

REFLECTIONS OF A REPATRIATE

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Armenians living in the diaspora, including me--a Lebanese Armenian who repatriated two-and-a-half years ago-- celebrated the heroic Battle of Vardanants every year with great pomp. While it is not a state or official holiday in Lebanon, we have the freedom to elevate it into a holiday from a community point of view. All our institutions (churches, schools, commercial and non-commercial) are closed, as we have made it a non-working day to commemorate the Battle of Vardanants.

The Battle of Avarayr (May 26, 451), is celebrated the Thursday before the *Poon Paregentan* feast, to glorify the bravery of Vardan's soldiers who meaningfully sacrificed their lives. Almost sixteen centuries (1,572 years) later, we observe it to convey the battle's messages to us. Now that I live in Yerevan, I asked my native Armenian colleague on Vardanants Day, as noted on the Diaspora calendar, if she knew today was Vardanants Day. She said: "No, do you?" I said: "Yes, it's today." Jokingly, she said: "Is Vardan aware?" But when I asked another native Armenian friend if she knew the message the Vardanants holiday conveyed to them, he said: "Yes, I always remind my children of the meaningful death... as well as the oath to defend the Fatherland and to preserve it until the last drop of our blood."

I asked myself: "Why are native Armenians living in Armenia accused of "disrespecting" the Vardanants holiday by not celebrating it in any official capacity? It didn't take long to find the answer. How would an Armenian living in Armenia celebrate the defeat of the many battles in our history? Should the Armenian living in Armenia celebrate Vardanants for what it stood for? Or, as a moral victory?

Preserving our language and faith have been passed down to us from generation to generation in the Diaspora and are symbolized as the message of the Vardanats War. But who said the language and the faith are not preserved in the Fatherland? Or let's ask in another way: "Who said the Armenians in Armenia are indifferent? It is true that there are such Armenians living in the Fatherland, but they are far from the threat of assimilation and far from the danger of giving up on their Armenian language and faith. In fact, it is the Armenian living in the Diaspora who must strive to keep the mother tongue and faith intact because of the influence of foreign languages, foreign customs, and foreign faiths and sects. Although many times we do not want to admit it out loud that the diaspora is temporary, sooner or later everyone in the Diaspora will be assimilated, no matter how hard we try to endure and persevere.

Should the Armenians in Armenia celebrate Vardanants War as a national holiday? Why are the statues of Vardan Mamikonian erected in the heart of Yerevan and Gyumri, along with the statues of other national heroes? Being nationalistic is not just a word, it is not just observing a holiday that has become a tradition. Nationalism is education. In the Diaspora every effort is made to preserve that education. The Armenians living in Armenia are also brought up with that awareness. The Armenian

in Armenia knows well the history, culture and traditions of his or her nation. Another proof of this are the billboards on the streets and on the walls of buildings in Armenia, which carry brief, sometimes bilingual, information about prominent Armenian spiritual, national, literary and cultural personalities, military personnel, and about churches and monastic complexes. They are not only meant to introduce our greatness and historical riches to foreigners, but also are reminders to Armenians that they should always keep them alive in their memory.

Should Vardanants be celebrated "For the Fatherland, for the faith" battle cry? Who has waged and is still waging battles of this nature against visible and invisible enemies more than native Armenians? Witness the Artsakh Wars. The people left everything and went to the border with the possibility of never returning. But they went because they had to go. They go because the Fatherland calls them, because the priority is the safety of the Fatherland, because they must protect their "home". They go because the Fatherland is above everything else. At the end, they go because patriotism dictates ownership of the Fatherland which is manifested by living up to that ownership. They go because protecting the Fatherland and standing up for it should not be expected from foreigners who, at best, will only serve their own interests.

Armenians living in Armenia, although not in an idealized way and with shortcomings, by thinking, speaking, reading and writing in Armenian, confessing the doctrine of the Armenian Church, preserving Armenian cultural values and shedding blood for the safety of the Fatherland, have implemented the message of Vardanants. It is true that Diaspora Armenians are proud of those messages and remember them hundreds of years later, but the essential act is to demonstrate that patriotism and to put it into practice.

Who assumes ownership of the Fatherland today? Is it the Armenian sitting far from his homeland where he has laid its foundation and strives to strengthen it further and claiming "there is no future in Armenia?" Is it the Armenian who is looking for a prosperous and peaceful life far from his homeland, who says: "In the future, when I retire, I will come and live peacefully in Armenia with my accumulated wealth"? Or is it the Armenian who criticizes his homeland and at every crisis and every opportunity gives a piece of his mind in abundance? Is it a secret that Armenia needs the potential of the Diaspora now, its strong arms and the creative minds of young people?

"I am the grandson of the brave Vardan who liberated Armenia" (a line from a poem recited mostly by children) should not be a cliché. Talk is meaningless without action. Each of us can "liberate Armenia" in ways we can, not just by fighting over the border. There are many challenges and our homeland does not only wage military struggle. Are there not Diaspora Armenians who, with their talent, knowledge and ability, can "liberate Armenia" and make it a "strong, prosperous, law-abiding country which no one wants to leave", as Berj Zeytuntsian would say? Will Armenian talent, experience, ability always be enjoyed by foreigners? And then shamelessly say that Armenia is not a developed country. O.K, let's develop this country... OUR COUNTRY. How beautifully and wisely my repatriated friend expressed it when she said: "Let my children study so that with their profession

they can better serve Armenia in the future."

Serving Armenia is not be confined to words. It is not only by singing revolutionary songs with raised fists (many times in a drunken state). It is not just by saying: "We will be going sooner or later" and in the best of circumstances go to Armenia for vacation. It is not only by uttering hostile and obscene words against Turks. It is not only by noting Vardanants Day and April 24 (dates outside of which we are disunited and divided).

Yes, in the Fatherland or in the Diaspora, we should make it our supreme goal to remain Armenian at all costs and to serve the Fatherland but also to believe that we are the master of our homeland and its destiny and that ARMENIA is the only home of the Armenian nation. Armenia is our legal refuge and the guarantee of our longevity.

There are no comments yet.