

Los Angeles: The Capital of the Armenian Immigrant Community in the Twenty-First Century

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This article is an introduction to the subject of Armenian Americans in Los Angeles, both within the broader context of the diaspora and a narrower one, presenting an analysis of the mutual relations between the Armenian community and the city.

In the twenty-first century, Los Angeles has become home to the second largest urban population of Armenians in the world after Yerevan. It consists of three main groups: descendants of the first immigrants, refugees from the Middle East, and most recently, the so-called “Soviet” Armenians and immigrants from the Republic of Armenia. The construction of the Armenian Americans Museum will begin in the near future. The mission of the institution will be to document the experience of Armenian migration and to support the maintenance of ethnic identity among the next generations of the diaspora.

In Glendale, an ethnoburb of Los Angeles, Armenian Americans make up 40 percent of the population. A significant proportion of the administrative decision-makers there come from the Armenian diaspora. The city is not only the informal second capital city for the Armenian global community, but also an incubator for its cultural project; in particular, it is a center of the Armenian music industry.

Key words: Armenians, ethnic minority, Armenian Americans, United States, Los Angeles

Introduction

In the “melting pot” of the United States, Armenians are a relatively small ethnic group. Nevertheless, over the last decade, their postulates have appeared on the state agenda and in the mainstream public discourse. An example of the success of Armenian lobbying groups in 2019 was the Congressional resolution on the genocide in

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the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1923. On the Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day in 2021, fulfilling a campaign pledge, President Joe Biden became the first United States President to officially recognize the genocide that has symbolic meaning not only for the American minority, but also for the entire pan-Armenian community, which exceeds 11 million people.

The largest number of Armenians outside the Republic of Armenia currently lives in the Russian Federation. The United States became the home to the second largest and most politically active group (Armenia's Diaspora 2014: 1). In addition to campaigns promoting knowledge about the Armenian genocide, in recent decades the Armenian Americans have supported their ancestral homeland in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the economic blockade of the country by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Their help played a significant role in rebuilding the country after it had gained independence. Thanks to efficient lobbying, the American government has donated over \$2 billion to Armenia. The diaspora itself has supported the Republic with several billion dollars through social and charity organizations and individual investments.

The scale of financial investments is reflected in the fact that only one Kirk Kerkorian Lincy Foundation has transferred over \$300 million to Armenia since 1992. A significant portion of these funds has been allocated to the expansion of railroads, renovation, or construction of public buildings; support for the health care system; and the funding of scholarship programs and international exchange for talented youth. In September 1991, the American University of Armenia (AUA), the only university in the post-Soviet area accredited by the United States, was established and largely funded by Armenian Americans. A particularly valuable form of the assistance they gave is education and technological consulting, as exemplified by the opening of TUMO centers, fully financed by the Simonian Educational Foundation and established by Sam and Sylva Simonian, who live overseas. The Cafesjian Center for the Arts (CCA) became another prestigious project in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. Gerard L. Cafesjian allocated over \$35 million for the construction of the complex, and then donated part of his private collection of contemporary art to it. In the first period after the re-gaining of Armenian independence, some re-emigration has been recorded, but it never occurred on a mass scale. Armenians raised abroad became ministers in several of the first post-Soviet governments.

It is important to mention that the global Armenian diaspora, called *Spyurk* ("dust" in Armenian), continues to feel a strong connection with the land of its ancestors, culture, and religion in its consecutive generations. Laurence Ritter claims that "the project of the modern Armenian nation" is still under construction. In the twenty-first century, two-thirds of the global Armenian population lives outside Armenia; therefore, the mutual relations between the diaspora and the Republic may play a prominent political role in the future (Ritter 2009: 110).

Until 1991, the main demarcation line was between immigrants and their host countries. Currently, as the researcher notes, the foreground is a diverse "set of diasporic

communities and societies of Armenia, which often exist in opposition to each other, creating a new Armenian world.” (Ritter 2009: 5) The first Pan-Armenian conference, a discussion forum for dispersed Armenians, was held in Yerevan on September the 22–23, 1999. Almost a decade later, the government of the Republic of Armenia created a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs in order to coordinate contacts and cooperation. By the end of the twentieth century, Los Angeles became the second city in the world with the largest Armenian population after Yerevan. The term “Los Armenios” appeared in the diaspora as a humorous synonym for the Armenian capital of the United States. The local Armenian minority is often dubbed the Armenian Angelenos.

The aim of this article is a descriptive study. The primary goal is to provide an introduction for the reader to the subject of Armenian Americans in the United States and to discuss the position of this minority as an active social actor in the urban space. Claude S. Fisher has proposed that the cities foster a sense of community and strengthen social groups by promoting the formation of diverse subcultures (Fisher 1995: 544). Subsequent paragraphs of this article present the two-way relationship with the second largest metropolis in the United States: the transformation of Armenian immigrants’ lives over recent decades, their position in the local community, and the impact they currently have on the local government and the city. Rajesh Gill argues that the large cities in particular “by virtue of their size and heterogeneity, instead of leading to de-ethnicization, stimulate minority groups to re-ethnicization” (Gill 2000: 222). In the twenty-first century, Glendale has not only become an Armenian ethnoburb, but also the world’s most important Armenian diasporic hub.

The analysis and interpretation are based on the literature on the subject, which consists mainly of monographs, reports, and government statistics. The presented data comes from the official sources of both the United States and the Republic of Armenia, declassified CIA analyses on the phenomenon of Armenian terrorism, censuses, reports of non-governmental organizations, and the media discourse with a particular emphasis on the ethnic newspapers and websites published by American diaspora organizations.

