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Czech-Armenians Relations: A Brief Historical Survey

(Polska wersja artykułu doc. Petry Košťálovej pt. *Stosunki czesko-ormiańskie: krótki przegląd historyczny*, ukazała się w 7 roczniku czasopisma „Lehahayer”)

Unlike other European countries with a long tradition of presence of Armenian merchants like France or Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Czech lands witnessed a minimal contact with the world of Armenian Diaspora from the historical point of view. Historically, the only part of lands of Bohemian crown (Bohemia, Moravia, part of Silesia), which came into contact with the notion of “Ottoman borderland”, was eastern part of Moravia (so-called Moravian Wallachia due to its certain ethno-historical similarity to mountainous Carpathian region in nowadays Romania, and Moravian Slovakia). Generally, Armenian-Czech relations did not intensify until the beginning of 20th century. After the First World War and the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, Czechoslovakia has emerged as a multi-ethnic state with numerous national minorities, whose traditional Hellenophilic approach was accompanied by certain interest of other Oriental disciplines, among others Armenology (Armenian Studies) as well. This interest is manifested for example by presence of Armenian manuscripts in Czech libraries and archives and also by emergence of literary images and stereotypes during the interwar period. There has been a real boom of this topic after the collapse of Soviet Union, when Czechoslovakia and later Czech Republic became one of the main transit countries of great migration waves from independent Republic of Armenia. Currently, Czech Republic is changing its status from transit country to country of final destination.

Hand in hand with this development goes the emergence of Armenian studies at Charles University in Prague. Individual topics as Armenian Genocide or Nagorno-Karabakh war are discussed also elsewhere, as a part of conflict and territorial studies at Masaryk University in Brno, or treated within The Theresienstadt Centre of Genocide Studies in Terezín. The actual research covers number of fields of Armenology, extended due to interdisciplinary approach also in the field of Oriental Studies and East European Studies in general. This article sought to summarize Armenian-Czech relations starting from Middle Ages to nowadays; as well as to define main research fields and institutions of Armenian studies in Czech Republic.

Middle Ages

Very little is known about Armenia in the lands of the Bohemian Crown during Middle Ages, but as far as we know, Czech lands were frequently visited in connection with so-called „Northern“ caravan route to Mongol Empire. Northern road known as famous *Via Regia* from Holy Roman Empire, whose branches came up even to Prague, connected trade towns along the Rhine, crossed actual Germany via Frankfurt, Aachen, Leipzig and continued to Kraków or Wrocław. In intersections of *Via Regia* and ancient Amber Road were located significant cultural crossroads. The northern road in East Europe was usually known also as „Tatar/Tartar road“.

Giovanni da Pian del Carpini, medieval diplomat and explorer, was sent as an envoy and papal legate to the court of the great khan of Mongols by Pope Innocenc IV. Jan/Iohannes/Giovanni, the member of Franciscan order, started his journey (or more precisely expedition) in Lyon and continued by *Via Regia* to Prague, where he spent some time at the court of Bohemian king Wenceslaus I., whose reign (based, inter alia, on prestige of one of defenders against Mongols in 1241), was characterised by the emergence of chivalrous social code, knight duels and troubadour poetry. Wenceslaus advised him to find an interpreter in Wroclav in Lower Silesia. Iohannes then continued to Kiev, crossing the rivers Don and Volga to the „land of Tatars“, and then through southern Russia and Siberia reached Karakorum, the famous moveable city of Mongols in the upper valley of river Orkhon, and presented Pope's message to khan Güyük. Crossing the river Volga two times (1246, 1247), Carpini was well informed about mountains of Caucasus and the land beyond them: *“then it comes the land ... of Georgians, Armenians and Turks”*.¹ Historical context of this period contains the mention of Georgian kingdom during the reign of queen Tamar's daughter, queen Rusudan, Seldjuk sultanate of Roum (Konya/Iconium), the part of Armenia under domination of brothers Zakarian and numerous dynasties related to Ayybides, Artukides, Zengides etc.² The Armenian kingdom of Cilicia (Little Armenia) was probably not mentioned by Iohannes Carpini because of its geographical distance, even if – together with Cyprus, Antiochia, Edessa, Tripolis and Jerusalem - represented an integral part of the history of the Crusades.³ As Iohannes Carpini returned the same way back, it is possible that some echoes of his journey were discussed at the Prague Premyslide court; however, they are not recorded in the historical sources.

¹ Jan del Plano Carpini in Tserstevens, A. *Předchůdcové Marca Pola/Precursors of Marco Polo*, Prague 1965, p. 63.

² Hacikyan, Agop Jack. *The Heritage of Armenian Literature: From the Sixth to the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 183-184.

³ Mutafian, Claude; van Lauwe, Éric. *Atlas historique de l'Arménie*, Éditions Autrement 2001, p. 54-55.

