The Contemporary Armenian Community in Colorado: Memorialization, Charity, Religion, and Language Preservation

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THE CONTEMPORARY ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN COLORADO: MEMORIALIZATION, CHARITY, RELIGION, AND LANGUAGE PRESERVATION

by

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B.A., Russian-Armenian University, 2016

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Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:
The Contemporary Armenian Community in Colorado: Memorialization, Charity, Religion, and Language Preservation
written by Anna Manukyan
has been approved for the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that the both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.
This paper examines the ways the Armenian diaspora of Colorado preserves its ethnic and cultural identity through activities directed toward the maintenance of memory, self-consciousness, language, religion, and support of the homeland. This thesis explores those ways through the lens of interviews with three immigrant generations of Colorado Armenians. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Armenian diaspora in Colorado is relatively small (2,916 people) in comparison with the largest Armenian diaspora in the U.S., located in California (202,432 people). Nevertheless, it has played a key role in maintenance of Armenianness through such actions as the creation of an Armenian Saturday School in Denver; Armenian Apostolic Churches in Colorado, the installation of a khachkar in honor of the Armenian Genocide; an Armenian Sardarapat Highway sign in Centennial, Colorado, that demonstrate the Armenian nation’s victory and survival, and the charity organization SOAR, (Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief), which collects money to benefit people with disabilities in Armenia.
Table of Contents

I. Introduction..................................................................................................................1

II. Common characteristics of diaspora.................................................................3

III. Preservation of Armenian ethnic identity........................................................7

   A. Historical memory.................................................................................................7

   B. Language, religion, traditions............................................................................15

IV. Second and third generations of the Armenian diaspora...............................19

V. The Colorado diaspora and its activities............................................................28

   A. The main Armenian diaspora organizations in Colorado.............................29

   B. Commemoration of the Genocide....................................................................32

   C. Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway.......................................................36

   D. Church................................................................................................................39

   E. Language............................................................................................................40

   F. Charity...............................................................................................................41

VI. Conclusion..............................................................................................................43

Works cited.................................................................................................................47

Appendix....................................................................................................................52
I. Introduction

Armenians are scattered around the world because of the Genocide\(^1\) of 1915. The Genocide was designed to wipe out the Armenian identity but it failed and, on the contrary, evoked and even increased the desire to preserve Armenianness among members of the Armenian diaspora. Wherever Armenians move, they try to create an Armenian community in which they can preserve Armenian traditions and values. One of such active communities is the Armenian diaspora of Colorado. It is an example of a community, like hundreds of others, that actively preserves its ethnic identity despite being small. In 1979, the Armenian diaspora created an organization, Armenians of Colorado,\(^2\) whose main goal is the maintenance of Armenianness. The organization oversees a number of initiatives directed toward that goal, mostly organized and maintained through volunteer efforts by members of the Armenian community. Some of those efforts are: the Armenian Apostolic Churches in Colorado; an Armenian Saturday School in Denver directed at teaching Armenian language and Armenian history; the khachkar\(^3\) erected on the state capitol grounds to honor the Armenian Genocide; an Armenian Sardarapat Highway sign in Centennial, which commemorates the Armenian nation’s victory and survival;

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\(^1\) “Genocide, the deliberate and systematic destruction of a group of people because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race” (Encyclopedia Britannica).

\(^2\) The Organization of Armenians of Colorado (AOC) became a “501(c)3 non-profit cultural organization in Colorado State” (Armenians of Colorado).

\(^3\) “A khachkar is an outdoor, vertically erected flat stele that is positioned in relation to the four cardinal points of the world; the western side has an ornamental carved cross, accompanied by vegetative-geometric motifs, with animals (particularly birds), and sometimes with carvings of people” (Petrosyan).
and the charity organization SOAR, Society for Orphaned Armenians Relief, which collects money to benefit people with disabilities in Armenia.

The affection of the Armenian people for their homeland is manifested not only through preservation of certain qualities but also through the desire to return to the homeland. The collective Armenian spirit is underscored by the shared longing for the tiny piece of the world that is the Republic of Armenia.

This longing has intensified due to Armenian’s recent Velvet Revolution, a “nonviolent resistance movement” that took place in Yerevan, Armenia, in April-May 2018. Thanks to the organized and peaceful protests of hundreds of thousands of citizens, the corrupt government that had been in place since the collapse of the Soviet Union was forced to resign (Makarov). This unprecedented event, an old regime giving way to a new system without a single shot being fired, has inspired the Armenian diaspora, which has shown increased aspirations to return to Armenia. As journalistic accounts have shown, since that event, the Armenian diaspora increasingly desires to work for their country and to make investments there that can lead to Armenia’s economic development (Mirmaksumova).

This thesis is divided into four main sections. In the first section I will define diaspora and explore the distinctive features of the Armenian diaspora. Several researchers have discussed the Armenian diaspora as historical, mobilized, and victimized. I will consider the categories of nation and ethnicity and distinguish differences between them that help determine the nature of Armenians. In the second section, I will consider the elements of Armenian ethnicity such as language, religion, traditions, and historical memory. In the third section, I will examine
interviews with Colorado Armenians and identify the features of ethnicity that they preserve. In the fourth section, I will describe different activities of the Armenian diaspora in Colorado that characterize the diaspora’s essence and cohesion.

I. Common characteristics of diaspora

According to the generally accepted definition, “diaspora” derives from Greek *dia* (‘through’) and *speirein* (‘to sow, scatter’)” (Encyclopedia Britannica). In practical terms, diaspora is a community that has been scattered throughout the world. Historically, this term was used for the experiences of Jewish people who were exiled and displaced. Gradually the term diaspora referred to not only Jewish people but to the people of different nations who migrated from their homeland due to various reasons: political, economic, religious. Communities affected by diaspora are characterized by the presence of certain features, such as language, religion, rituals, and traditions. They are concrete communities that researchers have defined in various ways. William Safran gives the following definition of diaspora:

1. They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral” or foreign regions;
2. They retain collective memory, vision, or myths about their original homeland, its physical location, and achievements;
3. They believe that they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate;

5. They believe that they should collectively be committed to the maintenance and restoration of their original homeland and its safety and prosperity;

6. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (Safran 84)

The Armenian diaspora fits this definition. The Armenian community is scattered throughout the world, far from its ancestral homeland, but continues to preserve its collective memory. It presents an almost unique circumstance: the majority of its people live outside their historic homeland. According to information provided by the United Nations, only 3 million Armenians live in Armenia, while 8 million live abroad. The largest Armenian communities are in Russia (about 2 million), the United States (about 1.5 million), and France (about 0.7 million). There are many thousands of Armenians registered in Georgia and Ukraine. Until a few years ago, thousands of Armenians resided in Syria, but many have left the country since the rise of ISIS and have sought refuge in Armenia, among other countries.

Different classifications of diasporas are suggested by researchers. For example, Gabriel Sheffer discusses divisions of diasporas into “historical” and “modern.” Researchers call Greek, Jewish, and Armenian immigrants a “historical diaspora” that emerged among multiethnic empires (Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian). A modern diaspora is characterized by researchers as communities that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as the Irish and the Polish (Sheffer 13).
John Armstrong divides diasporas into categories of “mobilized” and “proletarian,” and juxtaposes them against each other: “the proletarian diaspora, essentially a disadvantaged product of modernized polities; and the mobilized diaspora, an ethnic group which does not have a general status advantage, yet which enjoys many material and cultural advantages compared to other groups in the multiethnic polity” (Armstrong 393). Armstrong includes Jews, Armenians, and Greeks in the typology of mobilized diasporas. He terms Algerians, Poles, and Italians in France as belonging to proletarian diasporas.

A mobilized diaspora has a long history and the ability to socially adapt to its host country. Armstrong claims that “within the multiethnic polity, the mobilized diaspora is temporarily indispensable for the dominant ethnic elite.” Armstrong gives an example of Jews and Armenians who were appreciated by the “dominant ethnic elite” of the Ottoman Empire because they had “technical role specialization” which included medical and commercial skills. Jews and Armenians also had a distinguishing feature—good communication skills (Armstrong 396-397). These communities were initially advantaged because they were useful for the host country.

In his book *Global Diasporas*, Robin Cohen analyzes diasporas and unifies them in the following categories: victim, imperial, labor, trade, and deterritorialized. Cohen unites Armenians, Africans, Jews, Palestinians and the Irish in the victim group.