In Polish research, there are only a few studies on the Armenian minority in the United States. In general, these are single chapters in monographs, such as the work of Konrad Oświęcimski on Armenian interest groups in the publication *Lobby etniczne, a polityka zagraniczna USA* and a partial translation of Laurence Ritter’s doctoral dissertation *Ormiańskie losy. Historia i przyszłość diasporę*. Apart from articles published in the press and online, Polish academic journals still lack a comprehensive scientific study devoted to the Armenian American minority.

The subject of the structure of the Armenian diaspora has been occasionally analyzed in the United States in volumes such as Robert Mirak’s *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* and David Waldstreicher’s *The Armenian Americans*. Dennis R. Papazian closed the list of the main subject field authors, until the appearance of the most recognized American armenologist: Anna P. Bakalian.

Bakalian conducted a large-scale study on the diaspora as part of her doctoral dissertation in the mid-1980s. Inspired by Joan Rollins' work, she introduced the term "hidden minority" into analyses. In the very first paragraphs of her 1993 book *Armenian Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*, Bakalian notes that she was "pulling this largely overlooked ethnic group out of the academic closet" (Bakalian 2014: X), because "in the social sciences little had been written on contemporary Armenian Americans, to the point where they had been labeled a hidden minority" (Bakalian 2014: IX). Thanks to the help of the parishes of the Armenian Apostolic Church and social organizations, Bakalian was the first to collect a large number of interviews and surveys. Her pioneering research, however, does not cover the last twenty years of the twentieth century, particularly the most recent wave of immigration, which was exceptionally large and distinctive from previous waves.

A diploma thesis by the Armenian pastor and social worker Aram Serkis Yeretzián and submitted to the University of Southern California in 1923 is a unique source of information that allows for a partial reconstruction of the phenomenon of the early Armenian Angeleno community. It is based on data from parish documents, censuses, information obtained from diaspora organizations, reports from Near East Relief and County Charity.

Many scholarly works on the phenomenon of ethnic identity and its changes in subsequent generations have been published in the last two decades, such as *Becoming American, Remaining Ethnic: The Case of Armenian Americans in Central California* by Matthew A. Jendian. In his doctoral dissertation *Memory and the Politics of Construction of the Armenian Homeland* Turgut Kerema Tuncel examined the diaspora's relations with the Republic of Armenia and the programs targeted at young people abroad.

The following paragraphs discuss the structure of the Armenian American diaspora in recent years as well as the history of Armenian migration to the New World, focusing on California and their settlement in the Los Angeles area. It is important to raise the issue of the imprecise estimation of this population and discuss its relationship with its occupied urban space as well as the legal and social challenges faced by the first immigrants and their impact on the culture of the pan-Armenian community.

Is There One American Diaspora, or Are There Many Diverse Groups of Armenian Americans?

Jonathan Grossman has aggregated existing definitions of diaspora in the social science and the humanities in an attempt to work toward an integrated definition. According to Grossman's findings "diaspora is a transnational community whose members (or their ancestors) emigrated or were dispersed from their original homeland but remain oriented to it and preserve a group identity" (Grossman 2019: 1267).

Anna P. Bakalian has proposed the most popular definition of the American Diaspora in the literature on the subject. She defines Armenian Americans as a wide spectrum of people and a group of men and women who reside in the U.S. and trace their descent to the ancient land and culture of Armenia. This is a subjective definition based on identity: it inevitably produces wide within-group variation, by generational presence in America, recency of immigration, legal status, country of birth, religious affiliation, mixed parentage, socioeconomic status, knowledge of Armenian language and culture, political/ideological beliefs, degree of involvement in ethnic community activities, and so on (Bakalian 2014: 5). Bakalian draws attention to a very important element in the description of the Armenian community in exile, which has been emphasized by scholars from the Center for Near Eastern Studies UCLA, Claudia Der-Martirosian and Georges Sabagh. They argue that the collective term Armenian Americans is in fact no longer appropriate to describe this whole ethnic group because there are distinctly different “sub-ethnicities” within it (Der-Martirosian 2004: 1). In addition to the strongly assimilated “old” diaspora of American Armenians, beginning in the 1970s Lebanese and Syrian, later Egyptian and Turkish Armenians, who have cultivated a conservative ethnic identity, came to America in larger, successive waves. With time, they were included into the “first” diaspora. At the end of the twentieth century, however, the so-called “new” or “second” diaspora emerged (Gevorkyan 2016), mainly consisting of groups of so-called “Soviet” and Russian Armenians as well as immigrants from the young Republic of Armenia. The researchers argue that people from outside the group are not aware of the significance of these differences and internal divisions. Ignoring conflicts within an ethnic minority often leads to perceiving it as a monolith, which is not accurate.

Bakalian points out that apart from the traditional distinction between Armenian (Hye) and non-Armenian (Odar), which initially was determined by the matter of place of birth and so-called “code of conduct”, Armenian Americans were forced to give their Armenianness a more universal character. Today, identity has become a phenomenon with fluid boundaries, a symbolic choice, or a state of mind (Bakalian 2014: 431), meaning different things for different people and being more individualized matter.

Kathleen Neils Conzen’s research team describes ethnicity as a “dialogue between majority and minority cultures, *others* and themselves” (Conzen et al. 1992: 12). The authors explore conceptualization of “invented ethnicity” as “a process of construction or invention which incorporate, adapts and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes and historical memories” (Conzen et al. 1992: 4–5). In the publication *Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture*, Joane Nagel gives an example of Armenian Americans and the phenomenon of the transition from “being” an Armenian immigrant to “feeling” symbolic Armenian ethnicity. In her analyses, she invokes the metaphor of a shopping basket that each individual fills up, removing elements less important to the customer and leaving those they consider to be more significant (Nagel 1994: 154). The author refers both

to Bakalian's research and earlier works by Herbert J. Gans, who introduced the concept of "symbolic ethnicity" in the late 1970s and proposed the thesis that it would become the future of ethnic groups and cultures throughout America (Gans 1979: 1).