Carpini did not mention the presence of Armenian priests and merchants at the Great Khan's court, as did his successor, diplomatic envoy of Louis IX. King of France commonly known as Saint Louis, William of Rubruck. Rubruck, the member of Franciscan order, travelled to Karakorum at 1253, this time at the court of Great Khan Möngke. Ten years after Carpini, mutual relations between European countries, Cilician Armenia (especially ports as Layazzo/Ayass) and Great Armenia (Caucasus) developed and gradually became quite frequent; Rubruck being already a witness of the general use of Armenian interpreters and translators from Latin to Arabic and Mongol language (Armenians were usually considered bilingual or even multilingual, translating from Eastern Mediterranean *linguas francas* as Latin, Greek, old French, Arabic, Syriac or Mongol language). As he states: "*(King Louis') letters were translated by Armenians from Great Armenia, who detest strongly the nation of Saracens, so I was afraid, that they translated the text as they wished because of their hate and hatred*".⁴ Rubruck's mention about the vision of Armenian patriarch (saint Nerses) is also worth noting. This famous prophecy, widespread especially in the narrative of the late Middle Age, reflects the legend about alliance between Christians and „nation from Nord“, claiming that salvation for Christians in the fight against Muslims will come from the hands of a newly emerged nation of archers, thus evidently Mongols. Both Armenian and European negotiators relied in part on this prophecy and also on the vision of kingdom of Priest/King John. On the basis of this myth, dealing with protectors of Christianity, contemporary diplomats hoped in an agreement or an alliance between Mongols, Crusaders and Armenians.⁵ As Rubruck testified, the role of Armenians on the Tatar road was omnipresent – he frequented Armenian priest named Sergius at Karakorum⁶, he saw Armenian translators in Sartakh camp near Volga river etc. On their way back, William Rubruck and his companions met the Armenian king of Cilicia, Hetum, who was actually on his road to the court of Great Khan in order to sign an alliance between Cilicia and Mongols.

Another contact between Armenia and Czech lands, albeit indirect, took place in the period of Hussite Reformation at the beginning of the 15th century, movement precursor to the Protestant Reformation. Many of Hussite ideas, taken mainly from Jan Hus and inspired by John Wycliffe, were widely influenced by the dualist religious sect of Bogomils, which

⁴ Rubruck in A. Tserstevens 1965, p. 153.

⁵ Laiou, Angeliki; Roy, Mottahadeh. *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and Muslim World*, Dumbarton Oaks 2001, p. 77. Thomson, Robert H. *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Thirteenth Century: Identities and Allegiances: The Peripheries: Armenia* s. 197 in Herin Judith; Saint-Giullan Guillaume, *Identities and Allegiances in the Eastern Mediterranean After 1204*, Ashgate Publishing 2011, s. 208.

⁶ Tserstevens, p.169.

flourished in nowadays Bulgaria between 10-15th centuries. Bogomils were supposed to get the inspiration from Armenian (neo-Manichaeic) sect of Paulicians.⁷

Renaissance: pilgrimage to Holy City

First recorded direct contacts between Czech lands and worldwide Armenian diaspora trace their origins to the period of Renaissance and Humanism. The visit of sacred town of Jerusalem was at this time considered to be the accomplishment of sacred duty, quasi-obligation of well-educated Christian nobleman (in Armenian *նվառ*, *ukht*, “Covenant” with God). Pilgrims from Bohemia and Moravia came mostly by sea, embarked in Venice, landed in Jaffa port and continued already in holy procession to Jerusalem. Many Armenian pilgrims used the same road (from Constantinople or Cairo to Jaffa) and then continued in guarded caravan of pilgrims to the walls of Holy City. Itineraries of Czechs and Armenians differed at the beginning of the road - Armenian pilgrims known as *mahtes* (*մահտէ*, title expressing respect)⁸ coming from Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth used the southern branch of Tatar road to Black Sea region and Crimea – along of rivers Siret, Prut, Dnieper, crossing Danube river at Galati (actual eastern Romania) and through famous Aydos pass in Rodopy mountains to Edirne and Constantinople; and from there by sea or by land to Jerusalem.

At the same time, there were also local Armenians in Jerusalem, settled in *Haykakan tagh* (Armenian quarter) situated around Armenian Apostolic monastery of Saint Jacob (*սուրբ Հակոբ*, *surb Hakob*). Their language of communication being already Arabic, they regularly attended worship services, celebrated in their liturgical language, Classical Armenian (*grabar*). Armenian quarter, the part of Old City, was also the purpose of frequent visits of Armenian merchants from Ottoman empire or Persia – *ağas* from Constantinople, Diyarbakır, or Aleppo, *khodjas/khwadjas* from New Julfa near Isfahan; *bâzircans* or *dovlats* from Lvov/Lviv; they all came here not only for business, but also for a holy mission, after which they had the right to use the title of *mahtes*. Armenians mainly acted as intermediaries and interpreters – *tercimans* or *dragomans*, whose services were also used by Czech Catholic and Protestant pilgrims (in this case, through Italian or Latin language). Dragomans or “*tulmac*” were official interpreters with connection to ruling authorities. Known as skilled mediators with high degree of adaptability, Armenians also enjoyed the reputation of producers of “tourist/pilgrim souvenirs” of this period. From the beginning of 17th century, Armenian merchants could be considered as a “bridge” between European and Oriental culture⁹ - let us recall that they played the same role during the Crusades.

⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bogomils> 19.5. 2020

⁸ From Arabic *maqdisi*, equivalent of *haddji*

⁹ Ze'evi, Dror. *An Ottoman Century. The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s*, SUNY Press 1996, pp. 4-5.

