

THE CONTEMPORARY ARMENIAN DIASPORA IN ITALY: FROM THE TRADITIONAL TO THE TRANSNATIONAL

This paper¹ is an overview of the contemporary Armenian Diaspora in Italy, which is part of a wider research project about Armenians in Italy. A number of issues related to the Diaspora are raised and discussed: from the theoretical grounds to the practical realizations of research, from the historical background to the contemporary situation. The theoretical analysis leads to the concept of transnationality, the practical work involves observation, communication and participation (participant observation method, interview, survey), the historical time frame embraces the recent century, the focus is the state of the art of the Diaspora. As a result of different migration flows two varieties of the Armenian Diaspora, the so-called Old and New Diasporas, have emerged, each with its characteristics. Amid the cultural differences between the Old and New Diasporas the fundamental divergence between these two lies at the dichotomy of the absence – presence of the original homeland and the multiple changes of generations in the Old Diaspora. The reality of the Republic of Armenia as homeland has turned the contemporary Armenian Diaspora in Italy into a truly transnational phenomenon.

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The diaspora to be presented in this paper is the contemporary Armenian Diaspora in Italy². I took up this project of the diaspora research in 2022 launching myself into diasporist discourse and diasporic life as well³. Feeling that the Armenian Diaspora was changing and the most relevant way to explore it was from inside, in the field, I decided to follow the ethnographic approach of research and employ the participant observation method – living on site, participating in the community life of different regions, meeting Armenians from across the country, talking to them, i.e. sharing their context. It should be mentioned that by living in Italy for this research project I have also experienced the difficult realities of the immigrant and/or diasporic life in Italy – language, housing, lifestyle... Along with this it was decided to conduct in-depth interviews and an anonymous questionnaire survey to achieve the most rewarding combination of the qualitative and quantitative methods. After a while I started wondering: “But how are they called? Italian Armenians, Armenian-Italians, Italians of Armenian origin...? Which is correct? Which is politically correct? Does it make a difference which one is used?” In the beginning the project was thought of as research on the identity of the Armenians in Italy from social, cultural and linguistic perspectives. As time goes on, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the focus is not solely the identity of the Armenians living in Italy, but also the organization and institutions of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy, the various relations within the Diaspora, and everything else that remains beyond and behind the Diaspora. At the same time, identity – individual diasporic, communal diasporic as well as individual ethnocultural, non-diasporic – is affected by numerous factors deriving from, but not limited to, the sources mentioned above, which makes identity an accumulation of a whole variety of ethnic, cultural (in its broadest sense including social and

2 The unique and detailed book about the Armenian Diaspora in Italy is *Presenza Armena in Italia 1915-2000* by Agop Manoukian who has collected the history of this Diaspora with events, people, institutions, activities and communities till the end of the 20th century. This is a monumental work written by the member of the Diaspora throughout long years of his diasporic activity and provides a valuable source for research on the Armenian Diaspora in Italy. A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia 1915-2000*, Milano, Guerini e Associati, 2014.

3 For a detailed discussion of the concept and term *diaspora* as well as its derivative conceptual-terminological field including *diasporic*, *diasporist*, see KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *Rethinking Diaspora(s). Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment*, in «Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies», 1996, 5 (1).

political relations), diasporic, cosmopolitan characteristics. Accordingly, the study of identity tends to be most complicated and challenging for a researcher. Being an overview, this paper will present the basic concepts and general trends of the different aspects of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy placing a special focus on the phenomenon of transnationality.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE ARMENIAN DIASPORA IN ITALY

At this point it would be relevant to give a brief idea of the composition of the contemporary Armenian Diaspora in Italy. There were two important waves of Armenian immigration in the 20th-21st centuries. In both cases Armenians settled in Italy, too⁴: in the first case, at the turn of the 20th century and throughout the first quarter of that century fleeing from the Hamidian massacres and the Genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire⁵; in the second case, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Armenia in the 1990s, which continued into the 21st century. The Armenian Diaspora that already existed in numerous countries and is often called historical or traditional even by its own members faced a flow of co-nationals from the newly formed Armenian nation-state. These people were coming from a part of historical Armenia but were not their or their ancestors' compatriots in a strict sense of the word as they were not from their own country⁶. These newcomers were from the Republic of Armenia which is socially and politically the heir of Soviet Armenia. Thus, the Old Diaspora met numerous other Armenians who in the course of years multiplied to form the New Diaspora which in a range of countries has already exceeded the former in number. The terms Old Diaspora and New Diaspora are also in use among Armenians living in the Diaspora and these will mostly be used in my discussion for probably being less divisive. There were two essential factors for the first immigration of Armenians to Italy: the important Armenian religious and cultural center with the prominent college for the

4 A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., pp. 11-12; 131-132.

5 For the history of the Armenian Genocide refer to R. KÉVORKIAN, *The Armenian Genocide. A Complete History*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2011.

6 For a combined historical, cultural and anthropological discussion of the two Armenian realities – Western Armenian and Eastern, further Soviet Armenian, see R. PANOSSIAN, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*, London, Hurst & Company, 2006.

Armenian world, the Mekhitarist Congregation and the Armenian College Moorat-Raphael in Venice; and the Roman Catholic Church, the Vatican, and the Pontifical Armenian College in Rome⁷. It is worth mentioning here that the Mekhitarist Fathers gathered the Armenian orphans who survived the Hamidian massacres and the Genocide and took care of those children and educated them in orphanages in Italy⁸. During the second immigration Italy's membership in the European Union and its involvement in European/international educational programmes obviously played a significant role. There was one more, though a relatively smaller immigration flow. These were Armenians who mostly came from Middle Eastern countries and who were the descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide once established there. Afterwards, in the 1960-s and particularly in the 1970s, these Armenians had to escape from oppressive regimes, revolutions and conflicts in Libya (it was under the Italian rule from 1911 to 1943 and this was also the reason why many people there being Italian subjects escaped to Italy), Lebanon, Iran, but also Cyprus, etc.⁹. This flow of Armenians can actually be considered a continuation of the Genocide flow. I have also met Armenians who immigrated to Italy not in the major immigration periods. These are Armenians from Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Argentina, Armenia and some other places who once moved to Italy for study or job, then settled down there. Among this group there are also some who stayed after their studies in Moorat-Raphael College which functioned in Venice until 1997. Another considerable group of Armenians I know in Italy are Armenian women who are originally from Armenia and are married to Italians.

7 G. DEL ZANNA, *Gli Armeni in Italia nella seconda metà del '900*, in «Mediterranea. Ricerche storiche», 19 (2022), 54, pp. 18-20. P. NEGLIE, *Gli Armeni in Italia: emigranti per bisogno, profughi per necessità. La diaspora dopo i grandi massacri e il genocidio*, in *Europe of Migrations: Policies, Legal Issues and Experiences*, ed. by B. Serena, Z. Moreno, Trieste, EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2017, pp. 349-353.