The Memory of Genocide as a Central Element Consolidating the Diaspora

Despite the significant differences within the American diaspora, which have been emphasized in the above paragraphs, armenologists agree that it is possible to indicate one permanent and fundamental factor uniting all subgroups of Armenian Americans and the entire pan-Armenian community. Bakalian describes this force as the "centrality of Genocide in Armenianness" (Bakalian 2014: 347). The "The Great Tragedy" (the genocide), which took place between 1915 and 1923, has become a turning point in the history of Armenians. Although a century has passed, it still plays a consolidating role for later generations, influencing relationships with other communities. The first generation of refugees is referred to as the "desert generation," because Del-el-Dzor, where the displaced Armenians were driven by Turks, became a grave for most of them (Pomiciński 2017: 7). Ritter states that "the actors of Armenian identity" were created primarily by memory of the genocide, nurtured by families, the Armenian Apostolic Church, diasporic organizations, and political parties. (Ritter 2009: 11) The so-called "Armenian Question," the responsibility for maintaining the memory of the genocide passed on to children and grandchildren, is of central importance to emigrants (Ritter 2009: 147).

A History of Armenian American Immigration

The legendary origins of the Armenian diaspora in the New World are related to the figure of Martin the Armenian from Iran, who settled in Jamestown in 1618 and made a living by growing tobacco (Yeretjian 1923: 23). In 1653, Edward Diggs brought in specialists in silkworm breeding: two Armenians from Constantinople. At the same time, the export of American goods to the Ottoman Empire was to be organized by an unknown Armenian merchant (Papazian 2000: 312). Khachik Osakanian, the first Armenian immigrant to America known by name, came to North America in 1834 (Bedrosian 1991: 35). During the American Civil War, Khachadour Paul Garabedian (Pevear 2011) fought for the Union, while doctors Simeon Minasian, Baroning Matevosian, and Garabed Galstian were mentioned in the documents of Philadelphia's hospital. The Yale University Commemorative Book of Graduates mentions Christopher Der Seropian as well as probably the first trader of oriental carpets of Armenian origin, Hagop Bogigian, by name.

According to Margaret Bedrosian, by the 1870s there were about seventy Armenians who had permanently settled in the United States, mainly in Boston and New York. In the latter half of the 1880s, this group grew to 1,500, while in the subsequent decade it grew by another five hundred and consisted mainly of students, craftsmen, and merchants (Bedrosian 1991: 35). Bakalian mentions about 12,000 Armenians who had emigrated from the Ottoman Empire to the United States for political reasons (i.e., to flee ethnic cleansing) in the 1890s (Bakalian 2014: 2009).

It is worth recalling that until 1898 the American authorities did not record the ethnicities of the arriving immigrants, but only their nationality. Thus, Armenians were often listed as the citizens of other countries in documents. For decades, the American census questionnaire has been dominated by the race category, and the first that made it possible to identify ethnicity was carried out in 1980. The category of language use is not fully adequate because the use of the Armenian language is no longer the key determinant of identity for subsequent generations.

According to Robert Mirak, by the 1930s the number of Armenians who had crossed the United States border could have reached up to 100,000 (Mirak 1997: 391). The first period of Armenian migration to the New World for the most part was dominated by chain migrations, mostly young men, including youths temporarily studying at American universities. According to Eduard Melkonian, the immigrants initially lived together in overcrowded, cheap quarters. Emigrating from poor agricultural regions, they started new lives in the rapidly developing cities of the East Coast. If Armenians did not know the English language at a communicative level or lacked specialized skills, they were forced to take poorly paid menial jobs. In this generation, most marriages were arranged within rather narrow networks. Because of the huge disparity between the number of men and women in the early decades of settlement, the practice of mail-ordering wives thrived (Tuncel 2014: 348).

Immigrants who managed to improve their qualifications and get education quickly achieved success and joined the richer part of American society. Armenian Americans earned their living as craftsmen, salespeople, entrepreneurs, clerks, and teachers. The diaspora was often committed to the important affairs of their new homeland; for example, 18,500 young Armenian Americans joined the United States Army during World War II.

Based on declarations made by Armenians at the border, Yeretzian reports that in 1899–1917 they settled mostly in New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Illinois, and California (Yeretzian 1923: 26). This indicates that until the 1920s, the East Coast was the primary target of their immigration.

The genocide perpetrated by the Turks significantly influenced the shape and size of the Armenian diaspora. The community was actively involved in accepting refugees from the Ottoman Empire, especially in places where structures created by earlier immigrants functioned well. However, the quota system introduced in the United States and the regulations of the Immigration Act of 1924 drastically slowed down

this process. A small number of people crossed the border thanks to travel documents known today as Nansen passports.

After the end of World War II, under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 and especially thanks to the American National Committee for Homeless Armenians (ANCHA), 4,500 Armenians, mainly from the Russian diaspora, flocked from European refugee camps. In the 1950s, 8,500 people joined them as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine (Mirak 1997: 391). The border was also crossed under the quota system and as part of family reunification programs. By the 1980s, ANCHA allowed a total of about 25,000 Armenian refugees to enter the United States (Bakalian 2014: 11).