Armenian merchants (especially from Isfahan) formed a kind of *commenda* – specific trade companies, close to traditional companies of Italian towns, which extended much far beyond, even to India and China.¹⁰

Almost every pilgrim at this time came into contact with Armenians and their Church. The Chapel of St. Helena, located in the church of the Holy Sepulchre, was under administration of Armenian Apostolic church, as well as some smaller churches (St. Apostle, St. Thadée) and, of course, the famous monastery of saint Jakob/James serving as shelter and inn for all Armenian pilgrims. Monastery was the siege of Apostolic patriarch. Despite their *dhimmi* status or status of tolerated religious minority with specific rights and duties subjected to Muslims¹¹, the presence and social salience of Armenians in Ottoman Jerusalem did not escape attention of Czech pilgrims and authors of contemporary travel accounts. Pilgrims and interested writers in one person – namely Oldřich Prefát¹² and Kryštof Harant z Polžic a Bezdržic¹³, authors of detailed description of St. Helena Chapel and St. James monastery – they both visited Armenian quarter of Jerusalem few years before Simeon Lehatsi (Simon of Poland), famous Armenian traveller from Lvov.¹⁴ Also Vavřinec Slížanský, Czech pilgrim and author of travelogue, stated that: „*church of saint Iacobi/James belongs to Armenians. We were led inside by an Armenian who was a Christian and born a Pole*”.¹⁵ This quotation could be considered a proof of the existence of strong Armenian community in the territory of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Except Jerusalem, of course, Armenian pilgrims visited other places of pilgrimage as Rome, Loretto or Santiago de Compostella, but their number significantly decreased after the end of *pax mongolica*, so during 14th-15th century, as Simeon notes in tone of perceptible regret: “*But since, there are few Armenians coming now, one, two, three or four in a year, so this is why Franks have taken our inns for themselves and now they are living in*” (The Shrine of Our Lady in Loretto in Ancona). “*We learned from the locals, that they earlier (Franks in Rome) used to appreciate the Armenian nation (as pilgrims) from holy God. Pilgrims came in torn cloaks, (Franks) took them, cut them into small pieces, and gave them as gifts.*”

¹⁰ Harris, Ron., *Going the Distance: Eurasian Trade and the Rise of Business Corporation 1400-1700*, Princeton University Press 2020, p. 155.

¹¹ Peri, Oded. *Christianity Under Islam in Jerusalem: The Question of the Holy Sites in Early Ottoman Times*, Leiden Brill 2001 p.

¹² Oldřich Prefát z Vlkanova, Cesta z Prahy do Benátek a odtud potom po moři až do Palestiny. In *Cesty do svaté země/Pilgrimages to Holy Land*, ed. Josef Dostál s. 43.

¹³ Kryštof Harant z Polžic a Bezdržic, Cesta z království českého do Benátek, odtud do země Svaté. In *Cesty do svaté země/Pilgrimages to Holy Land*, ed. Josef Dostál s. 208.

¹⁴ Akinean, Nerses H. *Ughegruthyun, taregruthyun yev hishatakarankh*, Vienna Mkhitarakan tparan 1936, p. 126. Ներսէս Ակինեան, Ուղեգրութիւն, տարեգրութիւն եւ յիշատակարանք, Վիեննա Մխիթարական տպարան 1936, p. 126. Czech translation: Košťálová, Petra. *Putování 1608-1618 Cestopis a kroniky arménského poutníka*, Praha Argo 2016, s. 271.

¹⁵ Vavřinec Slížanský *Nový popis cesty do Jeruzaléma a Svaté země 1660-1661*, Boskovice 2009, p. 52.

But this is no longer the case.” (Rome).¹⁶ Simeons’ statements here have an obvious connection with contemporary codified stereotypes of Armenian nation – especially ambivalent autostereotype (self-image).

Early Modern Period

Unlike many other countries with a long tradition of presence of Armenian merchants and Armenian religious communities (either Apostolic, Catholic or Protestant confession) like France or Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Czech lands did never belong to the target countries of large Armenian diaspora in the context of the history of the Middle Ages and the Modern Age. Geographically closest were cities as Kraków, Wrocław, Zamość, Lvov/Lwów or Kamieniec Podolski (near Chernivtsi) with frequent connections to Danube ports, Crimean peninsula and Black Sea region in general.

According to preserved sources, the history of Prague is linked to the urban legend dealing with the establishment of the first Prague coffee house. The origin of the café is attributed to the person, known as Georgius Deodatus (in Latin) – George from Damas in Syria. Georgius was probably an Armenian, who came to Prague through Vienna at the very beginning of 18th century. As the knowledge of drinking coffee in Vienna was already extended (according to another urban legend, it was Polish soldier Georg Kolschitzky, who introduced coffee here just after Ottoman siege of the city in 1683), Georgius – probably on the advice of Jesuits – continued to Prague, where he started his own business in the Charles Street (Karlova ulice), located in the centre of Old City near Charles bridge, a part of so-called King’s Road. This route connected Prague Castle and King’s Court near Powder Gate and traditionally served as the road of coronation processions of Bohemian kings. The coffee culture at the time of Georgius flourished in Ottoman Empire, being on the one hand pleasant entertainment and on the another a more serious opportunity to meet and discuss a variety of topics, among them of course politics. “Rebel” visitors of Istanbul kahvehanes became a pretext for closing all coffee houses and occasional prohibitions of drinking coffee – which for example happened during the reign of sultan Murad IV. (1623-1640). Armenians then gradually lost a monopoly on oriental goods as coffee or silk due to the development of European colonies.

There exists a striking parallel in connection with the name of Diodato/Deodatus both in case of Prague and Vienna. Iohannes/Ovanes Diodato or Hovhannes Astvatsadourian (“Given by God”, as he translated his name from Armenian to Latin version) is sometimes linked also with the history of Vienna coffee houses. Iohannes Diodato was considered to be a kind of “Ottoman spy”; however, as such were usually perceived all merchants, soldiers

¹⁶ Akinean 1936, p. 69, 90.

or renegades coming from Ottoman Empire. The coffee was already known in Vienna from 1665 because of the presence of Ottoman embassy at the court of Emperor Leopold I. Habsbourg; but in this period, it had a bitter taste and was used for medical purposes (for example to aid digestion etc.). Vasvári treaty from 1664¹⁷ generally (even if only briefly) simplified Austrian Levantine trade with the coffee after long period of wars.