*Table 1. Cohen (2008). Main types of diaspora*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim/ refugee</th>
<th>Jews, Africans, Armenians. Others: Irish, Palestinians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperial /colonial</td>
<td>Ancient Greek, British, Russian. Others: Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnic diasporas have emerged as the result of either voluntary or forced emigration. The Armenian and Jewish cases are compared with each other by many researchers who draw parallels between them. One similarity is that the Armenians and the Jews were forced to emigrate because of genocide—by the Ottoman Empire in the first case and most recently by Germany in the latter case. The premises of Jewish and Armenian genocides are also identical. For example, Robert Melson emphasizes four points that unite the Armenian and Jewish cases and serve as preconditions for genocides:

1. They were both communal minorities defined as unequal and persecuted;

2. Both minorities modernized earlier and their relative success (compared to the dominant group) created “tensions” with elements of the dominant majority;

3. The victimized group comes to be identified, either geographically or ideologically, with the enemies of the larger society and state;

4. The larger society and the state experience a series of significant military and political disasters which undermine their security and worldview. (Melson 79-80)

As Armstrong argues, Jewish and Armenian populations were often more successful in trade and business than the dominant group, and at first they were privileged groups who were considered helpful to the host countries; later they became the object of jealousy, contempt, and persecution,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labor</th>
<th>Indentured Indians, Chinese and Japanese, Sikhs, Turks, Italians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>Venetians, Lebanese, Chinese Others: Today’s Indians, Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deterritorialized/ hybrid/ cultural</td>
<td>Caribbean people Others: Today’s Chinese, Indians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to define the distinctive features of the Armenian diaspora (historical, mobilized, and victimized) because it leads to an understanding of the historical background of the Armenian diaspora that has influenced the diaspora’s orientation, goals, and activities. Knowledge of the Armenian diaspora’s history and categorization helps us understand the reasons for its emergence and the qualities of the diaspora that can assist us in analyzing its current position. Without knowing the origin, it is difficult to examine any diaspora’s present and predict its future because these three elements are interconnected.

II. Preservation of Armenian ethnic identity

A. Historical memory

A key prerequisite for studying ethnic identity is defining what ethnic identity consists of. Anthony Smith uses a complex and multifaceted set of characteristics to define a nation’s ethnic identity. It is a comprehensive framework. Smith asserts that a nation is a “named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith 14).

Thomas Eriksen emphasizes that the difference between ethnicity and nationalism is in the relationship of the nation with the state. The connection of a nation with the state is strong, “whereas many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state” (Eriksen 31). Thus, a nation’s main characteristics are presence of territory, laws, and public culture, and so it has a political direction in comparison with ethnicity that is defined by historical-cultural features. Therefore, the ethnic model fits better for Armenians in diaspora, since they do not have the political control of the state.
A better model for the Armenian diaspora is Smith’s category of ‘ethnie,’ characterized by six features:

- a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with homeland: not necessarily physical possession of “its” territory, only its symbolic attachment to the ancestral land, as with diaspora people and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members (Smith 22-32).

According to Smith’s ‘ethnie’ model, people who emigrate to another country remain the representation of “the community of birth” since they have “a common descent” (Smith 11). But not all emigrants may be considered ethnic nationalists of the country they emigrate from, as having a common descent is not sufficient; other features that define ethnicity such as historical memories, myths, language, and culture must also be present. This thesis mostly uses the term “ethnic identity” rather than “nation” and “nationality” because the Armenian diaspora is spread over the world and has largely lost its ancestral homeland while it has preserved its ethnicity characterized by memories, symbols, myths, and culture. However, some theorists, such as Walker Connor, do support the use of the term “nation” in describing the Armenian identity because of his view that nationhood is a term relating to self-consciousness rather than material reality (Connor 389).

According to Smith, memory is crucial in defining ‘ethnie’:

- A central theme of historical ethno-symbolism is the relationship of shared memories to collective cultural identities: memory, almost by definition, is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities. (Smith 23)
Smith asserts that an essential step for the birth of a nation is: 1) an emergence of a name, because without a name, a nation does not have an identity, and its integration is on a low level; and 2) the homeland is not only a territory but also has a symbolic meaning present through important events in its history and heroic ancestors (Smith 23).

The important events of the nation—how it was born, how it evolved and survived over time—make up the most significant historical memories for defining nationhood. They are also facts that are capable of verification:

Historical enquiry, while it may demystify and dispel fictions, can also reinforce the shared memories and aspirations of members, their ethno-history, by providing material or documentary evidence for events and personages held in reverence by the community. (Smith 24)

Thus, the memory is preserved not only through stories told from generation to generation, but also thanks to the work of archaeologists, philologists, artists, sculptors, and writers. This tangible evidence of the historical events necessarily contributes to memorialization.

Historical memories are perhaps the strongest contributing factor for maintaining nationhood within the Armenian diaspora. To understand this point, it is first important to understand how the Armenian diaspora was created. Creation of the Armenian diaspora is usually referred to as starting in 387 AD, when Armenia was divided between Persia and the Byzantine Empire. The Armenian diaspora became larger in the tenth century in the Byzantine Empire because of the empire’s expansionary policy, and in the eleventh century because of the Seljuk conquests (Abramyan 138). Numerous invasions and occupations by various powers over centuries, the political division of Armenia by Russia and Western Europe, and political and economic situations led to many Armenians leaving their homeland and creating small
communities abroad during almost the entire time Armenians have existed. Not having a state of their own for over six centuries, Armenians organized the diaspora through community organizations, the church, and later through political parties. Such centers of diaspora are now spread all over the world.

However, the largest formation of the Armenian diaspora began with the mass extermination of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915-1916, the Armenian Genocide, when about 1.5 million Armenians were killed or died from starvation in the Syrian desert during forced exiles by the Young Turk government. This pushed Armenians out of their historical land and forced them to spread to all corners of the world (Encyclopedia Britannica).

The survivors of the Genocide found refuge in established settlements in Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Soviet Armenia, then many migrated to Europe and the United States. An interesting trend that arose was that many of the Western Armenians—those who lived on the west bank of the river Araks—moved to Europe and the United States, while the Eastern Armenians moved to Russia. Genocide survivors were in severe psychological distress, facing major economic, political, and language problems, and therefore endured hardships in foreign countries. Nevertheless, they survived and became one of the most dynamic and major diasporas in the world. There is almost no Armenian family that was not affected by the events of bloody April 24, 1915, the starting date of the Armenian Genocide (Ritter).

My own family was affected by the Armenian Genocide, and the memory of this event was passed down in my family in the ways historical memories are commonly passed on to generations: through oral stories and written memoirs. The story of my great-grandfather Aram, a genocide survivor, was passed on to us by my grandmother Marietta Khachatryan, born in 1938. I remember first asking her about the story of the Genocide in 2010 while my whole extended
family gathered together to drink tea in the evenings, which was a family tradition. Later, I asked my grandmother several times to tell the story to capture all the important details. My father heard this story from my grandmother because he told me that his grandfather never told this traumatic story himself. My father told me that my great-grandfather wrote memoirs (a family relic) stored on a bookshelf that were read by my grandmother, from which she learned the story of 1915. My father told me that he heard the story of genocide from my grandmother many times; she especially conveyed this family history after periodically watching her favorite folk concerts with songs from the region of Sasun, where her father, Aram Khachatryan, originated.

According to my grandmother Marietta’s narrative, Aram was a little boy who happily lived with his parents and older brother. Late on April 24, 2015, the Turkish military carried out an unexpected attack on the Armenians sleeping peacefully in their homes. As stated in the memoirs of my great-grandfather Aram, the Turks were ruthless toward the Armenian people. They killed everybody: women, children, men, old people. Besides murders, the Turks raped women and stabbed the stomachs of pregnant women.

Aram’s parents were killed before his eyes. He, his older brother, and cousin were able to escape from the Turks. The older brother, Zakar, carried Aram on his back. But as a young boy, Aram quickly lost strength and could not grasp Zakar and rolled down the mountain. Despite being in danger of being caught by the Turks, Zakar and his cousin went back in search of Aram, who was still alive, having been miraculously saved by a large rock that broke his fall.

