

Archival Searches and the Journey of the Post-WWII Repatriates to Soviet Armenia

BY HAZEL ANTARAMIAN-HOFMAN

It has been nearly three years since I began my steadfast search to document the experience of post-WWII repatriates to Soviet Armenia. Within this time, I have met with over 40 individuals, including family and friends of repatriates; scanned over 500 photographs of their lives in Armenia; and visited several archival centers. While collecting repatriates' stories has been fascinating, discovering incidental historical information has been equally intriguing.

My research of archival material began at NAASR in March 2013. Prior to my arrival, Marc Mamigonian graciously facilitated my search for printed sources among the personal papers of Rev. Charles A. Vertanes, a prominent East Coast supporter of the Great Repatriation. Among his papers were many contemporary newspaper articles that reported on the progress of the repatriation. Most of the articles that I found came from the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator*. Some of the articles in which I was interested were partial copies, so Marc directed me to the Krikor and Clara Zohrab Information Center where an entire collection of archived issues of the *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* was located. With the generous support of Father Daniel Findikyan, Director of the Zohrab Center, in the summer of 2013 I found the issues that I was looking for in addition to other articles in the same Armenian publication of the years 1947 and 1948.

One article caught my attention in particular. Published on November 8, 1947, it was quite telling of the propaganda behind the whole movement. Titled, "With Deepest Gratitude and Admiration Towards the Armenian People," the first paragraph read:

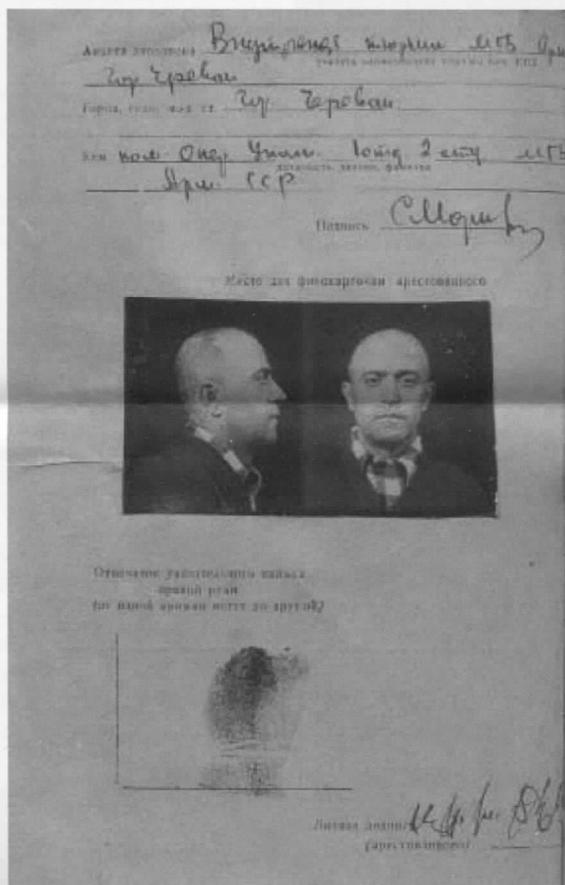
"We, the undersigned, a group of 150 Armenians up to the present time residents and citizens of the United States of America, are leaving this country of our adoption to return to the land of our forefathers, Soviet Armenia" (*Armenian Mirror-Spectator*; 8 November 1947, 3).

Anyone who knows a little of the history of the repatriation movement can quickly discern the misrepresentation of two basic facts from this paragraph. First, many if not all of the elders among the 150 repatriates were from cities and provinces in Turkey or Western Armenia, not from Soviet Armenia, hence, they were not "returning" to the land of their forefathers. Second, the repatriate youth and children among this group of 150 were born in the United States, so they were not leaving the

country of their adoption, but leaving the country of their birth. At the end of the article was a list of names of those repatriates who took the 1947 "caravan" from America. The list included the names of my father, barely an eighteen-year-old at the time, and my uncle, his older brother of nearly two years.

Finally in December of 2013, I visited the National Archives of Armenia with the assistance of Armenian filmmakers Satenik Faramazyan and Tigran Paskevichyan of Versus Studios in Yerevan. Faramazyan and her associates at Versus Studios have produced the first of their three-part

documentary on the Great Repatriation, and it was to our mutual benefit to assist each other in collecting information on the repatriation as found in our respective countries. At the National Archives I was able to gain limited access to security police files generated by the MGB (forerunners of the KGB) on two American-Armenian repatriates who had been exiled in the late 1940s, Alexander Khatchig Phillian and Alice Haiganoush Papazian. Alexander was the father of a close family friend, Crosby Phillian. For hours my translator, Nane Paskevichyan, Tigran's daughter, who knew Russian, Armenian, and English, helped me examine a stack of files and sift through hundreds of pages of documents. There were several moments during my time in the archives where I pushed back from my research and reflected upon the situation of these two individuals, who were arrested, tried, and sent into exile not long after arriving in Soviet Armenia; in the case of Alice, both she and her husband were sent into exile. My emotional response to their situation was further heightened after seeing the arrest photographs of Alexander Phillian and Alice Papazian among their document files. After I returned to the United States, I shared the MGB documents on Alexander with his eldest son, who currently lives in Paris.



Document from Antaramian-Hofman's research

Among the information that I sent to Crosby was his father's prolonged interrogation documents, which were first transcribed by hand in Armenian then typed in Russian.

As I consider the journey that I undertook to document the repatriation story,* I still remember my one-on-one conversation with Tom Mooradian, the first American-Armenian repatriate who returned from Soviet Armenia in 1960. While on a national tour for his published memoir, Tom and his wife visited my family in Fresno. One evening after dinner I revealed to Tom that from a very young age my dream was to have the repatriate story told through the art of theater. Perhaps the idea developed from looking at my curious family photographs, or perhaps it

came from the unusual stories that I heard growing up. Regardless, the dream is now being realized. A new play on the post-WWII Armenian Repatriation to be written by Richard Kalinoski, the playwright of the international renowned play on the Armenian Genocide, *Beast on the Moon*, will debut at Fresno State University in March 2015. And it cannot go unsaid that the play will include the talents of Jacqueline Antaramian, Broadway actor and Soviet Armenian-born daughter of two post-WWII repatriates.

About the Project: By Fall 2014, the author will be putting together her collection of stories, photographs, and archival material for publication. More information on the project can be found at www.hazelantaramhof.com. To contact the author, you can reach her at hazelantaramhof@yahoo.com. Please include "Repatriation Story" in the subject line.

*See my "call for repatriates" article in *NAASR Newsletter* of Fall/Winter/Spring 2011-2012, 12.