Iohannes Diodato should have been the founder of the first Vienna café in 1685, starting to add a sugar in cups of coffee. Although having royal licence for selling coffee accorded for 20 years, he was forced to leave Vienna and escape to Venice in 1693 because being suspected of working for the Ottoman side.¹⁸ He may returned back in 1701, seeing that all coffee trade is now in hands of others, probably members of Armenian Viennese community, originating from Lvov or Beograd. In contrast, the main contemporary rival of Diodato, Isaac de Luca (Sahak Ghukassian), came directly from Erevan, so from the territory of Persia.¹⁹ The imperial edict of Emperor Leopold I. dating from 1700 granted the right for Isaac and three others (probably Armenians too: Joseph, David and Philipp) to open public cafés.²⁰ The name of Diodato/Astvatsadourian/Astvatsadour then disappears from the Viennese legend and it does not reappear; nevertheless, the same name plays a crucial role in the legend of Prague, though not in the form of John/Iohanes/Hovhannes/Jan, but George/Georgius/Gevorg/Jiří. Astvatsadour is very common name in Armenian and so it is possible, that they were different people with the same name. On the other hand, the possibility of pure inspiration by Viennese legend cannot be rejected either. However, we can assume several aspects of coffee trade phenomenon – both Astvatsadour should have the strong connection with Ottoman or Persian business environment and both were obviously converts to the Catholic faith, which made it easier for them to integrate in Viennese or Prague society.

However, it should be noted that all above mentioned facts are not recorded in primary historical sources like chronicles or colophons; we can find them only in form of urban legends registered in the time of national revival period and vividly described in many articles in contemporary newspapers and journals. Unlike other neighboring states as Poland, Ukraine and Romania, the Armenian presence in Czech lands was never reflected in the toponyms (in contrast, we find the Armenian bell tower in Kamieniec, Armenian

¹⁷ Dangl, Vojtech. *Slovensko vo víre stavovských povstání* Bratislava 1986, p. 136.

¹⁸ For more details: Weinberg, Bennett Alan; Bealer, Bonnie. *The World of Caffeine: The Science and Culture of the World's Most Popular Drug*, Routledge 2004.

¹⁹ Segel, Harold B. *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits 1890-1938*. Purdue University Press, 1993, p. 9.

²⁰ Ibidem.

street in Lvov, Armenian cathedral in Lvov ²¹, Armenian *khachkars* in Caffa, Sudak and Lvov etc.).²²

Let us continue with the story (even if not well sourced) of Georgius Deodatus/Diodato/Dieudonné/Astvatsadour in Prague. He bought (probably in 1704) the house At the Golden Snake situated at the corner of Charles/Karlova Street and Liliová. Georgius started to introduce until unknown coffee to Prague rich bourgeois. The legend states that he used to carry the hot drink on a large tray on his head, dressed in an oriental robe (which was probably inspired by “Armenian fashion” of the period of Enlightenment (Lumières), characterised mostly by “Armenian” cap and coat popularized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and by baggy trousers, Turkish şalvar).²³

Georgius offered cups full of hot coffee to passers-by; growing success led him to stop walking through the city centre and to open the first coffeehouse in Malá Strana – nowadays’ the Prague quarter on the other bank of the river Vltava, then, however, the independent city (five cities of Prague were merged into one unit only in the year 1784). The café in the house At the Three Ostriches near the Charles Bridge existed till 1730 (the year of Georgius’s death). He was buried – as Catholic (Georgius Deodatus Damascenus) – in the graveyard of monastery of St. Thomas in Malá Strana.

This story could take its inspiration not only from Vienna, but also from Parisian urban legend about Armenian named Pascal, the first owner of coffee-shop in Paris, precisely in St. Germain fair in 1671.²⁴ The prevailing mood during the reign of King Louis XIV., known as Roi de Soleil, was extremely favourable to the introduction of “goût d’Orient” into European noble society. Pascal became famous for his cries “café, café” and for offering cups of hot coffee directly to passers-by – the story we know later from Vienna and Prague. Even if Central Europe had its own independent sources of Oriental inspiration, caused by imminent proximity of Ottoman border, the influence of Lumières from France should also be taken into account. The long coat and a cap decorated with fur correspond with “vogue orientaliste”, which has begun to gain importance in European intellectual circles since

²¹ Szulakowska, Urszula. *Renaissance and Baroque Art and Culture in the Eastern Polish-Lithuania*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019, pp. 147-150.

²² Donabedian, Patrick. Small mural khachkars in medieval Armenian communities of Crimea, Galicia, Podolia and Bessarabia In *On the borderline between the East and the West* (Materials of the International Conference dedicated to 90th anniversary of Yaroslav Dashkevych, Lviv 2018, pp. 324-335. halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01933957/document

²³ Crowe, Yolande. *Le manteau arménien de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. In Festschrift en honneur de Dickran Kouymjian, Fresno Californie 2007

<http://rousseaustudies.free.fr/articlemanteuarmenien.html>

²⁴ More details in: Ukers, William Harrison. *All About Coffee. History of the Early Parisian Coffee Houses*. Library of Alexandria 1935. Coffee introduced to Paris for the first time by Suleyman Aga, an ambassador to the court of King Louis XIV.

