

**THE GENERATION MATTERS:
ARMENIAN FAMILIES IN TBILISI
(A yard in Avlabari)**

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Abstract

This paper is based on a case study of three different Armenian families living in Avlabari district, Tbilisi. It explores how Armenian Families in Tbilisi have preserved their cultural heritage, the memories they have of their past life, and what they expect from the society in which they live in. Furthermore, it analyzes how they perceive themselves as Tbilisi natives rather than members of the Armenian diaspora community in Georgia. These families find that Georgia is a “homeland” whereas they consider Armenia as their “ancestral land.” Mostly, they practice traditions that are a mixture of Georgian and Armenian traditions, but there are some cases when participants have no knowledge of Armenian traditions, holidays, etc. Each family has its own story to tell, but they share several things that construct their self-perception – being born and raised in Tbilisi, particularly in Avlabari, which is known as the “most Armenian place” in the capital of Georgia. The article is based on fieldwork materials, Armenian and Georgian scholarly works, and some media sources. The data was collected through fieldwork conducted in Avlabari. The methodology employed included participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Introduction

The paper aims to show how Armenian families preserve their identity, cultural, and spiritual heritage. It does so by unpacking the

following: (1) How they view themselves as part of the society in Georgia and what memories do they carry with them; and (2) what are the main problems that might hamper successful integration into Georgia’s political, economic and socio-cultural life.

To further understand the aforementioned core objectives of this study, the main research questions are listed as follows:

1. How do Armenian families perceive their “ethnic” or “civic” identity?
2. How they transfer cultural or spiritual heritage to the next generation in the family?
3. How do they perceive both Armenia and Georgia?
4. What challenges (if any) do they face on the daily basis?
5. What prospects do Tbilisi Armenians have to consider for ethnic self-preservation and self-realization?

To answer these questions, the fieldwork component of the research began in one specific so-called Tbilisi yard (also known as Italian yard) in Avlabari (where I live.) The following methods were primarily used: observation and in-depth interviews as data collection methods, and coding the transcribed interviews and observation notes. Every member of three Armenian families – from young members to elder ones – were interviewed. Within each family, there is a distinct story that comprises several contrasting characteristics of a family itself. For each case, there are different family structures that greatly influence the way of life, customs, and traditions. For the first case, there is a single Armenian woman, Marina, who is the fifth generation living in Tbilisi. The second family provides more information about what possibilities are offered to Armenian youth and what has changed over time. In this case, the experiences and opinions of a father, a mother and their son are shared. For the third case, the family consists of two members - a mother and her son – who somehow share the same story about not being able to know their own fathers, which clearly reveals how such background stories can affect their memory of their ancestors, forgotten traditions, customs, and even the Armenian language.

Case 1 – In-between

Case 1 consists of a 48-year-old woman, Marina, who lives alone. She was born in Tbilisi and has been living in the Avlabari yard for her entire life. Both of her parents were Tbilisi-born Armenians. She also has a sister who lives in another district of Tbilisi with her husband and children. Since her sister's marriage, both of their parents passed away, and she has been living on her own. Marina went to Russian school but never managed to continue her studies at university. While speaking about this matter, she expresses how regretful she is that she couldn't pass an exam. Although she has been working as a receptionist at a prison for the past 15 years, she does not view it as her dream job.

Family history

“The fifth generation living in the yard”

Soviet regime and the feeling of lost ownership

She lives in a small house, occupying a little space of the yard. She identifies that her ancestors owned more than what she currently lives on, underlining that there is definitely an explanation. First of all, being the fifth generation of her family to live in this particular yard of Tbilisi makes her proud. Additionally, it is important to consider the role of the Soviet period because it was the time when her family lost property and were sent to the Gulag labor camps. The Soviet regime is crucial to remember, as it is the main reason for “losing the property.”

Perceptions on the dynamics of the situation, the so-called “change”

Memories of the yard: nostalgic, multiethnic and multicultural past.

