

# ETHIOPIAN ARMENIANS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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## [Appointees at the Imperial Court of Ethiopia \(Update 2017-10-04\)](#)

**2009-08-05**

### **Sevan Aslanian**



If you start asking around a little in Addis Ababa if anyone knows any Armenians, Sevan's name is often the first that is mentioned. The first time I heard of her was from a Swedish missionary in Addis Ababa, who got her hair cut at Sevan's salon. Sevan Aslanian is about forty years of age. She was born in Addis Ababa and grew up in the Aratkilo area near the Armenian Church and school. She is named after Armenia's largest lake, and has always felt herself to be a part of a large Armenian family. Sevan only has good things to say about her childhood and upbringing. All of the Armenian children always played with one another; they saw each other at school and at the club, as well as in church every Sunday. It was a community where everybody knew everybody else and where people took care of each other. Even though the Ethio-Armenian group has kept to itself, Sevan still feels herself to be an Ethiopian:

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*'This is home for me, I feel Ethiopian as well as Armenian. I mean, being here as an Armenian, we have lived here all our lives and we have taken on a lot of the Ethiopian mentality, so I can say that I feel both Ethiopian and Armenian.'*

Sevan went to the Armenian school. When she finished Grade 6 there were 15 students in her class, all Armenian. Today, Sevan is the only one of them still in the country. After the Armenian school followed studies at Sanford School, which is one of Ethiopia's best schools. She left the country in 1975 because of the situation at that time, and studied a few years on Cyprus, later to return home and complete her education at Sanford. When the Derg seized power, Sevan's parents decided to remain, partly because they didn't want to start a new life somewhere else, but also because Sevan's siblings had already married. They chose to remain when all the others left, and this is something Sevan has never regretted even if the time under the Derg wasn't the easiest. Sevan and her siblings are the last in the Aslanian family that remain in

Ethiopia. She has a nine year old daughter and three sisters and a brother.

Sevan has also trained in London to be a hairdresser. She is well travelled and very good at languages. While Armenian and Amarinja are her first languages, she is also fluent in English, Italian and French. Her daughter is presently attending the French school, and she speaks all the languages that Sevan does.


It's hard not to like Sevan. She is very nice and easy to communicate with, and she is never far from a laugh. Her voice only sounds sad when she speaks of Ethio-Armenians' future. She admits that there is little that can be done. She herself wants to remain in Ethiopia, which after all is her home. Sevan refers a number of times to Armenians in Calcutta. Just like them, Ethio-Armenians are far too few to be able to survive as a group. Who will take over after us, she asks herself. What will happen with the church and the club? Her daughter thinks she herself should make her own decisions when the time comes, but hopes nevertheless to be able to complete her education in Ethiopia and in the best of cases remain there like her mother.

Sevan has always felt herself to be a part of the Ethiopian community. She realises that the larger community and the people she meets on the street often see her as a *ferenji*, but, she says laughing, as soon as she opens her mouth people are forced to admit that she's an Ethiopian. Even though life is hard in Ethiopia, she nevertheless feels that it is easier than in Europe. There isn't as much stress, and more than anything Ethiopia is a community that Sevan understands. There is no other community she would feel as integrated in, and this applies to Armenia as well. The Ethio-Armenians have perhaps lived separately, but all the same their participation has contributed to the country's present condition. She points out that many of Ethiopia's main industries were once founded by Armenians, even if they are today owned by ethnic Ethiopians. Ethio-Armenians are a part of the Ethiopian community. They early learned the language and customs, even if they kept to themselves to the extent that they retained their own language and culture.

*'What happens to Ethiopians also happens to us.'*

According to Sevan what makes Ethio-Armenians unique is their solidarity. They have always stuck together through the years. In the Armenian community everybody knows everybody else. People take care of each other, and that is why they have survived as a group. Sevan has daily contact with her siblings. If someone doesn't get in touch within a few days, you immediately phone them to check that everything is ok, even to check that nobody has left the country, she jokes. Sevan hopes that she will be able to continue to live in Ethiopia. She operates a hair salon which is very popular among Addis Ababa's expatriate population. Apart from hair, Sevan is enthusiastic about music. For many years she had a band together with her brother.

**Vahe Tilbian**

 The first time I saw Vahe was in the Armenian Church one Sunday. Since most of the people in the congregation were over 50, I was surprised to see a young man, and wondered who he was. After the Mass we met. He spoke fluent English with me, the next moment to speak fluent Amharic with someone else. That he also spoke fluent Armenian I then took for granted, which was later confirmed.