1680 – in works of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau and others, we are confronted with a stereotypical vision of “Orient”, fictional category of literary discourse.²⁵ Rousseau bought his costume from Armenian merchant living in the departement of Val d’Oise (actually Paris) because of his own comfort and also because to make him visible in his social milieu – thus, in the milieu of elite. Armenians as multilingual merchants and interpreters were closest to Europeans and simultaneously considered a corner stone of “Oriental” category. Hence the popularity of Armenian dress caused (to a large extent) by the fascination of alterity and perceived as an attempt how to grasp it.

“Long” 19th century and the National Revival period

Some members of the Czech (or Slave) National Revival sympathized with ideas of Philhellenism or Hellenophilia. The interest in the study of ancient manuscripts was deepened by interest in ancient Greek civilisation in general. Next to the Greeks, Armenians were personification of the world of early Eastern Christianity and at the same time the quintessence of Orientalism. Maybe, the mutual sympathy between Czechs and Armenians – both landlocked²⁶ Christian nations situated historically on the Ottoman borders (eastern and western) or at least in their vicinity with own perception of history, defined by specific historical events – could also play its role. One of the most prominent figures of Czech National Revival period, Vojtěch Náprstek (well-known philanthropist and patron, later the founder of Naprstek museum and propagator of various technical innovations), even studied the classical Armenian language in Vienna. Viennese Mekhitarist order (Catholics of Armenian liturgy) was the nearest centre of Armenian Studies from the geographical point of view. Otherwise, interested students had to turn to schools in Venice or Paris. New wave of interest in the category of “Orient” emerged after 1864 due to travels of Ármin Vambéry in Ottoman Empire and Central Asia and his famous travel accounts.

Armenian Studies in 20th century

Due to the lack of previous frequent contacts, the turning point in the history of Czech-Armenian relations was certainly the period of 20th century. Several years before the declaration of First World War and the subsequent disintegration of Austria-Hungary, the family of Mardirossian/Martirosjan came to Prague from Eastern Ottoman Anatolia. Nshan Mardirossian then contributed strongly to raising awareness of Armenian language and culture in early Czechoslovakia – his student was Jaromír Jedlička, talented translator from

²⁵ Aravamudan, Srinivas. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*, University of Chicago Press 2011, p. 76. For more details: Saïd, Edward W. *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books 1978.

²⁶ Armenians in Constantinople or Smyrna of course were not landlocked; here we mean the territory of Great Armenia (later 6 Armenian vilayets) and Persian Armenia.

English a later the first established lecturer of Armenian and Georgian language at the Charles University. According to available sources, in addition to above-mentioned family, we know about the presence of Armenian carpet merchant (Artin Aslanian).²⁷ Carpets and rugs were traditionally “Armenian” speciality, like silk trade in general, facilitated by ethnic and religious networks of merchant families.²⁸ These merchants corresponded to the wide demand for oriental rugs, which served as decoration and a sign of social class in contemporary bourgeois society. Prague carpet house was probably connected with Istanbul (benefiting also from reputation of New Djulfa Armenians) or İzmir/Smyrna carpet houses, which we find among the most famous at this time.²⁹

Because of the fact that Austria-Hungary formed an alliance with Germany and the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, for obvious political reasons it did not publish information regarding the massacres of the Armenian population during the reign of the Young Turks. In contrast, Czech newspapers more widely informed about previous tragic events during the rule of sultan Abdul-Hamid II.³⁰ This Ottoman sultan was nicknamed by European medias “Red” because of Bulgarian and Armenian massacres of civil population, but also because of his strong opposition to Western interventions. Thus, the negative stereotype of Ottomans was strongly determined by contemporary politics and diplomatic relations. It became clear later, when - in this case visibly - the censorship favoured Ottoman Empire as German and Austro-Hungarian ally.

The change came after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the creation of Czechoslovakia. Years between 1918 – 1923 are usually described as the period of great migration waves, originating mainly from the region of Black Sea, Anatolia, Eastern Mediterranean and of course Russia. With certain exaggeration it could be said, that after the collapse of Ottoman and Russian Empire, the whole Mediterranean and East Europe were “in move”. Czechoslovakia – especially Prague – became a target of “white” Russian émigrés, who have created a well-consolidated and influential community there (Prague Linguistic circle), while Armenian refugees tried to get in other destinations, primarily France, United States, Canada etc. While official media were silent about Armenians, one person sought to popularize the question of Armenian refugees and get the financial help for them – his name was Karel Hansa. He travelled in the summer of 1922 in Aleppo, where

²⁷ Asatryan, Hakob. The Armenians in the Czech Republic in: Siekiersi, Konrad; Troebts, Stefan (ed.). *Armenians in Post-Socialist Europe*, Böhlau Verlag 2016, pp. 159-169.

²⁸ More details in Aslanian, Sepuh. *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks*, University of California Press 2014

²⁹ Quataert, Donald. *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 151-152. Armenian Ottoman subjects as missionary sponsored cheap workers.

³⁰ For more details: Jandák, Marek. *Arménská genocida: příčiny, průběh a osobní svědectví událostí z let 1915-1922*, EPOCH 2018. <https://a2larm.cz/2020/04/armenska-genocida-prvni-globalizace-velka-valka-a-cesky-tisk/>

he was (according to his own words) surprised and moved by the tragic situation of Armenian orphans working in carpet manufactories. Hansa started to cooperate with Near East Relief, launching a fundraiser to support repatriation of orphans. He published his memories, accompanied by eyewitness testimonies, entitled “Hrůzy Východu” (Atrocities of Orient, Prague 1923). Hansa’s book was recently republished thanks to efforts of Armenian diaspora.