8 H. L. ALIŠAN, *Namakani*, H. V. ŌHANEAN (ed.), voll. 3, Yerevan, 2020, vol. III, 1897 t', pp. 2078 and 2079, n. 74; H. A. TIROYEAN, *Hay orbanoc' Ėrekanati k'alak'in mēj*, «Bazmavēp», 55(1897), n. 7, pp. 321-326; H. L. TAYEAN, *Azgayin xandavar handēšner. Ōtar erkni' i tak (... I Fiēssoy, Hay orbern i Venetik...)*, «Bazmavēp», 81(1923), n. 6, pp. 183-192. H. H. BOŚPĖYĖK'ĖAN, *Milanu Mxit'arean orbanoc'-varžaranē*, «Bazmavēp», 84(1926), n. 12, pp. 378-383. H. E. P'ĖČ'ĪKEAN, *Mxit'arean orbaxnam jejnarkner: Pontos - Kovkas ew K'alkedon - Fiēssoy - Milan*, «Bazmavēp», 94(1936), n. 12, pp. 222-224; A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., pp. 64-68

9 A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., p. 130. G. DEL ZANNA, *Gli Armeni in Italia*, op. op. cit., p. 35.

Evidently, the Armenian Diaspora in Italy, as in some other Western nation-states, is not a homogeneous community, and the most discernible differences between the Old Diaspora and the New Diaspora probably are in their relations with the land of origin and behaviour patterns. In the first case, for the Old Diaspora, the homeland (Western Armenia, some cities and towns in the Byzantine Empire and then the Ottoman Empire – all in Turkey's territory now) was lost as a result of the Genocide. There was no land, no home; families and kinsfolk were half or totally exterminated. In the second case, for the New Diaspora, there is the homeland – the Republic of Armenia – often with parents (so there is also home), relatives and friends. The people of the new immigration are connected or even attached to Armenia on everyday basis. In the first case we speak about the second, third and already fourth generations of Genocide survivors, who have been living in Italy or also other countries with their families, relatives and friends for more than a hundred years. In the second case we consider Armenians of the first and young second generations in the process of establishing contacts and ties in Italy. In the first case people are socially rooted in Italy, i.e. they enjoy housing, education and employment security as well as usually stable income and pension, and they are fluent or even native speakers of Italian. In the second case people are looking for opportunities of education, re-qualification, sometimes possible validation of their certificates and diplomas received in Armenia, they are in permanent search for job opportunities to manage their living and housing needs in a foreign/new country and are continually in the process of linguistic integration.

The Armenian Diaspora in Italy has a considerably high level social composition and as evidenced both through my broad communication within the Community (participant observation method) and indicated by the completed questionnaires is predominantly represented by people with upper and middle educational and social backgrounds. 77.5% of the surveyed have got a higher education (almost equally distributed among the Old and New Diasporan participants as compared to their number) with over 6% of them holding the academic title of the Doctor (slightly more than the half of the latter come from the Republic of Armenia including several people holding a double doctoral title received in different countries). Thus many arriving in Italy from the Republic of Armenia also have a higher education as well as working experience in their fields of specialization but their foreign certificates are usually not valid in Italy so they often either get enrolled in an Italian university and obtain an Italian university degree (around 10% of the surveyed New Diasporans) or

complete a course of studies and get an Italian license (this means that people often have to follow a route of professional instruction anew and allocate double time from their lives to get established in the host society, which entails that the first generation Armenian immigrants tend to fall behind their local peers in social achievements investing more time and efforts in making themselves and their households). Another alternative is doing a job of a lower qualification or altogether not requiring higher education. There are also many young people who continue their studies in Italy by different international educational programmes. If they subsequently decide to go on to work in Italy and if the studies they have completed is not the equivalent to a full degree course in the country, they also take a full degree course to be integrated into the Italian educational system and get a job equivalent to their qualification. Some of these educated, licensed young people become self-employed and work individually. There are people who arrive on a job invitation, in some cases from their co-nationals already living in Italy. There is also a small number of Armenian women who work as caregivers. Other Armenians have set up their business such as bakeries, online shops, restaurants, catering services, etc. It is noteworthy that these businesses are largely Armenian-based. The food and drinks are mostly Armenian either made in Italy or imported from Armenia. The names of these businesses are also Armenian-derivative: they all contain an Armenian identifying word – a toponym, anthroponym, traditional food name or just the word *Armenian* itself.

TRADITIONAL AND/OR TRANSNATIONAL: REVOLVING AROUND THE HOMELAND

As already stated, the Old Diasporans do not have a point of reference for homeland in reality. Yet the image and memory of the fathers' country are still alive and have been cultivated by some three generations though the future developments do not seem that predictable as they could some fifty years ago: the communication with the original generation no longer exists and the young generation is more globalized in attitudes, as well as territorially, i.e. often living away from families. In this paper here and later some excerpts from my interviews with the Diasporans will be presented, one of which is with Gregorio Suren Zovighian¹⁰, a prominent

10 G.S. ZOVIGHIAN, *Interview for my research project on the Armenians in Italy*, Lido, Venice, 14 May 2022.

member of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy, member of Italiarmenia Association, editor of the historical Armenian periodical in Italy *La Voce Armena*¹¹.

«I remember when I was very young there were Armenians who came from the Country¹², from various cities either from the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia or Persia. These were, let us put it this way, completely Armenian, they were people who had absorbed the soil, air and water of Armenia. And these would often come together. Then this generation, naturally, passed away, the new generations came, if there were some ties remaining from the family, they still remained to some extent, but the ties have increasingly become sparse»¹³.

The discourse of the homeland has accompanied the life in the Diaspora transmitting facts and realities, feelings and perceptions, often attached to a specific city, town or village, relations people had with their kindred and friends. With time and distance this has shaped myths of homeland especially considering its unavailability. «Lacking that [*the homeland*], they [*diasporan communities*] exhibit a communal will to loyalty, keeping faith with a mythicized idea of the homeland»¹⁴. The diasporic discourse took on a particular significance in these circumstances as it became the unique channel of communication with the ancestral homeland, even though indirect both in terms of time and medium. For many years the homeland for the Old Diaspora Armenians has been the land on the other side of Ararat¹⁵, in Western Armenia, in the cities, towns and villages where their ancestors came from. Now maybe not a conceptual shift but a gradual addition is taking place in the consciousness of the Old Diaspora in Italy: the existing Republic of Armenia, which is a part of historical Eastern Armenia, is gaining its place in the conceptualization of

11 See A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., for details about the periodical *La Voce Armena*.

12 The Old Diasporan Armenians often use *the Country* to mean the original Armenian country, that is historical Armenia where Armenians lived and/or still live, at that one should bear in mind that its bigger part is presently in the territories of other countries mostly because Armenia was divided between the neighbouring countries such as Persia, Russia, (Ottoman) Turkey several times in the course of history as a result of wars in the region.