Memories about the yard are clearly nostalgic; they carry positive feelings of the yard's past lifestyle. This lifestyle is explained as “one whole family.” To this end, Marina states that “the life seemed much easier back then.” She explains that there were Russians, Jews, Kurds, Armenians, and Georgians living in the yard, trying to underline “multiculturalism” as one of the main characteristics of the yard in the past. She also remembers some previous yard traditions that are mostly

connected with the “unity” and “living as one whole family” of the yard, and these characteristics seem lost:

“I have a funny story to tell you about the neighborhood, it’s purely Tbilisi thing. Armenians and Georgians had perfect relations until two football clubs, Dinamo Tbilisi and Ararat Yerevan played against each other. That was the time when everyone forgot how to be a good neighbor. But the next day, when the match was over and everything was decided, everyone gathered in the center of the yard, where we had a big table. Men would buy some fish and beer and drank together, forgot about the day before. It was fun.”

Marina’s perspective stipulates that relations within neighborhood have changed. In the past, there was more connectivity between people. Children played different games than today. The interviewee tries to explain the main reasons for it, one of which and arguably the most important reason is due to “modern technologies” that decrease communication and out-door activities amongst children in the yard. Therefore, relationships within neighbors are wholly changed.

Reflections on Armenian-Georgian relations

Concerning ethnic issues (the so-called “nationality factor,”) there is a certain comparison between “the past” and the present found in Marina’s note. In the “past,” people were underlining the nationality factor less compared to the present-day. Currently, the “past” is becoming something worth mentioning. With regard to the issues of ethnic discrimination, a certain formula was revealed as follows: “I have never experienced but I have heard from others.” Within this framework and this case, as Marina observes a new generation -- the children playing in the neighboring yard -- ethnicity is occasionally mentioned in a negative context. However, she tries to avoid generalizing this problem by blaming it on every Georgian by providing an example based on her own experiences elsewhere. Marina tells the story of when she was visiting her uncle in Moscow and there was a scratching on his door, saying “Armenian,” being a frequent and “usual” thing there. Here, she attempts to underline this fact, saying that she has never experienced or heard of anything like that “scratching on the door”

story in Tbilisi. Multiculturalism has always been the main characteristic of Tbilisi, which made Georgians “kind of used to it” in her words:

“Tbilisi has always been a place of different cultures, nationalities and all. Georgians are kind of used to it. I’ve seen good and bad things, for sure, but nothing like that. And it is my own experience”.

Perceptions of “self” and of Armenia/Georgia

When discussing self-perception, the interviewee clearly is seemingly in an “in-between” (marginal) condition:

“I’ve finished Russian school and for Russian, I will never be Russian, for Georgian, I’ll never be Georgian; and for Armenians I’ll never be Armenian. I don’t really know who I am. I consider myself to be a citizen of Georgia, carrying Georgian culture with me, with Armenian roots.”

In this case, Georgian citizenship is highlighted more than the emphasis on the ethnic Armenian roots. Therefore, it can be inferred that Georgian citizenship matters more than Armenian ethnic roots in this context. According to Marina’s perception, knowing Georgian is a core responsibility of any Georgian citizen: it is a sign of respect and a way to the hearts of Georgians. It is how she shows her love and respect for the country. Another responsibility of being a Georgian citizen is her participation in political developments, e.g. elections, stating:

“One should also be active, taking part in the country’s political developments, however they can. Well, at least all I can do is to take part in elections. I do this for the hope of better future”.

Since she was born and raised on Georgian land, she feels a responsibility of knowing and understanding its culture and history. In this case, Armenia is more connected to ancestry. It is a “place” where her ancestors lived. She doesn’t mention it as a homeland, but as an “ethnic place” or “ethnic country;” and to her, “being Armenian” is a memory and love of ancestors, country, and Armenian language and culture. She has little experience of being in Armenia a long time ago. Such kind of experience surely shapes the whole picture and perception of Armenia proper.

Visions of Armenian cultural and spiritual heritage

As seen in several cases, the influence of the Soviet regime on religion and religious rituals is a re-emerging theme in the interviews. Marina does not remember family traditions that celebrated “Armenian holidays.” As far as she can remember, her family only celebrated one New Year and Easter according to the Georgian Orthodox calendar. Also, she doesn’t celebrate holidays as she only views and remembers holidays as religious. Marina has experience of going to both Armenian and Georgian churches. To this end, she is faced with the issue of a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Armenian language, which is challenging while attending rituals in the Armenian Church. She mentions how she couldn’t understand the Armenian words and meanings. While visiting her house, there was a “religious corner” of icons that drew special attention. Besides that, there was no object or symbol that could bear relevance to Armenia. This small icon corner seems to be enough for her, adding:

“It doesn’t matter if I am Gregorian or Orthodox, I just have to be a good person. That’s all I believe in.”