As a result of the liberalization of migration law, in 1965 the number of Armenian immigrants increased, followed by an influx of refugees from Turkey and Egypt. During the 1975 civil war in Lebanon and the Islamic revolution in Iran four years later, Armenian communities made the decision to emigrate on a massive scale. Bakalian and Harold Takooshian estimate that the United States border was crossed by about 60,000 Lebanese Armenians (Takooshian 1986: 138) and more than half of all Iranian Armenians who lived in the country at the end of the twentieth century. 75 percent of them settled in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (Bakalian 2014: 11). Since the late 1960s, Turkish Armenians have been arriving in the United States. Bakalian claims that about 10,000 of them settled in Los Angeles. In the next two decades, at least 47,700 people from Soviet Armenia emigrated to America, 90–95 percent of whom chose Los Angeles as their new home. Following the tragic 1988 Spitak earthquake, numerous groups of Armenians traveled overseas in just a dozen months (Bakalian 2014: 12).

The Most Recent Wave of Migration

Among the immigrants from the Republic of Armenia who have come in great numbers since the 1990s, the largest group are economic migrants from poor, rural areas who often do not speak the English language (Ritter 2009: 38). Middle Eastern Armenians were the most reluctant, and they feared that the positive image of the diaspora among Americans would weaken. After the period of intragroup conflicts at the end of the 1970s, the balance became established in the “old” diaspora, which at the turn of the new millennium was disturbed again by a clearly different system of values and the lifestyle of the newcomers (Ritter 2009: 35). According to Bakalian “many individuals in leadership positions in the Armenian community (...) have opposed Soviet Armenian emigration, interpreting the new immigrants’ desire for better life as a desertion, a betrayal of the nation” (Bakalian 2014: 21).

Ritter notes that an important factor of these differences was the post-Soviet mentality brought from their homeland: the acceptance of corruption, the lack of respect for public property, and the lack of perception of the state as a community for which one should take responsibility (Ritter 2009: 40). In the media, there were

reports on convicted Armenians as well as their participation in organized crime, forging documents, counterfeiting credit cards, and insurance and tax fraud. There was an Armenian gang in Los Angeles called Armenian Power (FBI 2011). However, more detailed statistical analyzes at the time indicate a low percentage of the participation of the Armenians in criminal activities. In the city of Glendale, with 27 percent Armenians in the total population in 2006, only 17 percent of the crimes were committed by the members of this particular ethnic group (Bedevian 2008: 5–6). The City-Data has reported the 114 crime rate in Glendale in 2019, a 2.4 times lower than the national average (City-Data).

Analyzing the results of the American Community Survey (ACS) from 1990 (U.S. Census), it becomes clear that in the 1990s over 40 percent of American Armenians were born outside the United States, of whom more than half did not have citizenship of their host country when the census was taken. As statistics show, they emphasized education: almost one-third of adults had at least a bachelor’s degree. Artineh Samkian draws attention to the fact that in 2007, 41 percent had at least a 4-year college degree, therefore this relatively small ethnic group constitute a highly educated community (Samkian 2007: 102). Matthew A. Jendian points out that the socioeconomic characteristics demonstrate their upward social mobility (Jendian 2008: 150). In terms of professional activity, two-thirds of Armenian Americans worked in the private sector, and the poverty rate was lower than the national average (U.S. Census). In 2016 median household income in the United States was \$57,617 and for Armenian Americans one-third higher: \$77,110 (American FactFinder).

Currently, diasporic organizations and the government of the Republic of Armenia claim that the United States may be inhabited by up to 1.5 million people of Armenian origin, but neither the ACS nor the United States Census support these values with data. The ACS reports that 485,970 people declared Armenian ethnicity in 2017. Some researchers point to the sense of belonging to several diasporas and hybrid identities (Bolsajian 2018: 33). There are also voices drawing attention to the problem of the reluctance to declare ethnic affiliation in official documents among the Armenian community, but still cultivating customs or participating in the life of ethnic parishes in the private space. To change this situation, in 2020 social organizations supported by ethnic media organized the “HYE Count” campaign. They encourage participation in censuses and the declaration of Armenian ethnicity, pointing to the measurable benefits of these activities. The diaspora will be able to seek increased federal funding for medical care, education, support for cultural and language programs, housing subsidies, assistance to incoming immigrants, and more. In its appeal, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) cites the example of California, claiming that this one state currently hosts up to a million Armenians (Asbarez 2020).

Jendian has analyzed the answers from the questionnaires completed by a group of 294 Armenians living in California in 2008. He focused his research on the process

of assimilation and ethnic identity transformations over four consecutive generations. He noted that the process of cultural assimilation will most likely occur in the usage of the Armenian language. The social networks of close and distant family as well as the traditional Armenian cuisine (which is combined with the holiday celebration) are still preserved. The researcher has emphasized that immediately after coming to the United States, the first generation prioritized the education of children, which greatly contributed to the high social mobility of the group. The reluctance of the first generation to marry people from outside the diaspora has decreased, and between 1990 and 1998 the percentage of marriages with non-Armenians reached 68 percent (Jendian 2008: 155).

Religion and Politics in the Diaspora

Religious practice has always played an important role in the life of Armenians. In the early period of immigration, the fact that the newcomers were Christians helped to build a positive image of them among Americans (Melkonian 2007). The first parish within the Armenian Apostolic Church began to organize among the workers of the textile factories in Massachusetts, who founded their own church in 1891 (Kurian, Lampert 2016: 127). Armenian parishes contributed greatly to the preservation of the ethnic identity. Currently, 80 percent of Armenian Americans still belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, 10 percent belong to Protestant churches, and 3 percent are members of the Armenian Catholic Church (Laderman, León 2014: 302). When it comes to religious life, Jendian draws attention to a decrease of 20.9 percent in practices between the first and fourth generation, yet attendance at services remains quite common since it helps building a network of social contacts and may facilitate finding a better job (Jendian 2008: 154).