13 Here and later the translation from Armenian into English is by M.B.

14 KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *Rethinking Diaspora(s)*, op. cit., p. 14.

15 Ararat is the biblical mountain situated in historical Armenia, which is in the territory of Turkey now.

Homeland or, it may be more correct to say, of the Pan-Armenian Country / the Pan-Armenian State. Many Old Diasporans travel to Armenia for tourism or live there for short periods, make acquaintances with the locals. Sometimes young generations (among which also descendants from mixed families, usually Armenian-Italian) accompany their parents or visit Armenia independently, but there are also some who have never been to Armenia and have no particular interest in their ancestral history and origins as have not engaged or been engaged by their families in the narrative about their family, the ancestral land and culture. Moreover, visiting Armenia can be a particular emotional and cultural experience but does not necessarily imply solid personal ties with the country though can often create a considerable spiritual liaison. What is most homogenizing is the overall consciousness of the importance of the existence of the Armenian State and the importance of its development. The Armenians who have come from the Republic of Armenia or are the immediate descendents of these first-generation immigrants normally have a different type of connection with the homeland – family, friends, business, economy, politics. Most of them are (also) citizens of Armenia with the right to vote, that is they are directly involved in the domestic affairs of the country also on the public/state level. The homeland is real and tangible. They often travel to visit family and friends, spend holidays, do business there. Their families and friends also visit them in Italy staying at their place. They are in everyday communication via video calls on the Internet, they share problems, interests, friends, common past as well as present to a large extent. The families in Armenia back their children, brothers and sisters living in Italy in many ways – morally, psychologically, in business if it is connected with Armenia, economically in the first period of immigration – and after a while the latter assist them organizing trips for them to Italy/Europe and sending them remittances. Furthermore, these Armenians living in Italy constantly follow the news about Armenia, both the affairs on the international arena and the details of the domestic developments in politics, economy, culture, sport, they discuss them passionately, including on the social media such as Facebook, Instagram, etc, which can mainly be the case with the active Old Diasporans. Obviously, the New Diasporans considerably participate in the life of the Republic of Armenia, involving political elections. Such a lifestyle demonstrates indicators of living in two realities. The New Armenian Diasporans actually live in Italy, remaining “based” in Armenia. This type of migration characteristic for today's reality is essentially different from the traditional perception of the phenomenon. It is an active transnational migration in which an immi-

grant/migrant is requalified as a transmigrant: «they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside» with a continuing engagement «elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated»¹⁶.

This kind of behaviour is typical of the New Armenian Diaspora in Italy like it is typical of diasporas as «the exemplary communities of the transnational moment»¹⁷ we are increasingly living in, from which it follows that the New Diaspora I am describing can legitimately and fully be defined as transnational. The Old Armenian Diaspora in Italy historically maintains more traditional forms of diasporic relations – mostly interaction with Armenians in the community or to a certain extent with those dispersed in other countries predominantly on a kinship or personal level, that is interaction with other diasporic realities. It should be mentioned that transnational elements are now more discernible in the Old Diaspora, too, as there have been certain changes conditioned by the possibility of travelling freely to Armenia and the countries of the Middle East (once not a secure place for the Old Armenian Diasporans any longer), as well as by the big number of the New Diasporans and more or less regular communication with them. Overall, the Armenian diasporic reality in Italy, as well as in other nation-states, and the reality of the Armenian Diaspora in general are becoming increasingly linked to the Republic of Armenia more than ever taking on the role of the point of reference – homeland for some, a dear land for others, a land of relations and ties for some others – which makes the Armenian Diaspora genuinely transnational. With all the divergent realities, anyway, in case of such national issues as consolidation and assistance to Armenia on occasions of emergency the Old and New Diasporan Armenians and even those who are far from diasporic reality converge on common ground. The 20th century phenomenon of the Armenian Diaspora developed in the post-Genocide 1920-s and 1930-s: «under the leadership of competing organizations, a heterogeneous group of people with fundamental differences in terms of regional

16 N. GLICK SCHILLER - L. BASCH - C. SZANTON BLANC, *From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration*, «Anthropological Quarterly», 1995, 68(1), p. 48.

17 KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface*, «Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies», 1991, 1(1), p. 5.

identity, religion (Apostolic, Catholic and Protestant), language (Armenian, Turkish, dialects), occupation and class, social status (refugees, assimilated elites, intellectuals), political loyalties and cultural influences from host-states were moulded into a relatively coherent community with a collective consciousness as a diasporic nation»¹⁸. This worldwide Armenian Diaspora has continuously undergone transformations and even profound changes in response to the global challenges, different host state-specific developments and the Armenian/pan-Armenian national issues. Consequently, despite the range of factors of Armenianness it has never been identical in the numerous and various countries of its presence. Still at the beginning of the 21st century Khachig Tölölyan wrote that the Armenian Diaspora was in the process of transnationalization but the process was not synchronized. Among the factors shaping this transition and determining its pace he mentions «the past history» of each diasporic community, «its relation to the “host” nation-state», «the extent to which transnationalism and globalization penetrate that state» and «the material and institutional resources available to each community». An essential difference of the transnational formation from a traditional diaspora is that the concept of repatriation (including the modified one¹⁹), even symbolic repatriation, is no longer valid, and «the Armenian diaspora no longer consists of a series of exile communities» awaiting it. Diaspora, actually, «is, and is regarded by an ever-larger majority of its members» as a «permanent phenomenon»²⁰. At the same time the growing significance of the Republic of Armenia as the pan-Armenian state, the availability of travelling to that land, the New Diasporans' condition of being “based” in Armenia in the various ways and the globalization processes penetrated all the spheres of human activity provide the natural environment of the

18 R. PANOSSIAN, *The Armenians*, op. cit., p. 292.

19 In his *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return* of 1991 William Safran already suggests a modified concept of the return to the «ancestral homeland as the true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate», in which there is no certainty which generation will return, even “should” is used what appears to make the statement prescriptive rather than descriptive, and the condition of appropriateness is emphasized. W. SAFRAN, *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return*, «Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies», 1991, 1(1), pp. 83-84.

20 KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *Elites and Institutions in the Armenian Transnation*, «Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies», 2000, 9(1), p. 108.

transnationality of the Armenian Diaspora, even though involving its different communities at different pace and intensity.

A contemporary diaspora with its permanent existence and the responsiveness to the globalizing cultures of the nation-states, intrinsically conditioned by the factor of sharing time and space, to the globalizing markets it should accommodate to among other social groups, to the globalizing politics it should find modes to interact with anyway has to comply with a range of criteria, even though updated, to be legitimately called a transnational diaspora or a transnation altogether as it is called by Tölölyan. «There is a heterogeneous, ever-changing set of norms and knowledges, of behaviours and cultural practices (for example, linguistic and economic, musical and literary, social and political, historical and contemporary) which are embedded in the properly transnational formation that includes homelands and diasporas alike»²¹. Moreover, the Armenians in Italy are not homogeneous in their ethnic identity either, both by ancestry and socio-cognitive formation or transformation. Inter-marriages, the multiple generation changes, the different territorial-political provenance, the considerably scattered distribution in the country account for this. In the case of the first and especially the second generation of the Genocide wave many Armenian men married Italian women as seen from to the 1971 census of the Armenians in Italy.²² As well as according to my numerous observations and a lot of communication with different groups of Armenians living in Italy a good part of Old Diasporans have/had Armenian fathers and Italian mothers, whereas in the case of the contemporary immigration, conversely, many Armenian women are married to Italian men. The latter is also showcased by the Questionnaire Survey I have conducted in different regions of Italy at several times within 2022-2024. 57% of female respondents of the Old Diaspora are married to non-Armenians, including 29% Italians, 3% people of other ethnic origins and 25% simply mentioned as non-Armenians without specification of the ethnic origin, against only 18% of females with Armenian husbands. Parallely, 44% of male respondents of the Old Diaspora are married to non-Armenians, including 30% Italians, 3% people of other ethnic origins and 11% simply mentioned as non-Armenians without specification of the ethnic origin, against only 24% of

21 KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *Rethinking Diaspora(s)*, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

22 For the details see *Censimento della Popolazione Armena in Italia 1971*, a cura di F. e A. MANOUKIAN, Unione degli Armeni d'Italia.

