ruled India, as well as most of the countries in South Asia.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, a number of Armenian merchants dealing in precious stones, silk and spices settled in Agra.

According to Mesrob Seth, Emperor Akbar the Great met an Armenian merchant named Hakob in Kashmir and adopted his promising young son. This unique adoption took place years before the birth of Akbar's son Jehangir (1570). The emperor attributed the birth of Jehangir to the settlement of Armenians in Agra and to express his gratitude, built an Armenian church at his own expense in the capital in 1562.

Later, Akbar the Great took an Armenian woman named Mariam as one of his wives. He also appointed another Armenian, Abdul Hai as his Chief Prosecutor.

Emperor Akbar liked and trusted the Armenians very much which is why he appointed an Armenian woman named Julia as the doctor of his family and the harem. Later he arranged Julia's marriage to French prince Jean-Philippe Bourbon. Julia and Philip were buried in the Armenian Church in Agra.

At the end of the 18th century, when Agra began to lose its commercial importance, the Armenians moved to Bombay, where an Armenian trading community already existed from the second half of the 17th century.

As witness to the once prosperous Armenian community of Agra, today only the cemetery remains, where one hundred and ten people, including eight clergy were buried between the years 1611-1927.

Calcutta

By the end of the 17th century, Calcutta had already become an important commercial centre, where Armenian merchants began to settle from different parts of India. Already a small Armenian community existed in the city, which had its own cemetery, where St. John's wooden chapel was constructed in 1707.

In 1724, due to the tireless efforts and financial assistance of an Armenian merchant, Agha Nazar (Nazaret), the chapel was rebuilt as a stone church. As there already existed a church in Chinsurah, not far from Calcutta with the same name, the newly built church was named *the Armenian Holy Church of Nazareth*, after its benefactor.

In 1734 Manvel Hazarmalian built the church bell tower and in 1790 Khachik Arakel donated the clock of the Church tower, built the vicarage and constructed the stone wall around the church. In 1906, Harutyun Grigor Abgar added another floor to the vicarage.

Thanks to the princely donations of the Abgar family, Sir Catchik Paul Chater, Thaddeus Mesrob Thaddeus and others, today the Holy Church of Nazareth is one of the richest Armenian churches in the world.

Besides the Holy Church of Nazareth, there are the following churches, cemeteries and national institutions in Calcutta;

1. Holy Trinity Chapel 2. St. Grigor Lusavorich Church at Park Circus 3. Kolutolla Cemetery 4. Tangra Cemetery.

Calcutta Armenians are also buried in two other cemeteries;

1. Park Circus cemetery 2. Tollygung cemetery.

Both the above cemeteries belong to the "Christian Burial Board of India" which has allocated a plot to the Armenian community in each of the cemeteries.

Sir Paul Chater Home

Until 1955, the Armenian church pensioners were provided with accommodation in different parts of the city. In 1955, the church committee built a three-storied building, attached to St. Gregory the Illuminator Church and named it "Sir Paul Chater Home", after the great benefactor. It has all the

modern amenities and the residents of the Home, besides receiving pension, are also provided with food and servants.

Armenian College and Philanthropic Academy (ACPA)

In 1797 an Armenian merchant, Astvatsatur Muratkhanian bequeathed 8,000 Indian rupees toward establishing a boys' school in Calcutta. Another merchant, Mnatsakan Vardanian from Saidabad, launched a fund-raising appeal in 1816 for the same project. The appeal raised more than 50,000 rupees, which added to Muratkhanian's 8000 rupees created a significant fund. As a result, on 2nd April 1821 the ACPA was founded.

The ACPA was located next to the Armenian Church on Old China Bazaar Street. In 1884 the College moved to 56B, Free School Street, located in the centre of the city. In 1969, the municipality changed its address to Mirza Ghalib Street.

The ACPA, which celebrated its 200th anniversary in 2021, has given free education for two centuries to students from different regions of India, Persia, Iraq and Armenian communities in the Far East.

In 1999, by a decree of the Calcutta High Court, the ACPA was placed under the trusteeship and administrative authority of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

Why was this done, and on what grounds did the High Court transfer the trusteeship to the Mother See, thus creating a legal precedent?

Certain remarks made by me in this respect may not please some readers, but hiding the truth has not and will never be in my dictionary.

In the second half of the 1990s, the ACPA was almost without students and on the verge of being closed down, even at risk of being sold!

To stop some dishonest people from achieving their evil intentions, a group of Indian Armenians and ex-ACPA students in London formed the "Committee for the Protection of the Armenian Churches and Schools in India". As a former teacher, the committee elected me Chairman, Heros Avetoom, an ex-student the Vice-charman and Jeanette David (Davidian) a Calcutta-Armenian lawyer, Secretary.

The newly formed committee decided to approach His Holiness Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians to seek authority to take the matter to Indian High Court, with a request to transfer the trusteeship and management of the ACPA

to the Mother See, to prevent any possible future misdeeds. The committee asked His Holiness to emphasize in his letter to the court that, although the ACPA was not owned by the church, it owed its existence solely to the financial support of the Holy Church of Nazareth.

Some readers may find it strange, even unbelievable, that Catholicos Karekin I refused to **“interfere in the internal affairs of the ACPA”!**

Sometime later, when His Holiness paid a pontifical visit to the UK, in the hope of changing his mind members of the Committee managed to have a short meeting with him. Unfortunately, His Holiness remained firm on his decision.

Knowing full well that without the support of the Mother See we could take no legal action, I decided to resign from the Committee, which continued its work under the chairmanship of Heros Avetoom.

In the spring of 1999, Heros Avetoom decided to go to Etchmiadzin to make a final attempt to change His Holiness' mind. H. Avetoom had taken with him the latest version of the letter prepared by Jeanette David in the name of Catholicos Karekin I, addressed to the Indian High Court. During a brief meeting, His Holiness, who had already lost his ability to speak, carefully read the letter and finally signed it! When the matter was taken to court, three senior Indian High Court judges without hesitation ordered the transfer of the trusteeship and Management of the ACPA to the Mother See. Two months later, His Holiness passed away.

Davtian Girls School

After the ACPA was founded, a number of attempts also were made to establish an Armenian girls' school in Calcutta. Several schools were opened, but all were short lived, until 1922, when David Davtian founded the Davtian Girls School. For financial reasons, in 1949 it was decided to educate the students of both schools by the same teaching staff at the ACPA. However, the students of the Davtian Girls School continued to reside in their own building.

Clubs

In Calcutta there are two Armenian clubs. The Social Club serves particularly the social needs of the older members of the community. The younger members play various sports at the Sports Club, the favoured ones being rugby and hockey. In the 1960s the rugby team, which included the students of the ACPA, was considered one of the top clubs in India.

Chinsurah

Chinsurah is located about 40 km from Calcutta, where in the past a prosperous Armenian community existed.

The Chinsurah St. John's Armenian Church was built in 1695 by the benevolence of Hovhannes Margar, a member of the famous Margar family. The Church is considered the second oldest Christian place of worship in West Bengal.

There are one hundred graves in the courtyard of the church and twenty-eight inside the church. Two of the graves belong to the Melik Beglar family, the last ruler of autonomous Karabakh. The first belongs to David Friedon Melik Beglar, the second to his son, Hovsep Melik Beglar, a well-known intellect, historian, archaeologist and journalist. From 1892-1895 in Calcutta and Dhaka (currently the capital of Bangladesh) he published the English-language periodical "Ara", dedicated to Armenian literature, Armenian history and the Armenian question. Hovsep Melik Beglar, who was appointed Director of Historical Monuments, was a highly respected name in Indian intellectual circles.

In 1960, the author of this article donated the complete collection of "Ara" to Matenadaran in Yerevan.

Madras

At the beginning of the 16th century, Armenians started trading with South India. In the 17th and 18th centuries a prosperous Armenian community was formed in Madras, from where the Armenian merchants conducted their trade with foreign countries.

In 1794, the first Armenian newspaper, entitled "Azdarar" was published in Madras, by a highly educated clergyman, Rev. Harutyun Shmavonian.

The first Armenian church, St. Asvatatsin (Virgin Mary) was built in Madras in 1712. In 1746, when the French army battled to capture Madras, along with other buildings, the Armenian church was also destroyed.

