NOR ARAX: ITALIAN HOME OF ARMENIANS

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By **Ilaria Milella**, Barinedita, 18 December 2014
Translated from Italian by Oşin Elagöz, Istanbul

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A century ago Bari, in the south east tip of Italy, became a sanctuary for dozens of Armenians refugees. The first group of exiles—about 60 people--landed here where they found refuge near a wool factory. In 1924 land was granted to them on the current Via Amendola. There Armenians established the village "Nor Arax" (Arax is a river that flows along the Armenian/Turkish border). It is there, on Via Amendola that some of them, after all these years, still live.

On that land they built nine wooden pavilions (assigned by royal decree) that were used as homes. Signs with the name of the village and the foundation year, written in Roman numerals, MCMXXVI: 1926, remain intact. The village was then supplied with water. Of the houses built then only four survive. Each has six rooms and can accommodate two families. To these were added two brick buildings: one was a chapel and the other a home of Hrand Nazariantz, the great poet who was the first (1913) Armenian to arrive in Bari.

And there, on Via Amendola, 15 Armenians still live--four elders, their children and grandchildren.

The village was also inhabited by nuns. At the request of Mr. Nazariantz, nuns came to the village to educate the children. The houses of the nuns were built next to those of the refugees. Later a brick building was built to serve as kindergarten.

"Community life originally was very simple," explaims Rupen Timurian, honorary president of the "Centre for the Study of Hrand Nazariantz, Bari". There was a strong sense of cooperation among the exiles. The elders acted as spiritual leaders. I remember Christmas with great joy. We celebrated the

Catholic Christmas on December 25 and the Armenian on January 6, receiving twice the presents. Easter was also special. We colored red eggs in our typical Eastern tradition."

The first business activity of the Armenian community was a collective. It was based in carpet weaving. "Most of the Armenians came from Anatolia which was the home of carpet production," said Timurian and added: "Armenians have always exported this knowledge throughout the world and so did my father. The carpets then became the basis of trade and a treasure for my family. The factory of Oriental carpets later became one of the most important in the West, explained Carlo Coppola, secretary of Nazariantz Educational Center. Handcrafts, among other works, were delivered to Pope Pius XI, Queen Elena of Montenegro and the famous Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello"

Over time most of inhabitants left the village. Many moved to northern Italy or went abroad. But Nor Arax is still there, protected by Armenians who live there, such as 43-year-old Kaianik Adagian. "I feel myself as the guardian of the village," he says. "A place full of the energy of the people who lived here. It is a sacred place, the memory of which must be preserved and transferred in the new generations of Armenians. "