males with Armenian wives, taking into consideration that the male participants of the survey surpassed the females by 14% at that. Meanwhile, 53% of female respondents of the New Diaspora are married to non-Armenians, including 43% Italians as the biggest cohort and 10% non-Armenians without indicating the ethnic origin, against 28% of females having Armenian husbands. My ethnographic observation can here come to supplement that the non-Armenians without ethnic specification are usually Italians, too. At the same time only 25% of the surveyed New Diasporan men are married to non-Armenian women, 19% percent of whom are of different ethnic origins and only 1 person is Italian against 38% of Armenian wives. And it should be noted that the men participants from the New Diaspora were almost 4 times less than the women (this difference in availability for a survey is perhaps a separate topic for analysis). The only man born in Armenia and having an Italian wife is an exception and can be considered an Old Diasporan as well, since he was just 11 when established in Italy and has lived his whole life in this country being among those rare people who managed to move still from Soviet Armenia. Thus, the mixed marriages and the entailing demographic particularity of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy are worth a relevant focus especially in the conditions of the absence of Armenian schools and elaborate community bodies, as well as with account of the dispersion of the Armenians along the Italian Peninsula. Here are also added the common diasporic factors – the generational and cultural differences. The generation has changed up to three times in the Old Diaspora, and it is mostly the primary with one successive generation in the New Diaspora. The ancestors of the Old Diasporans moved from Western Armenia and some other regions of the Ottoman Empire, including the capital Constantinople (today Istanbul), with a part initially settling in the countries of the Middle East, while the New Diasporans moved from the Republic of Armenia, on rare occasions from Soviet Armenia. The cultural background conditioned by territory and political regime in different nation-states first before Italy, then in Italy reveals itself in the difference in attitudes and behaviour patterns of these two parts of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy even though the fundamental ethnic basis is Armenian and common for everyone. These contemporary differences are also largely true for the Armenians coming from the Republic of Armenia with roots traced in Western Armenia. Thus, the seventy years of the Soviet communist and the European capitalist politics have had their inexorable effects on the two parts of the Armenian people.

There is much about the combination of roots and routes in diasporan reality but there is even more about spirit and ideology based on narrative and revived through consistent discourse. The discursive reality is crucial, with discourse being broadly a form of social action and discursive practice social interaction. Therefore, diasporic discourse is constitutive of diaspora, binding the nation throughout time and across space – providing the link between the generations, joining the Homeland and the Diaspora. The diaspora discourse can be produced on different levels – diasporic by the Diasporans themselves and diasporist by the researchers, intellectuals and artists of the Diaspora, thus including the academic discourse on Diaspora in the latter.

One of the central issues of diaspora discourse apart from the concept of diaspora itself is identity, both as a concept and a social formation. *Identity* is a term in academic communication. At first glance *identity* may seem to be an intangible phenomenon but when examined immersed in life it reveals itself as quite a tangible reality and can even be measurable to a large extent. One can try to define it through specific markers or dimensions. Throughout my participant observation of many different people and groups representing the Armenian Diaspora in Italy, examining how their life is constructed from inside I have made an attempt to envisage the area of the Armenian diasporic identity, which can include:

- a) ancestry – with or without Armenian family names,
- b) language – standard Armenian first of all, either Western Armenian or Eastern Armenian, but dialectal forms also count,
- c) religion – Christianity: Armenian Apostolic Church, also Armenian Catholic Church,
- d) history – knowledge/awareness and respect,
- e) geography and sights – knowledge/awareness and preferably personal experience,
- f) cuisine – awareness/experience though preferably practice,
- g) literature and art, music in particular,
- h) ceremonies – festive and mourning,
- i) standard behavior patterns,
- j) marriage and children,
- k) participation in the life of the Diaspora.

I have not mentioned *tradition(s)* as everything stated above is tradition itself and has its traditional ways of realization. I have not mentioned historical memory preferring knowledge/awareness and practice as more vibrant identifications of belonging though historical memory can be to a certain extent more realistic in the cases of multiple generation changes and/or absence of Armenian schools in the country²³. Assessing the diasporic identity by these categories and stating the extent to which these categories are realized in a specific case, turns them into identity markers – a kind of media/tools of measuring identity.

Addressing the Armenian Diaspora in Italy, it is relevant to note the variation of the markers across the Old and New Diasporas. The suggested markers, certainly, require a separate detailed discussion but even a brief look at them can make evident a mostly closer relation of the first generation New Diasporans to the Armenian ancestry, language/literacy, reality and culture, especially the contemporary one, as compared to the state of the art among the several generations of the Old Diaspora. This is a natural consequence of a diasporic existence for generations in a situation of a lost homeland, which has been experienced by the Traditional/Old Armenian Diaspora throughout more than a hundred years. Another most significant circumstance is the absence of Armenian schools in the Armenian Diaspora in Italy. The prominent Armenian College Moorat-Raphael, functioning till 1997, was an educational institution for Armenian boys from all over the world and could not serve the needs of this specific Armenian Community at full. While the first generation of the New Diasporan Armenians grew up in the natural Armenian environment, in the Armenian society (only a small part of them grew up in the Soviet time when there were certain national and cultural restrictions). They and their children have a point of reference in their Homeland, the Republic of Armenia, and even more – families are often split between Armenia and Italy and the roots are in the native land. Thus the concept and phenomenon of transnationality are absolutely vibrant and tangible among them. Regarding the diasporic participation it should be stated that there are committed individuals from both the Old and New Diasporas, and the more participative involvement of any of these segments largely depends on their number and distribution in the area, the local diasporic organizations or at least the organizational mechanisms used by the Diasporans.

23 It should be noted that there has been no Armenian school in Italy (elementary, middle or superior) since Moorat-Raphael College ceased functioning in 1997.

The concept of diaspora, beside as «social form», is described as «type of consciousness» and having characteristics of «dual or paradoxical nature» by Vertovec.²⁴ I consider this a phenomenon deserving a special focus: it can be valid for both active and passive diasporans or ethnic minority representatives as they all usually identify with both their country of origin and the country where they live, as well as they may bear in their collective memory very different kinds of impressions like those of traumatic experiences of migration and those of inspiration in their ancestral heritage, those of difficulties of establishment and those of success stories in a new nation-state. Another concept that can be central in diasporan life is the «awareness of multi-locality» which has a force to create ethnic ties and solidarity. Eventually, diaspora is discussed as a mode of «production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena» within the broad context of globalization as the «worldwide flow of cultural objects, images and meanings» which leads to continuous changes.

The community networks and ethnocultural identities in diaspora have experienced changes as well. The phenomenon of the diaspora community has shifted from a mostly permanent representation in the past to a largely situational engagement in the present. Individualistic, career-focused ideologies and practices have been dominant in the West which has predominantly been the destination of migrants. In such an environment, naturally, kindred and community networks have undergone transformations. But a new format of networking has recently absorbed our lives – the social media which does not preserve emotional attachment at the original level, yet provides speed of communication. Instant messaging, video calls and the technologies that have transformed the spread of information have had their impact on the relations with the homeland. Host country – homeland connection has become a matter of everyday practice in real time, even more facilitated than by the airplane and the telephone. At the same time, more ease of travel should not be underestimated as frequent trips to the homeland and back to the host country have substantially contributed to the transformation of the notion of immigration itself as well as, to a certain extent, the demythologization of the homeland. Homelands or countries of ancestral origin are no longer unreachable targets which were abundantly celebrated in narrative and folk traditions but actually not visited by many diaspora community mem-

24 S. VERTOVEC, *Three Meanings of "Diaspora", Exemplified among South Asian Religions*, «Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies», 1997, 6 (3).

bers. The unprecedented evolution of physical and virtual communications – transport and information technologies – has transformed both the idea and workings of immigration. These multi-faceted transformations have naturally reflected in the Diasporan Armenian's ethnocultural identity which is also leading to the change of the face of Diaspora now.