Certain echo of Oriental motives could be found reflected in numerous articles of Lev Nussimbaum or Kurban Said (originally from Baku), author of famous roman entitled Ali and Nino. But maybe the most famous literary monument of Armenian genocide during the First War was written by Franz Werfel, member of Prague circle literary group associated with names as Ernst Pollak, Max Brod or Franz Kafka, regularly meeting at the café Arco and writing in German (Prager Kreis of Max Brod). Werfel is the author of Forty Days of Musa Dagh (firstly published in German language as Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh in 1933), banned by the Nazis just a year after its release. In his historically based roman, Franz Werfel depicts with great precision (albeit with a certain dose of author’s imagination) deportations and massacres of Armenian civil population in the region of today’s south Turkey (Cilicia) and the resistance of the inhabitants of few villages around the Mountain of Moses. Armenians managed to defend themselves for 40 days against the Turkish army, fortified in the very top of the mountain. They were finally picked up by French steamer ship and taken to Port Saïd. Descendants of defenders are living today in diaspora (especially in France) or in Anjar in Libanon. Musa Dagh rebellion has similar connotations in Armenian collective memory as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising within the context of Jewish holocaust.

Dr. Jaromír Jedlička was the first officially established lecturer of Armenian and Georgian at Charles University, thus the founder of Caucasology in Czechoslovakia, later Czech Republic. One of his most important translations (till today) is *Vepqis tqaosani* or The Knight in the Panther’s Skin/Muž v tygří kůži by Shota Rustaveli (from Georgian language) and *Zajatci pardálí soutěsky* by Vakhtang Ananian, translated from Armenian. Jaromír Jedlička worked at Faculty of Arts also after the Second World War. Among his students we should mention especially dr. Václav A. Černý, the translator from Georgian, Abkhazian, modern Armenian and classical Armenian, and Ludmila Motalová, translator from Armenian. Both frequently visited Caucasus and the number of their works count many titles, mainly translations from Soviet Armenia literature.³¹

³¹ Armenian literature and folklore translated to Czech language:

Bohatýři dávných časů (Epic histories from Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus), (transl. Václav A. Černý)

Aksel Bakunc, Osévač černých brázd (transl. Václav A. Černý)

Jeghiše Čarenc: Země Nairi (transl. Václav A. Černý)

In “Golden” 60th and 70ths, Armenia was one of the most favourite “exotic” destinations of Czechoslovak tourists. Excursions and tours across Armenia (and, of course, Georgia) included the most important historical sites as Temple of Garni, Geghard monastery, Zvartnots cathedral ruins or monastery of Khor Virap; the city of Yerevan represented an example of modern city full of parks, gardens, fountains and delicious cuisine, accompanied by cognac and wine. The possibility to visit Armenia was usually associated with the “Soviet-wide” tour, including also Tbilisi, Pitzunda, Crimea and Moscow. The Czechoslovak society got also acquainted with the Armenian culture thanks to Leonid Yengibarov or Yengibarian, famous Soviet clown and actor of Armenian origin, member of Armenian State Circus. As an actor, Yengibarov appeared in films of Sergei Paradjanov or Tengiz Abuladze; later he established himself mainly as a mime. His work was very appreciated by audience in Eastern bloc countries, Prague being no exception. Leonid Yengibarov was seen in several plays in theatre Na Zábradlí between years 1963-1964; among his friends were for examples singers as Karel Gott, Waldemar Matuška, Jiří Suchý and his brother Ondřej from Semafor theatre etc. Czechoslovaks were familiarized with the literary works of Yeghishe Tcharents, Aksel Bakunts, Avetik Isahakyan, Paruyr Sevak, Vardges Petrosyan or Perch Zeythuntsyan; later in 80ths also with books of William Saroyan, Armenian writer born in Californian Fresno. Extremely popular were also famous jokes of “Radio Yerevan” - although they had nothing to do with Armenia really.

Few years before the collapse of Soviet Union, Czechoslovak society was deeply touched by 1988 Spitak earthquake. Humanitarian actions and collections took place throughout whole society; founders of Armenian Prague Diaspora were among the first leaders.

Armenian Diaspora in Czech Republic

The Armenian diaspora living in the Czech Republic dates back to the 1990s when, in connection with the collapse of the USSR and the start of the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the massive migration wave from the Republic of Armenia towards the Russian Federation or Western and Northern Europe started. The status of Czech Republic was gradually changing from the country of transit (in late 1990s) to the country of final destination; Prague playing the most important role in the number of immigrants. It is estimated that there are

Avetik Isahakjan, Abu-Lala Mahari (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Avetik Isahakjan: Bezpočtu cest (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Jablíčko zelené, červené a bílé (fairy tales), (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Čarovná růže (fairy tales), (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Mkrtič Armen: Zázračný pramen (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Parujr Sevak: Hymnus na světlo (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Hrant Mathevosjan: Síla země (transl. Ludmila Motalová)

Vardges Petrosjan Osamělý ořešák (transl. Hana Vrbová)

Písně země Nairi: lidové a trubadúrské písně středověké Arménie (transl. Petra Kohoutková)

thousands of Armenians living here today and the second generation is slowly growing up. Shortly after the year 2000, there were less than two thousand Armenians registered here; now almost twelve thousands of Czech Armenians is living in the territory of Czech Republic. Some of them have already Czech citizenship, others Armenian citizenship with permanent or temporary residence permit (the effort to obtain Czech citizenship and thus Czech passport is caused – especially in the case of young men – also by the fear of compulsory military service, in which they would have to participate in case of their return or visit in Armenia). The most numerous Armenian communities are in Prague or in Brno; groups of several families (often relatives) are living also in Ústí nad Labem, Děčín etc. Prague is perceived as a city with the greatest number of economic opportunities. Armenian diaspora could be described clearly by its urban character and it shows specific features dealing with its identity strategies and models of integration.³² The integration is facilitated among others by generally good knowledge of Russian and high degree of intelligibility between Czech and Russian language.