Vahe Tilbian is 25 years old. He was born in Addis Ababa at the Black Lion Hospital. He is one of the few young Ethiopian Armenians left. Just like Sevan he went to the Armenian school. The number of Armenian pupils at the school had dropped through the years, and when he left he was the only completely Armenian person in the class, the other three being half Armenian and half Ethiopian. All four in the class still live in Addis Ababa, and he meets with them socially. Altogether there were about 20 Armenian pupils at the school when Vahe was there. He remembers that they socialised both at and after school. Though the number of individuals was small, the solidarity was the same as before. Parents drove children to and from school and various activities. Vahe remembers his childhood as being good. He grew up in an area north of the Piassa, where he still lives with his parents. After the Armenian Community School, Vahe continued his studies at Sanford School.

Considering Vahe's age, most Armenians had already left the country when he grew up. Vahe is an example of those who grew up during Ethiopia's total isolation from the outside world. Despite this Vahe has never felt himself to be different. Even though the group was much smaller, the solidarity was the same, as was the Armenian identity. Often very small minorities are absorbed into the community of the majority.

*'No, honestly speaking, it's as if it's part of my identity so to speak to be of Armenian origin, being here, having so many Armenian friends, and in school so many half-Armenian half-Ethiopian friends. We are all mixed, always being together. Then I went to Sandford School and made a lot of Ethiopian friends there. I personally don't feel I'm any different from other Ethiopians, because we all live here.'*

Vahe admits that he has lived a rather sheltered life. This he thanks his parents for; and he doesn't think he would be the person he is if it hadn't been for them. Vahe thinks that life was simpler earlier for Armenians in Ethiopia; they must have had more freedom. Even though he has led a sheltered life, he has never felt unsure or afraid in Ethiopia. As he expresses it, he had the opportunity to study abroad, and did so for five years in Canada, where he also took his BA. When he socialised with people during his visit abroad there was never any doubt where he came from. He has met many Armenians from the diaspora and then his origins have never been questioned. He thinks only that there are some

local differences between all Armenians in the diaspora, and he feels that they all share the same culture and have the same values. He sees himself as having more in common with the people in the diaspora than with those in Armenia, which he has also visited.

Most of his friends are Ethiopians or Ethio-Italians. He thinks he understands the Ethiopian mentality, which for many outsiders can be difficult to grasp. But he can easily identify with expatriates, for he has himself been one. At the same time as understanding all of the questions expatriates come up with, he can understand the answers they receive from Ethiopians. To understand a mentality that lies at the basis of a culture you have to be a part of that culture. He sees himself as being a part of an Armenian community that is a part of Ethiopia. The Armenians are one of three such communities that are left, the other two being the Greek and the Italian. His contacts with the others have mainly been with Ethio-Italians, perhaps because he is interested in music and the opportunities for playing were just at the Italian club, which in Addis Ababa is called the Juventus Club. The difference between these and other ethnic groups according to Vahe is that they have always lived in Ethiopia. Other groups have come and gone, but the Armenians together with the Greeks and Italians have always been there. When I asked which language is his mother tongue he replies that both Armenian and Amharic are his first languages. Apart from very good English Vahe also speaks French and rather good Italian.

The times outside of Ethiopia that he has felt himself to be different in relation to his surroundings was just because he comes from Ethiopia. Vahe is, like most Ethio-Armenians in Ethiopia, an Ethiopian citizen, which makes it more difficult for him to obtain a visa to various countries. When many of his classmates in Canada went for trips during the spring break to Mexico or the United States, he couldn't accompany them. The visa-granting process for someone with an Ethiopian passport can take several weeks, and by that time the school break was most often already over. The most prejudice Vahe has met regarding his origins has been when he has been outside of Ethiopia.

*'You know, they look at your passport and they go ... They look at your face and then again at the passport and they ask: Are you sure?'*

He has just come home and plans to stay in Ethiopia, despite several of his friends' considering it to be a bad decision, and that there are many more opportunities outside Ethiopia. Vahe chose to return; it is in Ethiopia that he has his home and his family. The family in particular is important for Vahe – he could never leave one of his family behind.

Ethiopia is no easy country to live in, and as he is unemployed Vahe lives off his parents. He wants a job but is unfortunately too well educated for many of the jobs he has been offered. He would rather wait than have to take some underpaid job just to pass the time. To work for the government isn't enticing, and the work it provides is often very

poorly paid.

Vahe is unsure of his future. He hopes to be able to keep his identity as an Ethio-Armenian, but is at the same time aware that it is difficult. He would like to marry, but there are no potential marriage partners left among the Ethio-Armenians. The people who remain in the country are all related in some way so that marriage is impossible. He hopes to be able to get married some day, preferably to an Armenian, but it will be what it will be. Just like many other Armenians he places his future 'in God's hands.' What is interesting about Vahe is that he feels himself to be an Ethio-Armenian first, even if he should meet an Armenian from Armenia or from the larger diaspora he would never class them as Ethio-Armenians. He only shares the Ethio-Armenian identity with those who grew up in Ethiopia.

