IGNORANCE WAS NEVER BLISS

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Keghart.com Team Editorial, 25 August 2011

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Take the most basic of collective facts: population statistics. Many Toronto Armenians assume there are 30,000 to 35,000 Armenians in Canada's biggest city. The actual number is just over 20,000, according to community workers. Many facts about the community are hard to come by. For example, no one knows the number of Armenians who have recently come from the former Soviet republics and melted into the Russian-Jewish ghetto of the city.

Some Armenians believe there are 500,000 Armenians in France and 125,000 in Lebanon. Wrong again. The first is closer to 400,000 and the second is below 100,000. As well, we conveniently ignore the bitter truth that many French-Armenians are assimilated and hardly speak any Armenian, let alone participate in community affairs.

Population figures for California Armenians change depending on who one quotes. How many Armenian-Americans are there? Armeniapedia says over one million. However, a 2009 American Community Survey gave a much lower number, which included Armenians with "full or partial Armenian ancestry." Meanwhile, no one can tell with any authority the global Armenian population count. The statistics seesaw between 8 and 11 million, depending on the exuberance, optimism or

"patriotism" of the person enumerating it.

When we don't know our population statistics, how can we know more detailed demographic figures? What are our educational levels? What are our leading professions? Which are the growing Diaspora communities? Which ones are turning into ghosts? And what are rates of intermarriage with non-Armenians?

The above thoughts were partly elicited by a recent Statistics Canada survey of "mother" language retention. The government survey reported that the Armenian language is officially the third highest retained language behind Punjabi and Urdu.

According to "TorontoHye" newspaper (Vol. 6 No. 11), "the study took to consideration parents who have successfully passed on their own mother tongue to their children—in this case Armenian—and applied it to their day-to-day living." Statistics Canada said that the Armenian language is passed on to 75% of all teens under 18, with a minimum of 77% of Armenian children having at least some knowledge of Armenian.

The high Armenian standing was attributed to the Armenian tradition of marrying other Armenians—endogamy. When both parents speak the same native language, they can pass on their language with greater ease. "When a child grows up with both parents speaking Armenian, the language is transmitted as an 'at home' tongue and not forced onto them," wrote Armen Bedakian in "Torontohye".

Although the above statistics would bring a glow to the eyes of Armenians justly worried about assimilation ("Germak Chart"), the numbers seemingly contradict long-held anecdotal "evidence": a great many Toronto Armenians believe 50% of Armenian marriages in Toronto are intermarriages. If the anecdotal evidence is valid, it would be hard to believe the Canadian government's 77% Armenian tongue retention level.

The point? When we don't know the facts, we can't take steps to prevent, say, the erosion of the community. When we don't know where we are, how can we plan where we want to go? How can we build our communities, network with other Diaspora Armenian communities and with Armenia? When we don't have marriage stats and the number of offspring of those marriages we can't sensibly plan the building of schools or their size. When we don't know our numbers how can we impress vote-seeking politicians with our clout? When we don't know our numbers how can we impact the non-Armenian media? When we don't know our financial and human resources, how can we know what we are capable of achieving collectively?

Scientific data (age, gender, marriage, education, profession, income, address and much more) is

essential for the survival of any group. Without these statistics we are a herd of blind sheep. Before it's too late (some would say it's already 11th hour), our three traditional political parties, churches and all other organizations around the globe should launch a national census to determine our global vital statistics.

While the Statistics Canada data was positive, we should not depend on non-Armenian sources for these essential numbers. We should gather the data and be in command of our statistics.

Wikipedia says that Armenian-Americans have the highest rate of earning Bachelor's degree at around 70% and one of the highest (88%) high school graduate statistics. It also says Armenian-Americans are one of the most educated ethnic groups. How many North American Armenians know these facts? And more importantly, if we don't know these facts, how can we utilize them for our collective benefit?

About 25 year ago, a Canadian journalist rifling through government files in Ottawa discovered that Armenian-Canadians had the highest family income because a high percentage of both parents were professionals. That chest-thumping data vanished unremarked by the community. When we don't know our strengths, we can't chart our future with concrete and practical goals and plans. How can we decide, for example, our local fundraising campaign targets or how we can help the Motherland if we don't know our human resources?

Every year millions of words are written, broadcast and telecast by Armenian Diaspora media to safeguard our viability. Yet, as far as we know, no one has pointed out the necessity of drawing the scientific profile of Armenian Diaspora.

Misguided optimism, self-delusion or mystical belief that because the Diaspora has survived for nearly a thousand years it will, somehow, continue to survive is the height of irresponsibility. Despite the rosy numbers from Statistics Canada, intermarriage is widespread in Canada. As a wise man once said, quantitative change leads to qualitative change. A further increase in intermarriage in Canada and elsewhere could lead to the dissolution of Armenian Diaspora.

There is no logical reason to believe that our Diaspora communities will survive—unless we are proactive. Witness the fate of Istanbul, Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian Armenians.

Our willful ignorance threatens the viability of the Diaspora.

Ignorance was never bliss.

Let's get the numbers.