

Artsvi Bakhchinyan, *Armenia-Sweden: Historical and Cultural Relations*, Yerevan, Publishing House of Museum of Literature and Art, 2005, 152 p.

Since ancient times Armenians have had both social and economic relations with other people around the world. Many times they were forced to leave their country because of war, deportation and for various social and political reasons. This dispersion was observed by an 11th Century Armenian historiographer, Aristakes Lastivertatsi, who wrote that the Armenians were spread “like the stars”. Wherever they went, they left their own unique mark on the history and culture of the host nation.

Armenians have often been compared to the Jews, as both nations have been persecuted and subjected to genocide. These two nations have also been compared with each other regarding their presence and output throughout the world, both as merchants and as people of education and high competence. Perhaps the unique Armenian language with its equally unique alphabet has given rise to a self-consciousness that has contributed to the preservation of the Armenian culture.

Armenia’s geographical location around biblical Mount Ararat, the official symbol of the country, also helped to place Armenia on the historical map. If the Biblical story were true, indeed all people would be descendents of the Armenians – since the the survivors on Noah’s Ark were stranded on Ararat! In fact, the Bible really brings Armenians to the center of human history.

By means of documents on Armenian relations with Sweden throughout history, Dr. Artsvi Bakhchinyan, a historian working at the Academy of Sciences in Yerevan, has portrayed this people, which is remarkable in many ways.

The book is called *Armenia-Sweden: Historical and Cultural Relations*, published in Yerevan in 2006 from support by the Union of Armenian Associations of Sweden. It was written after the author’s visit as a guest researcher at the Afro-Asian Department of Uppsala University in 1996-1997, where he was invited. What the versatile, talented Dr. Bakhchinyan accomplished in Sweden, except to learn Swedish, is presented as the “History of the Armenians in Sweden”. It is a story that invites the reader to take a sharp look into details of population movements today, since many ethnic groups “possess a history in Sweden” or a “historical membership” in Sweden. However, to travel and move around “in the world” was for a very long time exceptional, to say the least. The Armenians did so long before modern times.

Notwithstanding the fact that Sweden was labeled as one of the most ethnically homogenous countries of Europe before WWII, Bakhchinyan’s research throws some doubt on this.

The early date of the very first Armenian visitors to Sweden is amazing.

International trade in ancient times required, as well as today, “intermediaries”, “middlemen” and “transporters” skilled in languages. Already, in prehistoric times, Armenians conducted trade missions from the Middle East to West Europe. Eventually, the so-called “Armenoids” settled in Cyprus. Then they moved to various corners of Europe, including Jutland (southern Denmark). These

migrations may have occurred at the end of the second millennium B.C. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* (written in 891 A.D.) starts with the testimony that the first inhabitants of the British Isles came from Armenia. Icelandic sources testify that three Armenian bishops – Abraham, Stepanos, and Petros – visited Iceland in the eleventh century. They reached Iceland around 1020-1030 to preach their version of Christianity, less severe than that preached by the Icelandic bishops.

We need this lesson. History as such should make us more humble. Bakhchinyan is a gifted researcher who uses multiple sources. The overwhelming number of sources in twenty-five countries brings the reader to a largely forgotten world. In addition, there are everyday details retrieved from archives and libraries, fragments that speak to the “present”, to our own thin time.

In cultural historic research one often talks about influence – imprint, power, distribution, residue, cultural borrowing, heritage trails. Human footprints have accidentally been preserved as monuments of the past – or for new purposes (churches converted to mosques) – in archive records, museum objects, coins, flags of countries. Cultural history is also embedded in the present time, in our language, ways of thinking and even in today’s politics.

The first time Sweden was mentioned in Armenian literature was probably in 1568, when an Armenian traveler and writer, Pirzade Ghapanets, visited Western Europe, including Denmark and Sweden. In his short travel stories he mentioned Sweden as “Shivec’oc’ yerkim” (the country of the Swedes). He writes that the peoples of these countries believed in Christ, his birth, tortures, crucifixion, and ascension and that they baptized their children. He notes, however, that they did not say mass or intercede with the Virgin Mary or any saints, and would not make the sign of the cross. They respected pilgrims. During Christmas, they did not work for 12 days – they just ate, drank, and disported themselves.

A different time began in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, when Armenian tradesmen from Persia – belonging to the “Khoja-class”, the Persian merchant elite – rose unexpectedly to great prominence. It was the result of enhanced political and economic ties between the East and the West. Now, more than ever, commercial brokers were needed. For a long time the Armenians more or less monopolized the trade. The oldest known document is a travel note by an Italian diplomat, who in 1571 wrote about the Armenians. According to it, they exported various goods, particularly unbleached calico, from Tabriz to Constantinople, Moldova, Poland, Denmark, and Sweden. The Armenians told the Italian diplomat that the profits were very low because of the many dangers. The arduous trips of Armenian merchants on camels and horseback through the Russian steppes and by ship across the Baltic Sea lasted for months. Some of their goods were exchanged for food from the local population. The kind of goods they carried was tableware, scissors, furs, playing cards, glasses, etc. It is these tangible facts which make this book an exciting journey into the past. Names of individuals ‘without historical importance’ are given in Dr. Bakhchinyan’s text; he even mentions relationships and surnames, including in Russified form.

So this is a book about individuals in history – not about countries and governments. For example, Anuch (even a Swedishized name was used) Vardanian in Armenian and Safar Vasilev in August 1688 applied for permission

from the Russian government to transport cargo from Sweden via Moscow and the city of Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea in southern Russia. Their inventories consisted primarily of fabrics, mirrors, knives, forks, inkwell, locks, and also fifty books. Later Vasilev was permitted by Peter the Great to establish the first factory for silkworm cultivation in Therek, Russia.

Another period in Armenian-Swedish relations was the 17th century. Swedes went to Persia, where New Julfa was a center of Armenian trade. From the 17th century on the Armenians were further incorporated into Swedish space. A large group of Armenian soldiers from the Ottoman Empire accompanied King Charles XII back to Sweden. Their fate is not known, except that probably some returned home, while others stayed in Sweden. By then some of them already had Swedish names like Lars and Anders.

During this time Armenians became increasingly involved in the affairs of the Swedish kingdom and international diplomacy as interpreters and diplomats. The minister and diplomat at the Swedish Legation in Constantinople, Baron Ignatius Mouradzea (1740-1807) was especially famous. His son Abraham, academician, had a versatile career, including a position as laboratory assistant to the internationally known scientist Jacob Berzelius. Abraham Mouradzea became a member of the Swedish Academy in 1823 and of the Science Society in Uppsala from 1828. Equally famous was Jean d'Anastasi, a merchant from Damascus, who later became the General Consul of Sweden and Norway in Alexandria and Cairo.

Historical "name dropping" is not always interesting. But it becomes interesting when a nation which has never been able to count itself as one of the world's major powers appears many times with remarkable individual accomplishments during the course of history. Dr. Bakhchinyan completes his project with a focus on the role of Armenians in Sweden in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Besides this, he highlights the social relief work of individual Swedish missionaries among Armenians in Armenia, in parts of Iran and in the Ottoman Empire from the beginning of the 20th century to 1915. He gives examples of Armenia-related research in Sweden as of the 18th century and, eventually, notes about the 20th century Armenian presence in Sweden.

Literary and cultural ties dating back to the 12th century are provided by the Armenian poet Grigor Tgha (1133-1194), who mentioned Sweden in one of his poems. Another kind of connection between the two countries is the translation of the works of Swedish novelists into Armenian. These included Astrid Lindgren, Pär Lagerkvist, Selma Lagerlöf and August Strindberg.

The book ends with a description of the Swedish political and media reactions to the Turkish massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during 1894-1896 and 1915-1920s. Among several foreign witnesses of the genocide there were Scandinavian diplomats and missionaries, like the Swedish diplomat Einar af Wirsén, and missionaries Alma Johansson, Bodil Björn, and Karen Jeppe. One chapter of the book is about the discussion in recent years raised by Swedish politicians about the necessity of Swedish official recognition of the genocide and also about a similar recognition by the government of Turkey.

Armenians residing in Sweden in modern times are presented in the book as well as the Armenian Apostolic Church and local Armenian organizations

established after the immigration of Armenians in the 1950s. The book also includes some final notes about earlier relationships between Soviet Armenia and Sweden and about the changed situation after Armenia's independence.

All in all, this is an impressive and remarkable book, a world history in your pocket, that focuses on the Armenians and the Swedes.

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