Another important element of the Armenian diaspora phenomenon is the political activity of its members. Political parties appeared in the diaspora at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, providing not only a platform for the expression of political views, but also a force to consolidate the community through cultural clubs, youth clubs, and women's organizations. The first Armenian American political party was the Social Democratic Hunchakian Party (SDHP) with offices in New York, Boston, and Worcester. The next were the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and the Democratic Liberal Party (ADLP). Apart from those listed above, currently the largest active Armenian groups in the United States are the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA), the Armenian Assembly of America (AAA), the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), and the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR).

The first member of the United States Congress with Armenian roots was the Republican Steven Boghos Derounian, who was elected to the House of Representatives

from New York in 1953. The only Armenian American to run for governor so far has been Courken George Deukmejian, the 35th Governor of California, who served from 1983 to 1991. The Armenian Caucus was organized in the House of Representatives in 1995, and, as Roger Waldinger writes, in the lower chamber of Congress today, at least 25 percent of votes are influenced by Armenian pressure groups (Waldinger 2015: 101).

The diaspora is trying to attract young Armenian Americans to the ethnic organizations; for example, the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) and the Armenian Relief Society (ARS). Financial assistance to Armenian students from all over the world is offered by the Glendale Armenian Educational Foundation (AEF), which was established in 1950.

In the United States, the ethnic press also developed dynamically from the early stage of the arrival of immigrants, who published in Armenian and English. It was initially closely related to the political groups. To this day, many titles are published, both locally and nationally. Armenians own the radio stations Sevan and Arax, as well as television stations such as Asbarez or U.S. Armenia. There are numerous ethnic websites and forums on the Internet.

The unquestioned success of the diaspora is the creation of an effective ethnic lobby. The pioneer who laid the foundations for its functioning in the 1920s was an immigrant from the Ottoman Empire, Vahan Cardashian. The unique strength of this community is its ability to build a coherent front on most of the diaspora's important issues, despite many differences and ongoing rivalries.

Armenians organize themselves around grassroot initiatives, especially those actively promoting fundraising for Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Turgut Kerem Tuncel believes that the government of the Republic is deliberately manipulating the diaspora by constantly emphasizing the difficult situation of the motherland. In a state of emergency, there is no room for critical voices from the diaspora, but it is a priority to mobilize political support and to provide financial aid (Tuncel 2014: 265). The diaspora has suspended criticism of the government several times in the past: after the tragic earthquake of 1988, in the first period after Armenia gained independence, and during the refugee crisis that has lasted since 2015. Since then, Armenia has taken in about 17,000 people, mainly Armenians from the Syrian diaspora (Gevorkyan 2016). The Syrian Armenian Relief Fund (SARF) has been established and relies heavily on donations from Armenian American church organizations. The outbreak of the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and the consequences of the signing of a tripartite agreement between the Republic of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Russian Federation in November 2020 mobilized the diaspora to organize support once again (the #All FOR ARTSAKH operation). For example, Kim Kardashian West announced a \$1 million donation on her official Instagram account on December 10, 2020, while the Armenia Fund collected \$22.9 million for this purpose only during its Thanksgiving Telethon, which was broadcasted on Facebook on November 26, 2020.

Racial Prerequisite Cases and Discrimination against Armenians in California

A crucial element of the history of Armenian settlement in California was obtaining the right to naturalize, acquire land and real estate in cities, and set up their own businesses. The following paragraphs will present the problem of racism and the struggle to incorporate Armenians into the American society in greater detail.

In 1790, the United States Congress passed the Naturalization Act, which authorized only white, free people to be citizens of the country. The Federation extended these powers to black Americans in 1870 and to Asians in the 1950s. Reluctance and discrimination against immigrants was manifested in the perception of race not so much in a biological sense, but as a tool of state policy and culture.

In 1909, a court case (*In re Halladjian* 1909) was concluded in Boston, determining whether the Ottoman-born Jacob Halladjian, Mkrtich Ekmekjian, Avak Mouradian, and Basar Bayentz could become American citizens and whether the refusal by officials had legal force. Judge Francis C. Lowell not only ruled that they could apply for citizenship, but also emphasized that they were “free white people.” Later that same year, Congress upheld Lowell’s position and passed a resolution according to which Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews are not Asians and as such are not subject to the laws excluding other groups from applying for naturalization (Ghoogasian 2017). Even so, a decade later, Armenian racial affiliation was once again questioned.

For the diaspora, similar processes were of fundamental importance. In California, the Alien Land Law (the Webb-Haney Act) was passed in 1913, prohibiting foreigners who could not apply for American citizenship from obtaining arable land or leasing it for more than three years. This law was directed against Asians, especially the Japanese, and the subsequent amendments of 1920 and 1923 were in theory intended to fill gaps to circumvent the above provisions. The recognition that Armenians did not belong to this category could put them in a much better position than the rest of the immigrants and allow them to buy land.

In Fresno, many Armenians worked as day wage laborers, setting aside funds to establish their own farms in the future. Therefore, the sentences in these cases had far-reaching consequences, which led to the mobilization of the entire diaspora (Craver 2009: 39). The successful campaign financed by fundraising undoubtedly contributed to winning the case known today as the *United States v. Cartozian* 1925.