Therefore, in her perspective, the beliefs and religion is not worth discussing and is not indicative of “being a good Armenian” or “being a good Georgian” whatsoever.

Prior to the interview, Marina attended a “dolma festival” which was held at St. Echmiadzin Armenian Church yard in Avlabari. She views festivals like the “dolma festival” as helpful for Armenian people to maintain their traditions. In this case, the church serves as a cultural “agent.” The interviewee also had information about Armenian language courses and dance circles in Avlabari. Moreover, the church is a community “place” rather than just being a spiritual one. According to Marina, preservation of national identity and self-motivation plays a decisive role as she sees no constraints for self-preservation and self-realization:

“I think the problem lies in people’s attitude itself. If you want to preserve your culture, language or beliefs, go for it. You are the first to work on it.”

Language competence and information sources

According to Marina's self-described formula, "national identity preservation is due to the self-motivation," where knowing Armenian is also seen as a "responsibility." To her, if she doesn't speak or write in Armenian, she thinks that it is only her fault. She is fluent in reading and writing in Georgian, yet she shows no pride of not knowing written Armenian. Marina wants to show that she tries to learn how to read and write in Armenian by watching Armenian TV shows. So in this case, Armenian TV shows are used as a source of learning the Armenian language. In this case, the Georgian schoolteacher is viewed as a key figure and main facilitator in Marina's Georgian language competence.

Case 2 – Mixed Traditions

The second family consists of 4 members: a 46-year-old mother (Mariana), a 52-year-old father, and two sons, who are 21 and 6. Both parents were born and raised in Tbilisi and have been living in the yard since their wedding. There was a time when they lived in Moscow where their first son was born. After living there for 7 years, they returned to Tbilisi and have been living in this yard ever since. Mariana went to Russian kindergarten and school in Tbilisi where she finished at the Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani Pedagogical Institute of Tbilisi. She works as a Mathematics teacher at a Russian school in Tbilisi. She views herself as a self-realized and a successful woman. Her husband also went to Russian school, but interestingly enough, he mentioned how his parents had influenced him to receive a Russian education at school, which was not a rare phenomenon in this time for several reasons. One of the reasons is due to the importance and influence of Russian in the Soviet past as it was the main language. People tried to use Russian for pragmatic reasons as it promised a better future and perspectives for getting a job, and for receiving an education. Their first son, who was born in Moscow, was also prepared to attend Russian school, so he could already speak Russian. Currently, he is studying at Tbilisi State University and is receiving an education in Georgian. It is clear that time changes perspectives and the necessity of receiving education in certain languages; for the son, the

“competitive” language is Georgian instead of Russian. According to the father, education has somehow become more accessible for Tbilisi Armenians in comparison with the Soviet period.

Family history

Mariana shares her family history and the history of the house in further detail. The house, which was built by her great-great-grandfather, holds special “value” for her. She knows how her ancestors lived, what their professions were, and what difficulties they experienced prior to settling in Georgia. While her husband was more concentrated on being the 4th generation living in Tbilisi, he also is knowledgeable of his ancestry and, within that, mentions the cross-cultural marriage in his family tree. In contrast to the parents’ generation, their 21-year-old son has little knowledge about his family history and is clearly less aware of his ancestry.

Perceptions on the dynamics of the situation, the so-called “change”

Various changes are also perceived and explained by each member of the family. They have different memories about the yard. The mother and father mostly talk about difficulties and poverty in the past. By “the past,” she refers to the 1990s. He also shares his memories about hard times in the 1990’s¹ and mentions the influence of nationalism among Georgians.

¹ Note: “the hard times in the 90’s” mentioned by the interviewee refers to the appraisal of the nationalistic trends in Georgia, which had a huge negative effect on the ethnic minorities of Georgia resulting in migration too. As Mamuka Komakhia mentioned: *“Parallel to the cessation from the Soviet Union and proclamation of independence, nationalistic slogans also appeared on the country scene, in certain cases entailing the open or latent oppression of ethnic minority representatives. The political rhetoric of then political leaders grew sometimes in nationalism, causing fear among the non-Georgian populations. Due to the mentioned, ethnic minority representatives maybe were not the direct victims of oppression but a vague future and*

He remembers the multicultural past where in this case, “the past” is the previous yard traditions and children games during the Soviet period, which have largely changed. He also highlights relations within the neighborhood, describing them as maintain a feeling of “unity” and “one family.” To him, this set of feelings and perceptions have changed over time. In the past, the typical work-load was less, yet today’s life offers more alternatives. For the son, the “change” is not a category itself as he cannot talk about the changes yet because he is still very young to have that kind of experience and memories about the yard and neighbors.

