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Armenians in Marseilles

To mark the Year of Armenia in France (2007), the Musée d'Histoire de Marseilles and Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM) jointly organized an exhibition under the main heading of *Far from Mount Ararat* (Loin de l'Ararat). While MuCEM highlighted *Lesser Armenia in Europe and the Mediterranean* (Petites Arménies d'Europe et Méditerranée)¹ in a virtual show, the Musée d'Histoire de Marseilles dedicated a special exhibition to the *Armenians in Marseilles* (Arméniens de Marseille) (see Morel-Deledalle et al. 2007).²

The Armenian community of Marseilles numbers amongst the most important in France. Over the years, but especially in recent times, its influence has grown so strong that responsible politicians in Marseilles could not do otherwise but listen to it and take its opinions into consideration. This is why MPs were continually asking the museum to accommodate ready-made exhibitions about the Armenian question, the genocide or the demands for its recognition, amongst other aspects. As curators of the Musée d'Histoire de Marseille, we had always refused to accept such a “prefab” exhibition, however, on the one hand owing to their propagandistic bias, and, on the other, for lack of reference to the Armenian community in Marseilles.

For the Year of Armenia, we had hence decided to organise a show about the Armenians in Marseilles, an unexplored topic at that point in time. This called for a downright research effort on our part wherein we needed to tap the sources and establish personal contact with Armenians in Marseilles, offering an opportunity to develop more intensive relationships with the city's Armenian community, and to collect relevant testimonies with its help, especially via the association ARAM (Association pour la Recherche et l'Archivage de la Mémoire arménienne)³. We needed to base our research on unpublished, authentic documents.

The credit for preserving and handing down this history in Marseilles should meanwhile go to a unique personality whom I would like to honour at this juncture: Garbis Artin. As he was not the only one interested in passing on the memory of the Armenians in Marseilles, but one of many who devoted all their powers to finding a way of or place for preserving this history, he established the ARAM association in his residential district Saint-Jérôme, the 13th arrondissement of Marseilles, in 1997. A very wise move!

Facing the loss of his own, unimparted history, Garbis had vowed to create such a place, by all and for all, where the testimonies of the families in whatever form would be gathered and where one could come for free advice from unpaid volunteers. In small steps, he began to collect keepsakes of the family, books and photographs, recording eyewitness reports and sensitizing his closer environment, in the course of which he intuitively realized the significance of his efforts, and the pressing need to put them in the hands of professional structures. Aware of the Armenian community's trust in him and also of his responsibility as their spokesman, he consequently established the ARAM association.

Smart and well-disposed as he was, Garbis—and his children with him and after him—felt a pressing need to create the right conditions for maintaining and

preserving this memory, driven by his two-fold ambition of lending his project a strictly scientific framework while simultaneously maintaining and preserving the memory and its tangible testimonies at the heart of the community. This circumstance indeed furnished the actors of the community with a fundamental security in Garbis' project.

He was doubtlessly the guarantor for this maintenance and preservation because he had successfully prevented a decentralised storage of the documents – for example in the city's or department's archives – and he had done that for understandable reasons: he wanted to ensure that the testimonies would be stored and scanned with due conservational care and thus made accessible to the public at a central location. They were not meant to disappear in an inaccessible depot that is only reserved for experts. Such an archive had to stay alive or come to life – and that by way of the words which explained the objects, images, photographs, etc.

To create the right conditions for the safekeeping and preservation of the treasures entrusted to him, and ultimately realise both, Garbis proceeded like a trained historian or anthropologist. He adopted methods for inventorying, cataloguing, etc. and applied them to the collection of testimonies to render the provided documents accessible, and hence enrich their content.

It is thanks to the intuitive, systematic work of Garbis, as well as his trust and generosity, that we, a small team at the Musée d'Histoire, have been able to access this archive, and thus unpublished, documented sources, for our studies and publication. Based on these historic sources, we have tried to tell a story of the Armenians and about Marseilles.

