

# ARTSAKH'S ARMENIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE: CONVERSATION WITH HRAIR HAWK KHATCHERIAN

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**By Arusyak Karapetyan, Ontario, 3 January 2021**

On Dec. 18, 2020, the Bolsahay Centre and MEG (ՄԵԿ Mekhitarian-Esayan-Getronagan) Cultural Association held an interactive webinar entitled "The Armenian Cultural Heritage of Artsakh". Photographer Hrair Hawk Khatcherian (HHK) of Montreal took the audience into the pages of his journey photographing Artsakh starting in early 1990s. Since the early days of the First Artsakh War he has recorded, through photographs, its cultural heritage. Such documentation plays a crucial role today when much of Artsakh's territory is in Azerbaijani control and the Armenian cultural heritage is in danger.



HHK in Aghtamar

HHK is an internationally-renowned photographer. Originally from Lebanon, HHK moved to Canada in 1984. He has spent thirty years documenting Armenian cultural heritage through photography and has presented exhibitions and lectures around the world. His photographs have appeared in magazines, newspapers, books and journals. HHK has traveled to Armenia over 150 times and taken many risks to capture the images of monasteries, churches, fortresses, khatchkars (stone-cross in Armenian), villages, manuscripts, among others. An online upload of his photo library of approximately one-million images, to be made available for public research, is one of Khatcherian's long term goals. He has visited over 40 countries and his album is a repository of the creative achievements of the Armenian communities from Crimea, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. HHK has published over a dozen photography books including *Artsakh: A Photographic Journey*; *40 Nudes*; *Karabakh: 100 Pictures*; *Yergir*; *Flying Hye*; *Armenian Ornamental Art* (in collaboration with Armen Kyurkchyan); *Armenian Ornamental Script*; *One Church One Nation*; *100 (1915-2015)*; *Khatchkar*; and *Armenia: Heaven on Earth*.

**KEGHART: Please tell us about the circumstances that took you to Artsakh for the first time and led you to a lifelong journey of photographing Armenian cultural heritage across the world.**

**HHK:** The Armenian community of Montreal held a demonstration in front of the consulate of the Soviet Union back in 1988. As a photojournalist working for the Gamma press agency, I could see the slogans "Karabakh is Ours". I asked some of the demonstrators where Karabakh was, who its inhabitants were. That was my initiation. In 1991, the Armenians of Artsakh had a referendum to become independent as the Soviet Union collapsed. In 1992 war erupted between Armenians and the Azeris. I flew to Armenia and three days later I was in Artsakh covering the war, discovering who the local Armenians were. A gentleman by the name of Levon gave me a book about the Armenian churches of Artsakh. Yeghishe Kouys Anapat, near Jardar village of Martuni region, was the first church I photographed. Same year in Armenia Zaven Sargsyan, photographer and director of the museum of Parajanov, became my mentor in photographing of monasteries and churches. In 1993, due to advanced lung cancer, the doctor gave me ten days to live. Right there and then I vowed to photograph the Armenian churches around the globe. A promise which took me 20



Yerits Mangants, Artsakh

years to complete with "One Church

One Nation", including most of the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, and Protestant churches.



Yerghishe Arakyal, Artsakh

**KEGHART: What meaning did the liberation of Artsakh have for you in the early '90s and what are your reflections now that Armenians suffered a defeat?**

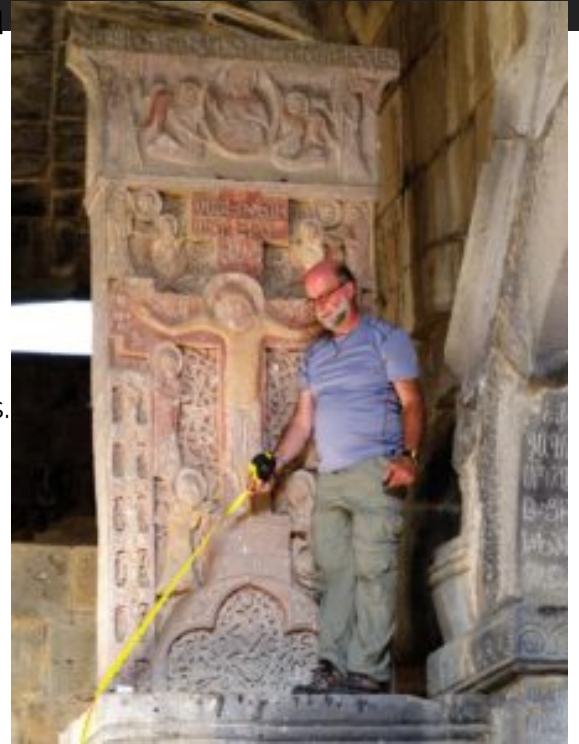
**HHK:** My grandparents were survivors of the Armenian Genocide. In 1997, the late Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian introduced me to Cilicia--the land my ancestors had lived for centuries. In 1992, while photographing in Zanzezur, I saw in Kapan scars of Azeri shelling. Many roads were reinforced by walls of sand for safety. The 1994 liberation of Artsakh secured the southern part of Armenia which had a buffer zone and for almost three decades the population enjoyed peace. For many centuries Greater Armenia had been shrinking but the 1994 war reversed that trend only to lose in 2020.

**KEGHART: What were the most interesting discoveries and favourite memories of your visits to Artsakh over the years?**

**HHK:** The people of Artsakh, the land, the struggle and the monasteries are all favourite memories. What I had missed at school in Lebanon because of the lack of images of our history, I was able to witness and document and learn firsthand.

**KEGHART: How has your passion for photography translated into preserving Armenian cultural history?**

**HHK:** In Lebanon, I bought my first camera at the age of 13. My subjects were my school friends, trees, birds, the sea, and the scars of war I witnessed in Beirut. I was an assistant to an Armenian photojournalist. While getting my wings as a pilot in California for two years aerial photography was my new passion. Moving to Canada in 1984 I worked as a freelance newspaper photographer in Toronto. In 1985, I moved to Montreal and freelanced for the Gamma Press Agency of Paris. From 1988 to 2001 my wife and I ran our photography store, shooting portraits, baptisms, and weddings. My first visit to Armenia and Artsakh was a catalyst for self discovery. Photography was a means to nurture my curiosity and to learn most of the subjects I did not have to learn in school. In 1997, my first book, "Artsakh: A Photographic Journey" was published by Archbishop Ashjian. To date I have published 15 books. More books are in the making. I have also contributed to many magazines and newspapers worldwide. Many professors rely upon my archives of photographs to complement their papers. Soon UNESCO will receive the list of my photographs of Armenian churches under Azeri control in the aftermath of the recent war. Through my books and exhibitions I was able to share visually with everyone, including those who were present at the demonstrations of Montreal in 1988. Most had not seen Artsakh until then.



HHK in Haghpad, Armenia



**KEGHART: Can the existing Armenian cultural history provide lessons and guidance to Armenians in changing the course of our journey in the right direction, following a difficult year and uncertainty.**

**HHK:** Any nation void of cultural inheritance is bound to fade into the past. In 2006, about 4,000 Armenian khatchkars of Julfa in Azeri-ruled Nakhchivan were shattered. I photographed the destruction from the Iranian border in 1997, 2003 and 2009. All the Armenian churches also were uprooted and mosques were built in those locations. Samvel Karapetyan of RAA (Research on Armenian Architecture), who passed away in 2020, documented the falsification of the Georgian government which replaced Armenian inscriptions with fake Georgian ones thus erasing the identity of those Armenian cultural monuments. Armenia has always occupied a strategic position, historically, culturally, and the war of 2020 unified Armenians all over the world. The challenge is to harness this unity. Between 1375 & 1918 we were without an independent Armenian state. Many civilizations are present exclusively in books but Armenia and Armenians have survived for millennia.



HHK in Cilicia by Lilit Khachatryan

**KEGHART: In addition to Crimea, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, where else have you photographed Armenian cultural structures?**

**HHK:** Since Armenians have set foot on all the continents and the church is one of their first achievements, I have photographed Armenian churches in Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Singapore, Australia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Cyprus, Iraq, UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Georgia, and most of European cities where there are Armenian churches. The most important centers are the Mekhitarists in Venice and in Vienna plus the Saints James in Jerusalem. They have been beacons of Armenian culture.

**HHK'S books of the past five years include:**

**"Armenia Heaven On Earth", 2018.** Helicopter images of Armenia and Artsakh. The aerial images are unique. A bird's eye view.

**"Khatchkar", 2017:** 516 pages and 26 years of khatchkar photography (khatchkars from Artsakh, Armenia, Western Armenia, and Cilicia).

**"100" (1915-2015), 2015:** Dedicated to the centennial of the Armenian Genocide. A 516-page book spanning 18 years of photography.

**KEGHART:** Thank you for your time, commitment, and the important work you have done in preserving Armenian cultural history.

## Comments



**Bardig** – 2021-01-08 09:24:43

A deep respect for your work and the years you spent photographing and promoting our culture. Thank you my friend and continue to shine with your always positive aura.



**Zohrab (Bob) Okhikian** – 2021-01-05 20:11:56

We need more people like this gentleman. He made me feel good as an Armenian and a proud one at that. We need more people who think of Armenians but not only of themselves. I wish I knew more, and that I could be more helpful to my heritage. Unfortunately, I didn't have the luck to be born and live among Armenians, and so I love to read anything and everything about Armenians, no matter what. I have an open mind and I enjoy reading and learning; one is never too old to learn. Thank you again Zohrab