Reflections on Armenian-Georgian relations

Another interesting theme is Georgian-Armenian relations, specifically ethnicity issues. The interviewees were asked about the relations of the Armenians and Georgians living in Tbilisi. The “parents” generation” of the family shared several ideas. The “unpleasant memories” of what it is like to be a Tbilisi Armenian refers to the negative attitude held by local Georgians based on personal experience was worth mentioning. The parents’ interviews, especially the mother’s interview, has several “explanations” on nationalism, trying to escape from generalizing the problem, and making it more of an individual observation. Thus, she perceives ethnicity issues as a “global problem,” something that can also be seen elsewhere. Within this framework, she mentions that “not all Georgians think that way;” to her, the discrimination cases stems from the individual. Moreover, there was a clear emphasis on the situation change. Thus, the mother claims that such kind of issues occur less today than in the past:

“It is better now, than several years ago.”

For the father, the changes are very specific. If the nationality factor was a main theme in the past, knowledge and experience matter more than Armenian surnames today.

a fear factor prompted them to emigrate. Armenia and the Russian Federation were two main countries of emigration for the Armenian population,” (Komakhia, 2003: 7)

Sergey, their 21-year-old son, describes the “ethnicity situation change” in correlation to the parents’ ideas. However, he has never experienced ethnic discrimination personally. Yet, the reflection of the ethnicity issue over the internet, which we can follow through the difference in lifestyle of the two generations, can be seen. One is the parents’ generation, and another the children’s time. Some research has proven that young people use the internet more often than older people, through which they are able to discuss different matters and cooperate with each other. Sergey uses the internet often, and it is the only place where he has encountered hate-comments about Armenia and Armenians:

“In recent years, the most ubiquitous form of cooperation are the various forums of young people, during which a wide range of issues are discussed,” (Armenian-Georgian Relations, Challenges, and Opportunities for the Bilateral Cooperation 2014: 22).

Perception of “self” and of Armenia/Georgia

When discussing self-perception, different answers came about. In the mother’s case, she felt a connection with Armenia and Georgia together; as if one attachment complements the other. As she was born in Georgia, the role of her birthplace had a significant influence on building self-perception and making strong ties with Georgia. The interviewee also claims that she never forgets her Armenian roots. She lists some things that explain what Armenia is for her:

“...language, love for Armenian literature, music, dance, its history, the memory of our ancestors and so on.”

Her views differ from her husband’s: first, he discusses the “task” of deciding what he identifies with more, and then he cannot decide if “he is more Armenian or Georgian.” To the son, Armenia is “an ethnic home” and he doesn’t give any more perception of “self” because it is not a real “task” in his life. The son feels comfortable where he resides and his “self-perception” is not under such bold questioning as it is for his parents.

Cultural and spiritual heritage

Another theme of this research is how Tbilisi Armenians have maintained their cultural and spiritual heritage, and how they try to pass it

on to future generations. In this case, the issue that elder members of the family often mentioned is the influence of the Soviet regime on the role of religion and the church. In the interviews, there is a clear reflection of this theme:

“The communist regime confiscated religious property, ridiculed religion, harassed believers, and propagated atheism.”

In the mother’s case, it is evident that the first subject she mentions while talking about cultural heritage is the family tradition of meals, which seem to be “a mixture of Georgian-Armenian traditions:”

“Our traditions were clearly a mixture of both Armenian and Georgian. I also remember that my mother cooked both Armenian and Georgian meals for us. She made Halva, Dolma. I remember my father had this kind of tradition – at 6 or 7 a.m. he invited his friends to our home to eat Georgian soup – Khashi with some vodka.”

