SHARING SUCCESS STORIES OF OUR PROGRAM ALUMNI

AGBU INSIDER

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The Music Issue

STAR SOPRANO

Opera Australia's **Natalie Aroyan** plays the role of a lifetime in Verdi's *Aida*

NEW AGBU ALUMNI INITIATIVE P.35

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Hratch Tchilingirian on the grounds of Pembroke College, University of Oxford, where he teaches Middle Eastern and Armenian Studies.

Field of Study

Exploring Armenian identity issues with Dr. Hratch Tchilingirian

***DR. HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN** is a scholar, sociologist and activist based in the United Kingdom, where he is currently an Associate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University, specializing in Middle Eastern and Armenian Studies, with a particular focus on cultural identity politics, homeland-diaspora relations, sociology of religion, and inter-ethnic conflicts in the Middle East and Eurasia. The author of numerous studies and publications (www.hratch.info), he has lectured internationally, recently drawing attention to the plight of minorities and Christian communities in the Middle East, especially in academic and policy-making circles. Following his PhD at the London School of Economics, for which he was supported by AGBU, he held a number of executive positions including director of research on Eurasia and lecturer at Cambridge University's business school (2003-2012). An active community member, Tchilingirian strives to make Armenian heritage, identity, culture and language a living experience.*

Q What attracted you to the field of academia and Armenian studies?

A Learning is a lifelong endeavor for me. My entry into academia was through my intellectual formation in the Armenian Church. I had studied in the Armenian seminary in Jerusalem and later at St. Nersess Seminary in New York. While the Armenian Church has a rich theological, doctrinal and pastoral heritage, the question of relevancy of this 1700-year-old institution to Armenians today has always been part of my intellectual and scholarly passion. It was my search for answers that led me to sociology of religion as an academic discipline. Armenian Studies is a vast field in academia, but my focus has more or less been on what I call the three main significant "pillars" in the Armenian national ethos: religion, education, and intellectual/cultural production. These three aspects, I believe, have been significant shapers of Armenian identity throughout history and modern times.

Q How did you become involved with AGBU?

A I have had the privilege and honor of working with Louise M. Simone, who was AGBU president when I was the rector of St. Nersess Seminary from 1991-1993. Ms. Simone was a board member and the chief fundraiser of the seminary at the time. She became a mentor for me and an inspirational person to work with. I wish to take this opportunity to once again thank AGBU for providing funding towards my doctoral studies. I am extremely grateful to AGBU and Louise M. Simone for their enormous support.

Q In the aftermath of Armenia's Velvet Revolution, there is a renewed emphasis on homeland-diaspora relations. How has that relationship changed recently and what trends do you foresee in the future?

A Since Armenia's independence, diasporans, generally speaking, wished and expected to see a homeland that is democratic and prosperous—or at least where there is a minimum of justice and equality. The first few years were considered a period of transition and, therefore, there was a degree of understanding in the Diaspora, but subsequent developments were disappointing and upsetting. Corruption, injustice and inequality were rampant. The Velvet Revolution introduced a radical change with that past and has inspired a renewed engagement with Armenia.

Q Your Armenian heritage has led you to study the plight of Christian communities in the Middle East. To what extent will these communities be able to recover from ongoing military and political conflict?

A Hundreds of thousands of Christians have left the Middle East, including tens of thousands of Armenians, resulting in a critical brain drain. The people who have left are largely middle class, doctors, engineers, professionals and leaders in the community who had the means. This has led to both economic decline as well a decline in institutional life as the people who left were also financial supporters for churches, schools and clubs. These are long-term effects, many of which are irreversible and these are the issues I am concerned about. In terms of Armenian communities, in Syria for instance, I don't think they will be able to reconstruct what was lost since 2011. They won't disappear; they will be much smaller and in much greater need of preserving their heritage in these regions. We don't know what kind of regimes and governments we will see in the Middle East and whether Armenians and other Christians will be free to practice their religion and live their culture freely. As we have seen, freedom of religion and the rights of minorities are not necessarily tolerated across the board and cannot be taken for granted.

Q What can Armenians in the Diaspora do in their daily lives to help make Armenian culture, heritage and language a more thriving living experience?

A As I always say, whenever and to whomever I can, instead of talking about Armenian culture, we need to live the rich Armenian culture in our daily life. We need to engage with the culture on a daily basis, for instance, by listening to a piece of music, read a piece of news about Armenia or Armenians, hang a Saryan or Minas painting (reproduction, of course) in your room to look at, speak with your grandparent in Armenian, so on. Basically, living the Armenian culture is the connections we make, the relationships we build, and the occasions we create in diasporic life. It could be the memory of a person or an event, a thought or an experience that a cultural object invokes—all these connect us to a meaning system and a cultural heritage that enrich our lives.

ZOE NORFOLK