Initially, action was taken by sending letters in support of Tatos O. Cartozian, then organizing a fundraising event that raised \$50,000 to cover law firm expenses and to collect a large amount of evidence (Coulson 2012: 123). The fact that Armenians are not Asians was to be confirmed not only by common observation, but also by systematized scientific knowledge. Statements were presented from organizations in which participation was racially dependent, such as the Grand Masonic Lodge of Oregon state (it only accepted white members, and there were Armenians among

them). Specialists were appointed, including the anthropologist Franz Boas. After months of litigation, Judge Charles E. Wolverton made a final verdict in 1925, ruling that Armenians are not Asians but white.

Based on a number of sources, Armen Don Minasian has stated that Armenians living in California have experienced various forms of discrimination and prejudice almost from the first years of settlement (Minasian 1972: 83). These included restrictions such as those introduced by the state of California in the 1920s on the purchase of real estate or renting a flat, difficulties in finding and keeping a job, or using public transportation.

This was especially important for the larger diaspora centers around Fresno. Armenian communities were met with a feeling of hostility from both Americans and other ethnic groups. They were referred to as “Fresno Indians,” the Armenian neighborhood was undesirable, they were not accepted into local organizations, and Armenian children suffered harassment in schools. This situation inspired eight young Armenians to found the ethnic association Triple X Fraternity in 1919, which is still in operation today.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Armenian minority living in the city decided to actively change this situation. They opened the Armenian-American Citizens Club, which was supposed to bring them closer to their neighbors. The second generation of immigrants often married people from outside the diaspora, which was unwelcome in the days of their parents, and also rapidly became Americanized, often at the expense of their ethnic identity.

Despite these efforts, Fresno maintained discriminatory laws until 1948, such as the racial segregation of residential districts, which was implemented by prohibiting the rental or purchase of real estate by persons from the “Turkish Empire” (Minasian 1972: 87). In practice, it was only by the 1950s that the period of Armenian segregation in California finally ended (Minasian 1972: 92).

Armenians in California and the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area

Today, Los Angeles is a multiethnic metropolis that is a part of the second largest metropolitan area in the United States. At the same time, it has taken on the role of the cultural and financial center of Southern California. For a minority of Armenian Americans, it has become the informal capital of the United States and a place where many decisions that also affect the life of the entire pan-Armenian community are made.

The beginnings of Armenian migration to the West Coast are linked to the central part of the state of California: San Joaquin Valley. It especially attracted those who planned to work in agriculture. The first Armenian to live there was supposedly a man named Normart, who came to Fresno in 1874 (Vartanian 2000). Then, in 1881, the Seropian brothers settled there and took up trade. Over time, they developed a fruit packing and transporting company. Their letters encouraged the arrival of another

forty Armenians in 1883 (Waldstreicher 1989: 59). In 1900, there were already five hundred Armenians living in the Fresno area; in 1908, that number increased to 3,000, and in 1914 to 10,000 people.

Most came from East Coast towns, especially in New England. The climate of the valley was similar to that of their native land, and many had experience in farming and succeeded in introducing less popular fruits. They contributed to California's vineyard development and raisin production. Malcolm G. Markarian monopolized the cultivation and sale of figs, while Krikor Arakelian became the "melon king of America" (Waldstreicher 1989: 60). As Ritter writes, in the 1920s, the economic situation of Armenian immigrants living in California was so prosperous that they led a lifestyle typical of the American middle class (Ritter 2009: 35).

According to Yeretzian, Armenians chose to settle in Los Angeles in the late 1890s. Referring to local parish books, he mentions the first Armenian child born in the city in 1902 by name and surname: Aram, the son of the carpet merchant John Pashgian who came in 1899 (Yeretzian 1923: 101). Bakalian reports that in 1923 the local Armenian population consisted of 2,500–3,000 people (Bakalian 2014: 15). In 1924, twenty young Armenians founded the Varoujan Club (Armenians of Pasadena) in Pasadena as a center of the local community and cultural activity. The Armenians ran crafts workshops, photo shops, and traded in the city.

In the 1920s, a group of Russian Armenians as well as refugees from the Ottoman Empire settled in the area of Boyle Heights. Until the middle of the century, the largest concentration of the diaspora lived in the Hollywood neighborhood (Fittante 2017: 11) of Little Armenia (between Thai Town and West Hollywood). Other districts with sizeable Armenian communities include Montebello and the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley.

The wave of immigration from the Middle East of the 1970s brought a significant change in the structure of the Armenian diaspora in Los Angeles and California more broadly. These refugees from Lebanon, Iran, and Egypt most often settled in Glendale, Burbank, and Pasadena. Among their members, a radicalization of views could be observed as they witnessed extremist actions in Lebanon and unrest in Turkey. They quickly found a place for themselves in the new reality, but they were characterized by a high level of Armenian nationalism, which was different from the balanced attitude of the earlier wave, which was wealthy, passive, and highly assimilated. Middle East Armenians focused on protecting their ethnic identity, which was their central and most cherished value. They were significantly different from the poor, unskilled wave of immigrants from the early century who worked in agriculture. They were fluent in several languages and had higher education, desirable professional skills (they were often doctors, engineers, architects, and academics), and substantial financial resources that enabled them to quickly open their own businesses. The United States Census reports that in 1980, Los Angeles was inhabited by 52,400 people who declared Armenian ethnicity. A decade later, that number rose to 115,000.

As I have mentioned, the diaspora's estimates of the Armenian population in California and Los Angeles differ significantly from official statistics from the ACS and United States Census. At present, the district with the largest Armenian American community is Glendale with almost 40 percent of entire population (Fittante 2018: 1240). Several industries are dominated by Armenian American enterprises, such as jewelry shops, waste companies, and shops in malls. In 2001, road signs in Armenian (alongside English and Spanish) were introduced on the streets.

