

The Armenian diaspora

Even in pre-Christian times, the progressive, cosmopolitan-minded and sociable people had Armenian communities with considerable cultural and economic influence in many of the then world centres such as Rome, Athens, Jerusalem or Alexandria. After the destruction of their empire by the Seljuks, a Turkish tribe who fell upon them from the east during the 11th century, Armenian refugees found a new home in Eastern Europe, and soon had a considerable reputation in that part of the world. Then came the invasion by the Mamelukes from Syria and Egypt in the 14th century, and this time the stream of Armenian refugees reached as far as the harbour towns of Italy and France, from which many of them took ship to other lands such as Holland, and later even India, Ceylon, and Siam. Significant communities were founded in those countries, and as the sea-trading routes were gradually opened up to Western shipping, the Armenians were by the 16th century in a favoured position as an energetic merchant class.

It was during the 19th century that the emigration to America began after some bloody persecution in Turkey, and this was followed by another stream of refugees in the 20th century.

A further 1.2 million Armenians live today in Canada, Latin America, France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, the German-speaking countries, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Iran.

There are around 3.5 million Armenians in the Soviet Union today, of whom 3.1 million live in the 30,000 square kilometres of the Armenian Socialist Soviet Republic with its capital city of Erivan. After the era of the Soviet dictator Stalin, a Georgian himself, who decimated the Armenian population by deportations in order to annex Armenia to Georgia, the situation calmed down again. Today, the Armenian Soviet Republic is regarded as a model of its kind, and is often described as "the Switzerland of the Soviet Union". The Armenians have the highest level of education of all the many peoples in the Soviet Union, and as a result Armenia's scientific, technical and cultural achievements provide its people with a relatively large degree of scope for the maintenance of Armenian tradition, in religion too.

One of the largest Armenian organizations is their charitable society with its headquarters in New York and Paris. This society maintains from its own funds Armenian schools, old folks' homes and hospitals.

The spirit of Armenia

An ancient people find a cultural home in Vienna

The small, narrow street in the Seventh District of Vienna carries their name - the Mechitaristengasse. It was here that Armenian priests found asylum and a home in the year 1811. From that time on the monastery has been fulfilling the duty laid on the monastic order in the year 1700 by its founder, Mekhitar of Sebaste, that it should be a pulsating centre of Armenian culture.

The Congregation of Mekhitarist Fathers of Vienna today are the guardians of a remarkable and comprehensive library with the world's largest collection of Armenian periodicals and newspapers, a splendid manuscript collection, and a museum with invaluable treasures of Armenian art, everything catalogued, restored and scientifically described. It can be described without exaggeration as the "Armenian National Library", for all

An intellectual centre outside the mother country . . .

Armenian publications up to the present day are collected there. It is, so to speak, the symbol of a significant national intellectual centre outside the mother country.

On the other hand, the Mekhitarists have proved to be "the first pioneers of Austrian culture in the Orient". This was how they were described in 1925 by the

then Austrian Federal Chancellor, Dr. Ignaz Seipel, on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of the large and still existing Mekhitarist school in Istanbul. For generations they have been founding mission stations, parish communities and schools in Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria,

. . . of the first Christian state in the world

Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, and in doing so have brought Austrian intellect and culture to those lands, often for the first time.

And even today young candidates from Lebanon and Syria are trained in Vienna for the priesthood in their native lands. The 20 fathers of the Order have to maintain their monastery by their own efforts, something which goes back to the year 1810, when Emperor Franz I granted asylum in Vienna to the Mekhitarists, under the condition that they would support themselves unaided.

But where did these Mekhitarist fathers come from, and how did it come about that Vienna is today one of the intellectual centres of the Armenian diaspora? The roots of the Mekhitarist congregation in Vienna go back for almost three centuries - or if one likes for almost 2000 years, for Armenia was the first Christian state in the world!

This West Armenian priest's crown was made in the middle of the 18th century. It is 26 cm high, made of silk, and richly embroidered with gold and silver threads and pearls. The life of Christ is depicted in scenes contained in five medallions, the one visible in the picture showing the crucifixion.

Armenia, whose founding has been traced back to the year 585 BC, was a natural geographical bridge for the spread of Christianity from Palestine to Europe. Apostles and preachers left their traces in an increasing number of early Christian communities and congregations. Around the year 110 AD some 10,000 Christians were martyred near Mount Ararat, but in the same century there were already resident bishops in Armenia, and in or about 301 AD Christianity became the Armenian state religion.