With huge difficulty Aram, Zakar, and their cousin fled from Western to Eastern Armenia. Life was hard in Eastern Armenia too. Like many other children who were orphaned and left in the streets after their parents were murdered, Zakar and Aram were assigned to an orphanage,
where they endured many hardships. Aram never gave up and eventually, after years of hard
work and studies, he became the governor of one of Armenia’s provinces, Abaran.

Aram’s story is not unique. Families in the Armenian diaspora, with almost no exception,
started out in almost exactly the same way—their great-grandparents were forced out of their
homes and homeland, lost their families and belongings, and were eventually “lucky” enough to
escape and live in camps and orphanages in severe poverty and hardship until they managed to
put down roots in Eastern Armenia. For these families, the historical memories of the Genocide
are unifying and powerful and are one of the strongest defining factors of their Armenian
national identity. They are passed on through stories of the Genocide, emigration, sorrow, and
struggle through generations. As Talar Chahinian has explained, “[a]lthough multiple memories
of many survivors contribute to the making of the narrative, the experience of the genocide is
recounted as a shared experience. Ultimately, the narrative serves as the conflated sum of many
individual perspectives, unified as one, as that of the victim” (Chahinian 207).

For the Armenian national identity, another factor identified by Smith, trauma and
suffering, is closely related to historical memories. According to Smith,

the ambiguities and nebulous character of European cultural identity contrasts
strongly with the dramatic and powerful diaspora nationalisms of the Greeks,
Jews and Armenians with their rich memories … their stark symbols of trauma
and suffering… (Smith 30)

Trauma and suffering are embedded in the consciousness of the people, who carry them the same
way they carry the historical memory of actual events. In the case of Armenians, the Genocide of
1915 unites them not only as a monumental event in the nation’s history, but also because of the
powerful emotion of tragedy and loss in its aftermath that is embedded in the Armenians’ collective consciousness. As Razmik Panossian explains, the Genocide remains the cornerstone of modern Armenian identity, particularly in the diaspora. It is a defining moment, which on the one hand acts as a fundamental break with the past and the historic homeland, while on the other it serves as a prism through which national identity is seen, politics interpreted and culture redefined. (Pannosian 228)

This ethno-historical event also unifies the Armenians through the tradition of commemorating it each year in April on every continent where ethnic Armenians are present.

Preservation of historical memory is reflected in the case of Anahid Katchian, born in 1943. Katchian has been living in Colorado most of her life. Her family moved to America in the 1940s. Historical memories have played and continue to play a strong role in maintaining her Armenian identity. Anahid Katchian’s father, Azat Katchian, was six years old at the time of the Armenian Genocide in 1915. He was one of the lucky ones: he was able to flee with other orphaned Armenian children who marched for three years until they reached Beirut, Lebanon, where they found shelter in an orphanage.

Anahid Katchian’s father did not like talking about those terrible events in Armenian history for fear of traumatizing his children. But Katchian learned the history of her father from a radio interview her father gave in the 1980s:

It wasn’t the hunger but it was the thirst that was the real hurdle and persons like me would kneel down to drink what remains in the holes made by the hooves of cattle or horses.... You see, shoes were worn off walking, walking, walking—they were in tatters, holes, and finally they fell off so it was barefoot walking that I had done. And that ended
in a person who had not developed tough soles under the feet into ulcers. And in the morning those ulcers and the feet were swollen and you could rest at your peril because you would not be left alive. We could see many people who had fallen and they just passed away that way. (Yoanna)

That story, similar to so many others, has been the primary influence in shaping Anahid Katchian’s identity as an Armenian. Katchian is collecting stories and recounts of the Genocide that constitute the historical memory of the Armenians. She shares them with other Armenians who come from families of emigrants like her own. Like Anahid Katchian, my grandmother’s sister, Knarik Sargsyan, collected stories of her ancestors transferred from generation to generation and shares them with other Armenians. She maintains a website where generations are depicted through photos and different stories (Sargsyan).

These two women, thousands of miles apart, are examples of how ethnic identity has survived and been maintained through centuries. This works not only in the case of Anahid Katchian and Knarik Sargsyan, but in the case of most Armenians who preserve their identity by knowing family stories and sharing them, since they feel an attachment to and love for their kin. For Armenians who witnessed the Genocide, it is very traumatic to speak about it, but, nevertheless, it is important for them to transfer the historical memory, whether through interviews as in the case of Anahid Katchian, through memoirs, as in the case of my great-grandfather, or through other means of memory preservation. A mediated way of telling the story of the Genocide shows the presence of suffering and trauma despite the fact that many years have passed from this tragic event in the life of Armenians. Historical memory is preserved, and group cohesion created, in this fashion.

B. Language, Religion, and Traditions
Language plays a vital role in the process of ethnic identity creation and preservation. According to Smith, ‘ethnie’ also includes “a shared cultural element (usually language or religion)” (Smith 25). Language is necessary for communication and preservation of cultural values in original manuscripts and books—the treasures of the people.

The Armenian language belongs to the Indo-European family. It is ancient and has a unique alphabet that does not resemble any other. The Armenian language attracts not only Armenians but also representatives of other nations who desire to learn about the Armenian culture.

For example, Armenian attracted the attention of the writer Lord Byron. Byron studied Armenian with Armenian monks (Mekhitarists) who belonged to the Armenian Catholic monastery founded in 1717 situated on the island of San Lazzaro in Venice. These monks found patronage from the Bishop of Rome while escaping the Turks’ pursuit. Byron was interested in Armenia and also emphasized the originality of the Armenian language: “But whatever may have been their destiny—and it has been bitter—whatever it may be in the future, their country must ever be one of the most interesting on the globe; and perhaps their language only requires to be more studied to become more attractive….” (Moore 337). Byron’s interest in the Armenian language is reflected in the publishing of the book “Lord Byron: Armenian Exercises and Poetry” in both Armenian and English.

Armenians hid their books during wars and the Genocide, sometimes at the cost of their lives, because the keeping of their language and literature was essential for them; preservation of the culture was more valuable than their life. Thanks to the Armenians’ efforts to protect manuscripts and books, and their desire to transfer these values to their descendants, many
cultural treasures were preserved and are now situated in the Armenian Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts and Museum (often referred to as the Matenadaran) in Armenia, named after the creator of the Armenian and Georgian alphabets. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant reasons that Armenians have managed to survive hundreds of years of war, the Genocide, lack of sovereignty, and emigration was the preservation of the Armenian language. It is one of the determinants of Armenian identity, has a long history, and plays an indispensable role in the preservation of the culture in the diaspora.

Likewise, religion presents and preserves a nation. According to Smith, “[m]yths and symbols of shared ethnicity play vital roles here,” but Smith also highlights the centrality of religion to “the process of creating and maintaining a sense of nationhood. The secular conception of a nation so prominent in the modern world cannot be understood without a grasp of its Judeo-Christian origins” (Smith 25). Having a distinct religion shared by members of the community helps to preserve nationhood since it characterizes common moral foundations.

Armenia, in 301 A.D., became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion. Since then, Christianity has formed the people’s deeds, intentions, and worldview. Armenian religion has its own unique direction in Christianity, with the Armenian Apostolic Church, named after the two apostles, Bartholomew and Thaddeus, who first brought Christianity to the Armenian people. The Armenian Apostolic Church has its own distinctive calendar and ceremonies. Liturgies are conducted in the Classical Armenian Language or Grabar. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the dominant Christian religion among Armenians. Karekin II

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4 “In the year 404, St. Mesrop Mashtots invented a system of writing [alphabet] for the Armenian language” (Stone 37).
is “the Catholicos of all Armenians and head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, with his seat in Ejmiatsin, [Armenia]” (Stone 33).

However, there is also an Armenian Catholic Church and a Protestant Armenian Church, although their members constitute a small percentage of Armenians. The Armenian Catholic Church is the continuation of “the Catholicosate that existed in the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia.” The head of the Armenian Catholic Church is Gregory Peter XX Chabroyan, who resides in Beirut, Lebanon (Stone 33). The Armenian Protestant Church was founded in 1846 by “American missionary activities among the Armenians” (Stone 33).

