

BIAS, NEGLECT HURT WRITERS CONFERENCE

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By Lucine Kasbarian, USA, 27 July 2013

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But – and I'm really thinking of Armenia-Diaspora relations, what about a self-identifying Roman whose family has been in exile for several generations? What if this individual often visited Rome and participated in its culture with an eye on solidarity with its people? And what if Rome was in economic and political turmoil, and the people were leaving in droves? Could one then afford to merely “do as the Romans do?”

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Such questions arose in my mind during my recent 40-day stay in Armenia and Artsakh, which concluded in my participation in the Fifth Conference of Writers of Armenian Origin Composing in Foreign Languages. The conference took place July 11 to 15 at the Writer's House in Tsaghgatsor, 40 km northeast of Yerevan.

Sponsored by the Diaspora Ministry, the Armenian Writer's Union (AWU), and the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Conference hosted about 40 writers from Armenia, Artsakh, Canada, England, France, Hungary, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, and the USA.

An often-heard comment from Diasporan repatriates to Armenia is that its positives are not trumpeted frequently enough in the global Armenian news media. While the majority of Diaspora Armenians who write about Armenia's problems are not people who want to see this country fail but people who wish to see Armenia succeed, it would still serve us to indulge in some well-deserved praise. As an example, the Tsaghgatsor conference is an outstanding concept that has been made into a reality. Where else do we have writers of Armenian descent gathering with the potential to testify, network, brainstorm, cross-pollinate ideas and sow the seeds for future collaborations?

The conference mainly involves writers of literary fiction and poetry, with some non-fiction writers also participating.

Unable to establish contact with the organizers while in the U.S., I visited the Diaspora Ministry while in Yerevan to register for the conference. Even then, bringing copies of the books I'd written, I did not know if I'd be accepted. In prior years writers did not apply for participation but were selected for inclusion, and often through recommendations from the AWU. I believe this practice is still in effect, but really should not be.

Though I had, in previous years, inquired about attending the Diaspora Ministry's media conferences and receiving its e-newsletters, my requests had inexplicably gone unanswered. One Diasporan editor-colleague suggested that I not hold my breath for an invitation to conferences sponsored by the Diaspora Ministry. He had observed that many writers reporting about the more "unflattering" aspects of the Armenian reality were excluded from such gatherings. To my advantage, no one at the ministry office appeared to check into my suitability before accepting me into the conference. Thus, this article is the result of my opportunity to bear witness to what happens at such gatherings.

Headphones at various Diaspora conferences are important because they enable non-Armenian speaking attendees to receive simultaneous translations of the proceedings and thus contribute to the discourse. The absence of headphones at the conference was alarming, especially as the stated purpose of the conference was to spotlight those who write in foreign languages.

Not surprisingly, several attendees told me that they felt like outsiders at the conference, as no official provision was made to consistently translate. And, as several presenters were not given an opportunity to have their speeches or works translated for the benefit of those present, some delegates told me that they felt like unwanted step-children invited under false pretenses, since they were unable to participate in whatever minimal dialogue there was--figuratively put into a corner as if punished or trivialized for not knowing the lingua franca.

As it turns out, history was repeating itself. An article in the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* of November 2011 reported that no formal translation services were provided at the Conference of Armenian Writers in Foreign Languages, held in October of that year. If this conference is to continue, it is crucial that official translators be provided.

Half the conference participants hailed from Armenia and Artsakh. The proceedings, held in the

Eastern Armenian dialect, seemed to serve the native Armenians first, and then, to a lesser degree, Diasporans who spoke Armenian. Writers in the latter category were generally limited to either a 5-minute presentation on a stated theme or a brief description of their new work. How could they not help but feel as if the defacto purpose of the conference was not to spotlight their poetic artistry and perceptions but to be “talked at” and prohibited from participating in a meaningful way? An opportunity for genuine intellectual discussion was missed. If this conference is to continue (the next one, in 2015, with the Armenian Genocide as its theme), the above aspects must change. Perhaps one new approach could feature the creation of subgroups within a conference, wherein more participants can express their views.

A Forum to Present Ideas

The main themes and activities of the conference centered on “Globalization and National Identity” in which participants read works or observations on globalization (in the multicultural sense rather than the economic). The conference included a session on William Saroyan. Essays, remembrances and poems about the writer were read aloud. There was also a session on new books, in which participants introduced their new works.

Well-known academics in Armenia steered the conference, including three long-time fixtures on the literary front in Armenia. Each has published large bodies of work and dedicated himself to literature.

What was astounding, however, was how each comported himself. These men acted like commissars whose objectives were to attempt to control public opinion or its natural expression. Some took 45 minutes to speak while allowing others only 5 minutes, commanding some to *ampopeh!* (abbreviate!). They would interrupt and angrily contradict other writers with whom they disagreed. They gave their favorite persons – some of them not even conference delegates – more time to present their work. They acted as arbiters of which presentations were worthy of translation. And if a session ran long, it was usually a Diasporan delegate asked to relinquish his time to talk.

There were other local participants who were discourteous to delegates. The rule of thumb seemed to be, “unless you are presenting your own speech or paper, you should feel free to hold loud and lengthy side conversations with others, work on your laptop, take phone calls or launch your Facebook page.”

Upon witnessing these behaviors, I decided to use my 5 minutes not to talk about Globalization and National Identity in the literal sense, but in what our dispersion could help us achieve in the long term. I discussed what I'd like to see happen at future conferences.

