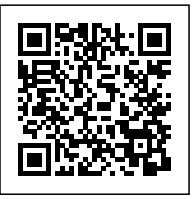
ARMENIANS OF CENTRAL AMERICA

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By Pablo Roberto Bedrossian MD, MBA, San Pedro Sula, Honduras, 31 August 2009

Dr. Pablo Bedrossian (cardiologist) is the grandson of Agop Bedrossian, a Genocide survivor who lived through the age of 101. Pablo's passion is to uncover the history of Armenians in Central America. He gathers bits and pieces of information during his travels, writes in Spanish and publishes on the internet. He was born in Argentina and now lives in Honduras. At present he is the marketing manager of a pharmaceutical company.
The following "paper" is an English adaptation of his LOS ARMENIOS EN CENTRO AMÉRICA

The presence of a small village on the Atlantic beaches known as Nueva Armenia (New Armenia) is a curiosity. It is located about thirty minutes driving from La Ceiba, the third largest city in Honduras. It is a garínagu community. They are a mixture of Arawak (original inhabitants of Caribbean islands) and descendents of African slaves in the British West Indies deported from St. Vincent Island in the late eighteenth century. They are known as Garifuna, which is the name of their language.

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There are also other areas in Salvador that have names related to Armenia or Armenians. In El Salvador, there is a municipality in Sonsonate district called Armenia. It is located northwest of San Salvador, near the Pacific Ocean. It has its own website. A farm called Armenia Lorena should be mentioned too. It lies in San Rafael Pie de La Cuesta, San Marcos, Guatemala, and is well known for its waterfalls of La Trinidad.
It is not clear how and why these three sites received their names.

Central America is one of the least populated regions by the Armenian Diaspora. According to an

article from Wikipedia 30 to 40 descendants of Armenians live in Costa Rica, 20 to 50 in Guatemala and 10 to 20 in Nicaragua. El Salvador is not mentioned, nor is Panama. The paper states that some 900 Armenians live in Honduras, but cites no sources. These numbers are questionable.

The Armenians of Honduras had a little joy in 2007. *Marathon* won the football (soccer) championship of the First Division despite the difficulties throughout the tournament. Manuel Keosseian led the team. This technician born in the Eastern Republic of Uruguay was hired in 2006.

I have heard of two other Armenians.

The first one was through reading the magazine that serves as an official tour guide, called *Honduras Tips*. It mentioned that "an American-Armenian owned a good restaurant" located near La Ceiba, Sambo Creek. I went to that place a hot afternoon in 2006. I was told that the business was sold, but the owner still lived there. Everybody knew him.

When I explained the reason for my visit, he was very kind with me. He was a man in his 60s who spoke only English. He asked my name. When I said Bedrossian, he became excited and exclaimed, "it's my family name!" He told me that he was fifty percent Armenian, and did not know other compatriots in Honduras. I returned in 2007 to visit him. I was informed that he had returned to America to permanently settle there.

The second case concerns an elderly woman who had died long ago. Apparently the children still live in Honduras but have no ties with Armenians.

Maybe there is a third person. In September 2007, the newspaper *La Prensa* in its Social section mentioned a certain Manassarians. Despite the "s" at the end, it sounded like Armenians. Bureaucrats sometimes changed the surnames of immigrants when they arrived to the country. This one could have been one of the cases. I wrote to the reporter asking him about Manassarians, but I got no answer.

Many of the most powerful families in Honduras are Christian of Palestinian origin. They came to the northern coast in the early twentieth century. Not only the Armenians suffered from the Ottoman yoke and persecution; many Greeks and Arabs did too. They fled the country or were driven away. They arrived with Turkish documents. Hence, here, as in Argentina, they are referred to as "Turks". However, these Paelstinians came mainly from Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and none of them want to be confused with their oppressors.

Besides Honduras, many Palestinians settled in El Salvador. It is noteworthy that both the former president of that sister nation, Elías Antonio Saca, like the late opposition leader, Schafik Jorge Handal, were of Palestinian origin. Palestinians also migrated en masse to Nicaragua with Turkish passports. These immigrants were integrated into the social and business life so successfully that in Nicaragua there is an expression "There are no poor Turks".

But back to the Armenians in Central America. Ramon Gurdian, one of the descendents of

Armenians in Nicaragua, is a marketing manager for a major company in Guatemala. According to him, some young Armenians arrived in the late nineteenth century to Nicaragua and made history. The brothers Santos and Gurdian Castulo settled in Nicaragua, while the third, a cousin (Arthur? Virgil?) emigrated to Costa Rica.

The Ortiz Gurdian family is one of the most important economic groups in the region. In 1996, Ramiro Mayorga Ortiz and Patricia Gurdian founded the prestigious Gurdian Ortiz Foundation which is dedicated to supporting health and culture. The Museum of the Foundation is in Leon, Nicaragua. There, I inquired about the origin of the Gurdians. The guide categorically denied their Armenian origin. However, Ramon Gurdian confirmed that the brothers and their cousin came to Central America from the land of the "stone crosses" and Mount Ararat.

In 2006, visiting Guatemala, in one of the largest dailies of the country I came across a very interesting interview with Samuel Berberian, dean of the Faculty of Theology of the Universidad Panamericana. This distinguished theologian, born in Argentina, expressed very profound and original thoughts. He reminded me that the Christian faith for our people is much more than a tradition: it is part of its essence. In 301 Armenia became the first country to recognize Christianity as official religion. Its history, full of martyrs, persecutions and genocide, has demonstrated the unshakable faith of the people in Jesus Christ. Berberian is often consulted by various media as an authority on ethics.

There is no organized Armenian community in Central America, nevertheless there are people like Keosseian, Gurdian and Berberian who make history. Ramon Gurdian estimates that there are about 150 Armenians in Costa Rica, at least 300 in Nicaragua, 15 in Guatemala, 20 or 30 in El Salvador. The latter was the residence of Edgardo Surenian, the evangelical pastor and his family that recently went back to Argentina.

Obviously, this note is not the product of a thorough research. It is rather the collection of pieces in an attempt to rebuild the history of the Diaspora. Therefore, it has an open end. I hope to meet other compatriots through communication that this note may generate. This paper may help document the contribution of Armenians to the Central American society and provide a worthy testimony of our history.

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