Christianity is intertwined with the Armenian ethnicity and language, all three forming the pillars that comprise the Armenian identity. Armenia was under the governance of Iran and Turkey for several centuries, but kept its originality and ethnic identity not only thanks to its language, but also because of its religion. The Armenian diaspora has spent tremendous resources in building and financing Armenian churches, holding regular masses, and celebrating Armenian religious holidays as not only an effort to provide a venue for worship, but as an effort to preserve the Armenian ethnic identity, especially for the second and third generations.

According to the Old Testament, Noah’s Ark landed on Mount Ararat, which was located in Armenian lands until 1923. Lord Byron used this biblical story and emphasized the possibility of the connection of Armenian land with holiness:

If the scriptures are rightly understood, it was in Armenia that Paradise was placed —Armenia, which has paid as dearly as the descendants of Adam for that fleeting participation of its soil in the happiness of him who was created from its dust. It was in Armenia that the flood first abated, and the dove alighted (Moore 337).
To Armenians, this biblical story is also important because Armenia is perceived as a sacred land to all Christians. Indeed, Armenians perceive Armenian land as sacred and beloved, having a lofty and biblical meaning. Religion helped Armenians to overcome suffering throughout many centuries of subordination to other nations.

A closely related concept is common traditions, as most Armenian traditions stem from religious rules and ceremonies. Traditions include holidays, national songs, dress, food, even lifestyle. Traditions also include customs of marriages and funerals. Armenians lived from generation to generation in extended families where every member had his/her own rights and obligations. In addition, Armenians married only Armenians for centuries to preserve the national identity. Many of the traditions, especially holidays, songs, and food, continue to this day in the homeland, as well as in the diaspora, maintaining Armenian ethnicity across the world.

III. Second and third generations of the Armenian diaspora

Three waves of Armenians have immigrated to America for political, economic, and educational reasons. The first wave was 1894-1924, the time of pogroms and the Genocide by the Ottoman Empire that led to tens of thousands of Armenians arriving in America. The second wave occurred in the 1970s, under the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and was due to crises in countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and various republics of the Soviet Union that resulted in Armenians’ immigration to America, in particular to California (Mirak 391). The third wave took place in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when
the individual Soviet republics, including Armenia, ended up unstable economically (Dekmejian 434).

This paper has chosen to focus on three generations of Armenian-American immigrants because every generation is unique and has distinctive features. There are different classifications of generations, and the categorization of generations in this paper is based on the view of social scientists and demographers who consider immigrants the first generation, their children born in the U.S. the second generation, and grandchildren of immigrants the third generation (Trevelyan).

The Armenian Genocide and the constant pursuit of justice—i.e., activities and efforts aimed at worldwide recognition of the Armenian Genocide—have made the Armenian diaspora more united abroad in comparison with many other immigrant communities. However, as with other immigrants, assimilation is a constant threat to the Armenian diaspora. However, as with other immigrants, assimilation is a constant factor that the Armenian diaspora must recognize and deal with. Assimilation does not always start with immigration and does not always follow a straight-line path. It starts when native-born second-generation people start speaking the destination country’s language better, get education in that country, have less time and opportunity to indulge in the memories of the homeland, and are simply more immersed in the local culture from a very early age. While first generation immigrant Armenians mainly live in ethnic enclaves and tend to marry within their ethnic groups, the second and third generations start to break away from those established traditions, accelerating assimilation.

The two main bases of assimilation into a culture are intermarriage (marrying a person from the culture where the immigrant lives) and loss of language (Papazian). However, these are
most certainly not the only factors. There are other major elements that contribute to assimilation. One is how the young generation understands, experiences, and conforms to its heritage. The younger generation of Armenians in the diaspora tend to not conform to a single identity. The same applies to its racial and class identity. As Khachig Tololyan describes, those belonging to the younger generation of Armenians in the diaspora tend to not conform to a “single identity,” and view identity as a multifaceted web of chosen affiliations, as opposed to an older conception of identity as predetermined, “socially inherited from the family.” (Papazian).

Many younger people, especially those not living in Armenia, who have already started assimilating into the culture and society of the nation they call home sometimes choose not to accept and conform to their parents’ and grandparents’ Armenian identity. Absent consistent pressure from their parents and community, who can influence their identity by promoting many of the factors Smith has discussed (religion, folk culture, traditions and customs), these young people, the second and third generation, risk cutting off the family’s Armenian identity in the future (Papazian).

One factor that appears to be successful in maintaining the interest of the second and third generations in their Armenian identity is, surprisingly, one that Smith has not identified: the interest in the success and safety of the historical homeland. The members of the Armenian diaspora are united by a single dream—the success of their motherland: “young diasporic Armenians, even more than their elders, want to choose the area of their committed efforts and need to feel that by becoming involved they can be active agents in the development of their homeland and people” (Papazian). As Safran mentions, the diaspora is “committed to the
maintenance or restoration of the homeland and to its safety and prosperity” (Safran 83-84). The Armenian diaspora unites around this goal to see the Republic of Armenia thrive.

This is an interesting concept—defining a nation through a common goal as opposed to looking to the past (be it memories or traditions). Many second and third generation people are attracted to their homeland for many reasons, some of which are to assist in humanitarian purposes or to just “find themselves” in the culture of their family. They may not be interested in or aware of the historical memories or the collective trauma and suffering of the diaspora. Their language skills may be marginal at best. But the Armenian identity is preserved by their desire to find a connection to their homeland, to visit it, to volunteer or find work there, to see it flourish as a matter of national pride. Despite the cultural dilution that many of these younger people have experienced due to constant exposure to cultural elements, thanks to, in no small part, the Internet and social media, their sense of ethnic national pride continues to define their identity (Papazian).

To that end, the Armenian diaspora helps struggling Armenia, and the support is mainly focused on international issues and charity work in Armenia. The Aurora Humanitarian Initiative is an important humanitarian prize organized by the Armenian diaspora and the philanthropic vision of Vartan Gregorian, Noubar Afeyan, and Ruben Vardanyan. It is represented by three organizations—the 100 Lives Foundation, Inc. (New York, USA), the 100 Lives Foundation (Geneva, Switzerland), and the IDeA Foundation (Yerevan, Armenia).

On behalf of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and in gratitude to their saviors, an Aurora Prize Laureate is honored each year with a $100,000 grant, as well as the unique opportunity to continue the cycle of giving by nominating
organizations that inspired their work for a $1,000,000 award. The Aurora Prize ceremonies have taken place annually in Yerevan, Armenia, beginning in 24 April 2016 (Aurora Prize).

Another element that affects the assimilation of the cultures is simply how the second or third generation is raised. In all simplicity, whether or not cultural dilution will occur in a generation is mostly up to how the parents raise their child. In theory, cultural dilution can never occur if the parents of every generation raise their child to embody the ethnic values and force the identity onto the children, at the same time limiting the children’s exposure to non-Armenian cultural elements: at least at home to practice speaking the language that characterizes ethnicity and to involve children into extracurricular activities.

I found an illustration of this principle when I interviewed a young man named Aram Gevorgian, who was born in 2001 in Colorado in the United States to Armenian immigrant parents. Gevorgian belongs to the second generation of immigrants. His parents have raised him to be Armenian, and therefore, Gevorgian has many Armenian values, including the ability to speak Armenian. He considers himself an American-Armenian. Gevorgian has visited Armenia three times. He spent the summer of 2016 in an Armenian camp in upstate New York where Armenian children gathered from all over the world: Armenia, America, Europe, and Turkey. They learned Armenian songs, went to mass at the Armenian church, learned Armenian prayers, cooked Armenian food, and took part in other activities that, as Smith puts it, promoted the Armenian identity through religion, traditions and customs, and folk art. This had a strong influence on Gevorgian, who was already heavily involved in the Armenian culture through his
immediate family as well as his extended family, most of whom are in Armenia. Despite being born and raised in the United States, Gevorgian has a strong sense of patriotism for Armenia. He wants to major in political science and eventually be able to work in the Embassy of Armenia in the United States.

Gevorgian’s ethnic identity is largely shaped by the language, religion, and modern-day pop culture of Armenia. However, historical memory is also a strong influence. Aram Gevorgian says “I know a lot about the Genocide because every year we commemorate the Genocide by the Memorial located near the State Capitol in Denver. We got stories like what happened in 1915. I am educated a lot about that” (Gevorgian).