This included a desire to see the participation of the Armenian Journalists Union, the Yerevan Press Club, Diasporan newspaper editors and contributors, Armenian and Diasporan publishers, booksellers, librarians and translators so that we may interact and grow into a massive, persuasive literary force in our respective communities and the world. I wished to see some of our best books being published in Armenia today – in the Armenian language as well as in foreign languages – be

presented at future conferences so that we can find ways to introduce and sell them in the Diaspora. I asked to hear from our best editors and translators – both from Armenia and the Diaspora – discussing our best contemporary writers as well as those famous works that have yet to be translated into foreign languages but deserve to be, and how we can make that a reality. I asked that we encourage young generations of writers to participate in these conferences and for specialists to be invited to talk about developments in the craft and business of writing, or even how one can become a “literary agent” who can represent global Armenian writers to foreign publishers so that the world can know of our great talents. And I asked that we think about the creation of a global Armenian writers society that can provide lectures and job banks and even develop a national agenda around what sorts of articles or novels could be useful to the Armenian people and nation in the foreign press at any given time.

While my remarks generated comments of support from some delegates, the organizers themselves were visibly riled, sought to marginalize the remarks, and did not permit me to translate my own words from the Armenian into the English.

A few Diasporan delegates later approached me to tell me that some of the issues I raised had come up at previous conferences. Some told me that hackneyed speeches they could not bear to hear repeated had brought about apathy at the conference. Others told me that since they brought up similar issues at previous conferences to no avail, they now simply tried to benefit from the valuable networking opportunities such a conference provides. Sure enough, when delegates had a chance to interact with one another during free periods, many profoundly collegial, sincere and abiding connections were made.

Later, a senior Armenian-American writer offered his views to me. He said that by speaking out at the conference, I was giving organizers further reason to be defensive and protective over their respective turfs. He suggested that we “work within the system” to help the society evolve, a comment I often heard from Diasporan repatriates working for NGOs. Since the senior writer in question received literary medals from the Diaspora Ministry and AWU (one at the fourth conference, and one at this fifth conference), I wondered if that is why he was willing to go along with the status quo. If so, is this not a short-sighted action that helps keep the corrupt in power?

Propaganda Ministry?

On the last day of the conference, the delegates were shown a promotional video extolling the achievements of the Diaspora (or should I say, Propaganda?) Ministry. By then, I had concluded that the purpose of the conference was not to give us space to think and share, but to tell us what to think. A conference participant approached the lectern during the closing session to say that an opportunity was not provided for delegates to converse during the presentations or offer feedback at the close of the conference. She had also hoped that delegates would get an idea of what the AWU's objectives and goals were, in general and surrounding this conference. Instead of being

asked to listen throughout the conference, she said that delegates could have discussed issues and talked about what the AWU and the Diaspora Ministry could do – such as promoting and funding Armenian literature abroad -- instead of asking delegates to listen to praise about the ministry and established writers about whom we already knew so much. In response to this delegate, who was, of course, told to keep her comments short, an organizer took all the time he needed to rebut the delegate's comments, even though his response did not address her concerns. As he raised his voice to her, he said she was not raised with manners in her country of origin and was told to put her complaints in writing. Luckily, there were a number of dedicated and efficient people--like Hermine Navasardyan of the AWU and Greta Mnatsakanyan of the Diaspora Ministry--who demonstrated professionalism as well as sincere affection and camaraderie to the delegates.

To dispel any notions that there may have been a unilateral "us and them" attitude among delegates, let me add that a local delegate later told me that she and other members of the Writer's Union had, in the past, raised the same sorts of concerns to the leadership. Learning of their discontent sowed seeds of hope within me. Imagine if like-minded Armenia and Diaspora writers independently and routinely met with an eye, not just to foster mutual understanding, but also to cultivate literary (and dare I say nation-building) initiatives?

When, on the last day of the conference, our group met with Diaspora Minister Hranush Hakobyan, a conference organizer announced that we had had a "significant discussion" about globalization and the national identity. When that discussion occurred is beyond my comprehension. I did notice, however, that for his presentation to the minister, he had English and Russian translators.

Hakobyan, in her words of welcome to the delegates, made five requests of attendees. These were quite mystifying, since writers in the Diaspora have been pursuing these avenues for some time with apparently little involvement from the Armenian government, and moreover, with the hope that Armenia would pursue the same initiatives. She asked that writers of the Diaspora collect Genocide survivor stories to publish for 2015; write about Hai Tahd in non-Armenian media; educate non-Armenian writers through networking about Hai Tahd; influence Turkish journalists, especially those writing truthfully about Armenian issues; and insist on our rightful demands as the Diaspora as well as a global nation.

Being late for our meeting with Minister Hakobyan, we observed her excusing herself to officiate at a large gathering of Diasporan youth participating in the "Ari Tun" ("[Come Home](#)") program in which they spend two weeks developing bonds with Armenia. Initially asked to view a video about what the Diaspora Ministry was doing to resettle Syrian-Armenians in Armenia, the writers were instead ushered in to join a large celebratory gathering for the "Ari Tun" participants.

The event was attended by a slew of journalists and filmed for national television. Minister Hakobyan then took the opportunity to bestow the [William Saroyan Literary Medal](#) upon two Diasporan writers from the conference for "contributing to the dissemination of Armenian culture in the Diaspora and

making great contributions to the strengthening of relations between Armenia and the Diaspora and relations within Diaspora Armenian communities."

I believe Diasporan writer who attend such a conference do so with enthusiasm and cooperation. Judging by how attentive Diasporan delegates were, I can say that they demonstrated a respectful attitude toward their fellow participants and hosts. However, the behaviors of the conference leadership and some local writers made it difficult to maintain a respectful atmosphere. It was as if the hosts insisted on having the upper hand instead of seeing Armenia and the Diaspora as two parts of a fully functioning body. In the end, though great effort was put into the initiative, the conference was largely self-defeating and wasteful. For future conferences to be successful, they have to have a more comprehensive and clearly stated purpose, along with better organization and respect by conference leaders/organizers toward attendees.