The vast majority of Armenians has its own business, based usually on family ties or more generally ethno-religious ones; they are searching the jobs in the compatriot networks either. The social salience of Armenian community in Prague significantly increased with the creation of Armenian art galleries in the historic centre of the city (streets Železná, Husova etc.). While artists dominate in Prague, small traders and sellers predominate in other cities (specializations as the sale of vegetables, clothing repair etc.). Some Armenians are also involved in the real estate business in the immediate vicinity of Prague (satellite housing in Jesenice). Armenians usually place great emphasis in higher education of their children (lawyers, IT specialists etc.). Other specific sectors of employment include for example the services connected with mediation (various permits and licences) and institutionalization of language (teaching).

Besides to teaching the language, the first attempt of the Armenian community is usually to establish regular church services. Armenian Apostolic liturgies took place either in the Church of Saint Giles, situated in the heart of Old Town (Husova street, Prague 1), either in the Church of Holy Spirit (at the crossroad between Old Town and Jewish Town). The Armenian Apostolic Church was registered in the Czech Republic under the name of St. Gregory Lusavoritch (directly on the approval of the Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Katholikos Garegin II.) in the year 2000. Church of Holy Spirit was transferred to Armenian Apostolic parish in 2015; keys were symbolically handed over by

³² Field research of Jaroslav Maroušek, in details: Uherek, Zdeněk. Cizinecké komunity a městský prostor v České republice In *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review* 39/2 2003, pp. 193-216. sreview.soc.cas.cz/pdfs/csr/2003/02/04.pdf

Catholic cardinal Dominik Duka to Armenian Apostolic representative, vardapet Barsegh Pilavchyan. At the same time, modern Armenian *khachkar* was erected in the centre of Prague, near the Church of Saint Kliment and Kunhuta (Jindřišská street, Prague 2).

Armenian Genocide commemoration and the fight for recognition is one of the cornerstones of modern Armenian identity, especially the identity of Armenian diaspora. Members of the Armenian diaspora in Czech Republic meet regularly each 24.4. in order to commemorate the Armenian genocide. The theme of these tragic events currently referred in Armenian as *Aghet* (Catastrophe) was raised (for the first time in Czech Republic) already in 2006, when international conference was held in the Senate under the auspices of former president Václav Havel, initiated by senator Jaromír Štětina (former war correspondent, among others also in Karabakh war). Contributions of well-known authors were heard during this conference; we can mention for example Tessa Hoffmann or Vahakn Dadrian.³³ Since the year 2006, the Armenian genocide represents the subject of the heated debate, going on the Czech political scene and dividing society into supporters of Armenian cause and partisans of Turkish one. In 2012, the conference entitled Mountains of Moses took place at Evangelical Theological Faculty of Charles University, headed by prof. Paul Levine. Here, its participants had the possibility to see – in the Czech Republic for the first time – the film about Armenian Genocide made in 1919, of which only a part has survived to this day (Ravished Armenia, its relict Auction of Souls). The same year (2012) a non-profit organization dealing with the causes of genocide in general, entitled Theresiensdadt Centre for Genocide Studies or Archaeology of Evil, was founded.³⁴ Current Czech president Miloš Zeman on the occasion of his state visit to Armenia in 2016 called the massacres of the Armenian civilian population genocide; he did the same in 2014 during the visit of former Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan in Prague. His opinion found its response at conservative and religious part of Czech society; a dialogue between the Czech Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church has begun. The turning point of this whole period was (besides the erection of the first Armenian khachkar in Prague and the foundation of Armenian church of Holy Spirit) a mass, celebrated in the metropolitan cathedral of Saint Vitus located in the Prague Castle, with the participation of cardinal Duka and vardapet Pilavchyan.

Czech Republic is not a strong enough geopolitical power that its support for this issue will provoke a strict Turkish response, although, of course, there were strong Turkey's protests, albeit limited to sending diplomatic notes. When deputies and senators condemned Nazi

³³ Jandák, Marek. *Arménská genocida: příčiny, průběh a osobní svědectví událostí z let 1915-1922*, EPOCH Praha 2018. For more details about Armenian genocide as the issue introduced to Czech readers see also: Řoutil, Michal; Košťálová, Petra; Novák, Petr. *Disaster of Christians: Extermination of Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks in the Ottoman Empire in 1914-1923*. Pavel Mervart Červený Kostelec, 2018.

³⁴ <http://www.archeologiezla.cz/aurora-z-armenie/>

crimes as well as Armenian genocide, it provoked a negative reaction from the side of Turkish Embassy and caused a verbal shootout between the current ambassadors of both concerned countries. Even if the Chamber of Deputies directly recognized Armenian Genocide in 2017 (and Senate did the same in 2020), top Czech politicians still prefer the cautious statement that only historians should have been called to decide on this matter, not politicians. Following Turkish protests, the Czech Foreign Ministry issued a statement that these resolutions were not legally binding.³⁵ Nevertheless, Czech Republic figures already on the list of countries that recognized Armenian Genocide.³⁶ Recently, two monographs were published in Czech language on the subject of Armenian genocide: *Disaster of Christians: Extermination of Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks in the Ottoman Empire in 1914-1923* (2017) by Michal Řoutil, Petra Košťálová, Petr Novák and *Armenian Genocide: Causes, Course of Events and Personal Testimonies* by Marek Jandák (2018).