If his parents had raised him as an American and had not taught him Armenian, I theorize that he would most certainly not hold as many Armenian values today. The fact that he considers himself as an Armenian is completely due to the upbringing he received from his parents. It is the parents who retain the values and culture of their ethnicity. Eventually, these values will be lost if they are not passed down from generation to generation, in many cases due to factors like intermarriage, cultural dilution, and loss of language. The only way for this not to happen is for the parents of each generation to instill these values in the child so they remain with them instead of fading away.

This is a fairly common experience for second and third generation children with parents who are both Armenian. By maintaining the Armenian language at home, exposing the children to Armenian folk tales, movies, and television, spending time with other Armenian families, and celebrating Armenian traditions and customs, these parents are a strong and steady influence in helping the younger generation maintain its Armenian identity. However, in intermarriage, where
one parent is not Armenian, the situation can be dramatically different. Even if parents (including the non-Armenian parent) are strongly interested in teaching their child his or her Armenian identity, the assimilation of that child into the surrounding culture and losing a sense of Armenian ethnicity is a lot more likely. One exception, as discussed above, is the desire of the child to visit Armenia and to take pride in its success, be it economic or political, or even athletic, like cheering for Armenia during the Olympic games.

Preservation of ethnic identity is reflected in my interview with Davis Onesian, an Armenian student at the University of Colorado in Boulder, born in 1998. He studies astrophysics. He comes from a family of Armenian immigrants. Davis says, “My grandfather came with his parents from Armenia to New Jersey and my grandmother was raised in New Jersey. They came from Diyarbakir, Van, and Yerevan” (Onesian). Davis Onesian is a third generation Armenian-American. He lived in Los Angeles, in Reno, and spent a small amount of time in Russia, France, and Italy. Although he has lived in different places and has not been to Armenia, he considers himself Armenian. He wishes to visit Armenia, to live there, and to get Armenian citizenship. Davis says “I do see myself as an Armenian-American and I see Armenia as the homeland” (Onesian). He says that he got the desire to go to Armenia from his grandmother, who created his love for Armenia. Thanks to his grandmother, who herself was not born in modern-day Armenia, Davis knows some Armenian traditions, stories, some folk culture, symbols, history, and food.

Because of his love for the homeland he has never seen, Onesian continues to work on improving his Armenian language skills. He says, “I want to become relatively fluent in Armenian because it is my culture and who I am. I want to embrace my Armenian background
and I have lived my life surrounded by the culture. I want to do this for myself and my grandmother, who I promised to learn the language when she was in her last moments of life” (Onesian). At his grandmother’s insistence, Davis was baptized in the Armenian Apostolic Church in Los Angeles and has a strong sense of belonging to the Armenian community through the shared religion.

The condition of partial preservation of the Armenian language is reflected in the case of one interviewee, Svetoslav Derderyan. Derderyan, born in 1982 in Bulgaria, belongs to the third generation of the Armenian diaspora. He is half-Armenian and half-Bulgarian, being Armenian on his father’s side. Derderyan is a lecturer of political science at the University of Colorado in Boulder. In the interview, he said that he was raised by his grandparents from the Bulgarian side while his parents spent a lot of time at work. Svetoslav Derderyan moved in with his Armenian grandmother when he was a teenager:

But at that time I [had] already studied English and German at school. I had not grown up speaking Armenian. So although she [grandmother] spoke Armenian all the time, I developed some comprehension but I never really learned the language. I didn’t have an early exposure to Armenian language, my first exposure to the Armenian language started at the age of 7-9. It happened late and also in the condition of learning of two other languages. (Derderyan)

Thus, his environment led to the condition of partial knowledge of the Armenian language. Nevertheless, the Armenian side was dominant for him: “Although I am half-Bulgarian, my Armenian ethnic identity was stronger. For my Armenian side it was important to emphasize their Armenianness in comparison with my Bulgarian side” (Derderyan).
Derderyan’s example can be explained using the theory of political scientist Walker Connor. Connor has developed the idea of “self-awareness and self-consciousness” in the definition of a nation. Connor argues that in the case of loss of some features that characterize a nation, the uniqueness of the particular nation would be preserved as long as its members feel part of that nation:

The essence of the nation … is a matter of self-awareness or self-consciousness…

That is why scholars such as Ernest Barker, Rupert Emerson, Carleton Hayes, and Hans Kohn have consistently used terms such as self-awareness or self-consciousness when analyzing and describing the nation. It is this group’s notion of kinship and uniqueness that is the essence of the nation, and tangible characteristics such as religion and nation are significant to the nation only to the degree to which they contribute to this notion or sense of the group’s self-identity and uniqueness. And it is worth noting that a nation can lose or alter any or all of its outward characteristics without losing its sense of vital uniqueness which makes it a nation. (Connor 389)

Walker Connor gives the example of the Scots and the Irish, who did not lose their national identity in the case of loss of their distinct language.

Partial loss of language does not exclude Derderyan from the preservation of national identity. Derderyan was baptized in the Armenian Apostolic church in Bulgaria. He maintains his religion although he is married to a Costa Rican Catholic woman. According to Derderyan, he celebrates Christmas twice: on December 25, following Catholicism (his wife’s religion) and on January 6, following the Armenian Apostolic Church. He also celebrates Easter twice because
the dates of the Catholic and Armenian Apostolic church do not always coincide for this holiday. Derderyan claims that he does it because it’s his “tribute to Armenian ethnicity” (Derderyan). Also, he keeps historical memory of the Genocide and Armenian traditions, in particular in cooking. Derderyan learned to cook Armenian dishes from his grandmother and he enjoys cooking such dishes as chaman (a coating used for meat), Armenian moussaka (eggplant with ground meat), and baklava (a sweet pastry) for Easter.

For Armenians, it is important to keep up the bond with their relatives and Armenian friends. Derderyan told about his experience with his relatives in New York, whom he had never met before coming to the U.S.:

When I was coming to US in 2002 my Armenian family was waiting for me at the airport in New York. They moved to America two generations ago but they stayed in touch with my grandmother and with my father through letters. As soon as I got off the plane, they welcomed me in the airport and then invited to their house (Derderyan).

Thus, there can be a strong bond between Armenian relatives even if they haven’t seen each other and know each other only by stories as in the case of Svetoslav Derderyan.

Besides connections with relatives, Armenians try to find other Armenians wherever they go. When Derderyan moved to South Carolina from Bulgaria, he found Armenian friends there, and he is eager to find new Armenian friends in Colorado since, as he told me, “we [Armenians] are one big family” (Derderyan). William Saroyan, a famous Armenian-American writer, has written about this phenomenon: “I should like to see any power in this world destroy this… small tribe of unimportant people… When two Armenians meet anywhere in the world, see if they will
not create a New Armenia” (Levy 64). Perhaps Armenians try to find each other because they have the same values and historical memory of the Genocide that unite them. Having the same destiny attracts representatives of the Armenian diaspora to each other because their families have experienced similar suffering, hardship, and trauma.

The situation of ethnic consciousness despite loss of cultural features can be observed in the example of my interviewee, Onesian, who only partially knows the Armenian language but nevertheless preserves Armenian culture and desires to visit Armenia and to get Armenian citizenship. The most difficult thing in the diaspora is to keep the language because assimilation to the host country language occurs quickly and unconsciously, especially in childhood, when children’s exposure and adaptation to different languages happens easily. Despite the loss of language, other characteristics of ethnic identity such as religion, self-consciousness, memory, traditions, all bonds with the homeland, are retained in the third generation in the examples I have given above. In the second generation, ethnic identity is expressed more vividly than in the third generation, especially when both parents are Armenian, as in the example of Aram Gevorgian.

IV. The Colorado diaspora and its activities

There are Armenian diasporas all over America: New York, California, Philadelphia, Chicago, Massachusetts, Michigan, Colorado. The most populous state with an Armenian diaspora is California, with several hundred thousand Armenians. There are Armenian TV channels, and various Californian universities offer Armenian studies programs.
This thesis is focused on the Armenian diaspora in Colorado, which has parallels with the Armenian diaspora in California. We see an emphasis on all aspects of ethnicity maintenance (religion, self-consciousness, memory, and homeland assistance), as well as language support. Like the Armenian diaspora in California, the Colorado diaspora is fairly united and actively involved in the preservation of Armenian ethnic identity, organizing commemoration days, language schools, charity, and liturgies, despite the fact that it is much smaller than the California diaspora.

