

HOW CAN BENEFACTORS MEET OUR MANY NEEDS?

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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, January 23, 2014

For Peter Balakian's Article [click here](#)

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In his article, Balakian deplores the Armenian-American community's failure to support a proposed Armenian Genocide exhibit at the Illinois Holocaust Museum, on the eve of the Genocide Centennial in 2015.

The exhibit, "The Shadow of Mount Ararat: The Armenian Genocide," would have been in display not only at the Illinois Holocaust Museum — the second largest such institution in the United States — but also throughout the country, and possibly in Europe and South America.

Balakian expresses his disappointment that the Chicago Armenian community could not raise the necessary \$600,000 to fund the project, resulting in the cancellation of the planned exhibit. In his view, this incident "reflects a larger failure of the Armenian community in the United States to create culture, by which I mean: to use financial means to conceive and engineer cultural production." Balakian believes that Armenian-Americans "have almost nothing to show in the domain of cultural production and representation in the mainstream." With few exceptions, "Armenians have created no mainstream cultural foundations, museums, performing arts centers.

Balakian complains that "the Armenian financial community has not been able to bring to fruition one feature film about the Armenian Genocide or other aspects of Armenian history." He quotes a Jewish scholar who told him: "There seems to be a disconnect between the Armenian business community and the Armenian arts community; the business people don't see that investing in the arts is investing in the core continuity of Armenian civilization. Investing in the community's culture should be understood as a celebration of the life of Armenians past and present, something that the Turkish perpetrators tried to extinguish. This is certainly the philosophy of a lot of Jewish investment in

While I share Balakian's concerns, I would like to express some additional thoughts regarding this important topic:

- 1) Most Armenian benefactors prefer to contribute and attach their names to tangible brick and mortar projects like churches and schools rather than more abstract endeavors such as public relations and the arts. Yet, everyone should realize that wealthy Armenians are entitled to spend their hard-earned money as they see fit. It's their money and they decide how to spend it!
- 2) The needs of the Armenian Diaspora and the Armenian Republic are so massive that it is practically impossible for even generous benefactors to satisfy everyone's demands.
- 3) There are no established mechanisms to prioritize the community's need and assess their merit. Benefactors and charitable organizations are bombarded with requests to fund movies, publications, artwork, aid to Armenia, monuments, memorials, churches, schools and orphanages. Few benefactors have the time and expertise to judge the quality and utility of the proposed projects in so many diverse fields.
- 4) Projects are sometimes funded not on merit, but on the basis of the personal relationship between the donor and the recipient. It could boil down to who is doing the asking!
- 5) Even though Armenians are quite generous in supporting their community organizations, the requests often outstrip the available funds. One cannot name a single category of needs that receives adequate funding, including social, cultural, religious, political, athletic, and humanitarian activities. Can anyone say that there are sufficient funds to:
 - Print all the books that are worthy of publication?
 - Digitize ancient manuscripts and other valuable archival materials before they are lost forever?
 - Produce professionally-made movies and documentaries on the Armenian Genocide and other topics?
 - Fund Genocide Centennial projects?
 - Provide funds for electing political candidates who endorse Armenian issues?
 - Support concerts, art exhibits, museums, medical, scientific and countless other worthy projects?
 - Meet the basic needs for the survival of Syrian Armenians, and the poor and needy in Armenia, Artsakh and the Diaspora?

Donors could certainly do more to support the seemingly endless needs of Armenians worldwide. However, a mechanism must first be established to prioritize the various needs, judge their merit, and make a professional presentation to potential donors. Finally, after the donation is made, periodic reports on the progress of the project must be given to the donor, demonstrating that the allocated funds are being properly spent to accomplish the promised objectives.

A Broken Connection: The Armenian Financial Community and the Making of Culture

By Peter Balakian, [The Armenian Weekly](#), 18 January 2014

When the Illinois Holocaust Museum asked me in the late summer of 2012 if I would be the advising scholar and a primary writer of text for a major exhibit that the museum would develop for the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide in 2015, I was delighted and agreed. I was also excited by the idea that the exhibit would travel not only in the United States, but possibly in Europe and South America. It was a breakthrough to have the second largest Holocaust museum in the United States planning an Armenian Genocide exhibit entitled, "The Shadow of Ararat: The Armenian Genocide." Not only would there be a significant exhibit—as the advising scholar, I can affirm that the proposal was excellent—it would be orchestrated and curated by a non-Armenian organization of high professional expertise.

In the last week of April, I went to the Illinois Holocaust Museum to give a keynote lecture for the April 24th commemoration and to kick off the campaign to raise the funding for the exhibit from the Armenian community of Chicago. We all left in good spirits, anticipating working together on the project. But, in early October, when I hadn't heard anything from the curators at the museum, I called to see what was happening. My friends there reported that despite various conversations with the leaders of the Chicago-Armenian community, the community had not delivered any funding. Apparently, they had tried to find funds outside of their region as well, but in the end could not deliver any funding, and the time necessary for planning was running out. I was shocked.

The budget, which was about \$600,000, seemed appropriate for the show planned, and in a larger context, I would say, it was a bargain, for this was a dream come true for many Armenians. With the museum about to pull the plug on it, I went into emergency mode, trying to raise several hundred thousand dollars in less than two weeks. I made calls for days to various friends and colleagues around the country. In the end, I could not raise enough money in such a short time. Shortly after, the museum cancelled its plans for the exhibit.