### Garbis Korajian

✘ When I had decided which subject I would write about the first difficulty was to find sources about Armenians in Ethiopia's history. Most searches only led me to a text on ABGU's homepage, which didn't give particularly much reliable information. Then, via the *Addis Tribune's* website, I finally found an article about the Armenian genocide written by an Armenian who had grown up in Ethiopia. Garbis Korajian became via e-mail my first real contact with Ethio-Armenians. When I told him about my chosen subject he became very enthusiastic, and I have a great deal to thank him for. It is primarily Garbis who has introduced me to people and taken me under his wing in meeting Ethiopia's Armenians.

Garbis was born in Addis Ababa in 1954 and grew up, just like many other Armenians, in the area around Aratkilo. He can trace his Armenian roots very far back in Ethiopia; the first Korajian came there already in 1852. Garbis' mother, Zarig Hakagmazian, later Korajian, was a daughter of one of the orphans from Jerusalem adopted by Ethiopia.

Garbis grew up in a large family with six brothers. They all lived in a large compound that had been donated to his paternal grandfather Abraham Korajian by the Emperor himself, as thanks for his faithful service to the Empire for 40 years. The whole Korajian family, including paternal uncles and their families, lived in this compound. Like most other Ethio-Armenians, Garbis went to the Armenian school. The Korajian family mixed very early with ethnic Ethiopians, and in distinction to many other Ethio-Armenians Garbis socialised just as much with them as with Armenians.

*'... however intermarriage with Ethiopians was not widespread, although within a range for example, if I look at my own family, two of my uncles were married to Ethiopians. And their children are offspring to an Armenian and Ethiopian heritage. And they also attended Armenian school and went to the Armenian church and club, so they felt comfortable being Armenian as well as Ethiopian.'*

Garbis was one of the Ethio-Armenians who chose to leave the country when the Derg seized power. He was 20 when he left in June of 1975. The new regime made it impossible for him as a young student to remain. The nationalisation hit the Korajian family hard, as they had invested large sums in properties. They also owned three plantations which were confiscated. Of everything they had worked for all that was left was a house to live in. Garbis was the only one in the family who left the country, though two of his brothers later followed him, as did some of his cousins. By applying as a refugee at the Canadian Embassy in Nairobi Garbis could come to Canada.

In Canada Garbis started afresh. A new life in a new country without capital or possessions. It would take until 1987 for him to return to Ethiopia for the first time. The country he returned to was not the same. Most of his friends were no longer there, and most of what had been built up by three generations of Armenians was no longer there. Armenians were no longer welcome in the country, despite their long presence and everything they had done for Ethiopia through the years. What saved most Armenians from death was the fact that they had never been involved in politics, though many of them, including Garbis' paternal aunt and her brother, were imprisoned.

*'... so there was this uneasy feeling of persecution, and a feeling of not belonging to a country where you had been for a hundred years and developed an empire of families and estates. They stripped us of that, and finally we figured that there was no future for us in Ethiopia.'*

Garbis feels that even if most Ethio-Armenians chose to leave the country, those who remained did all they could to keep the diaspora alive. Despite everything the Ethio-Armenians went through, the church, club and school still remained, even if the school had to be moved. Ethio-Armenians can thank their group's fiery spirits for their success in surviving as a group. Garmis often names the Nalbandian family, who did much to see to it that the infrastructure would remain intact – that Ethio-Armenians, despite their small number, would be able to live on as a local ethnic and cultural community.

Since 1976 Garbis has lived in Canada. He has two children and is married to an Armenian from Egypt. He has often returned to Ethiopia. Garbis' mother still lives in Ethiopia, but his love of the country also draws him back. As he says himself, he wants to be included in the restoration of the country. He plans to stay as long as he feels that he has something to contribute. Garbis sees a future in Ethiopia. His brother too has returned to look over his chances in the country. Garbis believes in Ethiopia; his family still lives in Canada, but he hopes one day to be able to bring them over as well. Everything depends on the future, which Garbis feels looks bright. Garbis thinks that the community that remains is strong; the group has survived a long time and is, according to him, far from dead. There exists a will in the group, and those who remain will not leave the country. Rather, more will return. According to Garbis, the Ethio-identity lives on outside Ethiopia. He gives an example: when an older man died his son came back to take over his father's business.

*'I would say for now, still there is a torch that is burning, which is the club and the church and the school.'*

Garbis is highly enthusiastic about Ethiopia and sees it as his country even though he has lived the greatest part of his life in exile. He will always have a connection to Ethiopia, and has made a codicil to his will that he wants to be buried in the Armenian graveyard in Addis Ababa. Garbis will forever be an Ethiopian of Armenian descent.

## 2017-10-04 (Update)

The below tables were prepared by Dr. Garo Yerevanian and are posted with his permission.

### APPOINTEES AT THE IMPERIAL COURT OF ETHIOPIA

#### 1905 - 1925



1925-1945



1945 - 1965



Consular Advisors