With regard to the holidays, the first part of what she says contains how it was not allowed to practice religious holidays, but her family still celebrated some of the religious holidays in secrecy. Her grandmother, being religious, was the only media to the Armenian Church, and her mother was the main source of Armenian language and culture. She remembers how her mother would read Armenian fairy tales, how she taught her dances, etc. She could still remember and quote Hovhannes Tumanyan, a prominent Armenian writer. Here, it is clear that her mother was being an active agent in her Armenian ethnic socialization in preserving and passing the culture to her daughter. Later on, she herself as a mother advocated for her children to learn Armenian. The husband takes their children to the Armenian Church, which is perceived as rather a “community place” and a very special social institution that preserves cultural and spiritual heritage. The son took Armenian language courses there. Generally, cultural and spiritual institutions seem to play a vital role in maintaining Armenian heritage. When discussing national identity, the mother uses different methods for preserving it, such as going to Armenian Church, Armenian theatre, different educational circles, etc. It is particularly interesting to see how the interviewees view holidays. In this family’s case, the husband also mentions the spiritual holiday – Easter –

and how his family celebrated it secretly during Soviet times. The son also pays attention to his parents' practice of celebrating both Armenian and Georgian holidays such as Armenian "Mariamoba" and then Georgian "Mariamoba", and Christmas.

The perceived sense of a "mixture" of the Armenian and the Georgian culture in this family is also vivid in the "cooking" practice and in the celebration of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary through "Armenian and Georgian Mariamoba." Another issue is the lack of knowledge of the Armenian language, which is considered as the most important "tool" for understanding the culture and receiving an education. Sometimes, little knowledge of Armenian may hamper the whole "culture learning" process.

Connections with/to Armenia

The mother has never been in Armenia, but she mentions one of her close relatives moving to Yerevan for a job-opportunity. While her husband has a minor experience of being in Armenia, there is an honest feeling of regret that there is much left for him to see. The son's case differs due to the significant role of cultural programs. Armenian programs for the "diaspora" brought positive impressions, leaving a feeling of wanting to learn more about the country in the future. There is a project implemented by the Ministry of Diaspora of Republic Armenia called Ari Tun. The aim of the project is to introduce Diaspora Armenian youth to Armenian history, culture, public life, religion, and family traditions, build strong relations with the Homeland, reinforce national identity, and establish kin relations between the youth of Armenia and the Diaspora². Within this program, the Armenian community in Tbilisi is referred to as part of the "diaspora." Interesting debates and different opinions about this term have been a major subject of Elli Ponomareva's research - "Native Tbilisians or Diaspora: Negotiating the Status of Armenians in Tbilisi" – where the idea about the Armenian communities that existed in the Soviet Union have not

² See details through the following link: <http://aritun.am/en/about-the-project-2/>

been covered by the term “diaspora” exists. This approach is explained by the fact that Armenians as citizens of the USSR were part of the Soviet people as a “new historical entity:” (Melkonyan 2003, 12)

“Under the Soviet rule Armenians in Georgia didn’t see themselves as separated from their “putative homeland”... they treated the Soviet Union as a whole as their homeland.” (Ponomareva 2015, 7).

This means that during the Soviet Union, Armenians used the term “diaspora” only to describe Armenians who lived outside of the USSR. According to the research participants, they see themselves as Tbilisians, while being born in Tbilisi and having several generations of ancestors from Tbilisi itself.

Case 3 - Mother and Son: Different possibilities

In this case, the family is consistent of two members – a 72-year-old mother (Laura) and a 45-year-old son (Nika.) Both were born and raised in Avlabari. The woman went to a Russian school in Tbilisi and studied Engineering at Georgian Technical University. She has never been married and has one son who she raised with her mother. Laura managed to build a successful and long-lasting career in the Ministry of Defense. Nika went to Russian kindergarten and school in Tbilisi and then studied Arts and Painting at Tbilisi State Academy of Arts. For about 15 years upon graduation, he lived and worked in Moscow and returned to Tbilisi about a year ago. His “absence” may have influenced some of his views on certain aspects or themes of this research.

Both interviews were held individually at the interviewees’ home. Their house is one of the oldest parts of the yard. While observing the home, one could easily recognize the typical Soviet style furniture and vintage dolls and toys. There was nothing that bore relevance to Armenia, but the woman kept a Georgian flag on the bookshelf, which was quite noticeable. She claimed to have many Armenian books left from her mother, which she gave to Armenian Church. The reason behind this is due to the lack of the knowledge of the Armenian language. Laura’s mother was also a Tbilisi-born Armenian who knew literary Armenian and often read Armenian books. But the interviewee does not know how to read or

write in Armenian because according to her, there is less necessity of it. Generally, she knows Russian better than other languages, as it was a prior language and a number one job requirement in the past during the Soviet era. When the Russian language lost its “power,” Georgian became the “lingua franca.” She remembers the situation at her work when after these changes took effect, she found it was difficult to speak or write in Georgian but eventually perfected her skills. A Georgian language teacher at the Russian school also had a great influence on learning and loving the Georgian language. She states that she had no strong ties with Armenia like her mother, and for her, it is one of the main reasons why she is not competent in Armenian. Like his mother, Nika also had more competency in Russian than in Armenian or Georgian since his childhood. It appears that Russian was a main language in the family, but since his grandmother knew Armenian, he showed interest in the Armenian alphabet as a child, but it was rarely used among his friends, so he forgot most of it.