Another turning point in the history of Czech-Armenian relations was the establishment of Armenian Embassy in Prague (whose counterpart represents the Czech Embassy in Yerevan). Armenian Embassy started to work in 2011 and primarily provides services to Armenian citizens living permanently or temporarily in the territory of Czech Republic. It cares also about sponsoring Armenian cultural events and promotion of Armenian culture in general. The Armenian Embassy aims to bring together Armenians living in the Czech Republic and to facilitate business contacts between two countries. Thanks to efforts of Armenian diaspora committee members, Armenian community has the opportunity to participate on annually held events as the Armenian Genocide commemoration (24. April) and celebration of Independence Day (21. September). Influential members of the diaspora figure as patrons of whole community – for example the founder of MIKO International, Gevorg Avetisian from Frýdek-Místek (producer of famous cakes Marlenka, starting originally as a family business and today exporting to whole Europe), sponsored the creation of documentary film and online courses and educational programs on Armenian Genocide.³⁷ In general, it can be stated that the most “visible” business specialities concern the import of Armenian cognacs and wines to the Czech Republic, other Armenian cuisine products and, of course, products of arts (especially in Prague, Armenians are nicknamed as “diaspora of artists”).

As regards the teaching of the Armenian language and the publishing of Armenian texts, the first steps have been taken already in late 90ths. Magazine Ozer (Days) started to be published (for the most part in Armenian language, chief-editor being Hakob Asatryan),

³⁵ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/turecko-ceska-republika-senat-usneseni-kritika-genocida-armeni.A200522_084233_zahranicni_aug

³⁶ https://www.armenian-genocide.org/recognition_countries.html

³⁷ https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/proc-cesko-oficialne-neuznalo-genocidu-armenu_340875.html

accompanied briefly by magazine Nairi (in Czech language). Saturday school of Armenian language for immigrant children started working and simultaneously, Armenian studies programme was established at Charles University, Faculty of Arts. Actually, Armenian language, literature and history are treated within Department of East-European Studies. Several books on Armenian issues have been published in Czech language – for example *Songs of the Land of Nairi: Folk and Troubadour Songs of Medieval Armenia* (2006), *Stereotypical Images and Ethnic Myths: Cultural Identity of Armenia* (2012), *Armenian Chronicles from Lake Van. 16th - 18th centuries* (2011) and more recently the commented translation of travelogue: *Simeon of Poland, Travels 1608-1618: Travel Accounts and Chronicles of the Armenian Pilgrim* (2016) by Petra Košťálová or *The Art of the Armenian Book Through the Ages* (2016), *Tntesean or the Music of the Armenian Hymnal* (2018) by Haig Utidjian. Both doc. Košťálová and dr. Utidjian teach in the Department of East-European Studies at Charles University; dr. Utidjian being also the choirmaster of the Charles University orchestra and author of exposition at National Library (The Art of the Armenian Book through the Ages). The most of above mentioned monographs were published under the auspices of the publishing house P. Mervart, whose edition series called Pro Oriente is dedicated to the heritage of Eastern Christianity. Scientific articles are published by journal Parrésia or other peer-reviewed journals.

Further Czech-Armenian cooperation is developing not only in the field of business, but also in the academic and research centres level. We could mention for example project Hayastan, which consists of 3D documentation of Armenian churches, khachkars, fortresses etc., coordinated by Department of Archaeology (Czech Academy of Sciences) and by Department of Archaeology (Armenian Academy of Sciences).³⁸ Non-profit humanitarian organization Archa dedicates its efforts to help earthquake victims in the area of Spitak and Gyumri.

Actual research in Czech Republic

Actual research in Czech Republic covers number of fields within the wide range of Armenian studies. Firstly, Armenian studies are taught at the Department of East-European Studies at Charles University as an independent branch. Besides Prague, there is a centre dealing with the art of Armenian Diaspora at University of Ostrava (prof. Waldemar Deluga). Doc. Košťálová, whose specialization consists in study of Armenian historical sources, prepares in cooperation with other colleagues a monograph about Armenian History (Lidové Noviny Publishing House) and an Anthology of Armenian Poetry. Dr. Utidjian is well-known musicologist and patristics scholar. Armenian issues are studied also at Masaryk University in Brno or Theresienstadt Centre (territorial studies, conflict studies,

³⁸ <https://starfos.tacr.cz/cs/project/DF12P01OVV032>

genocide studies etc.), mostly oriented to the phenomenon as Armenian genocide or Armenian diaspora integration strategies.

Fundamental objective of Armenian studies is to comprehend this field in terms of interdisciplinarity and to stress the importance - in addition to the historical-political issues of genocide, which are already widely discussed in Czech academic environment - of other topics dealing with Armenian literature, folklore, ethnology, religions studies or Diaspora studies within the broader context and in comparative perspective. The goal is to establish Armenian Studies as an independent research centre within the Department of East-European Studies and to open all above mentioned topics to wider – scientific or not – public. This means teaching students, publishing scientific articles and supporting the cooperation between other Armenian studies centres in the region (Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna, Halle-Wittenberg, Ostrava etc.).

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