As is so often the case, a legend has grown up around it: the Christian missionary Gregor refuses to take part in a heathen

As so often happens, there has grown up a legend - of the lustful King Tiridates and the devout nun Hripsime

cult ceremony to celebrate the accession of the Armenian King Tiridates III, and is thrown into prison. Years later, 36 Christian nuns arrive in the Armenian capital city in flight from the Romans, but the thoughts they arouse in the mind of the virile Tiridates are anything but holy. The pretty Hripsime in particular catches his eye, and is immediately destined to be added to his household as concubine. But the deeply religious maiden repulses him, which means death for her and all her companions. Soon the king is afflicted by an apparently incurable skin condition. He eventually follows the advice of his sister, who has a leaning towards Christianity, frees Gregor, who has now been imprisoned for 13 years, and consults him as physician. And in fact, Gregor heals the king, converts him to Christianity, and Tiridates, his wife Ashken, the entire court, the army and some of the people are baptised. Christianity is proclaimed to be the state religion, Gregor becomes known as "the Enlightener" and is appointed Katholikos, the head of the Armenian Church.



There are no definite historical sources concerning the life of Gregor, but it is fact that Armenia became the first Christian state around the year 301 AD - a

The Christians of the West should remember their "forgotten" brothers in Armenia

step which led to its political isolation and immunity against external influences, which seems to be a more sober and credible assessment of the situation.

The edict of tolerance issued by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 313 AD granted the Christians freedom of religion and equal rights within the Roman Empire, which at that time enclosed the entire Mediterranean Sea.

It was then that Christian churches

and monasteries began to spring up over the pagan altars throughout the land of Armenia. Bishop Gregor, with the support of the king, was able to establish the new religion in the country, and to assert the independent status of his church. During the following centuries Armenia never bowed to the will of more powerful states, and at the cost of considerable sacrifice the Armenian national church has existed right to the present day.

If we pass over the extraordinarily varied history of Armenia until the year 1700, we then come to Mekhitar of Sebaste.

In his youngest years he had learned how much an oppressive foreign rule had adversely affected the cultural and religious life of the historical Armenia. With the founding of his monastic Order, he wanted to obtain more attention from the Christians of the West for their "forgotten" brothers in Armenia. This seemed to him to be possible only outside the bounds of

ARMENIAN ROOTS

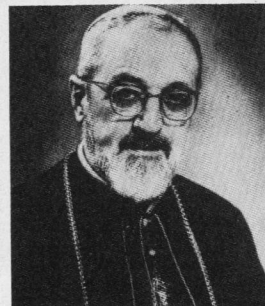
The list of prominent people of Armenian extraction is a long one. Here are just a few of the names from it: the novelists William Saroyan (USA), Michael Arlen (senior England, junior USA); the composer and singer Charles Aznavour (France); the patron of the arts Calouste Gulbenkian (Portugal); the politician Anastas Mikoyan, for many years a member of the highest governing class in the Soviet Union; the Soviet Marshall Bagramian; the "red Pope" and one of the most prominent Catholic clerics, Cardinal Agagianian (Rome); the Soviet composer Aram Katchaturian; and the world-famous Austrian conductor Herbert von Karajan is descended in the sixth generation from an Armenian family.



Herbert von Karajan



Charles Aznavour



Cardinal Agagianian

the mighty Ottoman Empire, which then ruled the entire Middle East. Therefore, in 1703, they found their first home on the Greek peninsula of Morea, in the north-west of the Peloponnese, which was then under Venetian rule.

Venice was also the place of refuge for Mekhitar and many of his followers, when the Venetian-Turkish War broke out some time later. The monks who remained on Morea were taken prisoner by the Turks, and had to have their freedom purchased in Constantinople in 1716.

In 1717 the Senate of Venice gave the Mekhitarists the barren island of San Lazaro, once a hospice for travellers to the Orient, and later a leper colony. When Mekhitar died in 1749 he left behind an established monastic community which was well able to maintain the Armenian culture and educate young people for the priesthood.

In 1773 a group of 19 fathers of the Order established a branch of the Mekhitarists in Trieste. The Austrian ruler Maria Theresa granted them extraordinary privileges, not least the then rare authority to establish a printing press in both Latin and Armenian script. For their missionary work in the East they were given Austrian passports - they were Austrian citizens.

It was just this fact which led to their undoing three decades later, when Trieste was occupied by French troops and was given over to Napoleon's Kingdom of Illy-

ria. As Austrian citizens the Mekhitarists lost all their belongings, and had to seek asylum in Vienna. Emperor Franz I granted them this asylum, and confirmed their privileges. In 1814, therefore, the Mekhitarists took over an abandoned Capuchin monastery, which to this day is their Vienna centre, and among other activities founded their new printing house there.