Family history

In this case, both the mother and the son have little knowledge about their ancestors, and their story is somehow different and sad compared to others. Laura’s parents were both Tbilisi-born Armenians. She never knew her father in-person. Even though her mother went to school in Yerevan for some time and knew literary Armenian well, she didn’t show much interest in learning and advancing the Armenian language. She also knows that her grandfather was born in Yerevan, and eventually he came to Tbilisi and married a Tbilisi-born Armenian. Nika has even less knowledge about his family history than his mother. He just underlines the fact that there were four generations of his ancestors living in Tbilisi. Like her mother, he never knew his own father, who was born in Yerevan and stayed there.

Perceptions on the dynamics of the situation, the so-called “change”

The woman’s memories about the yard in the past somehow show the resemblance to the first case analyzed in this research. She has very nostalgic and positive feelings of the past lifestyle of the yard. Here, we have several shared characteristics – more trust among neighbors, the feeling of “unity” and “one whole family,” and multiculturalism. The

interviewee provides a detailed account of yard traditions, one of them being the tradition of choosing the “head of the yard,” which still occurs today. She remembers how the whole yard celebrated birthdays and New Years together. These practices imply that there was collective thinking in the past. However, relations within the neighbors are different today. It doesn’t show that they are bad, but they are less intense and inclusive. She states that presently, there is less communication due to technological development. Migration also impacts the yard lifestyle; fewer Armenian families were left in the yard and new families are bringing more distance into current relations. As a member of another generation, the son has positive feelings towards the present days because Armenian youth have more opportunities than in the past.

In the discourse of this case, certain changes are also noticeable in the labor market. As “Russian” was the main language during the Soviet times, Georgian is now the “lingua franca” for ethnic minorities. The lack of knowing Georgian is a barrier to employment; the man thinks that due to his low competency in Georgian, he is currently unemployed. Komakhia discusses one of the aspects of connection of employment and language competencies of the representatives of the ethnic minorities in Georgia, their representation in the government, and governance bodies, stating:

“Ethnic minorities are scarcely represented in the Georgian central government and other governance bodies, poor command of state language being a reason for that. Yet, besides knowledge of state language, hidden artificial barriers for national minorities also exist, built up on the way to central authorities by their ethnic belonging. During the Soviet rule Armenian population enjoyed quotas for certain positions in the government. This mainly concerned compactly settled regions and districts in Tbilisi. However, Armenians living in the capital no more enjoy similar quotas.” (Komakhia, 2003: 23)

Reflections on Armenian-Georgian relations

Similar to other cases, the first answer that interviewees provide is that Armenian-Georgian relations are relatively positive, indicating that Georgians are hospitable people on a conditional basis, which stipulates that there are ethnicity-related issues between the two groups of people. In

this case, the woman remembers her personal experience of discrimination as someone mentioned her nationality in a negative context; she ends the story by stating:

“...bad experiences always depend on a certain occasion and certain people.”

Though the man claims that his personal experience is positive, he too has heard ethnicity-related occasions from some other people.

Perception of “self” and of Armenia/Georgia

As the third case previously stated, the woman kept a Georgian flag at home that is hanging from the bookshelf. She claims that she has had patriotic feelings for Georgia since childhood. Obviously, she is more connected with Georgia as it is her birthplace. She feels that patriotism is a responsibility towards Georgia. She finds that she is Georgian according to her birthplace, and “being Armenian” is dictated by blood. Having a minor experience of being in Yerevan, Armenia, she could never perceive Yerevan as her “home,” but rather she felt like a guest there. Since this trip was many years ago, she does not have many memories of being there. Yet she highlights that she never stopped respecting her ancestors and Armenia.