A page in the history of Armenian Americans which is omitted in most studies concerns the phenomenon of Armenian terrorism. The first Armenian terrorist act in the United States was the murder of a Turkish consul in Santa Barbara in 1973 (Włosowicz 2009). Subsequent attacks were carried out in 1980–1982 in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles. As analysts say in a declassified CIA report from 1984, radical ideas found fertile ground especially among Middle East immigrants to California, and evidence gathered by the FBI in the 1980s supported the claim that the Commandos of the Armenian Genocide Justice headquarters (JCAG) was located in Los Angeles, where the greatest number of arrests of terrorists took place in 1982 (FBI 2011).

Los Angeles as an Important Center of Armenian culture

In recognition of the long-term presence of the Armenian community and its contribution to the development of the city, in 2000 the Los Angeles City Council officially named the oldest Armenian district marked on the maps as Little Armenia. To this day, many cultural organizations operate there, such as the Hayastan Cultural Center and the Armenian Society of Los Angeles. Numerous restaurants and cafes serve ethnic dishes and attract multi-generational families. Little Armenia neighborhood clubs and parish associations are also important for Armenian Angelenos.

Claude Mutafian emphasizes the positive contribution of the diaspora to the development of Armenian culture. Both the first Armenian printed book and the first Armenian periodical were published in exile (Mutafian 2018). This observation still finds confirmation nowadays in the form of Armenian popular music. Most of the records that are played in the Republic of Armenia and in the Spyurk communities are produced in Glendale (Ritter 2009: 148).

System of a Down is a globally recognizable Armenian rock and heavy metal group. The band was founded in Los Angeles in 1994 by musicians of Armenian origin: Serj Tankian, Daron Malakian, Shavo Odadjian, John Dolmayan, and Ontronik "Andy" Kchaturian. From the very beginning, they wanted to recall the Armenian tragedy in their work, and they placed the manifesto *P.L.U.C.K.* on their eponymous 1998 debut album, calling for genocide recognition and compensation. In 2011, the group's lead vocalist Serj Tankian received a state award from the Republic of Armenia for his efforts in promoting recognition of the Armenian genocide.

Los Angeles is the hub of two musical genres that are popular among the global Armenian diaspora. The first is *rabiz* (*rabis*), dance music with folk and oriental elements, often in electronic arrangements. The roots of *rabiz* date back to “Soviet” Armenia and the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. A local variety is the so-called *Los-angelnots*. The biggest producer of *rabiz* records is a Middle East immigrant from the 1970s wave, Kevork Parseghian. His studio is known for its cooperation with famous Armenian musicians such as Paul Baghdadlian, Harout Pamboukijan, and Glakho Zakaryan, and he owns the copyrights to Tatoul Avoryan songs (Quinones 2015). In 2016, *rabiz* became popular outside the diaspora thanks to the Armenian rapper Super Sako and the hit record *Mi Gina* from the album *Love Crimes*.

Another popular genre in the diaspora, which is very closely related to Los Angeles, is the so-called Armenian American *kef*. The word *kef* has many meanings, including “fun” or “time well spent” (Kezelian 2012). Harry Kezelian described it as “Armeno-American jazz” (Kezelian 2019). In fact, they have a lot in common, from syncopated rhythm to an element of improvisation. According to Kazelian, it is a special example of “the Great Armenian American Art Form”. *Kef* originally referred only to folk music intended for traditional Armenian dances. The genre arrived in the United States with the wave of immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite the constant transformations of the original form, subsequent generations of artists maintained its distinctly folk sound (Kezelian 2019).

For over two decades, Los Angeles has hosted a multi-day festival of Armenian films: the Arpa International Film Festival, organized by the Arpa Foundation for Film, Music and Art. As a part of the commemoration of the one-hundredth anniversary of the Armenian genocide, the musical *I Am Alive* was staged at the Alex Theater.

Several art galleries are run by Armenian Americans in the city, some of which focus solely on promoting the diaspora artists, such as the Ararat Gallery. In Little Armenia and Glendale, there are numerous ethnic murals such as *We Are Still Here 2015* by Arutyun Gozukuchikyan, known as ArtViaArt, which commemorates the centenary of the genocide (Cuevas 2015), or *Our Wounds Are Still Open 1915* by Artoon Art.

Glendale: An Armenian Ethnoburb

Beginning in the early 1970s, the San Fernando Valley attracted an increasing number of Armenian Angelenos. Many affordable apartment complexes and shopping centers were built there. By the end of the 1980s, Armenians became clearly visible in the Glendale area, opening shops and centers of diasporic organizations as well as building churches in a style characteristic of classic Armenian temples. According to ACS statistics from 2010, there were 28,616 immigrants from the Republic of Armenia and “Soviet” Armenians in this district, 22,405 Iranian Armenians, and 15,367 Armenians who had lived in California for generations, which together constituted

88 percent of the total Armenian population in Glendale (Fittante 2018: 1241). A large number of them were educated people holding high positions in corporations and Armenian companies, such as the Service Titanor Kradijan Importing Company. Thanks to them, millions of dollars in taxes have been transferred to the city. Until the 1980s, the Armenian community of Glendale was not politically active, but a decade later it dominated the administration. The first Armenian politician who made a strong presence in the 1990s was Larry Zarian. The mobilization of the diaspora and high election participation rate resulted in many public offices filled with Armenian candidates. In 2018, four Armenian Americans were appointed to the five-seat City Council. Armenian Americans held the office of Glendale mayor many times, and more than 50 percent of decision-makers in the district's most important committees now come from the diaspora (Fittante 2018: 1242). Undoubtedly, this has had a direct impact on important administrative decisions, such as bilingual education, the financing of minority organizations, and the annual commemoration of the anniversary of the Armenian genocide.