This printing house has now been brought up to the very latest technical standards, and is one of the two main

Printing is one source of income; the other - liqueur

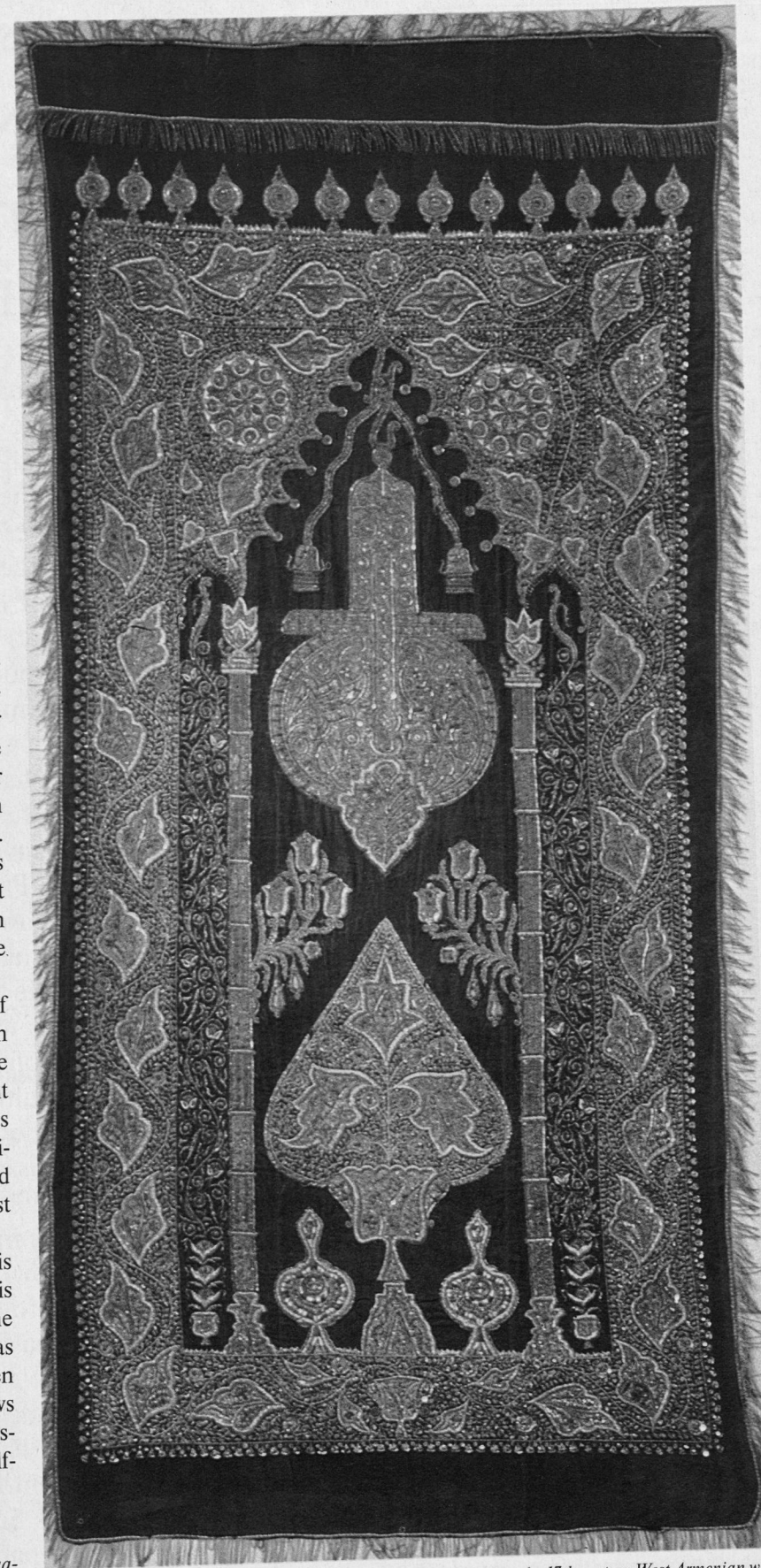
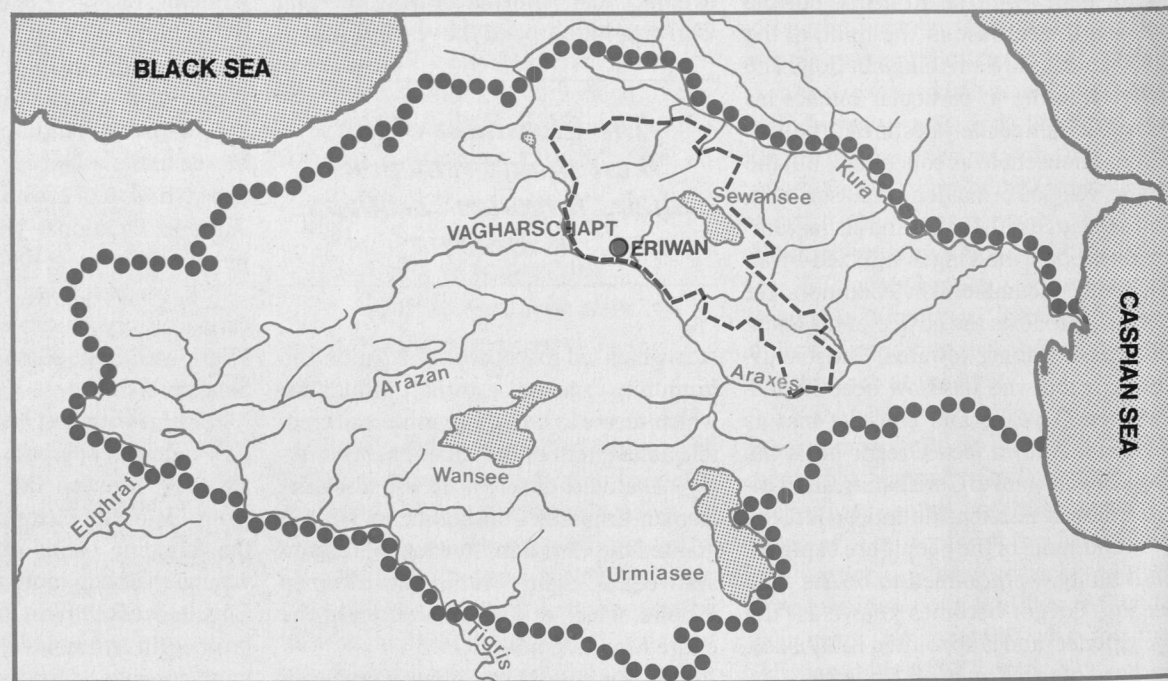
sources of income for the Mekhitarists (the folder "Building in Austria" enclosed with this issue of AUSTRIA TODAY was printed by the Mekhitarists). The second financial source can be found bubbling under the arches of the cellars. It is here that the "Mechitarine" liqueur is distilled, a bitter cordial in several different grades which enjoys considerable popularity in Austria. The father of the Order responsible for its production, however, maintains a strict vow of silence regarding the production quantity, and even more so as regards the recipe!