For Nika, Georgia is a homeland. He is very accustomed to Georgian culture, traditions, and the lifestyle. While being “ethnically Armenian,” he finds that Armenia is a homeland of his Armenian ancestors. He underlines that one should never forget the past and briefly states:

“I am Armenian, part of the Armenian community.”

Even though knowing and never forgetting the past is a major “responsibility” for him, he has a minor experience of visiting Armenia a long time ago.

Armenian cultural and spiritual heritage

In this case, both participants perceive themselves to be non-religious. They do not go to church and attend spiritual rituals. Both see the church as a “community place” and a way of preserving culture. Laura gave all of her Armenian books to the Armenian Church so the books could serve a purpose. She remembers having no family traditions whatsoever of

celebrating Armenian holidays. However, she celebrates Georgian holidays. She also claims that her mother would try to teach her Armenian rhymes, but she showed no interest. While discussing this matter, she clearly showed regret for not knowing much about Armenian culture and not visiting Armenia. Her son also talks about the role of the church, knowing that it offers more opportunities to young people – providing them knowledge of Armenian culture, language, and offering them free educational circles. As he views himself as part of the Armenian community, he thinks that the community has a decisive role in preserving Armenian cultural and spiritual heritage.

Information sources and mass media

The family has no access to Armenian-language information sources or TV channels. Laura spends much of her time watching TV, primarily viewing Georgian channels and different soap operas. She mentions the Armenian-Georgian TV show³ that she enjoyed and it gave her a sense of pride. As Nika had been living in Moscow for 15 years, he is accustomed to Russian TV shows and language, so he mostly prefers those to Georgian TV programs. He mostly uses the Internet to seek employment and to access information.

Conclusions

Each person's story is interesting and noteworthy. It is clear that the elders revealed more information than the younger participants. Some of them deliver their ancestors' memories, who had experienced political pressure, war, and emigration. Meanwhile, the young generation seems to be more integrated into Georgian society. There are even some cases when an Armenian youngster doesn't have another ethnic Armenian in his/her friend circle. This is not an unusual concept because it is often the case that

³ In 2011 Georgian Public Broadcaster channel collaborated with Armenian Public Broadcaster (AMPTV) launching the musical project which presented duets performed by Georgian and Armenian popular singers together.

“ethnic minorities have to constantly redefine the group boundaries and adjust them to changing circumstances, and sadly it may lead to gradual assimilation into the host culture.” (Herzig, Edmund & Kurkchyan, Marina 2005: 12)

The reflections on the question of identity were gathered from the research participants were geared to answer the following: what does it really mean to be “Armenian”? For some of them, “Armenianness” is just inherited genes and blood, while for others, it is a cultural and spiritual heritage that they carry – speaking the language, knowing the history of Armenia, participating in community activities and attending Church. The Church can be considered as the strongest and most important social institution that plays a vital role in maintaining cultural and spiritual heritage amongst Tbilisi Armenians as displayed through the second family’s case. In addition to the Church, one of the research participants also discussed the “Ari Tun” project for Armenian youth as another “connecting door” to Armenia. This study has showed the importance of the Church, Armenian community organizations, and different cultural projects for building a bridge between two countries, especially for forming a conscious ethnic community. The official “Ari Tun” program website states that the project aims to introduce Armenian culture, religion, and traditions to Armenian youth, and to help them “build strong relations with the Homeland, reinforce national identity, and establish kin relations between the youth of Armenia and the Diaspora.” To this end, it is clear how the Armenian government conveys the “diaspora” concept. Unlike the Soviet period, the Diaspora Armenian is one who lives outside Armenia proper. In this case, the Armenian organization, “Ari Tun,” tries to explain the concept the Homeland, and attempts to reinforce and build up national identity and ethnic community for all Armenians who live in different countries. This concept might also be strengthened by the following:

“Armenian community organizations are especially important for building a conscious ethnic community which is attached to Georgia on one hand and has cultural ties with Armenia – on the other. This way Georgia’s Armenian community itself becomes a connection between Armenia and Georgia,” (Chumbadze, Ketevan 2014: 93).