For some time, church services were conducted at the chapel of the Armenian cemetery. In 1772, the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary was built in central Madras, by the benevolence of Armenian merchants, who also bequeathed large sums of money and properties to the church. Madras Armenians were once considered the most influential, rich and patriotic community in India.

Unfortunately, due to disagreements and disputes, in 1916 the court appointed King & Partridge, a firm of solicitors as custodian of the Madras church, its properties and bequests.

According to Caro Martin's book entitled "The Armenian Community in India, Its Churches & Affairs", out of many properties only three were left in 1958. What happened to the others?

Now that there are no Armenians left in Madras, the remaining assets of the once prosperous community may disappear forever, as did the assets of many Armenian churches in the Far East. It is essential to take immediate legal action to transfer the trusteeship of the Madras Church to its legal owner, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

To get a clear idea about the Armenian church affairs in India, particularly those of Madras and Bombay, I would recommend reading C. Martin's above-mentioned book. I would be happy to provide a digital version of the book to those who are interested.

Bombay

Armenians started trading with West India in the second half of the 16th century, when Surat was a famous commercial centre. It was a place where many famous Armenian merchants had purchased houses, established trading companies and in 1778 built the St. Astvatsatsin Chapel, all of which were destroyed over the years.

The president of the Surat Armenian community, Khoja Minas, and several other wealthy merchants moved to Bombay in 1676. Soon others followed. By the middle of the 18th century, many Armenian merchant families had settled in Bombay, the most important port in West India. From there they conducted their domestic and foreign trade.

St. Peter's Church of Bombay was built in 1796-1797, with a princely donation from a wealthy Armenian merchant called Jacob Petros. After serving the Armenian community for over 150 years, the church, damaged through dampness, was rebuilt in 1956. The church wardens' plan was to build a vicarage and income-bearing buildings next to the church. In 1962, the construction of the six-story "Ararat" building next to the church was completed. The aim of the wardens was to use a part of the building for the needs of the church, and rent the rest as shops and offices.

In 1963, when Vasken I, Catholicos of All Armenians during his tour of India also visited the Armenian Community in Bombay, there were only 25 Armenians living there.

At present, there are no Armenians in Bombay.

Dhaka

Before becoming the capital of Bangladesh in 1971, Dhaka was an important commercial centre of West Bengal, in India with a prosperous Armenian community, consisting mainly of Armenian merchants, who started settling there at the beginning of the 17th century. The small Armenian community had a chapel in the Armenian cemetery situated in an area of the city called Armanitola. By the 18th century, the community had grown considerably and as a result the chapel was reconstructed as a church in 1781 and named Holy Resurrection. The church was built on a large plot of land donated by the well-known merchant Khachik Minas, whose wife Sophie is buried in the church. The consecration of the church was performed by Bishop Ephraim, who was later elected Catholicos of All Armenians.

In 1837 Hovhannes Karapet Sargis, a wealthy merchant built the bell tower of the church, which at the same time served as the " clock tower ". In 1907 a vicarage was built and three years later the church was equipped with electric lights and fans, as well as floors covered with marble. This was all financed by Harutyun Stepanian, owner of the famous Calcutta Grand Hotel, in memory of his grandfather, Rev. Grigor Pashkhumian, who had been pastor of the church for 15 years.

Saidabad

In 1758 Merchant Khoja Petros Harutyun built the Mariam Astsvatsatsin Church (Virgin Mary) in Saidabad, in memory of his late parents and brothers.

In 2005, the Saidabad church was renovated, financed by the Calcutta Armenian Holy Church of Nazareth.

Garegin II, Catholicos of All Armenians visited Calcutta on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Holy Church of Nazareth. On that occasion he also visited Saidabad on November 14, 2008.

BURMA

Rangoon

Unfortunately, during World War II the archives of the Rangoon Armenian Church were lost. With the help of interviews with older members of the community and study of the tombstones and epitaphs of the Armenian cemeteries of Mandalay, Siriam and Rangoon valuable information was collected. It became apparent that some of the Armenians emigrating from Persia to the Far East, settled in Burma, created communities and played an important role in the development of trade in the cities of Mandala, Siriam and Rangoon.