One very prestigious project is the Armenian American Museum complex, the construction of which was supposed to start in 2020. Fundraising has been conducted for several years, and the decision-makers declared a multi-million subsidy from state funds. The mission of the center will be to show the history and immigration experience of the Armenian American minority, organize cultural and educational events, and protect the tangible and intangible heritage of the diaspora. It is to become the most important place for all Armenian Americans, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of tradition.

The first primary school for Armenians in the United States was opened in Encino in the San Fernando Valley in 1964. Due to the numerous arrivals of the last immigration wave, the demand for classes outside of private Armenian institutions has increased; therefore, some public schools in California have launched courses in Armenian. In Little Armenia, Pasadena, and Glendale, there are many community centers offering education for Armenian youths, and Mashdots College has been opened in Glendale. Due to the fact that the number of students with Armenian roots reached 30 percent, since 2004 the calendar of school holidays has been modified to include the most important Armenian holidays (Pang 2004).

State universities like California State University (its Fresno and Northridge branches), the University of California (its Berkeley and Los Angeles branches), and the University of Southern California offer student programs that cover Armenian subjects. The International Society for Armenian Studies (SAS), an international association of researchers and academics, has been operating in Fresno since 1975 and publishes the *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*.

The first Armenian church in California was built in Fresno in 1900, while the Armenian Angelenos' first place of worship was the Holy Cross Church in Downtown Los Angeles, built in 1923. The second, built in the style of classic Armenian churches,

was built in Montebello in 1978. Currently, thirty-six temples celebrate masses for Armenian Angelenos (Krieger 2003). There are two cathedral churches: St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral in Glendale, which serves the Armenian Catholic Rite, and St. Leon Armenian Cathedral, which was built by the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Preserving the memory of the Armenian genocide plays a particularly important role for the diaspora on the West Coast. In 1968, the Armenian Genocide Martyrs Monument (Montebello Genocide Memorial) was unveiled in Los Angeles. Through the initiative of Luther Eskijian, in 1985 the Ararat-Eskijian Museum was opened in Mission Hills, a small center that presents a collection of Armenian souvenirs, conducts lectures and conferences, and provides access to library collections. There is a memorial sculpture in Los Angeles' Grand Park, which was preceded by the exhibition *iWitness*, which consists of photographs of Armenian genocide survivors. Meanwhile, the Armenian Genocide Memorial Square is yet to be finished.

During the term of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was commemorated not only in Sacramento, the capital of the State of California, but a week-long celebration was introduced in 2010 (Ardarutyun 2010). On April 24, 2015, a march was organized in Los Angeles, which, according to LAPD estimates, could have gathered over 130,000 participants (RT 2015).

The events marking the centenary of the Armenian genocide in 2015 were prepared on an unprecedented scale. Efforts were made to symbolically connect the scattered communities of the diaspora and the homeland. On behalf of the survivors and as an expression of gratitude to the people who helped save them, the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative was created; it includes several complementary programs: the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity, the 100 LIVES Initiative, the Aurora Dialogues, the Aurora Humanitarian Index, and the Gratitude Project. The first gala of the foundation took place on April 24, 2016, in Yerevan.

In March 2015, Armenian American organizations placed large-format billboards reading: "America, We Thank You" (O'Neil 2015) on the streets of Los Angeles, referring in their aesthetics to archival press articles and photos advertising the NER's activities between 1915 and 1930. The foundation has provided help to over one million refugees in the Middle East and provided housing and education to 132,000 orphans, raising \$116 million for this purpose. The memory of the NER's aid, thanks to which many Armenians survived and found a new home in the United States, continues to be cultivated by the diaspora today.

Summary

When examining the Armenian American diaspora, one can observe that this community has actively made use of the conditions offered by the host country to its advantage. Arguments in favor of this thesis are indicators of wealth, social mobility,

and education. The first, most numerous wave of immigrants managed to overcome prejudices and win the right to naturalization and land ownership. They assimilated quickly, yet they retained a sense of ethnic identity and many elements of their native culture. In subsequent generations, however, they lost their knowledge of the Armenian language and entered into marriages with people from outside their group, still emphasizing their membership in the Armenian minority.

The Armenian American community is clearly divided, with many unresolved conflicts. However, they have shown that they can unite and mobilize both in terms of their local agenda and the interests of the country of their ancestors. They achieved success in April 2021 when, after more than half a century of efforts, President Joe Biden became the first United States President to officially declare the mass murders of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as genocide. One hundred years after those dramatic events, the memory of the Armenian tragedy has spread throughout the federation.

Los Angeles is an important cultural center for the global Armenian diaspora. There are research centers and Armenian studies programs at California universities. In Glendale, an ethnic suburb, the impact of the diaspora is far-reaching. Despite the fact that they constitute 40 percent of the district's population, they have managed to dominate the decision-making centers of administration, introduce modifications to the education system, and obtain multimillion-dollar grants for important ethnic projects.

An event that may significantly affect the immediate future of Armenian Americans, especially in the city that has become the home of the largest number of Armenians overseas, is the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and the loss of Armenian territories. Once again, the Armenian Americans suspended their internal disputes, consolidating a divided community in the face of the tragedy of victims and displaced persons. They have been running fundraising activities for the Republic of Armenia and are open to accept immigrants from Artsakh. This is not the first wave of forced migrations in the Armenian history, and, as the previous waves have shown, social networks and a strong sense of social responsibility are an enduring feature of this ethnic minority, which William Saroyan has accurately described as follows: "For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia" (Saroyan 1936: 438).

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