But it is not only the monastery itself and its training centre for the priesthood in the Middle East which is financed by these means, to say nothing of the magnificent library and art museum. The mekhitarists operate large schools in Istanbul and Beirut, maintain a parish in Budapest, and organize a holiday camp and school in East Falmouth, USA.

But the visitor hardly realises all this when the ancient, heavy monastery door is (eventually) opened to him, and the elderly father of the Order who acts as doorkeeper (and watches over an even more elderly telephone apparatus) shows him the way to the museum, to an unsuspected treasure house of a now half-legendary land.

This article is based on the book by Dr. Elisabeth Bauer, "Armenia - its past and present" (New York, Armenian Prelacy, 1980), which is also published in French and German editions. Dr. Christian Sapper of the Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna assisted with documentary material.

The frontiers of Armenia from the first century BC to the 4th century AD, the era of the wars against the Roman Empire. In 69 BC the Roman general Lucullus defeats the Armenian army, and is remembered to the present day for his "Lucullian" triumph feast. In 62 AD the Roman army is beaten, and in Rome Emperor Nero crowns Tiridates I as King of Armenia. The newly-built capital city of Wagharschapat lies to the west of Eriwan, the present-day capital of the Armenian Socialist Soviet Republic. The present frontiers of the states which rule the area of the original Armenian state are drawn in red.



One of the most precious pieces in the Mechitarist collection - the 17th century West Armenian wall carpet. Measuring 264 x 127 cm, its red silk is embroidered with gold, silver and woolen threads, sequins, and strips of silver and other metals. Traditional motifs such as the stylised pomegranate as a fertility symbol, or the rosette, are combined with crosses after ancient Armenian custom. The style and theme of the pattern is representative of the classical Armenian school of famous carpet makers in Asia Minor during the early 17th century.