Armenians could be found in Marseilles since the Middle Ages, or even earlier, as merchants and traders. The large medieval harbour maintained contacts to all other ports and received goods from the entire Mediterranean and beyond for onward sale in the town's markets.

Characterised by cultural heterogeneity since the 6th century BC, Marseilles is the “daughter” of an immigrant from Phocaea and Ligurian natives. The port took in people from other countries who alighted on its shores to engage in commerce, seek refuge or dare a new beginning. This is the manner in which Italian, Swiss, Greek, Algerian-French, Corsican, Indochinese or Vietnamese and Comorian communities have come to form Marseilles in all its entirety and variety.

The new Armenian population arriving in Marseilles since 1922 had a different background. These were people who had fled from their villages in the wake of political upheavals in the Middle East. Between the end of the 19th century and the 1920s, over 60,000 Armenians sought refuge in Marseilles (see *Les Arméniens* 2015). ▶ Fig. 1

The sources collected by ARAM largely relate to the persons themselves, and that in a highly descriptive type of document: identification papers, “Nansen passports”⁴, photographs with the names of fathers, mothers, and cousins scrawled on them, along with various comments rendered deeply upsetting by



Fig. 1 So-called Nansen passport, 1924 | ARAM

their humanity. The large, official entry register of Marseilles' own reception centre, Oddo, surprisingly well-preserved with its writing of fine and thick lines, meanwhile pays a great homage to the refugees by virtue of its exactitude.

The new arrivals, however, were poor and destitute, were met with a bad reception, and blamed for all evil, every sickness, etc. They were crammed into camps and told to move on as soon as possible; the city's superannuated authorities did not want these migrants, whom they distrusted. Marseilles was a port of arrival, to be sure, but one hoped to be able to make them relocate to other towns and countries, or to America. Most of them stayed nonetheless.

With no preparation for the arrival of the refugees, the reality was grim: Between October 10th and 30th 1923, more than 3,000 people disembarked in Marseilles. They were herded together in inhospitable, run-down military camps. Camp Oddo, which had the greatest reception capacities, had to face the arrival of over 2,000 migrants between September and November 1923. ▶ Fig. 2

One of the most extraordinary documents in ARAM's possession is the already mentioned register of Camp Oddo, which accepted Armenian refugees from 1922 to 1927. This handwritten register lists the new arrivals with great precision, providing information about them in twelve columns including their last name, first names, degrees of kinship, age, place of birth, gender, marital status, arrival date at the camp with month and year, occupation, release date from the camp, and finally a rubric for "Observations". A review of this document has shown that a large part of the migrants came from rural areas. The others were tradesmen,

N°	Nom - Prénom	Age à l'arrivée	Sexe	Profession	Origine	Date d'arrivée	Statut	Remarques
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Fig. 2 List of registered refugees at Camp Oddo, Marseilles | ARAM

including shoemakers, blacksmiths, carpenters and tailors. Garbis Artin was able to find his father’s last name in the entry register. He had been born in 1889 and came from the village of Kantaros, near Sivas, the ancient Sebaste at the centre of Anatolia. His last name was Keusseyan, his first name Artin, turned into his surname when the French authorities prepared the official integration documents. Garbis’ father had fled from his village at the age of 16. He had roamed around in Baghdad, where he apparently also got married, as a surviving photograph shows. Then he had found a ship in Aleppo that took him all the way to Marseilles. Although he and his brother Garabed were the only survivors out of a family of 50, he never told Garbis much about his escape from Anatolia, the hard times, or his parents, if anything at all.

The reception camps in Marseilles, only meant to be temporary, were organized in a manner that sought to improve the social coexistence under these dramatic conditions: A structure was created for dealing with administrative, financial and social matters, with a French-Armenian school being established as a consequence. One should note in this regard that the Armenians managed the entire operation themselves. This included the provision of accommodation in furnished apartments where several families would be penned up in a single room, sometimes with the aid of Armenians who had settled there earlier and came to help their fellow countrymen. ▶ Fig. 3

Paradoxically, the pooling together of the population in camps generated greater optimism amongst those concerned, and promoted the development of an

undeniable mutual support that became a cornerstone of the refugees' survival. As the migrants were already grouped in the camps, by their family roots, neighbourhoods and origins, the fact that they had pulled through these difficult times together created intensive bonds between families and individuals.