During the 18th century Armenians built the St. Gregory the Illuminator Church in Mandalay on a plot donated by the King of Burma. Religious services were regularly conducted at the church until the 1920s, when the Armenians moved to Rangoon.

St. John the Baptist Church of Rangoon was built 1862, which underwent major renovation in 1908-1909.

During World War II, the Burmese Armenians, in addition to great material losses, also suffered human casualties, when Japanese troops attacked Burma. The spacious community hall, the vicarage and the church were reduced to rubble. Armenians tried to leave the country by all possible means. Many of them managed to reach Calcutta, exhausted after walking through forest roads for weeks.

At the end of the war, community life was partially reinstated in Rangoon. With the generous donations of Rangoon and Calcutta Armenians, the church was renovated in 1946-1947.

The "Rangoon Armenian Progressive Society" published a periodical in English entitled "Haratch" in Rangoon, edited by M. H. Vardanian. I have at my disposal the only 1939 Christmas issue, which contains articles on Archbishop Mesrob Nshanian, Mesrob Seth, the renowned singer Armenak Shahmuradian and His Holiness Catholicos Sahak of the See of Cilicia.

INDONESIA

Jakarta

At the end of the 18th century, Armenian merchants began to settle in Java (Indonesia), which was under Dutch rule. They established a number of trading companies in different cities, some of international fame.

A well-known Armenian merchant from Batavia (the old name for Jakarta), Hacob Harutyun, who was a representative of the Shahamirian Trading Company of Madras, built the wooden Chapel of St. Hripsime in 1831. When In 1844 the chapel was damaged by fire, Harutyun renovated and renamed it St. Harutyun (Resurrection). This generous benefactor died in June of the same year. In 1854, his widow, Marie Harutyun rebuilt the wooden chapel as a stone church. Marie Harutyun's charitable acts were supported by her sister, Taguhi Manuk. The two sisters inherited all the wealth of their bachelor brother, Gevorg Manuk and donated a part of it for the construction of St. John the Baptist church, located in central Jakarta.

In the late 1950s, the Indonesian government decided to rebuild central Jakarta (Medan Merdeka) in order to beautify the capital. As a consequence, the buildings in the designated area, including St. John the Baptist Church, had to be demolished and new buildings, with the same facilities, built at the expense of the state on a suitable plot of land.

In 1960, the state provided the church committee with a plot of land next to the newly built "Indonesia" hotel. According to our information, the "Bank of Indonesia" building was constructed on the grounds of the St. John the Baptist Church.

The State provided a plot of land to the church valued at 7,500,000 rupees in 1960.

In 1954, the Central Committee of Armenians in Indonesia moved from Jakarta to Surabaya. The Committee was responsible for the management of educational foundations, incomes from the church properties and bequests, as well as the administration of the St. John the Baptist Church in Jakarta and St. Gevorg Church in Surabaya, the Manuk and Harutyun School, Armenian Association, the Theological School of Julfa and issues related to Amenaprkich (All Saver) Church of Julfa. The Committee was also responsible for supervising the assets bequeathed to about 12 Julfa Armenian religious, national, social and educational institutions. These consisted of Java Bank shares, most of which had already been sold and the money transferred to Julfa via Amsterdam.

Manuk and Harutyun School

The school was founded in 1855 by Mariam Harutyun and her sister Taguhi Manuk. The two sisters had the satisfaction of knowing that their brother Agha Gevorg Manuk's wish of establishing a university in London had been partly realised. According to the regulations of the school, the principal had to be an Armenian. The first principal was Khachik Tovmas, who served until 1866. When the Dutch government opened its own school, the number of students at the Armenian school decreased significantly and the school closed in 1878. In 1923 the Manuk and Harutyun School moved to Surabaya. Out of funds left in the school foundation, scholarships were awarded to the students of the ACPA in the name of the benefactors. Hundreds of Armenian boys were educated at the ACPA through the Manuk and Harutyun Educational Trust.

Surabaya

At the beginning of the 20th century a large number of Armenians from Persia settled in various cities of Indonesia, including Surabaya. The decision to build a church was first taken at a general community meeting in 1911.

Unfortunately, due to un-foreseen circumstances, (World I), the project could only be implemented in 1927, when, with the help of the Central Committee of Jakarta Armenians, a plot of land was purchased and within 2 months the St. Gevorg Church was built. Besides satisfying the religious requirements of the community it also served as a national, educational, cultural and social centre for the Armenians of Surabaya.

Unfortunately, During World War II, when Japanese troops occupied Indonesia, Armenians suffered both financial and human losses. In 1942, according to the census conducted by the Japanese troops, there were 550 Armenians in Indonesia, 230 of whom lived in Surabaya.

MALAYSIA

PENANG

Armenian merchants, especially those from South India, traded with Malacca, Penang and Singapore, which were important ports in the Far East.

In 1786, the British East India Trading Company bought Penang Island from the Sultan of Ketah. Like Malacca, Penang also became a successful trading port, where Armenians had a small, but prosperous community.

In 1824, when the St. Gregory the Illuminator Church was built by benefactor Khachatur Galust, the Penang Armenian community consisted of only 25 persons. On the grounds of the church, a vicarage was also constructed.

In the 1830s, some of Penang's Armenian merchants moved to Singapore, others returned to India. According to the 1871 census, there were only 16 Armenians left in Penang, 15 of whom being members of the Antony (Antonian) family, a wealthy merchant.

Archbishop Sahak, the Prelate of the Irano-Indian Diocese visited Penang in 1906 where he had a meeting with the members of the community, which resulted in a decision to demolish the church. As the church minutes are lost, the reason for the demolition of the church is not known.

In 1937, the graves at the churchyard were transferred to the "Western Cemetery" of the city, and the plot of the demolished church (as well as other church properties) was sold at an auction for 33,000 dollars. The money was transferred to the Khachatur Galust Foundation, which was managed by the Trustees of the St. Gregory the Illuminator Church of Singapore. With the funds the trustees built houses and shops on a plot of land owned by the church, which were demolished in the 1880s.

Armenian merchants of Penang were very patriotic and generous. They supported schools and national institutions in India and New Julfa. In 1895, they established a Benevolent Society to assist their compatriots affected by the Hamidian Massacres. In 1917, when Archbishop Torgom Gushakian, Prelate of the Armenian Diocese of Egypt, visited Penang during his fundraising tour in aid of the surviving orphans of the Armenian Genocide, the Armenian community of Penang contributed generously.

SINGAPORE

The Singapore Armenian Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator was built in 1835 and consecrated a year later, by Rev. Father Hovhannes Khachikian. The church is located in the Centre of the city, on "Armenian Street". During the 19th century, most of the houses around the church belonged to wealthy Armenian merchants. With the generous donation of philanthropist Mrs. Shahnazar, a vicarage was built next to the church in 1905.

During World War II, the Armenian community of Singapore also suffered great material and human losses. A number of well-known merchants left the city and searched for new ventures in other countries.

At the end of the war, the remaining members of the community renovated the church at great cost. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds it became impossible to employ a priest.

It is worth noting that the owners of the famous Raffles Hotel of Singapore were the members of the Sarkis family. By the way, four of the city's streets had Armenian names.

CHINA

KHARBIN (Harbin)

After World War I, many Armenian refugees, overcoming great difficulties, managed to reach Kharbin, the capital of Manchuria, an important trade centre in China at the time.

With the assistance of Dr Stepanos Mukhtsian, a famous doctor in the service of the state and with the financial help of Karapet Aspetian, a noble and generous Armenian merchant from Georgia, as well as donations from the members of the community St. Gregory the Illuminator Church was built in 1927. The same year a spacious hall, the vicarage and an alms-house were also built on the church grounds in central Kharbin. The church was surrounded by a large and beautiful garden.

From 1927-1932, Rev. Yeghishe Rostamians served as the pastor of the church, but from 1932-1937 the Armenian community had no priest. Archbishop Torkom Gushakian, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem responding to the request of the Kharbin Armenians, appointed Rev. Asoghig Ghazarian as the spiritual head of the Armenian churches in the Far East and sent him to Kharbin.

Rev. Asoghig first put the church finances on a solid foundation, raising income to its peak. He organized night classes for Armenian children and teenagers, personally teaching Armenian language, history and church history.

During World War II, when the Japanese army occupied Kharbin, Rev. Asoghig was detained in a military camp for four years as a prisoner of war. At the end of the war, he returned to Jerusalem.

I had the good fortune of meeting this devoted clergyman for the first time, when I was a student at the Armenian Seminary of the Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias (1948-1955). I remember very well, when Catholicos Garegin Hovsepants (Hero of Sartarapat) greeted him on the steps of *Veharan*, the official residence of the catholicos and said;

"Here is a living martyr of the Armenian Church."

Indeed, Rev. Asoghig was a churchman embodying the true meaning of the word *clergyman*.

Until 1957, the Armenian churches in India and the Far East came under the jurisdiction of the Irano-Indian Diocese, which in its turn was subject the authority of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. When In 1957 the Irano-Indian Diocese was removed from Etchmiadzin by the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, the Armenian communities in India and the Far East refused to accept the authority of Antelias. On 16 December 1957, the " Far Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Churches" was established under the jurisdiction of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

Acknowledging the exceptional work done by Father Asoghig Ghazarian in Kharbin, His Holiness Vasken I, Catholicos of All Armenians ordained him a Bishop and sent His Grace to Calcutta, as his Pontifical Delegate and Prelate of the newly formed Diocese.

I had the good fortune calling Bishop Asoghig my friend when I was teaching Armenian studies at the ACPA (1957-1964) in Calcutta.

To return to the Armenian community of Kharbin, due to mass emigration, the number of Armenians greatly decreased. In 1959, by the order of communist government of China, the Armenian church in Kharbin was turned into a garment manufacturing factory and in 1966, when the Armenian community no longer existed, the government demolished the Armenian Church, along with all the other churches.

CONCLUSION

Due to invasions, wars and political upheavals over centuries, the Armenians fled Armenia or were forcefully deported, settling in different countries, including India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, China etc., where they established prosperous communities, built churches, commercial enterprises, educational institutions, cultural and social societies. Today, with the exception of Calcutta (Kolkata), Armenian communities no longer exist in any of the above-mentioned countries.

Sadly, most of the church assets of once prosperous Armenian communities in India and the Far East are lost. The remainder will certainly suffer the same sad

fate, unless immediate steps are taken by their legal owner, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

In 2013, His Holiness Garegin II, Catholicos of All Armenians formed a committee under his patronage, headed by the late national benefactor Haik Didizian, to take care of the maintenance of Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church, Singapore, Holy Resurrection Church, Dhaka and St. John the Baptist Church, Yangon, Myanmar.

The arrangement made by His Holiness is greatly appreciated, but cannot help the efforts being made to prevent the loss of the remaining assets of the Armenian churches in the Far East.

It is a fact that the legal owner of the Armenian churches and their assets in the above-mentioned countries is the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, headed by His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians.

Therefore, I would humbly submit the following proposals for the kind attention of His Holiness Garegin II, Catholicos of All Armenians.

1. A committee to be formed under His Holiness' patronage to deal with the issues related to the Armenian churches and their assets in India and the Far East.
2. The duty of the committee; preparation of a complete list of all Armenian churches and their liquid (wills, money, shares etc.) and fixed (churches, cemeteries, land, buildings etc.) assets in the Far East and have them legally confirm that the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin as their legal owner.
3. As there is no possibility of having new Armenian communities formed in the above countries, the Mother See is advised to sell all the defunct churches, cemeteries and other church properties and belongings and to deposit proceeds of the sales into a special account, to be used for financing important national and church projects.

Finally, the Calcutta Armenian Community has shrunk significantly after the World War II and judging from what happened to the others, it will sooner or later will also have the same fate. Therefore, it is advisable that the Mother See and the Committee of the Holy Church of Nazareth discuss this issue and take the necessary steps to safe-guard the huge assets of the church.

In writing this article, my intention has been to bring to the kind attention of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin the important issues discussed in it, while at

the same time to give the readers a brief historical background on the Armenian communities in the Far East.

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London, May 2023