THE COMMERCIAL

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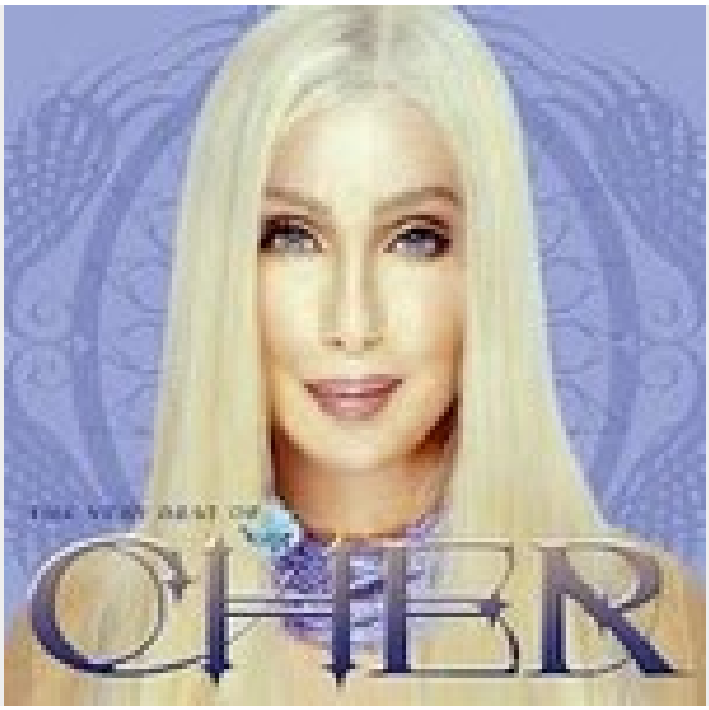

Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, 5 March 2013

When you meet a Frenchman he doesn't tell you that Voltaire, Debussy, and Renoir were French.

When you meet an Englishman, he doesn't tell you that Shakespeare, Charles Darwin, and Churchill were English.

When you meet a Spaniard, he doesn't tell you that El Cid, Cervantes, and Goya were Spanish.

But when an Armenian meets an "odar" (non-Armenian), who is not familiar with Armenians, many of us come up with the boiler-plate, the roll-call… Armenia was the first country to enact Christianity as state religion, that William Saroyan was Armenian, that the co-inventor (we often neglect to include the "co-") of the MiG fighter plane was Artem Migoyan, that Charles Aznavour, Mike Connors, Cher… are all Armenian. We invariably "forget" to say that Cher's mother wasn't Armenian. Why slow down the rousing introduction with a qualifier?

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The more ingenious among us even tailor our litany of Armenian Idols to the interest of the person who is being introduced to our people. Thus, to a movie buff, we would cite directors Atom Egoyan and Roupen Mamoulian, and actor Akim Tamiroff; to those who follow American politics, we would say Gov. George Duekmejian of California is Armenian; to chess fans we would mention Tigran Petrossyan, Garry Kasparov; to people interested in literature we would say that "French" Henri Troyat and "English" Michael Arlen were Armenian. To the younger set we would say that Gegard (Keghart) Mousasi of Ultimate Fighting Champions is also Armenian.

Some Armenians are queasy about the capsule introduction-cum-commercial. Some Armenians feel it's undignified compulsion, over the top jingo, if not racist. A few years ago an American comedy movie—"My Big Fat Greek Wedding" made fun of a Greek character who claimed every

great person was of Greek origin. It's OK to wrap the globe with the US flag and its pop culture, but it's not OK for a humble immigrant to talk about his people.

Do we run the tape of the minimalist "commercial" because we are insecure?

Do we suffer from superiority complex?

To go back to the first paragraph, a Frenchman doesn't have to tell us that Alexandre Dumas, Yves St. Laurent, Edith Piaf are French. France has been an important country for centuries. It has played a key role in world history for more than 1,200 years and has produced more than its share of greats. Likewise, the English, the Germans. America, although a late-comer, has been a superpower for a century. In fact, the 20th century has been labeled the American Century. Americans don't have to remind us of their greats, although they are unseemly eager to appropriate the genius of others. Canadians can cite the names of hundreds of great Canadian entertainers the world thinks are American… Mary Pickford, Raymond Massey, Glenn Ford, Yvonne de Carlo, Raymond Burr, Lorne Greene, Rich Little, Christopher Plummer, William Shatner of "Star Trek", Mike Myers, Jim Carrey . . .

Armenians are forced to introduce their nation in the above cliché manner because there was no Armenian state from the late 14th century on. And even in the late Middle Ages, Armenia was no more than vulnerable cities in Cilicia. For more than 600 years Armenians were subject of various empires or were scattered all over the map, often because of persecution. We "vanished" from history, thanks to the Egyptian Mamluks, the Arab Caliphates, the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, the Safavid Persians, and the Czarist Russians. Meanwhile, the Armenian genius-in-exile helped contribute to the fame and advancement of the countries where Armenians were forced to live. Thus, Sinan the fabled architect, became an Ottoman Turk, painter Ivan Aivazovsky (Hovhannes Aivazian) became Russian, and the great Armenian merchant families in Southeast Asia came to be known as Iranians. The list is practically endless… Sultana Shajar el-Durr of Egypt, Fatimid Vizier al-Afdal, fifteen to twenty Byzantian emperors, General Narses (Nerses) of Byzantium, Queen Melisende of Jerusalem, General Suvarov, Count Loris-Melikoff of Russia, Nubar Pasha of Egypt, Anna Arslan of Romania…Even today the world thinks contemporary author, social scientist Daron Acemoglu is Turkish, because he is a citizen of Turkey, although he is Armenian.

Since we had no state, no citizens of Armenia, and the non-existent Armenian state could not play a role in Middle East history, let alone in world affairs, we became invisible or "none-people". The educated foreigner might kindly have said that we had been around for thousands of years, but "now…there's no Armenia."
While the reappearance of the Republic of Armenia in the past two decades has put us back on the map, our homeland is small, poor, and "remote". The recent presidential elections there hardly got any ink in the international media. Except for chess master Levon Aronian, the Republic of Armenia has not produced an Armenian of the stature of Aram Khachaturian. While Armenia hobbles, challenged by a blockade, persistent threats of war, emigration, and corruption, Diaspora Armenians

have to continue to rely on the Diaspora genius to introduce our nation to the world.

Historic circumstances have put us in this position of "marketers" of our people. We are not the only nation to do so. Jews will remind you that Christ, Karl Marx, Freud, Einstein… were Jews. Indians will tell you that Engelbert Humperdinck, Freddy Mercury and a number of other "English" entertainers were born in India. Australians will tell you that Peter Finch, Errol Flynn, Rod Taylor, Mel Gibson, Nicole Kidman, etc. are Australian. Meanwhile, Canadians and Egyptians argue whether Cairo-born, Canada-raised Atom Egoyan is Canadian or Egyptian.

When we list our greats, we are not boasting, we are not being insecure; we are not suffering from superiority complex. We are telling odars about us in the only way we know, from the only seat available to us. After all, when we talk of France, Germany, Britain, or America, we are talking mostly about Victor Hugo, Beethoven, William Gladstone, John F. Kennedy. We are certainly not talking about the Massif Centrale, the Black Forest, the Yorkshire moors, or the Grand Canyon. We are talking about people. People who have made the world take notice of their nation or their state. It's people who, through their work, have elevated their country and the image of their country as a positive presence in human civilization.

Perhaps the day will come when Armenians will not have to cite their greats. Perhaps someday the world will know how much we have contributed to humanity. Perhaps someday 'odars' will tell us the names of Armenian superstars.

Meanwhile, there's no need to be queasy about our "Tweets" of Armenian greats.