While many of us are more than disappointed in the failure of the Chicago-Armenian community to fulfill its obligation for 2015, I think this reflects a larger failure of the Armenian Diasporan community in the United States to create culture—by which I mean to use financial means to conceive and engineer cultural production. A hundred years after the genocide, Armenians in the United States, probably the most propitious place in the world for cultural production (just look at the film, book, arts and performing arts industries in the U.S.), have almost nothing to show in the domain of cultural production and representation in the mainstream. Armenians have created no mainstream cultural foundations, museums, performing arts centers, except for several cultural institutions such as

NAASR, ANI, the Armenian Library and Museum, Zoryan Institute in Canada, all of which do admirable work, but there are no research institutes like that of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan.

The Armenian financial community has not been able to bring to fruition one feature film about the genocide or other aspects of Armenian history. By 2013, and given the presence of Armenian Americans in Hollywood in the 20th century, there's something shocking about this. Surely, there might have been at least a dozen or so feature films dealing with these issues and stories in the past 50 years.

I want to underscore the obvious. Without culture there is no presence of a nation/ethnic group/people in a given society—in popular cultural thought, academic and intellectual thought, and in the wider global culture. Individuals live and die, money comes and goes, national borders appear and disappear, but artistic representation and culture remain the primary mode of general knowledge about any civilization/nation/ethnic group. Without museums, centers for the visual and performing arts, research institutes, sustained funding for translations, endowed chairs for academics, and more, there is no identity for any nation.

In the Armenian case (and I'm sure Armenians are not alone in this) something has gone wrong, or perhaps has not gone at all. Armenians in the United States, and probably in Europe, South America, and the Middle East (this is not true in the Republic of Armenia), have almost nothing to show as culture, either to themselves or to the wider public. Other than the individual achievements of various people in the arts and academic and intellectual world who have broken through into the mainstream, Armenian culture is a blank to our fellow Americans.

One Jewish scholar put it this way: "There seems to be a disconnect between the Armenian business community and the Armenian arts community; the business people don't see that investing in the arts is investing in the core continuity of Armenian civilization. Investing in the community's culture should be understood as a celebration of the life of all Armenians past and present, something that the Turkish perpetrators tried to extinguish. This is certainly the philosophy of a lot of Jewish investment in Jewish arts. It's a 'f-you Hitler' attitude."

Let's take, just briefly, the case of Jewish-American culture as an example. We must acknowledge that there are more Jews than Armenians in the United States and in the world, and that there are correspondingly more resources, and that there is a much longer history in their diaspora and hence more experience.

Notwithstanding this, the discrepancy between Jewish-American cultural production and Armenian-American cultural production is painful to consider.

If we take New York City alone, we find that Jewish culture is represented by major institutions: the Jewish Museum, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, the 92nd Street Y, and the Center for Jewish History, which houses five Jewish cultural organizations. All of these are beautiful edifices run with

high administrative professionalism, and all serve a broad public. If you look just cursorily around the country, you find the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, Holocaust museums in major cities from Chicago to Houston to Fort Lauderdale. I won't spend time cataloging the Jewish cultural centers, the endowed chairs, the journals, magazines, newspapers, publishing imprints, and so on. The fact is clear.

There is no Armenian who would not applaud Armenian-American philanthropists for the commitment they have made to the Republic since its independence and to the extraordinary work organizations like the AGBU (the grandparent of it all), FAR, Armenian Tree Project, COAF, and others have done globally over the past decades for Armenian communities everywhere. Armenian civilization is about 2,500 years old and it embodies a remarkable story of survival against great odds. Its survival and identity are inextricable from the existence of the seminal texts made by such figures as Toros Roslin, Krikor of Nareg, Avivovsky, Komitas, Charents, Essayan, Gorky, Sarian, Saroyan, Paradjanov, Minas, Khatchadourian, Hovaness, the architects of the medieval churches, and so on. Armenian artists and intellectuals have been impressive cultural and aesthetic creators, especially given the duress of their historical situation. But they have not been backed by their financial communities.

If in the modern era the Armenian financial community can't figure out ways to produce and finance Armenian culture and history—both historical and contemporary—and our present is very rich and dynamic (perhaps more so than ever) with artists, writers, composers, filmmakers, and others, then Armenian culture will not exist in any serious, representative way in the wider public arena, and correspondingly, Armenia as a cultural entity will be relegated to a ghettoized place in an obscure corner. This need not be the case.

There are some extraordinary individuals in our business community who have made a great deal happen, and some of them—though very few—have put some of their energies toward culture and education. They are great visionaries for doing so. I am deeply grateful for the personal support I've received from some of these extraordinary people. But, for the most part, in the big picture, there has been no sustained creation and nurturing of cultural production of the kind I and many of my colleagues in the various cultural arenas are noting.

I know it's difficult—given the pressing challenges of working for the Republic and working for a complex diasporan society—but it has to be done. The Armenian community—especially its financial infrastructure—has to begin to work with its cultural producers (writers, artists, architects, academics, journalists, etc.) in order to create lasting institutions, fora, structures for culture to be made, created, and represented.

Furthermore, certain segments of the Armenian community need to feel at ease and embrace other communities that want to support Armenian history and culture. It might be noted that the only major PBS documentary made about the Armenian Genocide was made by Andrew Goldberg, and

the only major feature film—Atom Egoyan's "Ararat"—was produced by Robert Lantos.

The Armenian financial community has to turn the corner; it has to see the issue in a fresh and larger way, to make Armenian cultural production a top priority, if Armenian history and culture—and Armenia as a significant, ancient civilization—are to be a visible force in the global arena. There can be no progress without this.

