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A PIECE OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE NORTH – THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY OF SWEDEN

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Since the mid-20th century Sweden has changed from an ethnically and religiously homogenous country to one that is highly diverse. In the census of 1930, 15 people said that they were “Mohammedans” or followers of other Asian religions,¹ while today Muslims in Sweden number several hundred thousand.² The reason for this change is substantial immigration. Between 1950 and 1970 no less than 625,000 people moved to Sweden for work, mainly from Finland, Greece and Yugoslavia.³ In 1972 the influx of foreign labor in effect stopped and, since then, immigrants have predominately been refugees and asylum seekers.⁴ This development has fundamentally changed the demography of Sweden. In 2016, 17.8% of those living in Sweden were born abroad.⁵

In 1975 the policy of the Swedish government concerning immigration drastically changed. Moving away from promoting the assimilation of immigrants, the new policy became one of encouraging multiculturalism. Since then ethnic organizations have been generously supported so they can help preserve the original culture of their members, and immigrant children in public schools are offered classes in their mother tongue. The immigrants themselves are supposed to decide how integrated they want to become, meanwhile being supplied with opportunities to preserve their own culture.⁶

There are 10–13,000 Armenians in Sweden today.⁷ Nobody knows the exact number as Sweden does not register people according to their ethnicity;

¹ Simon Sorgenfrei, *Islam i Sverige – de första 1300 åren* [Islam in Sweden – the first 1300 years], Bromma, Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfunden, 2018, p. 3.

² As Sweden does not register people according to their religion, nobody knows the real number of Muslims. Not more than about 190,000 are officially connected to Islamic organizations, but approximately 400–450,000 have a Muslim background (Göran Larsson, *Islam och muslimer i Sverige – en kunskapsöversikt* [Islam and Muslims in Sweden – an overview], Bromma, Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfunden, 2014, pp. 112–16.

³ Mikael Byström and Pär Frohnert, *Invandringens historia – från ”folkhemmet” till dagens Sverige* [The history of immigration – from Folkhemmet to the Sweden of today], Stockholm, Delmi, 2017, p. 39.

⁴ Byström and Frohnert, pp. 52–56.

⁵ Byström and Frohnert, p. 4. The most important countries of origin were Yugoslavia, Finland, Syria and Iraq.

⁶ Byström and Frohnert, pp. 70–72.

⁷ Estimates differ. I asked my respondents what they think and most gave an estimate close to this. According to the Armenian Ambassador the number is 13,000.

however, it does register people according to their country of origin. A minority of Armenians in Sweden come from Armenia, while most are from the Middle East.⁸ Sweden also registers people according to their mother tongue,⁹ yet for many Armenians in Sweden this is Arabic or some other language, rather than Armenian. Therefore, neither the number of people born in Armenia nor the number of Armenian speakers indicates the real number of Armenians in the country. According to the statistics of the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, in 2019 4,650 people were connected to the Armenian Apostolic Church in Sweden,¹⁰ yet this does not represent the number of Armenians in the country either, as many belong to the Catholic Church, to different Protestant churches or to no faith community at all.

In this article, I first provide a short overview of the history of Armenians in Sweden. Then I describe how the community is organized, what challenges it faces and the kind of issues with which it struggles. My method of research is – or rather, should have been – participant observation and semi-structured interviews. However, because of the pandemic I was not able to travel to the various Armenian events customarily held in Sweden (most of which, furthermore, were cancelled), and my interviews were conducted by telephone or online.

In total, I interviewed 17 people, some of whom are or have been in leading positions within the community, in the Union of Armenian Associations in Sweden or in other Armenian organizations. The youngest respondent was 23 and the oldest 70. The interviews took place in January and February of 2021, and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. I also interviewed the Armenian Ambassador, Alexander Arzoumanian. All interviews except the one with the Ambassador were conducted in Swedish.

FROM EARLY CONTACTS TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A COMMUNITY

Before the middle of the 20th century the immigration of Armenians to Sweden was restricted to a few individuals and families. The first mention of Sweden in an Armenian text is from 1568, when Pirzade Ghapanetsi wrote about his visit to the country. From the late 16th century there were commercial contacts between Swedish and Armenian merchants in Persia, especially New Julfa after it was established. The Swedish officer Ludwig Fabritius (1648-1729) visited Persia several times to negotiate with Armenian merchants over trade

⁸ According to Statistics Sweden, at the end of 2019 there were 3282 persons in Sweden born in Armenia.

⁹ According to an estimate from 2015, there are 5700 Armenian speakers in Sweden. Of these 23% are said to be born in Sweden. (Mikael Parkvall, *Sveriges språk i siffror. Vilka språk talas och av hur många?* [The languages of Sweden in numbers. Which languages are spoken and by how many?] Stockholm, Språkrådet och Morfem, 2015, pp. 233-34).

¹⁰ <https://www.myndighetsstatistik.se/kunskap/statistik-om-trossamfund.html> .

to Sweden, and in 1687 he returned to Sweden in the company of four Armenian merchants, who were warmly received by the Swedish king, Karl (Charles) XI (1655-97), and given favorable trading terms. Trade between the Armenians of New Julfa and Europe via Sweden came to an end with the outbreak of the Great Northern War in 1700.¹¹

During the next centuries a number of Armenians from the Ottoman Empire served as Swedish diplomats, and some of them lived at least for a while in Sweden. The most prominent among them were several generations of the d'Ohsson family and Ohan (Hovhannes) Demirgian (1836-77), who was granted Swedish citizenship in 1867. Demirgian, who was first master of the horses at the court of the Swedish king, built a house in a suburb of Stockholm which was inspired by Armenian Church architecture. It was called the "Armenian chapel" and is still standing, although not in use.¹² The philologist Norayr Byuzandatsi (originally Stepanos Gapezian, 1844-1916) lived in Sweden for two decades and published the first Armenian magazine in Scandinavia, of which only two issues appeared.¹³

In the late 19th century an evangelical free church, Svenska Missionsförbundet (Mission Covenant Church of Sweden), started to send missionaries to different parts of the world. Some served for many years in the Caucasus and in Persia, where they worked among many different peoples, including Armenians. Meanwhile, a number of their Armenian partners spent time in Sweden studying theology, among them Margara Ter Asaturiantz (1868-?) and Johannes Avetarian (1861-1919), a Muslim Turk who converted to Christianity and took an Armenian name. Swedish missionaries wrote articles and books not only about their missionary work but also about the massacres of Armenians.¹⁴

Another Nordic missionary organization, Kvinnliga Missionsarbetare (Women Missionary Workers), also sent women missionaries to Armenia, "the land of blood and tears", where some, including Swedish Alma Johansson (1881-1974), witnessed the Armenian genocide. After the genocide Johansson worked for two decades among Armenian refugees in Constantinople and

¹¹ Artsvi Bakhchinyan, *Armenia-Sweden. Historical and Cultural Relations*, Yerevan, 2006, pp. 26-48.

¹² Bakhchinyan, p. 57; Gösta Hallonsten, *Östkyrkor i Sverige – en översikt* [Eastern Churches in Sweden – an overview], Skellefteå, Artos, 1992, p. 33.

¹³ Bakhchinyan, *Armenia-Sweden*, pp. 49-62.

¹⁴ Bakhchinyan, pp. 63-69; John Hultvall, *Mission och vision i Orienten. Svenska Missionsförbundets mission i Transkaukasien – Persien 1882-1921* [Mission and vision in the Orient. The mission of the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden in Transcaucasia], Stockholm, Verbum, 1991.

Thessaloniki.¹⁵ In the 1920s there was a short-lived Armenia Committee in Sweden, which spread information about the plight of the Armenians and collected money for the work of the Danish aid-worker Karen Jeppe (1876-1935) in Aleppo.¹⁶

The first years of the 20th century saw a new phenomenon: groups of Armenians, mainly from Persia, came to Sweden and toured the country begging for money, sometimes with stories about how they had been persecuted by Muslims. As this was illegal, they were deported from Sweden, with 363 Armenians being repatriated between 1902 and 1914.¹⁷

During the second half of the 20th century Sweden witnessed real Armenian immigration in the sense that individuals and families came and settled permanently. In the 1950s the first families arrived from Istanbul. In the 1970s Armenians from Turkey and Lebanon started to come and after 1979 from Iran. In the mid-1990s there were approximately 3,500-4,000 Armenians in Sweden, the majority of them from Iran.¹⁸ Political developments, particularly the conflict and war in Iraq from 2003 and in Syria from 2011, saw an influx of Armenians from these countries and the concomitant establishment of the Armenian community in Sweden. The community is far from homogenous, as its members have backgrounds in a range of countries. The Armenians from the Middle East tend to find the Hayastantsis (Armenians from Armenia) too Russian, whereas the latter think the Middle Eastern Armenians are too Arabic or Iranian. One of my respondents, with a background in Iran, also claimed that Armenians with Iranian backgrounds differ from those from Arab countries, observing that the Armenians in Iran have never been persecuted and are, therefore, more open-minded. Unlike other Armenians, those from

¹⁵ Svante Lundgren, "Scandinavian Women Missionaries as Part of the Armenophile Movement" *Haigazian Armenological Review* 39 (2019), pp. 253-76.

¹⁶ Göran Gunner, *Folkmordet på armenier – sett med svenska ögon* [The Armenian Genocide through Swedish eyes], Skellefteå, Artos, 2012, pp. 322-43.

¹⁷ Tomas Hammar, *Sverige åt svenskarna. Invandringspolitik, utlänningskontroll och asylrätt 1900-1932* [Sweden to the Swedes. Immigration policy, control of foreigners and right of asylum 1900-1932], Stockholm, 1964, pp. 69-71. An interesting fact is that, at the same time and in a similar way, Assyrians from Iran were also begging in some countries, sometimes by pretending to be priests. See Florence Hellot-Bellier, *Chroniques de massacres annoncés. Les Assyro-Chaldéens d'Iran et du Hakkari face aux ambitions des empires (1896-1920)*, Paris: Geuthner, 2014, pp. 61-66; Jan Beṭ-Şawoce (ed.), *Den assyro-kaldeiska nationalrörelsen: uppkomst, uppgång och upplösning. Malik Qambar & Agha Petros: politik, diplomati och militär organisering* [The Assyro-Chaldean national movement: birth, rise and dissolution. Malik Qambar & Agha Petros: politics, diplomacy and military organization], Södertälje, Beṭ-Froso & Beṭ-Prasa Nsibin, 2016, pp. 337-55.

¹⁸ Bakhchinyan, *Armenia-Sweden*, p. 118.

Iran, my respondent claimed, are usually only culturally Christians, not believers.

ORGANIZING THE COMMUNITY

With the number of Armenians in Sweden growing, the next step was to organize the community. The first Armenian organization to be established in the country was a local club in Stockholm in 1973, followed by one in Uppsala in 1980. In 1992 a national federation was established as an umbrella organization: Armeniska riksförbundet i Sverige (Union of Armenian Associations in Sweden).¹⁹ In 2019 it had 14 local clubs with 1,371 members in total,²⁰ although some clubs have been short-lived and there are also Armenian organizations which are not members of the national Union.

The local clubs are cultural associations which organize different activities. Special days (like April 24 and Armenian Independence Day on September 21) are commemorated, and clubs often have group cultural activities featuring Armenian music and dance and various sports, although the latter are also organized in separate sport clubs. Classes in the Armenian language are frequently offered both to adults and to children to complement the language tuition they have in school. The Union runs an activity center, Hay Doun, in a suburb of Stockholm, where young people gather to hang out, but also holds organized activities like dance, language classes and chess.

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) has a Swedish branch, engaged in political lobbying, and there are also Dashnak-connected organizations including the Armenian Youth Federation, the Armenian Relief Society (HOM), Hamazkayin, Homenetmen and Svensk-Armenisk Kommitté för Rättvisa och Demokrati (a branch of the European Armenian Federation for Justice and Democracy). Hamazkayin was established in 2013 and organizes cultural activities for adults and adolescents. There are three Homenetmen clubs, in Stockholm, Södertälje and Västerås, dedicated to sports and scouting. The Dashnak-connected organizations have two centers, one in Södertälje (Sardarabad) and the other in a suburb of Stockholm (Azadamard).²¹ As in other diaspora communities, there have been conflicts between Dashnakists and non-Dashnakists, both on the national and the local level. In the 1980s a number of Dashnakists left the Armenian club in Uppsala and started their own, named Raffi kulturförening, also in Uppsala.

¹⁹ Bakhchinyan (pp. 118-120) writes that this happened in 1989. That year the decision to establish the Union was made. However, it wasn't officially registered until 1992.

²⁰ This accords with what the Union has reported to the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Myndigheten för Ungdoms- och Civilsamhällesfrågor, MUCF). MUCF distributes state grants to different actors in civil society, e.g., ethnic organizations.

²¹ www.homenetmen.se. Interviews with ARF-connected respondents.

A few magazines have been published by Armenian organizations in Sweden, although most of them have been short-lived. The national Union started a magazine called *Nor Horizon* in 1994,²² but the final issue seems to have been published in 2013. In the 1980s Armenian programs were broadcast on a local radio station in Stockholm for one and a half hours per week.²³

The first Armenian Apostolic masses in Stockholm were held in the 1970s and the first church established in 1979. There are now seven local churches, which are served by two or three priests. The church is under the Catholicos of All Armenians in Echmiadzin and belongs to the Western Europe exarchate (diocese). The head of this exarchate is Bishop Tiran Petrosyan, based in Vienna. Most of the local churches meet in church buildings which they borrow from other church denominations (both Protestant and Orthodox), although in April 2015 the first specifically Armenian church building was inaugurated in Södertälje: the Church of Virgin Mary, which was bought from the Syriac Orthodox Church.²⁴ In 2019 the Armenian-Apostolic Church in Sweden had 4650 members.²⁵

There are also 350-400 families of Armenian Catholics in Sweden, all of whom belong to the Catholic diocese of Stockholm, which beside Roman Catholics also incorporates members of the Eastern and Oriental Catholic Churches, among them the Armenian Catholic Church. Armenian Catholic masses are regularly held in three locations, a Catholic church and two churches belonging to the Church of Sweden (Protestant). Occasionally the priest also visits other locations to meet the faithful there. The Armenian Catholic community is served by one priest and two deacons. It also has activities for children such as scouting, language courses and religious instruction.²⁶

SÖDERTÄLJE

The town of Södertälje, 30 kilometers south-west of Stockholm, has been mentioned several times. Since the 1970s this town has been a magnet for

²² Bakhchinyan, *Armenia-Sweden*, p. 121.

²³ Göran Gunner, "Armenier" [Armenians], Ingvar Svanberg & Harald Runblom (ed.), *Det mångkulturella Sverige. En handbok om etniska grupper och minoriteter* [The multicultural Sweden. A handbook on ethnic groups and minorities], Stockholm, Gidlunds bokförlag, 1989, pp. 19-22.

²⁴ Thomas Arentzen, *Ortodoxa och österländska kyrkor i Sverige* [Orthodox and Oriental Churches in Sweden], Stockholm, Nämnden för stöd till trossamfund, 2016, pp. 101-102. Interview with a representative of the church board.

²⁵ <https://www.myndigheten.se/kunskap/statistik-om-trossamfund.html> .

²⁶ <https://www.katolskakyrkan.se/forsamlingsliv/vikariatet-for-de-orientalisk-katolska-kyrkorna/armeniska-katolska-kyrkan> and interview with Father Hovsep Khachig Baheyanyan, January 28, 2021.

Christians from the Middle East. Of its 100,000 inhabitants more than half have non-Swedish backgrounds. Most of these are Assyrians/Syriacs, but there are also numerous inhabitants belonging to other Oriental Christian groups, among them Armenians. Because of the strong presence of Middle Eastern Christians, Södertälje has been called “Mesopotälje” and “the Aleppo of Sweden”. Relations between Armenians and the huge Assyrian/Syriac community in Södertälje are cordial, and marriages between partners from these communities are common. Södertälje has in fact such a concentration of Oriental Christians that it functions as an ethnic bubble. One young respondent from the town answered my question about his Armenian versus Swedish identity by observing, “In Södertälje it is easy to forget your Swedish part.”

As already mentioned, the only church building owned by the Armenian Apostolic Church in Sweden is in Södertälje. The town also has the largest and most active Homenetmen club. It is estimated that there are about 4,000 Armenians in the town, most of them recently arrived from Syria. At big religious holidays the church will be overcrowded, and sometimes concerts with famous Armenian singers are organized, attracting large audiences.

An Armenian visitor in Sweden in 2019 wrote the following description of her experience of a picnic with the Armenian scouts in Södertälje:

The daily forecast predicted rain showers, but the weather changed and became a comfortable overcast—the perfect weather for a picnic. As we arrived, the smell of grilled kebabs filled the air. A few volunteers were in charge of preparing the food. Around 2 p.m., the youngsters wrapped up their activities and games. Before enjoying the delectable food that I’m sure they could hardly wait for, the scouts lined up to perform the flag ceremony of the color guard and to recite their pledges. The kids ranged in age from six years old to sixteen, and were all neatly dressed in their uniforms. The ceremony aroused my emotions. It was heartwarming to see that our Armenian society is thriving on “Odar Aperoom” (on foreign shores).²⁷

In 2019 some Armenians from Södertälje accompanied the town’s mayor, Boel Godner (Social Democrat), on a visit to Armenia, where they participated in the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. Unlike their party at the national level, the ruling Social Democrats in Södertälje fully support recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

PROMINENT INDIVIDUALS

As the Armenian community in Sweden is small, it has not produced Kardashian or Aznavour-like celebrities. However, there have been prominent individuals among the Swedish Armenians, although there are, of course,

²⁷ Catherine Yesayan, “Another Crossing, Another Armenian Community: Sweden” *Asbarez* October 16, 2019 (<http://asbarez.com/187049/another-crossing-another-armenian-community/>).

different forms of prominence. Someone might be an important figure within the community, but unknown to the wider public. Yet several Armenian scholars, business people and artists have left an impact on Swedish society. Among them is the film maker Suzanne Khardalian (b. 1956 in Beirut), who was awarded a Guldbagge (Swedish equivalent to an Oscar) for best film for *Tillbaka till Ararat* (Back to Ararat), which she made with her husband PeÅ Holmquist (b. 1947). Her film *Farmors tatueringar* (Grandma's Tattoos) is about her grandmother, a survivor of the Armenian genocide.²⁸

So far three Armenians have been members of the national parliament. Murad Artin (b. 1960 in Iraq) was a member for the Left Party from 1998 to 2002 who was active in working for recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Swedish parliament. He also took the initiative in creating a memorial to the victims of the Genocide of 1915, inaugurated in 2015, in his hometown of Örebro; it is the only such memorial in Sweden erected by a municipality (others have been sponsored by churches and organizations). Esabelle Dingizian (b. 1962 in Baghdad) was an MP representing the Green Party from 2006 to 2018. During the last four years she was the third deputy speaker of the parliament. In that capacity she headed the Swedish delegation to the First Global Forum Against the Crime of Genocide, held in Yerevan in April 2015.²⁹ Her brother Greg Dingizian (b. 1960 in Baghdad) is a prominent businessman in Malmö, Sweden's third biggest city. At present there is one Armenian member of parliament, Arin Karapet (b. 1988 in Sweden, parents from Iran), elected in 2018 and representing the Conservative Party (Moderaterna). He is the chair of the parliament's friendship group with Armenia, which works for greater cooperation between Sweden and Armenia, and to promote anti-corruption, rule of law, environmental protection and women's rights in Armenia.

An important figure for the Armenian community is the historian Vahagn Avedian (b. 1972 in Iran). He has been the president and later the spokesperson of the Union of Armenian Associations in Sweden, and is the editor of homepages on Armenia,³⁰ the genocide³¹ and the Karabakh issue.³² He is a

²⁸ See Suzanne Khardalian, *Berättandets befrielse. Att filma överlevande från ett folk mord* [Liberative narration. To film survivors of a genocide], Stockholm, Dramatiska Institutet, 2009.

²⁹ Tigran Mkrtchyan (ed.), *Global Forum Yerevan Against the Crime of Genocide 22-23 April 2015*, Yerevan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, pp. 205-6.

³⁰ www.armenica.org .

³¹ www.folkmordet1915.se .

³² www.karabach.se .

Doctor of History, having written a dissertation about Armenian memory politics concerning the genocide.³³

The most well-known Swedish-Armenian in sport is definitely Ara Abrahamian (b. 1975 in Gyumri) who has two gold and one silver medal from World Championships in Greco-Roman wrestling and a silver from the 2004 Olympics in Athens. He is mostly famous for what happened in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, where he came third but refused to accept the bronze medal as he—and many others—thought that he had been unjustly robbed of winning the semi-final. This led to a heated debate about corruption in United World Wrestling.³⁴

THE GENOCIDE ISSUE

Like Armenian communities in other countries, Swedish Armenians are active in raising awareness about the genocide and in lobbying for genocide recognition. Every April 24 Armenian churches and organizations across Sweden organize different activities which normally include a demonstration at the Turkish Embassy and a ceremony at the grave of Alma Johansson.

Sweden is different from most other countries in that it has a much larger Assyrian/Syriac community than Armenian. The first Assyrians immigrated in 1967, and since then the community has grown to approximately 150,000.³⁵ When the question of recognizing the Ottoman genocide was first raised in the Swedish parliament, the focus was on what had happened to the Assyrians.³⁶ The first time the genocide was mentioned in a member's bill was in 1991. Two members of the Left Party raised the issue of the present situation of Assyrians/Syriacs in Turkey. They also wrote about what had happened during World War I both to this group and to the Armenians. From the late 1990s almost every year there have been member's bills, interpellations and questions about recognizing the genocide. In 2000 the parliamentary committee for foreign affairs wrote about the genocide in its report, which has sometimes

³³ Vahagn Avedian, *Knowledge and Acknowledgement in the Politics of Memory of the Armenian Genocide*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019.

³⁴ "Wrestler banned two years for Beijing medal protest" *USA Today* June 11, 2008 (http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2008-11-06-wrestler-suspended_N.htm).

³⁵ Svante Lundgren, *The Assyrians – Fifty Years in Sweden*, Translated by Carl Ahlstrand, Mölndal, Nineveh Press, 2017.

³⁶ On the Assyrian genocide, see David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I*, Piscataway, New Jersey, Gorgias Press, 2006; David Gaunt, Naures Atto & Soner O. Barthoma (eds.), *Let Them Not Return. Sayfo – The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, New York – Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2017; Hannibal Travis (ed.), *The Assyrian Genocide. Cultural and Political Legacies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018.

been seen as an official recognition. However, this is not the case as the issue was not brought to the house for a vote.³⁷

On June 12, 2008, the house voted on the issue and decided not to recognize the genocide with an overwhelming majority of 245-37. Two years later the issue had a different outcome; with the smallest possible margin, 131-130, the Swedish parliament decided to recognize the “genocide against Armenians, Assyrians/Syriacs/Chaldeans, and Pontic Greeks”. The reason for the turnaround was that the biggest party, the Social Democrats, had changed its position on the issue and its parliamentarians voted in favor of recognition.³⁸ The 130 parliamentarians who voted against recognition did not deny the genocide; on the contrary, many of them declared that they definitely believe that what happened constitutes genocide. However, they believe that this is not an issue on which a parliament should make a decision.

This was a historic moment. Many national parliaments had earlier recognized the Armenian genocide, but the Swedish parliament was the first to include Assyrians/Syriacs and (Pontic) Greeks in its recognition. Yet the drama was not over with the decision made; rather, it had only just started. The then right-wing government expressed its regrets over the decision, while the Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, complained about its unfortunate nature.³⁹ The government, which is responsible for foreign policy affairs, also declared that it would not implement the parliament’s decision. Since 2014 Sweden has had a government dominated by the Social Democrats. Despite earlier promises, it has not implemented the decision, and therefore the genocide has continued to be an object of animated political debate and accusations of broken promises.

An important factor in the process that led to the parliament’s decision to recognize the genocide was the tight cooperation between the Union of Armenian Associations in Sweden, the National Federation of Assyrians in Sweden and the Pontic Greek organization in Stockholm. These organizations have sometimes engaged in common demonstrations in Stockholm on April 24,

³⁷ This report is mentioned on the homepage of the Armenian Genocide Museum Institute, although with a misleading translation: the parliamentary committee for foreign affairs (*utrikesutskottet*) is not the same as “The Foreign Ministry” (http://www.genocidemuseum.am/eng/Sweden_Parliament_Report.php).

³⁸ For an analysis of this process, see Svante Lundgren, *Hundra år av tveksamhet. Osmanska folkmordet på kristna och Sveriges reaktion* [A hundred years of ambiguity. The Ottoman genocide against Christians and Sweden’s response], Södertälje, Tigris Press, 2015, pp. 9-35.

³⁹ “Genocide vote sparks diplomatic fallout” *The Local* March 12, 2010 (<https://www.thelocal.se/20100312/25484>).

but some years ago this ended, mainly due to internal schisms within the Assyrian community.

There has been some research on the genocide done in Sweden. The historian David Gaunt has written the most exhaustive study of the Assyrian genocide (in English)⁴⁰, whereas Klas-Göran Karlsson, history professor at Lund University, has published a thorough book on the Armenian genocide (in Swedish).⁴¹ Vahagn Avedian, mentioned above, has published studies on the Armenian genocide in both Swedish and English⁴², and the theologian Göran Gunner has written a book about the Armenian genocide from Swedish sources.⁴³ The historian Maria Karlsson wrote her doctoral dissertation on the denial of the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide.⁴⁴

OFFICIAL SWEDISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS

After Armenia's independence Sweden established diplomatic relations with the country in January 1992. After that, relations developed on many levels in political, economic and cultural fields. Between 1999 and 2001 a Swedish House operated in Yerevan, organizing lectures, concerts, exhibitions and film screenings. Humanitarian projects were carried out, funded both by voluntary organizations and by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).⁴⁵ An Armenian Embassy did not open in Stockholm until 2013, with Artak Apitonian as the first ambassador. In March 2019, the Armenian Embassy in Copenhagen was closed and the ambassador there, Alexander Arzoumanian, moved to the Stockholm embassy, which is now in charge of all the Nordic countries: Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway.

After the Velvet Revolution in 2018 the interest in Armenia increased in Sweden, and several official visits were made by the Speakers of the Parliament and various ministers. In 2019 Sweden decided to re-establish "a window for bilateral development cooperation with Armenia" with three main areas of cooperation: "economic integration with the EU and development of market

⁴⁰ Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors*.

⁴¹ Klas-Göran Karlsson, *"De som är oskyldiga idag kan bli skyldiga imorgon..." Det armeniska folkmordet och dess efterbörd* [Those who are innocent today might be guilty tomorrow... The Armenian genocide and its aftermath], Stockholm, Atlantis, 2012.

⁴² Avedian; Armin T. Wegner: *Utdrivningen av det armeniska folket i öknen* [The expulsion of the Armenian people into the desert], ed. by Vahagn Avedian, transl. by Harry Näslund, Järfälla, Armenica.org & Armeniska riksförbundet i Sverige, 2015.

⁴³ Gunner, *Folkmordet på armenier*.

⁴⁴ Maria Karlsson, *Cultures of Denial. Comparing Holocaust and Armenian Genocide Denial*, Lund, Department of History, Lund University, 2015.

⁴⁵ Bakhchinyan, *Armenia-Sweden*, pp. 139-145.

economy; strengthened democracy and respect for human rights; and better environment and reduced climate impact”.⁴⁶

The corona pandemic put a—hopefully temporary—stop to much of this cooperation. The Karabakh War in 2020 dealt another blow. Ambassador Arzoumanian is very critical of the attitude of Sweden and most other EU-countries on the matter. The Swedish government saw the war as an internal Azerbaijani affair and did not condemn the aggressor, merely appealing to both sides for constraint. The Ambassador and Armenian organizations in Sweden emphasized another aspect to the Swedish government, the right of the Armenians of Artsakh to national self-determination, but to little effect.⁴⁷ In 2021 Sweden is the chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which through its Minsk Group is in charge of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace negotiations. Parliamentarians supporting Armenia have shown some understanding of Swedish caution during the Second Karabakh War: precisely because Sweden is the chair of OSCE in 2021, the country had to be diplomatic during the war. Hopefully, Swedish representatives will be more outspoken behind closed doors.

INTEGRATING WHILE NOT ASSIMILATING

John W. Berry (1939-), a Canadian psychologist, has studied the process of acculturation, which he defines in the following way:

Acculturation is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. At the group level, it involves changes in social structures and institutions and in cultural practices. At the individual level, it involves changes in a person's behavioral repertoire. These cultural and psychological changes come about through a long-term process, sometimes taking years, sometimes generations, and sometimes centuries.⁴⁸

Berry has distinguished between four different modes or strategies of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization.⁴⁹ Marginalization happens when there is little interest from a minority group to have closer relations with the majority population, often because of discrimination and exclusion. The Armenians have often been discriminated against, but have in general had a strong desire to maintain their own culture and religion. They have, therefore, often chosen the strategy of separation,

⁴⁶ <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/armenia-yerevan/about-us/> .

⁴⁷ Interview with Ambassador Arzoumanian January 21, 2021.

⁴⁸ John W. Berry, “Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 2005:29(6), pp. 698-99.

⁴⁹ Berry, pp. 704-705.

choosing to live in neighborhoods dominated by Armenians, like New Julfa in Isfahan.

In modern, liberal societies ethnic and religious discrimination is banned, although not absent. Armenians in Western countries today normally opt for integration, although some naturally will end up assimilating. The process of assimilation normally takes some time, with the third generation often already fully assimilated. Mixed marriages are usually seen making the assimilation process easier and faster. However, sometimes the first two generations opt for integration whereas the third generation wants to reclaim its roots, or as Marcus Lee Hansen (1892-1938) has put it, “what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember”.⁵⁰

Armenians have a long history, a strong identity and an independent church which, in the absence of an independent state, has been the guarantee of national survival. Compared to many other immigrant groups, therefore, Armenians have preserved their identity better even when fully integrated, especially in Western countries. The fact that Armenians have suffered greatly throughout history is also a factor. Many Armenians feel that because their ancestors preferred to die rather than give up their faith, it would be unforgivable to lose their Armenian identity.⁵¹

One of my respondents expressed the view that Armenians in Sweden who seem very assimilated—they have been in the country a long time, speak better Swedish than Armenian, are married to non-Armenians—still have a strong Armenian identity and offer strong support to high-profile Armenian causes. Even in open and welcoming countries like Sweden Armenians tend to be insistent on preserving their Armenian identity. Another respondent was of the opinion that to be able to survive without assimilation in the long run there needs to be a critical mass of 10,000 Armenians in a location. With Södertälje as the biggest concentration of Armenians, but only numbering approximately 4,000, there is nowhere in Sweden for such a critical mass. In the 1990s dozens of Iranian Armenian families emigrated from Sweden to Los Angeles precisely to be able to live in a place where Armenians are numerous enough to have a kind of ethnic enclave.

PATTERNS OF IDENTIFICATION

Do Armenians in Sweden think about themselves as Armenians who happen to live in Sweden, or as Swedes who happen to have an Armenian background?

⁵⁰ Eugene I. Bender, and George Kagiwada, “Hansen’s Law of ‘Third-Generation Return’ and the Study of American Religion-Ethnic Groups”, *Phylon*, Vol. 1968:29(4), pp. 360-70.

⁵¹ Leo Hamalian has written about how his first generation survivor-father in the USA insisted on keeping his children Armenian, because by doing that they would triumph over the Turks. (Leo Hamalian, “Unmaking it in America”, *Ararat* Winter 1977, pp. 66-67).

That is impossible to know for certain because there are no comprehensive questionnaire studies scrutinizing Armenians' subjective views on the matter. On the basis of my interviews it is evident that many see themselves primarily as Armenians. That is not surprising, taking into account that the Armenian community in Sweden is quite young; the generations which have been born in Sweden might look differently at this.

The question about Armenian and/or Swedish identity is not an either/or issue. Many feel 100 percent Armenian and at the same time 100 percent Swedish. Like all contemporary ethnic communities, the Swedish-Armenian community is hybrid, mixing Swedish and Armenian identity with influences from different countries of origin.⁵² One of my respondents used the metaphor of a hybrid car; in the same way as it runs on both electricity and petrol, he is both Armenian and Swedish, the one does not exclude the other.

All of my respondents have a strong Armenian identity. That is not surprising, as it is more difficult to find persons to interview who have been estranged from that identity and are largely assimilated. Another expected finding is that those who are born and/or raised in Sweden have a stronger Swedish identity than those who immigrated as adults. Those who are born here speak Swedish better than Armenian, and feel very Swedish. Generally, these people understand Armenian and speak it fluently, but have problems in reading and writing the language. One weekly lesson in school is not much, even when it is supported by language instruction in the local Armenian club or church. Those families who live in towns with few Armenians normally do not get language instruction for their children as a minimum number of children asking for that instruction is needed for the school to be obliged to offer it.

The younger Armenians, thus, feel both Armenian and Swedish. As one of them put it: they mix the warmth and passion of the Armenian mentality with the correctness and matter-of-factness of the Swedish. Those who immigrated later in life, too, connect Sweden with coldness: not only is the weather cold, but also the people. Although Swedes are considered kind and friendly, it is not always easy to make Swedish friends.⁵³ On the other hand, Sweden is highly appreciated as a free, democratic and well-functioning country.

⁵² For more on diasporas and transnational identities, see Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds.), *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, Cheltenham, UK & Northampton, MA, USA, Edward Elgar Publishing, 1999.

⁵³ In her study on Armenians in Manchester, Denise Aghanian heard of similar experiences. The Armenians found English neighbors and colleagues to be "lovely people", but did not socialize with them. Denise Aghanian, *The Armenian Diaspora. Cohesion and Fracture*, Lanham – Boulder – New York – Toronto – Plymouth, UK, University Press of America, 2007, pp. 150-151.

An element which strengthens self-identification as Armenian is having connections to Armenia. Most Swedish-Armenians have visited the country, many do it regularly, and some own an apartment or house there. Every time there is a major crisis in Armenia—such as the Second Karabakh War in the autumn of 2020—even those who are not closely connected to Armenian institutions will also get engaged. Although none of my respondents were planning to move to live in Armenia in the near future, many were open to that possibility in the long run. The idea was that after getting a good education in Sweden, Armenians have an obligation to help Armenia by using their know-how; however, many think that it is possible to help Armenia in other ways besides moving there.

The Armenian community in Sweden resembles other Armenian diasporas to a high degree, as indicated by the following key findings of the Armenian Diaspora Survey of 2019, findings which are, in my view, also applicable to Armenians in Sweden:

- Identity is largely defined through hyphenated Armenianness, where family, language and culture are the defining constituents of Armenian identity.
- Christianity and the Armenian Church are important aspects of Armenianness, but there is a wide spectrum of perceptions of religion and more nuanced views on spirituality.
- Armenian language and culture are vital parts of both being Armenian and of community life, and demand for high-quality Armenian education is high.
- Visionary leadership and more cultural and educational activities are in high demand in community life.
- Armenia, as an independent state and country, is an important point of reference for the Diaspora.⁵⁴

THE WORLD'S MOST MODERN COUNTRY

Sweden has been called the world's most modern country. This refers not only to the country's fondness for modern technology, but also to the notion that Swedes have adopted modern ideas and values to a greater extent or earlier than most other countries. One example is gender equality, which is extremely important in the country. The present Swedish government identifies itself as a "feminist government" leading a "feminist foreign policy".

This can be new for many from a traditional Armenian culture, where boys and girls are treated differently. As one female respondent put it, boys are never asked to make their beds, to wash up, to be back home at a certain time

⁵⁴ Hratch Tchilingirian (ed.), *Armenian Diaspora Public Opinion (1). Armenian Diaspora Survey 2019*, London, Armenian Institute 2020, p. 8. The surveys in this study were conducted in Argentina, Canada, Lebanon and Romania.

and many other things that girls are supposed to do. She also noticed that things are changing in Sweden, as Armenian women today can be seen doing things that they normally could not have done, like smoking in public, wearing a tattoo and dominating discussions.

Another feature of Sweden's modernity is its individualism. The findings of the World Values Survey show that Sweden stands out as the country with the highest scores in secular-rational and self-expression values globally.⁵⁵ This is connected to individualism, as the self-expression values focus on the right of every individual to shape his or her life independent of family and society. Swedish individualism has been called "state individualism"⁵⁶ as the state is the guarantor for every individual's choices. When people in Sweden need help—when growing old, becoming sick or unemployed, for example—they do not have to rely on their families. Instead, the state will provide them with the support they need. One of my respondents found it strange, even horrifying, that some people in Sweden only visit their parents once or twice a year. This is very different from traditional Armenian life, which is family-oriented. When Armenians—and others from family-centered cultures—come to Sweden, they find the country's individualism strange, while for those who want to go their own way and maybe challenge their community's norms, Sweden is a good country as it cherishes individual choice above all. Most Armenians in Sweden combine the best of both cultures: they respect the freedom given to the individual but appreciate strong family ties.

Another aspect of Swedish modernity is secularism. Sweden is one of the most non-religious countries in the world, with only a small minority of respondents in a number of different surveys claiming that religion is important to them. A 2018 study by Pew Research Center ranked 34 European countries according to how religious their population was; Sweden was ranked number 30 (Armenia number 2).⁵⁷ Representatives of both the Armenian Apostolic and the Armenian Catholic Church in Sweden claimed that the Swedish-Armenian community generally has remained loyal. However, they admitted that younger Armenians in the country are somewhat influenced by secularist ideas and that this might increase in the future.⁵⁸ Another respondent told me that her

⁵⁵ Ronald Inglehart et al. (eds.), *Human Beliefs and Values. A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook on the 1999-2002 Values Surveys*, Mexico City, Siglo XXI Ed, 2004, pp. 11-14.

⁵⁶ Henrik Berggren & Lars Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* [Is the Swede a human being? Community and independence in modern Sweden], Stockholm, Norstedt, 2014.

⁵⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/>.

⁵⁸ In the much older Armenian community in Manchester one person put it like this: "Back home the church was much more connected to the community and the priest used to visit

teenage daughter was the only person in her class in school who believed in God, while a young man active in the church was pessimistic about the future. According to him young Armenians are already estranged from the church and the faith, and the church is not willing to make the necessary changes to present itself in a more attractive light to the young.

So why have Armenians chosen to settle in Sweden? Some of my respondents came to Sweden because their families knew people who were already living there. Others chose Sweden because the country is known for being a democratic and well-functioning welfare state, which offers a high degree of personal freedom, good education prospects and a fair degree of tolerance and security to ethnic minorities. Some have come to Sweden to study, but have decided to stay permanently. The culture shock associated with moving to another country is moderated by the existence of Armenian networks in many, although not all, places. As with other immigrant groups, Armenians in Sweden tend to settle in cities and towns with a substantial number of compatriots (Stockholm, Uppsala, Södertälje, Västerås).

Another reason for many Armenians coming to Sweden is that the country had a very generous immigration and refugee policy for a long time. People escaping wars in Iraq or Syria could easily get asylum in Sweden. This policy changed dramatically in the autumn of 2015.⁵⁹ Immigrants who settle in Sweden have the right to apply for citizenship after five years, and such applications would normally be approved. Once they become citizens, these new Swedes have the same rights and responsibilities as other Swedes.

CONCLUSIONS

Sweden has dramatically changed from a homogenous to a genuinely multicultural country. Although most Swedes find this development positive, there are also those who see “mass immigration” as a major source of problems like segregated neighborhoods and growing gang violence. Compared to many other countries, it takes a long time in general for most of the refugees arriving in Sweden to get a job and be able to earn a living.⁶⁰

us regularly, they do here but you have to make an appointment. It is not the same. The young over here are not interested in going to church... it is boring for them, maybe they will change when they get older... I would like my boys to attend the church, but I cannot force them; they come with us sometimes on special occasions.” Aghanian, p. 157.

⁵⁹ The Social Democratic Prime Minister Stefan Löfven has stated, “It became particularly clear after the autumn of 2015 that Sweden’s migration policy was not sustainable” and therefore needed to be reformed (i.e., tightened). “Swedish Social Democrats want to halve refugee numbers”, *The Local* May 4, 2018 (<https://www.thelocal.se/20180504/swedish-social-democrats-aim-to-halve-refugee-numbers>).

⁶⁰ Half of all refugee job seekers do not have a job after eight years in Sweden. “Not utilizing the skills of immigrants is a huge waste of resources”, *The Local* February 27, 2019

This is not the case for Armenians in Sweden. Their tradition of loving and valuing education and their skills as entrepreneurs have guaranteed them remarkable upward mobility. The fact that Sweden is characterized by tolerance, democracy and rule-of-law has made them appreciate their new homeland. Sweden is also generous towards immigrant communities, supporting ethnic organizations economically. It is therefore possible to integrate into Swedish society and at the same time preserve one's Armenian identity. However, in a free and welcoming society assimilation is an attractive option. While the young Armenians I have spoken to tell me that, despite being Swedish in many ways, they still self-identify primarily as Armenians, the Armenian community in Sweden is young. The more time that passes, the further along the assimilation scale it, or at least many of its members, will find themselves.

So what will happen in the long run? Experience shows that with the third generation of immigrants the struggle to preserve one's ethnic identity becomes hard. In Sweden the Armenians are now first and second generation immigrants, so the real challenge lies before them. The present Swedish-Armenians will no doubt have Armenian children. The question remains, however: Will they have grandchildren who self-identify as Armenians?

ԿՏՈՐ ՄԸ ԱՐԵՒԵԼՔ՝ ՀԻՄՆԻՍԻ ՄԷՋ. ՇՈՒԷՏԻ ՀԱՅԿԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱՅՆՔԸ

(Ամփոփում)

ՍՎԱՆԹԷ ԼԻԻՆՏԿԳՐԷՆ (Svante.Lundgren@ctr.lu.se)

1950ականներուն Շուէտ չունէր այլեւս միատարր էթնիք բնակչութիւն: Յիրաւի, Ի. դարու երկրորդ կէսէն սկսեալ մեծաթիւ *օտարներ* բնակութիւն հաստատեցին Շուէտի մէջ, այն համեմատութեամբ որ 2016ի Շուէտի բնակչութեան 17,8%ը օտարածին է, այսինքն չէ ծնած Շուէտի մէջ:

1950ականներէն սկսեալ հատուկենտ հայեր սկսած են հաստատուիլ Շուէտ: Անոնց թիւը աւելցաւ մանաւանդ վերջին տասնամեակներուն՝ Լիբանանի, Իրաքի, Սուրիոյ տագնապներուն եւ Հայաստանէն արտագաղթի հետեւանքով:

Այսօր Շուէտի հայութիւնը կը հաշուէ 10-13,000 հոգի:

Հեղինակը այս յօդուածով կը ներկայացնէ համառօտ դիմանկարը շուէտահայութեան. անոր կազմաւորումին, կազմակերպութեան, կազմակերպութեանց հարցերը, ինքնութենական խնդիրները, համարկում-ծուլում իրավիճակը, Հայոց Յեղասպանութեան ճանաչողական դրսեւորումները եւ՝ շարք մը նշանաւոր շուէտահայեր:

(<https://www.thelocal.se/20190227/not-utilizing-the-skills-of-immigrants-is-a-huge-waste-of-resources>).