

Passing the Torch

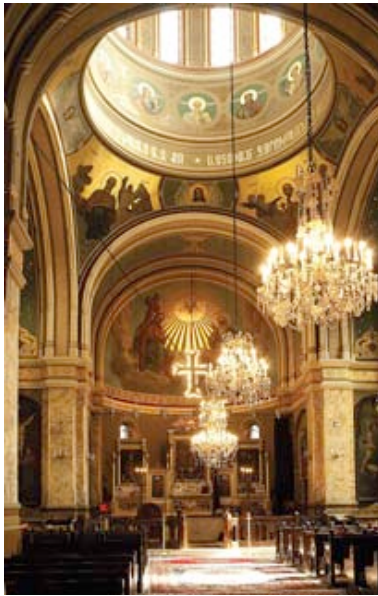


The tales about Ani have always been cherished and treasured but there were a few who carried the bright memory of this medieval capital city of Armenia in their hearts, passing the torch from generation to generation. Ani stayed alive in them and among them.

Text **Verzhine Nikoghosyan**

Suceava was the new Ani for the Armenian-Romanian community in Romania who erected churches from the memories of their ancestors. Reconstructing and reliving their lost homeland, the Armenian community continues to live their dream in a foreign land that has become home. “Armenian-Romanians have kept in their hearts the pride of being from Ani,” said Bishop Datev Hagopian, the Primate of the Armenian Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Romania. Coming from a city of 1001 churches, these people constructed their own churches in a remote country. Because they were surrounded with the spirit of the Armenian ancient heritage and pure faith, the only lifestyle they knew, they decided to rebuild it. In 1350, the community erected the first Armenian Apostolic Church dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Botusha; more churches were built in the 1500s, still more in the 1600s and 1700s, and the last church was built in 1915 to show the world that the Genocide was not the end of the Armenian nation. This was a message of faith and hope toward the bright future of all Armenians. In the middle of the 19th century, there were 21,000 Armenians living throughout Romania. Most of them were concentrated in Transylvania, the central area of modern-day Romania. The Armenian community flourished in this country throughout the years. They have been a significant part of Romania, giving birth to key historic figures and enriching its culture with their unique customs.

Many outstanding Armenian-Romanians not only were devoted to their Armenian roots but also played important role in the Romanian political, cultural and social life. One of these was Spiru Haret. Born in 1851 to an Armenian family, he became an outstanding mathematician, astronomer and politician. He served three terms as Minister of Education, where he established reforms to improve the Romanian education system. He also founded the astronomical observatory in Bucharest and was a member of the Romanian Academy in 1892. Today there is a Spiru Haret University in Bucharest, Romania. Among Armenians who had a significant and irreplaceable contribution to Romanian history and culture was Garabet Ibrăileanu. Born in 1871, he was a literary critic, writer, theorist, translator and sociologist at Iai University. Other famous Armenian-Romanians were: Vasile Conta, born in 1845, was a philosopher, poet and politician and Virgil Traian N. Madgearu, born in 1887, who was an economist, sociologist and a politician. Romanian-Armenian businessmen continued the trades of their ancestors who traditionally succeeded in the field. There are records in Romanian trading books of Armenian salesman living in Bucharest in 1832. The list includes all the people who were allowed to work and have their own businesses or worked as craftsmen. The list includes 111 Armenians, many of whom owned their businesses while others were carpenters, coffee traders and so on.



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The cathedral of Holy Archangel is the diocesan cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Romania.



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The altar of Hagigadar, the ancient Armenian monastery.



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Every icon around the altar is a treasure from the Middle Ages.

It wasn't until the middle of the 19th century when Armenian schools and educational establishments opened their doors for the Armenian youth. Here the students could learn Romanian, the Armenian language, history and much more. The 40s and 50s of the 19th century are known as a Renaissance of the Armenian community in Romania. Education became more accessible for Armenians, and the first Armenian printing house was established in 1847, in the city of Iași. The typography house was named Ani and soon the Armenian media flourished along with it. In 1913 there were Armenian communities in over 14 cities throughout Romania. In three of them there were large Armenian schools, Mesropyan, Haykazian, and Ghevondyanc. Most of the communities, however, had small schools close to the churches. Today the Armenian community of Romania is proud of their large and rich library, ancient Armenian iconography, the over three centuries-old archive and a large number of church artifacts. Although the Romanian-Armenian community is still vibrant, they face many challenges.

"In order to keep our heritage, we need to fight on two fronts," said Bishop Datev. "One of them is to preserve the Armenian heritage and the other is to prepare the new generation of Armenians to carry on their heritage into the future. It is really hard for us to sustain this enormous cultural treasury with which we have been entrusted."

From time to time the diocese organizes events to bring Armenian youth together around their common cultural heritage, language and faith. Last year 87 young people gathered in the monastery of Hagigadar to discuss and learn about the Armenian Church, the liturgy and our language. "We prayed together, we had liturgy, we arranged pilgrimages to different churches, and most importantly, had an opportunity to get to know each other."

This was the first time the youth participated in a pilgrimage. Afterwards, they were proud to join the demonstration dedicated to the Armenian Genocide. The enthusiastic response of the participants of these kinds of events inspired the community to continue the tradition of gathering the youth and teaching them about their Armenian heritage in the future. Among these events, the consecration of Hagigadar, the ancient Armenian monastery in Europe, was the highlight of this year's Armenian-

Romanian community events. The All Armenians Catholicos, His Holiness Karekin II, made a Pontifical visit to the Armenian Diocese of Romania to re-consecrate the monastery. Hagigadar is not merely an Armenian house of worship, it has also gained fame as an all-Christian sanctuary. People from different Christian denominations make pilgrimages to Hagigadar because they believe that God will answer their prayers here. This miraculous place has a mysterious history. Two Armenian merchants traveled to Austria, and on their way they stopped at this site for a night's rest. Here they saw visions of angels praying and worshipping God all night long. Driven by this spiritual experience, they promised to build a church on the site if their business was successful. Their prayers were answered and they built the monastery, calling it Hagigadar, which means "answered prayer." During the past 500 years, there was not a day when the prayer stopped in this location. Constructed in 1512, the monastery celebrated its 500th anniversary in August. Today the church is restored to its original magnificence. Pilgrims from all over the world came to Romania to celebrate this occasion.

"We raise praises to God for granting us this meeting on this joyous and wonderful day. I am glad to see you all gathered, strong in faith and unified with your brothers who have arrived from different parts of the world to share these festive days with you," said his Holiness Karekin II, All Armenian Catholicos. This event was a momentous occasion for the Armenian-Romanian community. "This is an opportunity for us to say that we celebrate our history by affirming that we are going to mold our history for another 500 years," said Bishop Datev. "It is very important for us to tell the coming generation that they are the future of this community, and they will be molding it for the years to come. If there is only 10% Armenian blood in any person, then I surely will consider them Armenian. I saw the Armenian blood to be so powerful that even that much is enough for them to care," he concluded.

Even though Romania is far from the motherland, the Armenian-Romanian community lives and prospers today. The memory, connectedness and pride of being from Ani is still there, keeping the Armenian traditions alive. ■