A. The main Armenian diaspora organizations in Colorado

Diaspora organizations are important for representatives of any diaspora because they do not allow particular ethnic qualities of a people to be dissolved in the host country, especially in a multiethnic country such as America. One of the most active organizations for the Colorado diaspora is Armenians of Colorado (AOC), which aims to preserve culture and which is controlled by eight leaders, all of whom are volunteers. One of my interviewees was Sona Hedeshian, born in 1960, a sociologist and a realtor who has been involved with the AOC organization since she and her family moved to Colorado 27 years ago from Beirut, Lebanon. Hedeshian served as an AOC board director from 1992 to 1994 and she was elected as a board president in 2001 for a two-year term. She re-joined the board in 2008 and currently is serving her fifth term as board president. Hedeshian is an example of dedication to the Armenian diaspora. She has demonstrated the desire to preserve Armenianess by serving as the board president numerous times and organizing various events.

The AOC’s members involve several Armenian generations, and it encourages the younger generation to take an active part in it. I observed how the young generation actively
participated in various events such as performances (reciting poems about the Armenian Genocide at the memorialization day), helped in the organization of summer Armenian picnics, volunteered to be photographers of different occasions, and did similar actions. The organization’s purpose is to foster a cohesive Armenian community and to further the understanding of Armenian history, culture, language, customs, and heritage. AOC actively supports issues and concerns of the Armenian-American community in Colorado as well as those identified within the Armenian diaspora throughout the world (Armenians of Colorado).

Showing the multifaceted nature of AOC, this organization aims to facilitate both internal cohesiveness and external recognition of Armenian culture. AOC uses social media for its work: it has a Facebook page that is followed by the Armenian diaspora from different generations. There they can find information about and participate in upcoming Armenian events in Colorado. Along with events connected with Colorado, members of the Armenian diaspora share news about Armenia in order to provide people with awareness about recent political and cultural events in Armenia. These efforts are important not only to sustain knowledge about past Armenian events but also to inform Armenian-Americans about the current situation of Armenia so they do not lose connections with and interest in it. The Facebook page organized by AOC brings internal cohesiveness to the Armenian community along with awareness of worldwide concerns.

AOC organizes and sponsors events such as the annual commemoration of the Genocide and various religious and social gatherings. The AOC’s database includes 500 Armenian families
in Colorado, according to Sona Hedeshian, but there are many Armenians in Colorado who are not registered with the organization. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, there were 2,916 Armenians in Colorado. The Armenian population in Colorado has grown because there has been an influx of immigrants from Armenia as well as from other US states every year.

Another main organization that deals with Armenian issues in America is ANCA (Armenian National Committee of America), which is based in Washington, D.C. ANCA is divided into eastern and western regions. Colorado belongs to the western region chapter of ANCA. The western region headquarters of ANCA are based in Los Angeles, California. ANCA-WR works with various media, such as the Armenian daily *Asbarez*.

According to its website, ANCA-WR has the following main goals:

- To foster public awareness in support of a free, independent and united Armenia;
- To influence and guide U.S. policy on matters of interest to the Armenian American community;
- To empower and represent the collective Armenian American viewpoint on matters of public policy, while serving as liaison between the community and their elected officials and government institutions. (ANCA Western Region)

ANCA-WR works with various political questions directed toward strengthening the Republic of Armenia. ANCA-WR focuses on issues directed at the relations among Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia, especially considering the Nagorno-Karabakh\(^5\) issue, providing assistance

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\(^5\) The landlocked mountainous region of Nagorno-Karabakh is the subject of an unresolved dispute between Azerbaijan, in which it lies, and its ethnic Armenian majority, backed by neighboring Armenia (Nagorno-Karabakh profile).
to Armenia that leads to its democratic and economic development, and to the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide by the United States.

ANCA-WR and AOC complement each other because they both take on responsibility for the survival of Armenian ethnicity in the diaspora in Colorado. However, these organizations function differently. AOC mostly organizes different Armenian gatherings such as picnics, art exhibits, concerts, Armenian lessons, and holiday parties while ANCA is more politically oriented. AOC also occasionally deals with Armenian political issues, but mostly it develops the cultural side of the Armenia diaspora, whereas ANCA tries to resolve political issues that are connected with Armenia. I believe these two organizations constitute a harmonious entity that leads the Armenian diaspora forward.

B. Memorialization of the Genocide

Awareness of the Armenian Genocide is a main issue for the Armenian diaspora, since they fervently desire to sustain its historical memory. Several projects led by Armenian community members and organizations in Colorado help to bring public attention to the genocide.

AOC has organized Armenian Genocide Commemorative Programs annually in April, including a “Mayoral and Gubernatorial proclamation” each year for over 30 years, as well as passing a Colorado State Resolution by the Colorado Legislature designating “April 24 as the Colorado Day of Remembrance of the Armenian Genocide.” The Armenian Genocide Memorial Plaque was placed on the grounds of the state capitol in April 1982. An important event for the Armenian community was the installation of a khachkar on the grounds of the state capitol in Colorado, in April 2015, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide and “dedicated to all victims of crimes against humanity.”
The installation of the khachkar was result of several years’ efforts. Simon Maghakyan, a community development coordinator at ANCA-WR, was instrumental in those efforts. Maghakyan was born in 1987 in Yerevan, Armenia, and moved to Colorado in 2003. He is a political scientist and plays a key role in the Armenian American community in Colorado. According to Maghakyan, there were a number of challenges in bringing the khachkar to the state capitol:

The idea for it came up during a 2011 discussion between me and a guest from Armenia, who promised to sponsor the donation of the khachkar if I were able to get authorization from the government. I then convinced Armenians of Colorado, who was the founder of the original Armenian Genocide plaque in 1982, to support the effort and then convinced the legislature to pass the law authorizing the monument. It was many years of hard work and very challenging, since Azerbaijan lobbied against us because the khachkar is a replica of one of the 2000 cross-stones that they destroyed in the medieval Djulfa[6] cemetery [in the former Armenian exclave of Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan] in December 2005 (Maghakyan).

The khachkar is a symbol of Armenian heritage that is embedded in Armenian history and culture. Armenians living in the Republic of Armenia are used to seeing khachkars in the yards of the churches and cemeteries in that country. The installation of the khachkar was an important act, installing a piece of material culture that links them to Armenia.

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6 Maghakyan is one of the founders of “the Djulfa Virtual Memorial and Museum – Djulfa.com” is a collection of stories, articles, film and photos about the deliberate destruction of the medieval Armenian cemetery in Djulfa by Azerbaijani (Maghakyan).
The year 2015 was not only the 100-year anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, but also
the 10-year anniversary of the destruction of cross-stones (khachkars), Armenian cultural
monuments, in Nakhchivan by Azerbaijanis. Thus, the year 2015 has a symbolic meaning in
Armenian history and the consciousness of the Armenian people.

Annually, on April 24, Colorado politicians give speeches about the Armenian Genocide,
along with representatives of AOC such as Sona Hedeshian and Simon Maghakyan. During the
years from 2015-2018 such politicians included Governor John Hickenlooper (2011-present),
state representative Cole Wist (2016-present), U.S. Congressman Mike Coffman (2009-present),
and others. After speeches, members of the Armenian community recite the prayer “Our Father”
in Armenian: they are given fliers with the prayer in both Armenian and in an English
transliteration for those who have difficulty reading Armenian. Singing creates a sense of
collective identity among Armenians and shows their Christian identity. Benedict Anderson
states that collective events “provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical
realization of the imagined community.” According to Anderson, singing national anthems or
“listening to the recitation of ceremonial poetry, such as sections of The Book of Common
Prayer” create a sense of connection among people (Anderson 145). I observed the same
connection among Armenians in the process of singing the prayer “Our Father” in 2017. During
the event, community members also take turns reciting poems about the Genocide, performing
Armenian music, and telling their stories. Thus, this one event—Commemoration of the
Armenian Genocide—includes elements of “ethnic” identity as historical memory and Armenian
language and religion that lead to the unity of the Armenians of Colorado.
The 100-year anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was also honored by a new project—the “I Am Alive” musical written by Armenian-American Emmy Award-winning composer Denise Gentilini, who lives in Littleton, Colorado. The musical first began as a documentary Gentilini made in 2002, “The Hanjian Story: A Road Less Traveled” about her grandparents, who were survivors of the Armenian Genocide. She won an Emmy for the documentary. Gentilini also desired to work with her grandparents’ story of the Genocide in another format, and in 2015, she created the musical “I Am Alive” about which she said, “I thought it would be a new and different approach that would hopefully reach more people” (Wolf). It is the first musical ever about the Armenian Genocide, and it tells Gentilini’s “grandparents’ story of survival, finding love after witnessing such hatred, and how they forged ahead to create a life and family” (Gentilini).