SOME DIASPORIC MOMENTS FIRST-HAND

Since this paper is intended as an overview, here, too, my discourse will be confined to a brief description of some diasporic moments I have had a chance to observe and participate in, making an attempt to discover the workings and life of this Diaspora. A particular though brief reference will be made to the Communities of Milan and Venice as exemplary models of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy.

Armenians in Lombardy are considerably numerous: it has historically been so and it has remained as such after the recent migration. Thus, the Armenian Community of Milan (the capital of the Region of Lombardy)²⁵ has always been important in the Armenian Diaspora in Italy. However, not only the number of the Armenians counts for this but also the diasporic infrastructure – the Armenian Apostolic Church of Milan (1958) and Casa Armena (1954) which is a cultural association and meeting place in the center of Milan, in fact, a unique platform for different types of cultural, educational, social activities in the Armenian Diaspora in Italy. The Church was founded and maintained by the forefathers of the Community, the grandfathers and fathers of today's Old Diasporans, and is a point of reference for both the Old and New Diasporans.

The Armenian Community of Venice (the capital of the Region of Veneto)²⁶ has historically been large and prominent, mostly thanks to the Mekhitarist Congregation on the Island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni (where it has been based since 1717) and their Moorat-Raphael College (since 1850 in Venice). Unlike the Community of Milan, this community has shrunk – the number of the Armenians in the city of Venice itself is especially small, even though the Armenians dispersed in the other towns and localities of Veneto are not numerous either. The religious, cultural

25 For the detailed history of the Armenian Community of Milan in the 20th century see A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit.

26 For the detailed history of the Armenian Community of Venice in the 20th century see A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit.

and academic center is the Mekhitarist Congregation with Saint Lazarus' Church, the depository of the ancient manuscripts, the monumental library, the museums, the galleries and the conference hall. Armenians also gather for the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Cross of Armenians in Venice, and in an Italian church in nearby Padua. In the community of Venice the relative majority gathering on the occasion of major religious holidays are the Old Diasporans. This can also be attributed to the scattered geography of the Armenians in the territory and the transportation particularity of Venice. Another cultural and academic center in Venice is the Armenian Culture Studies and Documentation Center (founded in Milan in 1976 and in Venice since 1992) engaged in the fields of architecture, music and cultural activity in general. A unique phenomenon is the Summer Intensive Course of the Armenian Language and Culture in Venice or as it is usually called by the Diasporan Armenians the Summer School of Venice. It has taken place every year since 1986 and has taught the Armenian language and culture to numerous Armenians across Italy, Europe, the US and so on. Many foreigners interested in the Armenian language attend the summer school as well.

In the Armenian Diaspora in Italy I have observed diasporans of different degrees of activity, different forms of involvement in the Armenian affairs. I have seen or heard of those who interact with the Diaspora on particular occasions only. I have heard of those who are the descendants of the previous diasporan generations and are assimilated in the Italian society as well as those who have arrived in the recent two decades and are many – and I have never met either. I have also seen active diasporans from both the Old and New Diasporas. I have met tens of times, talked, engaged in different diasporic activities with those who are the pillars, the engines or the networking force of the Diaspora. Another observation to be made is that the intellectual and organizational elites of the Diaspora which once were mostly identical may not always coincide now. A particular reality of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy is the continuous cooperation between the Old Diasporan intellectual elite, the cultural organizations founded and managed by them and the academic/university circles in which there have also been a number of Armenian Diasporans for decades. This cooperation often results in conferences and presentations in the community as well as the larger Italian society. The extent of the contribution to the Diaspora certainly along with the other markers is indicative of the Armenian diasporic identity. «The more exigent traditional paradigm emphasizes doing – individual and collective acts that

support and maintain religious and communal institutions, or language, or philanthropy – as the behavior that underwrites identity and forestalls assimilation»²⁷.

As already stated above in this paper, the Armenian Diaspora in Italy is becoming increasingly transnational which is a current focal phenomenon. Whereas the different associations, mostly territory/community-bound, were created and managed by people without a point of reference in Homeland but instead with considerably strong ties and cooperation with the Italian organizations and people interested in the Armenian culture. The diasporic institutions established years ago, in the exclusively Old Diasporan reality are also presently on the way of transformation to a broad transnationality.

FOLLOWING THE DIASPORIC IDENTITY FORMATION CHAIN: COMMUNITY – INTEGRATION – CULTURE – INTERMARRIAGE – LANGUAGE – NATIONALITY – IDENTITY/-IES

The preceding discussions may lead to the question if the concepts of a diasporan and a diaspora community member strictly coincide. The simple etymological analysis of the words *diaspora* and *community* shows that the first one is based on the idea of being dispersed and diverging trajectories while the second one expresses the idea of commonness and convergence of trajectories. Probably it is also worth differentiating between the individual and communal/collective diasporic identity not to get into a pitfall of conceptual discrepancy, the second one being of higher importance in the diasporan context at that. The cornerstones of the bunch of differences between the Old and New Diasporas are the absence versus existence of the Homeland and the European/Italian versus Soviet paths, accompanied by certain language difficulties of communication (Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian). For the majority of the Old Diasporans Italy is their homeland and Italian is their mother tongue. The original homeland has long «become a culturally foreign and emotionally remote concept for most diasporan Armenians in the West», simultaneously the host country has «become ‘home’ as the boundaries around the community eroded, making it increasingly susceptible to assimilation»²⁸. What makes an Armenian in the Diaspora is, above all, the Armenian spirit, the

27 KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *Rethinking Diaspora(s)*, op. cit., p. 15.

28 R. PANOSSIAN, *The Armenians*, op. cit., p. 306.

common spirit which is in all the above proposed categories making the Armenian diasporic identity and even beyond. It can be on different levels – thinking, feeling, experiencing, doing²⁹. The spirit is most capable of uniting all the Armenians both from the Old and New Diasporas. It is the sense of descending, belonging, surviving and continuing. In his discussion of the transformations of diaspora in our age Rogers Brubaker examines dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary-maintenance as the basic criteria of diaspora and argues between entity and stance. He promotes the idea that «as idiom, stance, and claim, diaspora is a way of formulating the identities and loyalties of a population»³⁰. Elaborating a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of national identity, Razmik Panossian argues that it «is primarily a ‘felt’ category of self-definition, but it is tied to certain objective characteristics» which are ethno-cultural and rooted in the past. Further he emphasizes the outweighing importance of the subjective «*what* is being felt» as «profoundly connected to modernity»³¹. Based on her study of Armenian-Americans in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, Anny Bakalian supports the thesis that, particularly in the Diaspora-born generations, the “traditional” Armenian diasporic identity has been replaced by a “symbolic” Armenian identity which is activated in certain circumstances and is not at the forefront of the self-consciousness³². In his discussion of the issues of the Armenian identity in the Diaspora Hratch Tchilingirian emphasizes the significance of «the idea of choice», adding a third stage of the transformation of the phenomenon for the new generations: hence, in the 21st century the Armenianness in the Diaspora, «beyond being and feeling», should be a matter of “thinking”³³. The distance of diasporic generations and distancing globalized lifestyle can be potent factors for the formation of a mostly non-participative diasporic identity and a corresponding diaspora, however on the necessary condition of preserving the fundamentals of the constitutive and differentiating categories of diasporic iden-

tity. What makes the difference is this difference from the locals, though not opposed but coexisting and cooperating, which makes the diaspora.

The Armenians overwhelmingly feel integrated in Italy according to my numerous conversations, interviews and the questionnaire survey. In the case of the Old Diaspora this should be an expected outcome as most of them have already been citizens of Italy for generations and they normally do not feel as immigrants – 77% of the respondents, only 15% of the respondents have answered that they sometimes feel as immigrants, among whom there are both Old Diasporans transferred from the Middle Eastern countries and born in Italy. As my constant communication with the Old Diaspora has shown they usually do not consider their first generation in Italy as immigrants either as they believe people who have moved because of the threat of annihilation or political oppression are not immigrants. What is more unexpected is that more New Diasporans do not feel as immigrants than those who do – 44% against 33% of the participants of the survey. Another 18% sometimes experience the feeling of being an immigrant in Italy. The answer “Sometimes” has very interesting implications: it is not “No” as indicates a presence of the feeling, though it shows a low frequency, unlike “Often”, and draws the answer close to “No”. 83% of the Old Diasporan Armenian population answer “Yes” to the direct summarizing question “Do you feel fully integrated in Italy?”. 56% of the surveyed New Diasporans, in their turn, answer positively. This question, however, finds a diverse resonance among this segment of the Armenians in Italy – 17% respond “No”, 16% “Often” and 9% “Sometimes”, from which we can assume that the integration processes are still underway and the condition of the New Diasporans is not even, though more than the half of the participants of the survey already confirm their full integration in the country. I can also observe that they normally have a good knowledge of Italian and have heard Italians stating with admiration that «all Armenians [*Armenians in Italy*] speak Italian well». Another thing to be mentioned is that both Armenians and Italians are sociable and emotional which can facilitate communication. Finally, Italy is a European country, which essentially determines the relatively smooth adjustment of Armenians to the environment. These are certainly beneficial factors for establishing and living in the country. Naturally, there are no grounds for enclavization or marginalization for Armenians, which is a positive outcome. But there are higher risks of assimilation than, say, in the Middle East where in many countries the prevalence of another culture usually makes Armenians firmer in their unity around their kin, Church and diasporan institutions.

29 cf. KH. TÖLÖLYAN, *Rethinking Diaspora(s)*, op. cit., p. 15.

30 R. BRUBAKER, *The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora*, in «Ethnic and Racial Studies», 2005, 28 (1), p. 10.

31 R. PANOSSIAN, *The Armenians*, op. cit., pp. 22, 27.

32 A. BAKALIAN, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick (U.S.A.) - London (U.K.), 1994.

33 H. TCHILINGIRIAN, *What is “Armenian” in the Armenian Identity?*, «EVN Report», February 6, 2018.

«It is so in Western countries, when your religion is very similar, you will be Christian: it is said, in the shade of the mosque the Armenian remains Armenian, but wherever there is the cross, the Armenian assimilates – indeed we see it here, in France, America [*the US*], etc. Today, look, there are a million and a half Armenians in America [*the US*], but of these how many are really Armenian? There are half a million Armenians in France, how many are Armenian?»³⁴.

The Armenian Diaspora in Italy does not have to engage in «political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community», which has been one of the realizations of the phenomenon of *diaspora* together with transnationality and movement in «historical contexts of displacement»³⁵. Neither do the Armenians have to be particularly selective in accommodating with the political, cultural, economic, everyday life forms of the Italian society though probably keeping in focus the essential Armenian cultural and traditional characteristics which make a difference³⁶. In fact, the Old Diasporans have already long had the feeling of being Italian and «something else»³⁷, that is they feel both Italian and Armenian, or they also say in some situations Italian and in others Armenian – a hybrid identity with two or multiple cultural components which is still another issue requiring an in-depth analysis. The issue of the preservation of the Armenian identity in Armenian settlements abroad is discovered from a particular perspective by Boghos Levon Zekiyian who describes it as “multi-dimensional”, “polyvalent” since history has witnessed Armenians maintaining their cultural heritage while «being fully or almost fully integrated into the life and structures of the host society». This type of identity should not be perceived as «composed in itself of various parts, almost juxtaposed or superimposed» but as meaning «the inseparable unity of the person expressing himself multifacetedly in various dimensions, including the ethnocultural level». The «polyvalent identity» is based on «differentiated integration», a model of integration distinguished by Zekiyian, when each of the systems – the nation-state and the ethnocultural colony/diaspora – preserves its individuality, its characteristics «in the harmony of the whole” provided the context of cosmopolitan society, that is symbiosis of diverse ethnicities, populations, cultures, languages and religions in which

34 G.S. ZOVIGHIAN, 14 May 2022.

35 J. CLIFFORD, *Diasporas*, «Cultural Anthropology. Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future», 1994, 9 (3), p. 308.

36 cfr. J. CLIFFORD, *Diasporas*, op. cit.

37 An expression we find in Clifford's *Diasporas*.

“every single component can maintain and develop its own identity and thereby contribute to the total synthesis»³⁸.

Inevitably the generation sequences in the Old Diaspora – with overall acculturation, full linguistic integration or linguistic assimilation, frequent intermarriage – have brought about changes in the ethnic, linguistic and communal behaviours. And undoubtedly, time is a forceful factor in changing realities including people and especially people living in diaspora though it should also be stated that I have observed various cases with different combinations of factors. In any case, language preference and intermarriage are decisive factors, the former also depending on the latter among other circumstances.

«I have not kept statistics, of course. I only know that when I was little or young, among the elder generation, not only from my family, the young people that I knew, there was a kind of not to say a rule but a popular idea that one shouldn't marry a person of a different cultural background. ... Probably this was a reflection of the consequences of the Genocide that we wanted to preserve the nation so that it wasn't lost. But these things [*intermarriages*] are inevitable ... Now it [*that unwritten law*] doesn't exist, intermarriages are many and increasingly on the rise because life entails this»³⁹.

When both parents are Armenian, even Diaspora-born, there is more likelihood for the children to speak Armenian as a mother tongue or as the second language along with Italian, than in the case of one Italian parent, in particular an Italian mother. «Language preference, a key index of cultural assimilation»⁴⁰, is probably the first index of cultural assimilation or acculturation as the transformation takes place «in word, deed and ultimately in thought»⁴¹. Here I will present an extract from my interview with an Armenologist, Very Rev. Fr. Vahan Ohanian of the Mekhitarist Congregation of the Island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni of Venice.

38 B.L. ZEKIYAN, *L'Armenia e gli armeni. Polis lacerata e patria spirituale: la sfida di una sopravvivenza*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2000, pp. 155-173. The translation from Italian into English is by M.B.

39 G.S. ZOVIGHIAN, 14 May 2022.

40 R.G. RUMBAUT, *Assimilation and Its Discontents: Between Rhetoric and Reality*, «The International Migration Review», 1997, Special Issue: *Immigrant Adaptation and Native-Born Responses in the Making of Americans*, 31(4), p. 939.

41 *Ivi*, p. 948.

«The mother has a very big role. ... It is exclusive for the father to be very consistent and speak Armenian to the child or, somehow, say, communicating with the grandparents, for the child to understand a little Armenian, but in general when the mother is of a different cultural background, this usually has a decisive role in the child's knowledge of Armenian: yes, the surname remains Armenian, yes, the child knows two-three words [*in Armenian*] unless, of course, the parents are persistent [*for him/her to learn the language*]»⁴².

The parents' roles in the language preservation can be attributed to the fact that mothers usually spent more time with children in their early years while fathers were traditionally more engaged in their business being particularly responsible for earning a living for the family. Such a family situation can be valid to a certain extent at present, too.

The language is probably the most obvious and distinctive characteristic of any ethnic belonging or origin. Simultaneously it is usually a subconscious one both for the bearer/speaker of the language and anyone hearing the person speaking it. A normal speaker of Armenian in the Diaspora does not have to make as much conscious effort as a non-speaker to maintain his/her ethnic culture. Language is both a reservoir and transmitter of culture.

The survival of the family name is another crucial element of diasporic existence, which has always been in the focus of diasporic discourse.

«I remember there was a very passionate Armenian from Kars [*a town in historical Armenia*], whose wife was Italian, and he had sent his both sons to Moorat-Raphael. His wife would repeat, "These are Italian! These are Italian because were born in Italy, are citizens of Italy." And I remember my father would argue with her saying, "What surname do they have? They have an Armenian surname! These are Armenian." You see? Such things»⁴³.

So, who is the Armenian in the Diaspora in Italy? How can we know that?

«Yes, we have a census [*the census of 1971*], but it cannot give exact numbers because, if you have noticed, there are surnames there

42 V. OHANIAN, *Interview for my research project on the Armenians in Italy*, The Island of San Lazzaro degli Armeni, Venice, 27 August 2022. Here and later the translation from Armenian into English is by M.B.

43 G.S. ZOVIGHIAN, 14 May 2022.

which are Italian, that is to say if the mother is Armenian he/she feels Armenian. But first it should be defined who an Armenian abroad is. If both parents are Armenian, all right, let us say this is Armenian whatever citizenship he/she has, but if one of the parents is not Armenian how to deal in this situation?»⁴⁴.

In general terms nationalization passes through language, lifestyle and consciousness, including self-consciousness. Naturally the ethnocultural consciousness can experience changes, moreover it can be considerably diluted or absent at all. The diasporans' communal behaviour has also changed as the young generations have increasingly engaged in broader national as well as international contexts and larger consumption patterns: hence following the traditional communal behaviour requires developed diasporan consciousness or high ethnocultural consciousness.

In *Presenza Armena in Italia* Agop Manoukian also raises the question of the identification of Armenians in Italy not just in the difficulty of finding all the Armenians living in the country «but in outlining the difficult boundary between who is an Armenian and who is not. This is especially true for the new generations in which the trace of the Armenian origin sometimes appears increasingly remote; even more so if this is not constantly revived by participation in community life»⁴⁵.

Reflecting on how Armenians living in Italy should be named I was trying to find the appropriate phrase – "Armenian-Italians", "Italians of Armenian origin", "ethnic Armenians", "Italian Armenians", "Italians" or just "Armenians in Italy", some of which mentioned by analogy with phrases that are in regular circulation in the American reality, for example such a widely accepted term as "Armenian-Americans". The phrase one can more or less often come across in the Italian reality is *italiani di origine armena*, that is *Italians of Armenian origin*. A popularly accepted Armenian term in regular circulation cannot be found either. For the Armenians in the US the Armenian word is normally *ամերիկահայեր/amerikahayer* ("Armenian-Americans"), for the Armenians in France *ֆրանսահայեր/fransahayer*, for the Armenians in Lebanon *լիբանանահայեր/libananahayer*. According to the Armenian productive word-building scheme, a perfectly correct word *իտալահայեր/italahayer* can be said though it is not usual unlike its parallel *ամերիկահայեր/amerikahayer*.

44 *ibid.*

45 A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., 336. Here and later the translation from Italian into English is by M.B.

So I asked Setrag Manoukian⁴⁶, an active member of the Armenian Diaspora, an anthropologist who teaches at McGill University in Montreal, Canada:

“Who are the Armenians in Italy: Italians, Armenians, Armenian-Italians, Armenians living in Italy? I cannot call them just Italian though many of them are Italian citizens.”

“Why?” he said wishing to listen to my answer.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

Maybe because I did not well consider the fact that many of the Old Diasporans in Italy, Setrag Manoukian among them, have only one Armenian parent or grandparent. Or probably because many of them, Setrag Manoukian among them, have Armenian names and/or surnames, probably also because Setrag Manoukian said he was interested in what was going on in the Republic of Armenia, and I still cannot think of them as just Italian probably because Setrag has named his son Vahagn, an ancient Armenian name, as I learnt afterwards. Certainly, he knew the answer.

The situation is different with the New Diasporans (first generation) whose both parents are Armenian and many of them are citizens or also citizens of Armenia. Probably one of the main reasons why there is no universally accepted term for both the New and Old Diasporans in Italy is their cultural heterogeneity and the big difference in the period of time living in the Diaspora.

«In the recent decades a new diasporic reality, a new notion has evolved... So I’ll tell you what happened. Armenians coming from the Republic of Armenia could even be counted on fingers: in the 1980s and 1990s there was almost no one. For us, once when you said a Diasporan Armenian, we understood as the Diaspora the Armenian from Lebanon, Syria, France. Today you cannot say that as the Eastern Armenians have become the majority now. That is the geopolitical conditions changed, that mass emigration to Europe started – Spain, France, Germany or other countries where there was no Eastern Armenian at all or just in exceptional cases, today they have become the majority. ... Why I am saying all this, just to come back to the language. I mean if you consider the 1990s or before, you couldn’t hear Eastern Armenian at all. All the arrived Ar-

46 From my informal discussion with Setrag Manoukian, Venice, 4 August 2022 (the material is used with his consent).

menians – the ones arrived in the past, the previous graduates [*the graduates of Moorat-Raphael College*], their children or everybody totally – were people who had come, had immigrated from Turkey, including those who were established in Italy...»⁴⁷.

Another important reason for the Armenians in Italy not to have a well-established name in official, academic and everyday discourse, like, say, “Armenian-Americans” for the Armenians in the US, can probably be their incomparably small number and scattered distribution throughout the country in different cities and small localities, from the North to the South. Moreover, considering the geographical specificity of Italy, the length, it becomes clear that the constant or even regular physical communication is complicated. And most importantly this natural and social environment does not bring about a unifying or consolidating effect on the Old and New Diasporan realities in Italy. The Old Diaspora is essentially integrated into the Italian society, with a small group of traditionally active members and a larger one loosely connected to them or altogether unrelated to the community, while the New Diaspora is yet on the way of establishing in the social order of Italy and is strongly based in Armenia, with a small group of young active members and a much larger one with only developing transnational diasporic consciousness.

A month after my talk with Setrag Manoukian I met with Agop Manoukian⁴⁸, his father and the son of a survivor of the Armenian Genocide, a sociologist, a prominent member of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy, the Honorary President of the Union of the Armenians of Italy and the President of the Armenian Culture Studies and Documentation Center.

“I want to ask you a question. How are Armenians living in Italy called? Who are they? Armeni d’Italia, italiani, italo-armeni [*Armenians of Italy, Italians, Italian Armenians*]...?”

“Dicono italiani di origine armena. Non lo so. Tu lo devi scoprire [*They say Italians of Armenian origin. I don’t know. You have to discover it.*],” smiled Dr Manoukian. “Io sono demi-armeno [*I am half Armenian*]⁴⁹. ... When I saw the title of your research project “identity” I thought: “Oh...how is she going to find out the identity...?”

47 V. OHANIAN, 27 August 2022.

48 From my informal discussion with Agop Manoukian, Venice, 7 September 2022 (the material is used with his consent).

49 Agop Manoukian's father was Armenian and mother was Italian.

“I think the identity of an Armenian is different in Armenia and in the Diaspora, also it is not the same in Italy, France, the US, Lebanon, Russia ...,” I commented.

“Yes,” nodded he⁵⁰.

Later in Agop Manoukian’s *Presenza Armena in Italia* I came across the following description of diasporization, which is very much like a definition. «When immigration has taken place for a long time or dates back to previous generations, a more individual terminology takes over: the reference to the group disappears and the Armenian component becomes a trace; one is no longer an Armenian but an Italian “of Armenian origin” – an expression that signals the originality of only one of the many geneological lines that individual people can own»⁵¹.

Then he elaborates his discussion of diaspora and belonging to that diaspora on the part of different generations. The term *diaspora*, according to the author, indicates not the people but the social space they have constructed involving imaginary components, supposedly memories and nostalgias, based on the country, the homeland, the native place, they once had to leave. Hence, the first generations, in particular, feel their objective existence in their diasporan condition, and for the succeeding generations belonging to diaspora involves a subjective component, i.e. it is a choice made by them or their parents. This is an existential difference as I should say in the first case there is an orientation towards the land of origin, while in the second case there is a derivation from the land of ancestral origin. «With this expression [*diaspora*] a real group is not identified, but a social and imaginary space is identified that includes both individuals and institutions that have a strong point of reference with the country and the place from which they once separated. Belonging to the diaspora, at least for the first generation of Armenians arriving in Italy, is an objective fact, it describes a condition. For subsequent generations, belonging cannot ignore a subjective component»⁵².

In an evening in the autumn of 2022 I was coming back from Padua to Venice with Avedis Hadjian, a native speaker of Armenian, a Cambridge University graduate, a journalist and a researcher born in the Diaspora and actively engaged in its intellectual life. We had been to an event

50 We talked half English, half Italian. Also, I have left some phrases in Italian as they can be of terminological value.

51 A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., p. 13, note 4.

52 A. MANOUKIAN, *Presenza Armena in Italia*, op. cit., p. 14.

concerning the history of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy and were talking about the Armenian Diaspora and the Armenian language in general. I had two takeaways from the conversation. «The national preservation is the basis of my identity”, he said. A while later he added, “For you being Armenian is real, for me ideal»⁵³.

CONCLUSION

As an overview of the contemporary Armenian Diaspora in Italy this paper is an attempt to raise a series of issues relevant to this Diaspora, that is issues that need to be observed and discussed in the light of the current reality which is no more the same as some fifty and even twenty years ago. The major development we can record in today’s Diaspora is its transnational character truly and fully introduced by the New Diasporan reality, induced by the grand geopolitical changes at the turn of the 21th century and the ongoing economic globalization processes in the world. The phenomenon of transnationality is becoming increasingly vibrant in the Armenian Diaspora in Italy not only as the natural mode of existence of the New Armenian Diasporans in various ways based in their homeland, the Republic of Armenia, without the experience of diasporic life, but also penetrating the mostly traditional diasporic space and consciousness of the Old Armenian Diasporans present in Italy for over a century without their original homeland as a point of reference. The transnationalization of the Armenian Diaspora in Italy actually commenced a little later than in the major Armenian Diasporas such as, say, the US. The former has always been small in number and incomparably limited in material resources and infrastructure, but remarkably rich in the cultural aspect and potent in the educational-social composition. The arrival of the Armenians from the Republic in the 2000s has doubled if not more the Armenian Diaspora in Italy which is a significant diasporic change, especially enlarging the segment of young people. Next, these new arrivals made the component of the Homeland, the Armenian nation-state vibrant in the Community. Another important point is that the new contingent has mostly higher education and many of them are engaged in the arts, which means that the

53 From my informal conversation with Avedis Hadjian, Padua-Venice, 18 November 2022 (the material is used with his consent). The translation from Armenian into English is by M.B.

Armenian Diaspora in Italy now, too, enjoys a high social-educational-cultural level.

The framework of this paper embraces the issues of ethnocultural background, language, integration, identity and the particularities of the Old and New Armenian Diasporas in the Italian reality. Along with the historical and cultural aspects, the educational, intellectual, academic, as well as geographic ones have also proved important in the formation and activity of this Diaspora which has taken the path of transnationalization. All these aspects of transnational diasporic existence can be the focus of separate papers with a specific research insight.

MARA BAGHDASARYAN

Ամփոփում

ԺԱՄԱՆԱԿԱԿԻՑ ՀԱՅԿԱԿԱՆ ՍՓԻՒՌԵՆ ԻՏԱԼԻԱՅՈՒՄ՝ ԱՒԱՆԴԱԿԱՆԻՑ ԱՆԴՐԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ

ՄԱՌԱ ԲԱՂԴԱՍԱՐԵԱՆ

Սոյն յօդուածում փորձ է արւում ամփոփ կերպով ներկայացնել Իտալիայում ժամանակակից հայկական սփիւռքը տարբեր տեսանկիւններից: Բարձրացում եւ քննարկում են այս սփիւռքին վերաբերող մի շարք հարցեր՝ հետազոտութեան տեսական հիմքերից մինչեւ գործնական իրականացումը, տուեալ սփիւռքային համայնքի պատմական հենքից մինչեւ ժամանակակից իրավիճակը: Տեսական վերլուծութիւնը տանում է դէպի անդրազգայնութեան հասկացութիւն, գործնական աշխատանքը ներառում է դիտարկում, հաղորդակցում եւ մասնակցութիւն (մասնակցային դիտարկման մեթոդ, հարցազրոյց, հարցախոյզ), պատմական ժամանակաշրջանն ընդգրկում է վերջին դարը, ուշադրութեան կենտրոնում է տուեալ սփիւռքի ներկայիս վիճակը: Տարբեր միգրացիոն հոսքերի արդիւնքում ձեւաւորուել են Հայ սփիւռքի երկու իրողութիւնները՝ այսպէս կոչուած Հին եւ Նոր սփիւռքերը, իւրաքանչիւրն իր բնորոշ գծերով:

Սոյն հետազոտութիւնը շօշափում է Իտալիայում Հին եւ Նոր հայկական սփիւռքերի էթնոմշակութային հիմքի, լեզուի, ինտեգրացիայի, ինքնութեան առանձնապատկութիւններին վերաբերող հարցեր: Մշակութային տարբերութիւններից բացի Հին եւ Նոր սփիւռքերի հենքային տարամիտումը բխում է պապենական հայրենիքի բացակայութեան-գոյութեան երկճիւղումից եւ Հին սփիւռքում սերունդների բազմակի հերթափոփութիւնից: Հայաստանի Հանրա-

պետութեան իրողութիւնը որպէս հայրենիք ժամանակակից հայկական սփիւռքը դարձնում է իբրպէս անդրազգային երեւոյթ: Իտալահայ սփիւռքային իրականութիւնը, որ ներկայումս բռնել է անդրազգայնացման ուղին, ձեւաւորման եւ կենսագործունէութեան ողջ ընթացքում, ինչպէս եւ այժմ պատմական ու մշակութային հայեցակերպերի հետ մէկտեղ առանձնանում է իր աշխարհագրական, կրթական, մտաւոր, ակադեմիական հայեցակերպերով: