ARGENTINE-ARMENIANS UNDAUNTED

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Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 18 February 2015

They might be in the distant South Atlantic, many thousand miles away from Armenia and other major Diaspora centres (except for the miraculous Uruguay), but the 110,000-strong Armenians of Argentina are making every effort to preserve their culture, identity and community in a continent with a population of 400 million.

Avo Naccachian placed the Armenian tricolor along with the Argentine flag at the peak of Aconcagua in 1981

The overwhelming majority of Armenians of Argentine live in Buenos Aires, the capital.

The heart of the community is Armenia Street in the fashionable Palermo neighborhood where internationally-known writer Luis Borges lived for many years. The main church, the secondary school, the AGBU, the RAG, the various committees of Tashnagtsoutyoun, the Armenian Communist club, three compatriotic (Hayrenagtsagan) associations of Marash, Aintab, and Hajen, two weeklies, cafes, restaurants, a theatre and several concert halls are huddled on or around Armenia Street. Decades ago, when Armenians arrived to the city many of them settled in Palermo because real estate was not expensive there. Years later when Palermo became a chic district, the Armenian community benefited as property values sky-rocketed and Armenians found their Little Armenia now situated in one of the most-desired parts of an already elegant city.

The community boasts two bilingual weeklies—"Sardarabad" and "Armenia". The first is published by the RAG. Its editor is Sergio Nahabetian, the son of legendary journalist Nahabed Nahabetian who was at the helm of the weekly for many decades. "Sardarabad" has correspondents in Montevideo, Sao Paolo, and in Cordoba (western Argentine) where 5,000 to 7,000 Armenians live.

The "Armenia" weekly, founded on April 24, 1931, is edited by Jorge Ruben Kazandjian and is published by the Armenian Cultural Association, a division of Tashnagtsoutyoun. Like "Sardarabad" it has 12 pages of bilingual text. "Sevan" is another local publication.

There are four Armenian churches and two chapels in Argentine's capital. The city also has seven Armenian schools. While at one time the students were all Armenian, nowadays a significant percentage of the student body is non-Armenian: since the schools need government subsidies they can't restrict attendance exclusively to Armenians.

The busy anthill on Armenia Street even has a theatre—"Tadron"—which shares premises with a café where you might see Armenian coffee cup readers tell the future to avid customers. The "Tadron" and the café are owned by actor-director Kalousd Jansezian and his Argentine-born Armenian wife Hermineh, a theatrical director. Beirut-born Jansezian settled in Buenos Aires after a visit in 1971. His productions—often monologues—have taken him several times to Armenia and to North America.

The monologues are pastiches from Armenian literary pieces.

Two other Armenians who are prominent in the local theatre are Armenia-born Vahram Hamparian, the maestro of the world-famous Teatro Colon of Buenos Aires. His wife is also a prominent figure at the same theatre.

There's no doubt that the most prominent neighborhood restaurant is "Armenia". Its menu is Armenian and Lebanese. In addition to serving food it's also an informal centre where young adults congregate, socialize, and sample traditional dishes late into the night.

The spiritual centre of the community is the Sourp Kevork Church on Armenia Street. It's headed by Archbishop Gissig Muradian of the St. James Brotherhood of Jerusalem. He has been here since 1975. He is assisted by Armenia-born Father Maghakia Amirian and brother Kahanas Mesrob and Yeghishe Nazarian.

The community also has five or six choirs (Gomidas, Arax, Arevakal) and dance groups (Nayiri, Kayane, Masis, Nareg).

When Armenians first settled in Buenos Aires they often pursued traditional trades they had learned back in the Middle East. Nowadays their children and grandchildren are textile, leather, and shoe merchants and factory owners. Many of them are also prominent in the jewellery district on Libertad Street. Others have also entered the professions—medical doctors, dentists, accountants, engineers, psychiatrists, pharmacists… At least six hotels are owned by Armenians. However, the most prominent Armenian-hotel is EuroBuilding on July 9 Avenue, the main street of Buenos Aires. Owned by Armenians in Venezuela, the hotel is managed by president Jorge Vartabetian. Lawyer Roberto Malkassian, who teaches law at a Buenos Aires university, is a working colleague of Vartabetian. He is also active in the National Congress of Western Armenians where he provides valued advice on Armenian demands from Turkey.

An unsung Armenian-Argentine hero (at least in the Armenian Diaspora) is Avo Naccachian. In 1981 the Buenos Aires native climbed Aconcagua, the highest mountain in America, and placed the Armenian tricolor at its peak, along with the Argentine flag. The Armenian flag was sewn by his mother Mary Mekdjian.

Of course, two internationally-most famous Argentine-Armenians are tennis champion David Nalbandian and airport builder and philanthropist Eduardo Eurnekian who is the second richest Argentine citizen.