Gentilini belongs to the second generation of Armenian-American immigrants who try to teach Armenian history to other nations in order to achieve their awareness of the events of 1915. Although Gentilini is half Armenian and half Italian, for her, it is significant to continue the tradition of telling stories of the Genocide as it was for her grandparents: “As long as I am able to, I will continue to take the responsibility and the honor of telling my family’s story very seriously. For because they survived, I am alive” (Gentilini).

Armenians search for different ways to tell the stories of the Genocide, such as memoirs, interviews, and websites that help transfer this information to other people. Denise Gentilini invented a new method for approaching people’s consciousness—through music. This is a powerful method because the musical demonstrates not only the facts, but also the music, dance,
and other aspects of Armenian culture. These have significant influence on a broad audience because the genre affects emotional side of audience members.

C. Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway

Preservation of ethnic identity is manifested through the Armenian diaspora’s desire to name towns, cities, villages, and streets after Armenia. There are numerous places in Europe and Russia named after Armenia. In the U.S., there is a town named Armenia in Wisconsin; a neighborhood, Armenia Gardens Estates, and North Armenia Avenue in Tampa, Florida; Armenian Township in Pennsylvania; the Little Armenia neighborhood in Los Angeles, California; Armenian Road in Sherman, New York; and Armenian Heritage Park in Boston, Massachusetts. The Armenians of Colorado have the same desire to have a memorial that emphasizes their belonging, a desire realized in the installation of Sardarapat Armenian Highway Memorial, which is a joint project of ANCA-AOC.

Simon Maghakyan highlights that

the idea for the Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway came up during a conversation with a Department of Transportation employee in 2016, whom I asked if we could add a sign on the highway for the khachkar. He said it would be very hard but that it would be easier to do a Memorial Highway designation instead. I reached out to one of our strongest supporters in the Colorado legislature, Representative Cole Wist, and we had several discussions over several months about the idea (Maghakyan).

According to Maghakyan, there had been other suggestions for the name by the leaders of AOC, but Cole Wist chose that name after learning of its historical meaning: the Sardarapat battle,
which occurred May 22-29 of 1918, plays a key role in Armenian history since it prevented the Armenian nation from destruction through the Armenian victory over Turkey. Following this historic battle, Armenia, albeit for a very short period, gained independence from Ottoman Turkey. The sign was also placed as a recognition of the massive Near East Relief charity⁷ Colorado had organized and provided to the Armenians during WWI and the Genocide.

Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway is a “four-mile portion of Arapahoe Road between Interstate 25 and Parker Road—which connects Centennial and Aurora, two cities with large Armenian American populations” and is dedicated to the contributions of the “Armenian Genocide survivors” who created the independent nation of Armenia in 1918 (Colorado Unveils). The unveiling ceremony included a prayer by Father Arsen Kassabian, and speeches by State Senator Dominick Moreno, Congressman Mike Coffman, City of Centennial Councilmember Mike Sutherland, State Representative Cole Wist, AOC Board President Sona Hedeshian, chairwoman of the ANCA-WR Nora Hovsepian, and master of ceremonies Simon Maghakyan (Colorado Unveils).

Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway has a symbolical meaning for Armenians, many of whom gathered in Colorado on September 29 to celebrate this event. Hovsepian emphasized its symbolism:

We are truly happy and proud to be here with you on this wonderful occasion.

This may be just a small sign on a highway for some people, but it’s really a

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⁷“Near East Relief was the name of the American charity specifically organized in response to the Armenian Genocide. Between 1915 and 1930, when it ended operations, NER administered $117,000,000 in assistance. It delivered food, clothing, and materials for shelter by the shipload from America. It set up refugee camps, clinics, hospitals, orphanages, and centers for vocational training” (Adalian).
symbol of so much more than that. It’s a symbol of victory. It’s a symbol of survival. It’s a symbol of rising up out of the ashes of the Armenian Genocide.……

(Colorado Unveils)

Installation of the Armenian Memorial Highway sign is a substantial achievement for Armenians that highlights their survival, unity, and prosperity despite attempts by the Ottoman Empire to erase the Armenian nation from the Earth.

Maghakyan connected the celebration of the Sardarapat unveiling ceremony with the current Armenian democratization situation, combining them into one unit by emphasizing the importance of a revolution:

When AOC and ANCA announced the resolution that was passed in April establishing the Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway, we announced it in support of the revolution in Armenia. So in some ways we are not only celebrating the survival at Sardarapat but also the truly democratic Armenia that has become a beacon of hope for all freedom-loving people across the world.

(Colorado Unveils)

The Velvet Revolution in spring 2018 and the beginning of the process of Armenian democratization was a long-awaited moment for the Armenian diaspora that increased people’s desire to return to their homeland. Journalist Aida Mirmaksumova asserts that 40 Armenians returned to Armenia after the Velvet Revolution, and many other Armenians plan to return from different countries. Some 300 Armenians returned to Armenia to serve in the armed forces following an appeal by Nikol Pashinyan, the Prime Minister of Armenia (Mirmaksumova).
Because of recent political events, many Colorado Armenians have expressed a desire to return to Armenia. In his interview, Maghakyan told that he has “always wanted one day either to return to Armenia or share time between Colorado and Armenia, and the recent revolution makes the desire to move even stronger” (Maghakyan). Thus, the Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway has become a symbol for not only remembering the Sardarapat battle and the independence of Armenia, but also coincides with the change of political structure in Armenia that attracts many Armenians to return to their homeland. This could help Armenia in the future because it will bring back intellectuals who can help lead the country forward. Interestingly, the Sardarapat Armenian Memorial sign that was installed in 2018 became for Armenians of Colorado not only an excursion into the past but a bridge from the past to the present since both events, the Sardarapat and the recent political changes in Armenia, are indicators of liberty.

D. Church

Religion has an essential meaning in most Armenians’ life and plays an important role in sustaining ethnic identity. There are two Armenian churches in Colorado: the Armenian Apostolic Church of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Region, and the Armenian Apostolic Church of Denver of the Western Diocese. The Armenian Apostolic Church of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Region refers to the Western Prelacy, which controls a church in Nevada and 10 churches in California (Prelacy History). The Armenian Apostolic Church of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Region was founded in 1983 and has been functioning and holding services since the 1980s. Church services were carried out every fourth Sunday. In 2006-2007, the Armenian Apostolic Church of Denver was set up in Colorado as a mission parish where church services are carried out on the second Sunday of every month. The Armenian Apostolic Church
of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Region conducts liturgies and religious holidays such as Easter celebrations, the Feast of the Holy Cross, the Blessing of Grapes, and so forth.

Religion is a key element of Armenianness that applies not only to Armenians in the Republic of Armenia, but also to the Armenian diaspora. My interviewees indicated the importance of being baptized, attending Armenian mass, and celebrating religious holidays. The Armenian Apostolic Church of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain Region and Armenian Apostolic Church of Denver of the Western Diocese help the Armenian diaspora to be an active participant in religious events and to not lose connection with the church, which is an integral part of the Armenian essence since fourth century.

E. Language

The Armenian language has been the liturgical language of the Armenian Apostolic Church since the creation of the Armenian alphabet (fifth century), and since that time the Christian religion and Armenian language form one spiritual nature. But since 1915, the time of the largest formation of the Armenian diaspora, the language has begun to lose its importance—not in the first generation of the diaspora, who still feel a strong connection with the homeland and see the spirituality of language, but in the following generations. The Armenian diaspora tries to preserve the language, as manifested in the creation of Armenian Saturday School in Denver, which was founded in fall 2017. As Ruzanna Avetisyan, a geography teacher by profession and an Armenian language teacher in the Armenian school in Denver, states, 40 students of different ages from 5 years old and up attend this school. According to my interview with Avetisyan, two subjects are taught in the school: Armenian language and history. The
Armenian school is directed toward achievement of certain goals, in which preservation of Armenian heritage is emphasized and articulated:

- to strengthen the student’s appreciation and respect for the heritage and culture of their ancestors
- to teach students to read, write, and speak Armenian
- to establish ties with other families in the community and develop a sense of belonging
- to support and assist parents in preserving their Armenian values
- to provide a loving, fun, and stimulating environment for the students.