To conclude, it is evident that the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language is a major barrier for Armenians to participate in political and social life, and specifically while finding a job or receiving an education. Learning Georgian is key to improve the integration process, but nevertheless, it is a long-term process. A shared perception during the Soviet period was that minorities did not face as much difficulty if they did not know Georgian since Russian was the common language. Nowadays, a new generation speaks Georgian fluently, which eliminates the same problems while getting an education or accessing employment. Several generations of Armenians in Tbilisi, particularly during the Soviet period, have made a choice that has influenced the language situation. Many Armenians consider Russian as their first language because the majority of them have received an education in Russian, even though most of them are still multilingual. As Mamuka Komakhia states, “Tbilisi Armenians, in contrast to those who live in other regions, have different levels of proficiency in Georgian as well, which is predetermined by everyday contacts with Georgians.” (Komakhia 2003: 23)

Based on the different cases, there are different strategies of learning the Georgian language. On the one hand, Tbilisi-born Armenians learn Georgian while communicating with their Georgian neighbors and friends. On the other hand, they also learn Georgian in Armenian and Russian schools. To this end, the family also plays a big role in understanding certain languages.

One of the main issues is that when discussing traditional Armenian culture, it was particularly noticeable that the interviewees had vague memories of the customs, habits, and traditions. It could be concluded that each generation becomes increasingly comfortable and integrated into their homeland. They are continuously engraining themselves into Georgian society. The situation could be remedied through the stimulation of mutual interest by activating media, launching educational initiatives, and establishing and boosting collaboration between the members of every society. Perception of “homeland” is another major subject of the research. Most of the interviewees perceive Georgia as their homeland and they

never call it their host-land, or “second homeland,” while Armenia is more of an ancestral land to which their ethnic roots are connected:

“Armenians have been rooted in the towns and villages of Georgia for a long time, yet throughout modern history, they have been under external rule – Tsarist, Soviet, or Georgian – rather than their own. They have been living in the midst of larger cultural spheres, and struggled to preserve their national characteristics, while at the same time adjusting to the shifting social milieus,” (Blauvelt, Timothy K. & Berglund, Christofer 2015: 16).

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**ՍԵՐՈՒՆԴԸ ՆՇԱՆԱԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ՈՒՆԻ. ՀԱՅԿԱԿԱՆ
ԸՆՏԱՆԻՔՆԵՐԸ ԹԲԻԼԻՍԻՈՒՄ
(Հավլաբարի բակերից մեկում)
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Բանալի բառեր. Էթնիկ փոքրամասնություններ, Թբիլիսիի հայ համայնք, հայ-վրացական հարաբերություններ, էթնիկություն, ինտեգրացիա:

Այս ուսումնասիրությունը հիմնված է Թբիլիսիի Հավլաբար թաղամասում ապրող երեք հայկական ընտանիքների դեպքերի

դիտարկման վրա: Այն դիտարկում է, թե ինչպես են հայկական ընտանիքները Թբիլիսում պահպանել իրենց էթնիկ մշակութային ժառանգությունը, իրենց նախնիների մասին հիշողությունները, և ինչ են սպասում այն հասարակությունից, որում ապրում են: Ավելին, այն վերլուծում է, թե ինչպես են իրենք իրենց ավելի շատ ընկալում որպես Թբիլիսիի տեղաբնակներ, այլ ոչ թե որպես Վրաստանում հայկական սփյուռքի ներկայացուցիչներ: Այս ընտանիքները Վրաստանը համարում են «նախնյաց հայրենիք», իսկ Հայաստանը՝ «հայրերի հող»: Հիմնականում նրանց կողմից կիրառվող ավանդական պրակտիկաները վրացական և հայկական ավանդույթների խառնուրդներ են, սակայն կան դեպքեր, երբ նրանք տեղյակ չեն որոշակի հայկական ավանդույթների ու տոների մասին: Յուրաքանչյուր ընտանիքն իր պատմությունն ունի, սակայն նրանք կիսում են սեփական ինքնաընկալման կառուցման որոշակի բաղադրիչներ, օրինակ՝ Թբիլիսիում ծնված և մեծացած լինելը, մասնավորապես, Հավլաբարում, որը հայտնի է որպես Վրաստանի մայրաքաղաքի «հայկական վայրերից մեկը»: Հոդվածը հիմնված է դաշտային աշխատանքների նյութերի վրա, գիտական աշխատությունների և որոշ լրատվամիջոցների նյութերի վերլուծության վրա: Տեղեկատվությունը հավաքվել է Հավլաբարում (2016 թ.) դաշտային աշխատանքի շնորհիվ: Մեթոդաբանական գործիքների թվում էին մասնակցային դիտարկումը և խորին հարցազրույցները: