


MARTA MEZHLUMYAN*

*PhD Student at the Institute of Archaeology
and Ethnography of the NAS RA*

marta.mezhlumyan@gmail.com

0000-0002-5619-3417 

DOI: 10.54503/1829-4073-2025.3.56-67

THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC (BASED ON NARRATIVE-BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY)

Abstract

This study examines the development of the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic, based on narrative-biographical interviews with members of the first migration generation. It highlights how identity and memory are shaped and transmitted in a diasporic context.

Although small in number, the Armenian community represents a distinct case of post-Soviet migration and cultural continuity. The study explores key historical triggers – such as the Armenian Genocide, the 1988 Spitak earthquake, and the collapse of the USSR – and their impact on migration trajectories and collective memory.

Using a narrative approach and framed by theories of transnationalism and diasporic identity, the research shows how migrants negotiate between cultures and generations. It also reveals the symbolic role of language, family, and everyday practices in maintaining a sense of belonging.

Keywords: *Armenian diaspora, migration, identity, memory, Czech Republic, transnationalism, Diaspora Studies*

* The article has been delivered on 19.06.2025, reviewed on 22.12.2025, accepted for publication on 19.12.2025.

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Introduction

This academic study aims to analyze the emergence, development, and current form of the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic, primarily through the biographical narratives of members of the first generation of migrants.

The Armenian diaspora in the Czech environment represents a specific case of transnational migration: it is neither numerous nor significantly institutionalized, but its members show a strong sense of belonging to their national identity, historical memory, and diasporic consciousness. The study attempts to grasp this community as a dynamic formation that is not only the result of migratory pressures, but also an active strategy of individuals, families, and communities in a new environment.

Special attention is paid to the role of memory and identity in the life stories of Armenian migrants. The study examines how ethnic identity is formed in exile, how cultural heritage is transmitted across generations, and how the Armenian past is actualized in relation to current challenges. The research thus does not only provide a historical or sociological reconstruction of migration, but focuses on how people talk about their past, how they organize it, and what meanings they give to it.

Terminological definition: diaspora, integration, witness

Diaspora is understood in the sense formulated by William Safran (1991)¹ – that is, as a transnational community that maintains symbolic and cultural ties to its homeland, shares historical memory (often trauma), and perceives itself as partially isolated from the majority society. Steven Vertovec (1999)² develops this concept as a transnational social field in which there is a constant negotiation of identity between “here” and “there.”

Integration is seen as a two-way process that involves both the adaptation of the migrants to new social norms and the willingness of the host society to allow acceptance while preserving cultural specificities.³ In the Armenian context, integration often takes place at the level of everyday practice – language,

¹ Safran 1991, 83–84.

² Steven Vertovec 1999.

³ Ager & Strang 2008, 166–191.

education, work – while individuals maintain cultural continuity through family, faith, and holidays.

The term “memoirist” here refers to first-generation migrants who share their life stories and reflect on their experiences of arrival, adaptation, and cultural anchoring in the Czech Republic. These actors are not only seen as informants, but as authentic bearers of historical memory who help shape the discourse on diaspora and migration.⁴

Theoretical framework: transnationalism and diasporic identity

Theoretically, the study draws on the concepts of transnationalism and diasporic identity. Transnationalism deals with how migrants maintain simultaneous ties to multiple geographical and cultural spaces.⁵ In the case of the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic, this involves a constant balancing act between Armenia, the post-Soviet space, and Czech reality – both on the level of emotions and values, and through language, customs, media consumption, and communication with relatives.⁶

Diasporic identity is understood as fluid, multi-layered, and situationally conditioned.⁷ The biographical narratives of eyewitnesses provide insight into these processes – how identity is negotiated, how it is transformed, and what contradictions, continuities, and strategies shape it.

The Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Lands – First Contacts and Historical Traces (until the 20th Century)⁸

Contacts between the Armenian and Czech communities can be traced back to the early modern period, although these were more individual than collective migrations. Armenian merchants and craftsmen moved around the Habsburg Monarchy, especially in cities such as Brno, Olomouc, and Lviv (then part of Galicia). Research shows that these contacts were more or less intermittent and

⁴ Portelli 1991.

⁵ Vertovec 2009.

⁶ Kamenická Mezhlumyan 2018.

⁷ Hall 1990, 222–237.

⁸ Based on research: Marta Mezhlumyan. The emergence and history of the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic based on interviews with eyewitnesses 2025 and Kamenická Mezhlumyan 2018.

The Origin and History of the Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Republic...

did not lead to the creation of permanent communities. The Armenian diaspora left more significant traces in the 20th century.

Armenians appeared in the Czech lands mainly as individual merchants, academics, or students. In some cases, their Armenian origin became invisible in the context of assimilation or was overshadowed by another national or professional identity. Until the 20th century, therefore, it is not possible to speak of an Armenian community in the narrower sense.

The Armenian diaspora in the Czech lands – The first wave of migration (1980s–1990s)

A more systematic arrival of Armenians to Czechoslovakia began in the 1980s and intensified significantly after 1988 in connection with the devastating earthquake in Spitak. It was this natural disaster that led to the mass displacement of thousands of people and created the conditions for the first significant wave of diaspora. Another key factor was the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought economic turmoil, ethnic conflicts, and uncertainty, especially in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Analyses show that the first arrivals were not a homogeneous group – they included university students, migrant workers, asylum seekers, and family migrants who followed their relatives. The common denominator was pragmatic motivation – the desire to find a safe and stable environment for living, education, or work. Often, it was not a planned move, but a series of decisions motivated by crises in the country of origin.

So-called intermediaries played a key role in the settlement process – individuals who became a source of support for new arrivals thanks to their familiarity with the Czech environment. It is important to emphasize their significance as “informal institutions” that replaced the role of the state in the integration process: they interpreted, helped with housing, government offices, job searches, and even with negotiating identity with the surrounding community.

The Armenian diaspora in the Czech lands – Formation of the community and its transformation after 2000

In the 1990s, and especially after 2000, the community gradually became institutionalized. In addition to informal networks, the first associations and

cultural initiatives emerged, such as Saturday schools for teaching Armenian, dance groups, church activities, and regular cultural events. An important milestone was the launch of the magazine *Orer* (1999), which established itself as a transregional platform for sharing information and preserving cultural memory.

At the same time, the community is diversifying internally – not only Armenians from Armenia are coming to the Czech Republic, but also from other parts of the post-Soviet space (Ukraine, Georgia, Russia), often with different cultural habits, languages, and historical memories. The respondents' statements capture the tension between different currents within the diaspora – for example, the differences between so-called Eastern and Western Armenians, or between those who emphasize cultural tradition and those who choose to move towards integration.

The linguistic landscape of the community is undergoing significant changes. Although Armenian remains symbolically important, it is often replaced by Czech among the younger generation. Russian then serves as a means of communication between individuals from different parts of the former USSR. Research shows that language is becoming not only a communication tool but also an indicator of identity – the level of knowledge of Armenian is perceived in the community as a sign of being a “true Armenian,” which can create pressure and tension, especially for the younger generation. It also plays an important role in selecting a partner.

Integration strategies include both assimilation (especially among the second generation) and diaspora mobility – that is, the ability to maintain contact with other parts of the diaspora, travel to Armenia, follow Armenian media, and engage in political or humanitarian activities. The community in the Czech Republic is not isolated – it connects with the diaspora in Germany, France, and the US through family ties, church structures, and educational projects.

Despite its relative size, the Armenian community in Czechia is often perceived as an “invisible minority”⁹ – it does not cause conflicts, is not the subject of media stereotypes, and its integration is rather quiet. However, it should be noted that this invisibility is not necessarily an advantage – it can also

⁹ A designation for a group of people who are in some way a minority (ethnic, religious, social, sexual, etc.), but whose presence, problems, or needs are not visible, recognized, or reflected in wider society.

The Origin and History of the Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Republic...

mean an absence of political voice and institutional support. At the same time, however, it allows for a certain degree of autonomous cultural survival, outside the supervision of the state or the expectations of the majority.

The research was conceived as an in-depth qualitative probe focused on survivors of the first generation of Armenian migrants who came to Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic) from the 1980s to the early 2000s. The basic method of data collection was narrative-biographical interviews,¹⁰ which were used to gather their authentic narratives and personal life stories.

The interviews were conducted mainly in Czech and Armenian. Respondents were asked to tell their life stories with an emphasis on moments of migration, adaptation, maintaining identity, family life, and relationship to their origins.

A total of twenty interviews were conducted with respondents who had immigrated to the Czech Republic independently of each other, all during the same initial period.

Identity, memory, and intergenerational transmission in the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic

The Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic represents a specific space in which identity, memory, and historical experiences are reflected in everyday life and intergenerational relationships. Biographical-narrative interviews show that the construction of Armenian identity is not uniform, but consists of a mosaic of individual experiences, family narratives, and strategies shaped by cultural memory, migration experiences, and interactions with the majority society. Identity and memory are thus interconnected and jointly determine how individuals and families interpret the past, anchor themselves in the present, and plan for the future.

Memory as a source of identity

The collective memory¹¹ of the Armenian diaspora is deeply influenced by historical traumas. The Genocide of 1915, the Spitak earthquake (1988), the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and the collapse of the Soviet Union are not only historical moments, but also symbolic points that shape the sense of belonging

¹⁰ Fischer-Rosenthal, Rosenthal 2001, No. 24: 34.