It is, therefore, understandable that these groups, upon leaving the camp, would stay together as they settled in the surrounding districts of Marseilles, in order to re-establish their own villages once more. Their choices led the Armenians near places where they started out as simple labourers in industrial enterprises such as soap factories, shipyards, brickworks and sugar refineries. The groups have spread to several quarters of Marseilles: to Saint-Antoine with families from Sivas, to Saint-Loup with families from Cilicia and Adana, to Beaumont with those from Van, to Saint-Jérôme, Vallon des Tuves, Verduron and Ayalades with those from Caesarea.

In comparison to other population groups, some things were different about the way the Armenians settled in Marseilles: They built new districts with their church at the centre, recognisable to all who belonged, but also from a number of constructional features that weren't really "architectural characteristics" in the proper meaning of the word, but referred to as such. This is the case in Saint-Jérôme, the 13th district of Marseilles, where one asks oneself if this is a typical Armenian village. It certainly is not, to anyone looking for classic identification marks. Instead, one would need to see with the eyes of our friend Garbis to open one's own eyes and be able to understand the attendant history.

Certainly no Armenian village per se, this is still a village where the Armenians are amongst themselves. Indeed, one has the feeling of being somewhere else,



Fig. 3 Armenian school at Camp Oddo, 1925 | ARAM

but without knowing where, as Garbis put it. Only those, who originate from there, know their roots. They have learned over time to preserve this knowledge for the future, even if they come from a country that is no longer the same as the one their ancestors left, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

This is probably what is so special about the Armenian community: It has created a history in Marseilles that is no more than a memory, a history that is kept alive in this way by virtue of a number of everyday objects (a traditional coffee grinder here, a photograph there), and, most of all, by one or several narratives. The people perpetuate their “being Armenian” through their concerted and individual actions, by handing down their language, culture and memory from one family to the next, in the thick of life in the quarter.

After Garbis’ passing in 2012 and the death of his son Christian in 2015, they are now followed by his daughter Astrid, who, with the support of the entire association, continues their efforts and is even stepping them up to expand the collection, and number and circulate the sources as they grow ever more extensive and multi-faceted.

Although the arrival of the first Armenians is receding ever further into the past – and although the last survivor, who was born in Abadazar in 1907 and arrived in Marseilles in 1928, has died in 2015, aged 106 – historic testimonies still keep emerging from this collection of memories.

1 See <http://www.armeniens.culture.fr/> (accessed on 19/08/2016)

2 The exhibition catalogue created for the Year of Armenia in France bears the title Armenia, my friend (Arménie mon amie).

3 Translation: “Association for Researching and Archiving the Armenian Memory” (see [http://webaram.com/-accessed on 03/06/2016](http://webaram.com/-accessed-on-03/06/2016)).

4 Named after Fridtjof Nansen, the League of Nation’s first High Commissioner for Refugees. In 1922, he introduced

the so-called Nansen passport that could serve refugees as a first internationally recognized document (see <http://www.unhcr.de/unhcr/events/nansen-fluechtlingspreis/fridtjof-nansen.html> – accessed on 18/08/2016).

Source

UNHCR. The UN refugee agency: Fridtjof Nansen <http://www.unhcr.de/unhcr/events/nansen-fluechtlingspreis/fridtjof-nansen.html>.

Literature

Les Arméniens de Provence (March–April 2015) [special issue of the magazine La Provence / Histoire].

Morel-Deledalle, Myriame et al. (2007): *Loin de l’Ararat: Les petites Arménies d’Europe et de Méditerranée / Les Arméniens de Marseille*, publ. by Musée d’Histoire de Marseille and MuCEM.