(Armenians of Colorado)

As Avetisyan asserts, the primary reason for participation in the AOC organization, which includes the Armenian Saturday School, is the importance of interaction with other Armenians. Avetisyan has a strong bond with Armenia, and she sustains Armenianness through teaching and transferring language to another generation despite the host country’s language domination in the children’s consciousness.

F. Charity

Gevorg Poghosyan emphasizes that “every Armenian should consider the affairs and matters of national importance much higher than his/her personal affairs (including family and personal matters),” and I believe this call determines the actions of many Armenians in the diaspora who desire to be helpful to their nation, which exists in unfavorable economic and political conditions (Poghosyan 65). Since the Armenian diaspora comprises two-thirds of the Armenian population, the help that it provides is very important for Armenia. Gevorg Poghosyan
writes that “the diaspora investment in the [Republic of Armenia] economy is rather big” (Poghosyan 65). As a whole, members of the Armenian diaspora have better jobs and salaries in foreign countries than those who live in Armenia due to the greater range of opportunities that foreign countries offer. They do not forget to give tribute to their homeland by participating in various charities (educational, social, and humanitarian) because they want to support their home country, which struggled under a corrupt government for the past 30 years.

These charities would not exist if it were not for diaspora funds. One such charity is SOAR—the Society for Orphaned Armenian Relief, founded in 2006 by George Yacoubian, an American-Armenian born in the U.S. Yacoubian started the charity after he adopted his first daughter from an Armenian orphanage. SOAR includes 115 chapters and 6 junior chapters around the world, serving 28 institutions in Armenia, 2 in Artsakh, 4 in Beirut, 3 in Syria, and 2 institutions in Istanbul (SOAR). One of the chapters is situated in Colorado.

One of its board members is Mara Gevorgian, a financial analyst at Standard and Poor’s who was born in 1973 in Armenia and moved to Colorado in 1998. Gevorgian joined SOAR in 2011 as a treasurer for the Colorado Chapter, supporting “Friends of Warm Hearth—an organization that provides aid to orphaned Armenian adults with special needs who have outgrown orphanages” (SOAR). Warm Hearth was founded in 2006, and it is a first-ever long-term group home in Armenia that provides a home to residents with disabilities rather than having them sent to psychiatric institutions due to lack of funds and support.

In my interview, Gevorgian said that “living outside of Armenia and learning about the tremendous things that SOAR has accomplished, [she] wanted to be part of it and give back to her country, change the life of those that are in need” (Gevorgian). She further stated that “in
2006, SOAR made $59,700 in distributions and in 2017, distributions exceeded $1.6M!” (Gevorgian).

SOAR organizes a charity event in Colorado in one of its chapters annually in February, where Armenians of Colorado gather and make donations to support adults with disabilities. In 2017 I participated in this event and observed how many Armenians of different generations came to this event to help Armenian orphans. The event shows the internal and external cohesion that is manifested through interaction of the diaspora among themselves and between the diaspora and the residents of the Republic of Armenia. During this event, Armenian orphans’ drawings and other Armenian items such as souvenirs, jewelry, and other national products brought from Armenia are sold, and all the money collected from the sale is sent to the Armenian orphanage. This event unites the diaspora through the common desire to be useful to the vulnerable part of the society that needs help the most. Participants believe that if everyone would make even small contributions, conditions in Armenia would be improved. As the Armenian proverb says, “If we move shoulder to shoulder, we can move mountains.”

V. Conclusion

Currently, Armenia is fortunate enough to be an independent, sovereign country, a country all Armenians around the world could call “home.” Despite that, there is no single place that all Armenians would call their homeland. The Republic of Armenia, or Hayastan, is a homeland for those who live there and for many Armenians who have emigrated from Eastern Armenia or Russia. For other Armenians in the diaspora whose ancestors fled from Western Armenia, the meaning of “homeland” is not as straightforward. Some see their homeland as the land of their ancestors (now in the territory of Turkey), while others see it simply as a country of
origin. For many of these Armenians who have been assimilated to a host country over generations, the diaspora is their home even though it is not one particular place. Yet, even those who have never set foot in modern-day Armenia dream and long for a powerful and successful Armenia to be a shining beacon, giving Armenians scattered all over the world a place they can always call home.

The Armenian diaspora members who were born or have lived for decades in a foreign country have assimilated to their particular host country, but recent political changes have influenced their choice of living place. According to Robert Mirak, people lose their connection with their homeland over generations; this is impossible to avoid (Mirak). But some representatives of the Armenian diaspora desire to move back and some of them already have moved back despite living many years in the host country. As stated above, the recent Velvet Revolution that led to governmental changes in Armenia has inspired more members of the diaspora to live in the homeland (Mirmaksumova).

The most striking symbol of “homecoming” for members of the diaspora, migrant or refugee, is an individual decision to return home at the end of life and be buried in their native land. Such a nostalgic form of migration is defined as a reaction to the plight of displacement and the stigmatized status of ethnic or religious minorities in the new location. In the words of the Armenian poet Sylva Gaboudikian:

There is a walnut tree
Growing in the vineyard
At the very edge of the world.
My people, you are like
That huge ancient tree---

With branches blessed by the graces

But sprawling

Over the small corner of land

Roots and arms spread out

And spilling your fruit

To nourish foreign soils. (Pattie 80)

This poem symbolizes familiar Armenian themes: longing, loss, enduring, always from afar, enriching the lands of other nations who have given us a home, yet yearning to return home someday to a successful and prosperous Armenia. Hard work and perseverance have managed to help us carry on this complex tapestry of characteristics that we proudly call Armenia.

As demonstrated in the case of Armenians, common descent alone is insufficient to maintain a nation and ethnic nationalism. Defining a nation, and what makes one an ethnic nationalist, is a complex combination of historic memory, folk culture, the symbolic meaning of certain events, shared trauma and suffering, symbols of territory and community, language, and religion.

Considering these features of ethnicity in the example of the Armenian diaspora in Colorado, we conclude that the diaspora tries to maintain ethnic Armenian identity despite having a hybrid ethnic identity, as we can see distinctly in my interviews with Davis Onesian and Svetoslav Derderyan, who have formed the third generation of diaspora and have adopted American and Bulgarian identities in addition to their Armenian identity.
Organizations like ANCA-WR, AOC, the Armenian Apostolic Churches, SOAR, and Armenian Saturday School emphasize the importance of ethnic identity and play a vital role in the maintenance of Armenianess. Even though there are certain fourth or fifth generation Armenians who are so assimilated into a foreign nation that they have not learned or maintained their ethnic identity, most Armenians around the globe, through hard work and perseverance, have managed to carry on their complex tapestry of Armenian characteristics through their participation in such organizations.

While there are concerns regarding whether over time assimilation will overtake the preservation efforts, I believe they are unfounded. The Armenian ethnic identity has persevered over many centuries despite both cultural and political attacks, forced conversions to Islam, and prohibitions against speaking Armenian, and it will continue to do so for many more centuries to come. The sociologist Laurence Ritter predicts that the Armenian diaspora will not lose its Armenianess: “The fear of total disappearance through assimilation does not seem grounded considering the very dynamism of the communities, and the artistic creativity and social success of many” (Ritter). The example of the Armenian diaspora in Colorado can serve as evidence of a dynamic community that does not forget its roots and does as much as possible to preserve its Armenianess.
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APPENDIX
Picture 1. The Ejmiatsin Cathedral. The Main Apostolic Armenian Church in the Republic of Armenia

Picture 2. The Armenian Apostolic Church of Denver of the Western Diocese

Picture 3. Armenian Alphabet

Picture 4. The drawings of adults with disabilities which are bought by Armenian diaspora for donations
Picture 5. The Armenian Saturday School lessons

Picture 6. The Sardarapat Armenian Memorial Highway sign
Picture 7. The Colorado State Capitol Khachkar