¹¹ Herzig and Kurkchian 2016.

to the Armenian nation. The stories of eyewitnesses often reflect experiences of loss and threat, the necessity to leave home, whether for reasons of war, economic hardship, or politics. These stories form a “memory repertoire”¹² that is repeated within the community and becomes a framework for self-understanding.

Memory has a performative character: through storytelling, identity and relationships to both home and the new country are actively constructed. It is activated through contact with family abroad, during cultural events or crisis situations, such as the war in Karabakh.

Intergenerational transmission of identity and tension

The transfer of memory and identity¹³ between generations is a dynamic, often tense, but also creative process. The differences between the first and second generations are reflected in language skills, religious practices, cultural customs, and the relationship to Armenia as a symbolic “home.” Language is a key element: the older generation considers Armenian to be the bearer of identity, but the younger generation often grows up in a bilingual or predominantly Czech environment and has only a passive command of the language. This linguistic difference can create a distance from one's own identity, but at the same time it stimulates internal reflection and negotiation of one's own cultural heritage.

A complex situation also arises, for example, with bilingual respondents, where it is difficult to distinguish the use of the terms “we” and “they.” Although logically they should use “we” to refer to Armenians, i.e., themselves, and “they” for Czechs, as members of the majority population, in the interviews these designations were often swapped, even though the context usually made it clear who was being referred to. In particular, informants who grew up or were born in the Czech Republic referred to both Czechs and other Armenians as “they,” and did not perceive themselves as belonging to either group, but somewhere in between. On the other hand, Armenians, who came to the Czech Republic at a later age, consistently used “they” only for Czechs, and always referred to himself as part of “we,” that is, Armenians.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Based on research: Kamenická Mezhlumyan 2018.

The Origin and History of the Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Republic...

Similar tensions arise in the area of religion and traditions. The older generation sees the Armenian Apostolic Church as a cultural anchor, while the younger generation often lacks a deeper knowledge of rituals and participates in church life only during symbolic events¹⁵ – weddings, funerals, or holidays.

Memory practices in public space

In addition to family and community life, public space plays a key role. The Armenian diaspora in Czechia articulates its presence through commemorative acts, cultural events, and media representation. Commemorations of the 1915 Genocide, such as memorial gatherings at Khachkars in Prague and Jihlava, have not only ritual but also political significance – they emphasize the continuity of suffering, the need for recognition, and diasporic solidarity.

Cultural festivals, concerts, gastronomic events, and exhibitions of photographs from Armenia serve not only to promote community cohesion but also to present the community's identity to the Czech public. Diasporic media, especially the magazine *Orer*, function as institutions of memory, offering a space for sharing information, interviews, commemorations of anniversaries, and historical events. Readers perceive them as an active memory institution¹⁶ that supports the preservation and transmission of cultural identity.

The current generation also uses digital media – social networks, online communities, and campaigns allow them to connect with Armenian culture even without physically participating in community life. This phenomenon of the “digital diaspora”¹⁷ offers new ways of preserving and staging memory, allowing for the aestheticization of cultural symbols and connection with younger generations.

Conclusion

The study examines the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic as a dynamic phenomenon in which individual life stories are linked to broader processes of migration, adaptation, and cultural transmission. The use of a biographical-narrative approach made it possible to capture the subjective experiences of migrants who have established themselves in the Czech

¹⁵ **Smith** 2009, 42.

¹⁶ **Sarkissian** 2008, 57.

¹⁷ **Vertovec** 2009, 178.

environment, especially since the 1980s. Interviews with eyewitnesses show that Armenian migration was not homogeneous, but included different trajectories, motivations, and strategies, influenced by personal, historical, and geopolitical circumstances.

The key conclusion is that Armenian identity in the Czech context is not static, but a changing construct, emerging from constant negotiation between the past and the present. Members of the diaspora are not merely “bearers of tradition,” but actors who shape their identity in response to new challenges and situations. Identity is performative, fragmentary, and consists of memory fragments, symbolic gestures, and selectively maintained cultural elements.

Memory plays a fundamental role in this process – not only as historical or collective memory, but especially as mediated memory. Memory is narrated within the family, ritualized in public space, aestheticized in media representations, and digitized in the online environment. It serves both symbolic cohesion and intergenerational tension, as different generations interpret it differently and assign different meanings to it.

The family proves to be a key space for the transmission of identity and cultural values. Women often act as guardians of traditions and narrators of memory. However, the transmission of identity is not mechanical – it is influenced by language barriers, generational differences, and different roots in Czech society.

Intergenerational tension manifests itself, for example, in language and religion. The older generation emphasizes the preservation of the Armenian language and traditional values, while the younger generation often grows up in a bilingual or predominantly Czech environment, which creates an ambivalent relationship to their Armenian origins. Nevertheless, young Armenians often actively redefine their identity, combining and transforming cultural elements based on family memory and current social challenges.

Public space plays a crucial role as an arena for the symbolic presence of the community. Memorial events, cultural festivals, media platforms, and digital memory practices function not merely as representations of the past, but as active instruments in its construction, dissemination, and reinterpretation. Such practices enable to maintain community cohesion, articulate political positions, and strengthen cultural self-confidence.

The Origin and History of the Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Republic...

Methodologically, the study shows that the biographical-narrative approach provides unique insight into the subjective dimensions of migration that quantitative methods cannot capture. The narratives of eyewitnesses reveal how migrants perceive their past, structure it, and give it meaning in relation to their present.

This study advances understanding of Armenian migration to the Czech republic and contributes to discussions of diasporic identity in post-communist and post-migration contexts. It highlights that diasporic communities emerge not as static repositories of tradition, but as dynamic actors shaping their identities in a transnational world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ager, A., & Strang, A.** (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166–191.
- Appadurai, Arjun.** 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Boym, Svetlana.** 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brubaker, Rogers.** 2005. "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(1): 1–19.
- Fischer-Rosenthal, W, / Rosenthal, G.** (2001): Analysis of Narrative-Biographical Interviews. *Biograf* (24): 34 para. Available at <http://www.biograf.org/clanek.php?clanek=v2402>
- Hall, Stuart.** (1990). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 222–237.
- Herzig, Edmund a Kurkchian, Margarita.** The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Kamenická Mezhlumyan, Marta.** Partner selection preferences among members of the Armenian community in the Czech Republic. Master's thesis, supervisor Jakoubek, Marek. Charles University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Ethnology, 2018.
- King, Russell, and Wood, Nancy.** 2001. *Media and Migration: Constructions of Mobility and Difference*. London: Routledge.
- Portelli, Alessandro.** *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Safran, William.** 1991. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1(1): 83–99.
- Sarkissian, Shushan.** *Armenian Diaspora: Memories and Identity*. London: Routledge, 2008, 57.
- Smith, Anthony D.** *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. London: Routledge, 2009, 42.

Vertovec, Steven. *Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Vertovec, Steven. 1999. "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,' Exemplified among South Asian Religions." *Diaspora* 6(3): 277–299.

Vertovec, Steven. *Transnationalism*. London: Routledge, 2009.


Marta Mezhlumyan. *The Emergence and History of the Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Republic Based on Interviews with Eyewitnesses*. Prague, 2025.

ՄԱՐՏԱ ՄԵԺԼՈՒՄՅԱՆ

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ հնագիտության և ազգագրության

ինստիտուտի ասպիրանտ

marta.mezhlumyan@gmail.com

0000-0002-5619-3417 

**ՉԵԽԻԱՅԻ ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՈՒՄ ՀԱՅ ՀԱՄԱՅՆՔԻ
ՁԵՎԱՎՈՐՈՒՄՆ ՈՒ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ
(ՀԵՆՎԱԾ Է ՊԱՏՄՈՂԱԿԱՆ-ԿԵՆՍԱԳՐԱԿԱՆ
ՈՒՍՈՒՄՆԱՍԻՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՎՐԱ)**

Ամփոփում

Հետազոտությունը ներկայացնում է Չեխիայի Հանրապետությունում հայ համայնքի ձևավորումը և ներկայիս իրավիճակը՝ հիմնվելով առաջին միգրացիոն ակիթի ներկայացուցիչների հետ կենսագրական հարցազրույցների վրա: Այն ընդգծում է, թե ինչպես են ձևավորվում և փոխանցվում ինքնությունն ու հիշողությունը սփյուռքյան համատեքստում: Չնայած փոքրաքանակ, սակայն Չեխիայի հայ համայնքը հետխորհրդային միգրացիայի և մշակութային շարունակականության առանձնահատուկ օրինակ է: Բացահատվում են միգրացիայի հիմնական պատմական գործոնները՝ ինչպես Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը, 1988 թվականի Սպիտակի երկրաշարժը և ԽՍՀՄ փլուզումը և դրանց ազդեցությունը միգրացիոն ուղիների և կոլեկտիվ հիշողության վրա:

Օգտագործելով պատմողական-կենսագրական հարցազրույցների մեթոդը և հիմնվելով անդրազգայնականության և սփյուռքյան ինքնության տե-

The Origin and History of the Armenian Diaspora in the Czech Republic...

սությունների վրա, հետազոտությունը ցույց է տալիս, թե ինչպես են միգրանտները փոխազդեցության մեջ գտնում մշակույթների և սերունդների հետ: Այն նաև բացահայտում է լեզվի, ընտանիքի և ամենօրյա գործառույթների խորհրդանշային դերերը՝ պատկանելիության զգացումը պահպանելու համար:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Հայկական սփյուռք, միգրացիա, ինքնություն, հիշողություն, Չեխիայի Հանրապետություն, անդրազգայնականություն, սփյուռքագիտություն: