

# Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Armenians in Diaspora

## The Role of the Church in Preserving the Cultural Heritage: The Example of the Armenians in Rome, Italy

Nadya Vladimirova<sup>1</sup>, Robert Badichah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, 119, Tsarigradsko shosse,  
1784, Sofia, Bulgaria

<sup>2</sup> Pontifical Armenian College, 17, Salita di San Nicola da Tolentino, 00187, Rome, Italy  
nadja.vladimirova@gmail.com, badichah\_robert@hotmail.com

**Abstract.** This article refers to the role of the Church as an institution which is important for the preserving the cultural heritage of the ethnic communities in the Diaspora and, in particular, how the Armenian Catholic Church in Rome is involved in the preservation of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the Armenians in the Italian capital city.

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage, Preservation, Church, Diaspora, Armenians in Rome.

### 1 Introduction

Preserving the cultural heritage of ethnic communities in diaspora differs significantly from the cases in which ethnic communities thriving inside their own countries. In diaspora there are specific ethno-unifying factors which act. Ethnic communities which live in diaspora either generate or not several practices of preservation for their cultural heritage. By studying them we are able to identify useful models or problems. We are also able to monitor the maintenance of cultural diversity that corresponds to the cultural policies not only in Europe, but in the world [16]. The topic is relevant because diaspora cultural heritage of ethnic communities is more vulnerable to integration, loss of identity, and memory.

This study is focused on Armenians - a diaspora community that can be found in different countries and continents. Although in some countries (such as Italy and Bulgaria) the Armenian communities have centuries of history, one of the main reasons for the development or growth of the Armenian diaspora communities was the genocide of the Armenian people by the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th - early 20th century [2], [6].

The paper is a result of the blending between the viewpoints of two authors. On the one hand, it is a continuation of several years of research interests in the field of preservation and conservation of the cultural heritage of the Armenians in Bulgaria.

The topic is studied from the perspective of international utility models and best practices [5]. On the other hand, it represents the position of the Armenian Catholic Church about the problems of preservation of cultural heritage of the Armenians in Rome that reflected in the policies of the Pontifical Armenian College.

The city of Rome hosts an Armenian community in Italy which currently numbers about 200-250 families [14]. Some of the Armenians there are an indigenous community. Others are temporary residents who come from different countries such as Armenia, Iran, Libya and Georgia to study or work in Rome. Although the Armenian community in Milan is the most populous, the best practices of preserving the Armenian cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, can be observed in Rome. In terms of preserving the cultural heritage of the Armenians in Rome, it is important that there is the presence of one of the four major seminaries at the service of the Armenian Catholic Church - The Pontifical Armenian College, founded in Rome in 1883 by Pope Leo XIII [11]. The Pontifical Armenian College is intended to prepare for the apostolic ministry young Armenians who will be able to help bishops for the propagation and conservation of clergy, singular advantage and decorum to the Church of God. As far as it is known, Armenia is the country that had first adopted Christianity as the official state religion in 301 and established the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. But there is also the Armenian Catholic Church that was recognized by the Pope of the Roman Church (Pope Benedict XIV named the first Armenian Catholicos, with the title of Cilicia and Patriarchal seat in Lebanon) in 8 December 1742 [9]. This study aims to clarify the role and importance of the Armenian Catholic Church for the preserving the cultural heritage of the Armenian community in Rome. The problems encompassed are both of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

## **2 The Role of the Church in Preserving the Tangible Heritage**

A big part of the tangible (particularly religious) heritage of the Armenians in Rome belongs to or it is managed by the Church and its education authority – the College. This fact is decisive regarding the role of the Church for the preservation of cultural heritage. Armenians in Rome have two churches, situated in the central part of the city – St. Nicolas of Tolentino (San Nicola da Tolentino) and Armenian Church of St. Blaise (San Biagio degli Armeni). The first one is an architectural ensemble with the college building. On the territory of this ensemble, most of the elements of tangible cultural heritage - church plate, tombstones and monuments, books and documentary heritage are concentrated. Among the Armenians in some Bulgarian cities, architectural ensembles containing a church, school and cultural center are also known [8]. Such a form of organization is interesting not only because of its historical and artistic value, but also for sociocultural functions it performs in supporting the preservation of cultural heritage.

In terms of cultural heritage the question of preserving the Armenian churches in Rome as a type of property is very important. What is the practice used in case the churches need to be renovated? The Ministry of Interior has assets which consist of over seven hundred churches, as well as convents, barracks, a castle, hundreds of real-

estate funds, rustic farms, woods and forests, scattered all over the Italian territory. The places of worship are an entity with a legal personality [7]. The origin of such wealth comes from the legislation in the second half of 1800, by which most of the Catholic Church assets are taken into possession by the Italian state. The fund was managed by the Ministry of Interior through the Central Board and it was flanked by a dedicated Board of Directors. At the provincial level it was controlled by the prefects. The purpose of the institutional fund is the preservation and enhancement of the property of the churches. One of these churches is the Armenian one - St. Nicolas of Tolentino.

A good practice which is applied helps the socialization of the cultural heritage. In St. Nicolas of Tolentino brochures available in 3 languages: Italian, English and Armenian [1]. The brochures prepared by the Vice-Rector of the College are based on an earlier study of the history of the Armenian church [18]. Rome is an established tourist destination. That is why explanations and historical information for tourists are presented near each chapel. The St. Nicolas of Tolentino is opened for all - Armenians, Italians, tourists, etc. The church is open only for liturgical functions and may be visited everyday. On Sundays there is a choir practice followed by a divine liturgy.

Another policy that the leaders of the College apply, which is significant to the promotion and socialization of cultural heritage, is its presentation on the Internet through the website of the College [10]. In addition the College is also presented in the social media where it provides updated information related to the life of the community in Rome. Armenians do not live compactly in a separate area or territory but are scattered around Rome. Therefore the Internet offers not only a quick and easy access to information, but also provides space for sharing emotions, values, and knowledge that contributes to building a community. These practices are also known in Bulgaria where some of the Armenian churches have their own websites [15].

In addition to promoting and socializing cultural heritage, the Church invests in the physical preservation of Armenian religious artifacts. In the Armenian church in Rome a valuable collection of church plates is preserved. Situated in the Sacristia of St. Nicolas of Tolentino, the collection is organized on the principle used in a museum, although it is not public. This practice is also known in other Armenian churches and once again emphasizes the role of the Church as the guardian of the Armenian values symbolized by the artifacts. In Bulgaria the most remarkable and well organized collection of church plate is in the Armenian Apostolic Church of Surp Kevork (St. George) in Plovdiv [17].

Another kind of artifacts, which are preserved in St. Nicolas of Tolentino Church, is the collection of tombstones. The collection's history is linked with the history of the Armenian Catholic Church in Rome. In the past the Armenians in Rome were authorized by the pope to build a little church - San Lorenzo dei Cavallucci. Due to the enlargement of the Jewish ghetto, in which territories the Armenian Church was, San Lorenzo dei Cavallucci was deconsecrated. As compensation the Pope granted the Armenians the church of Santa Maria Egiziaca near which a hospice run by Armenian monks for Armenian pilgrims was built. After ordering a restoration, Pope Leo XIII granted the Armenian community the convent of San Nicola da Tolentino for a new seminary college. In 1921 Santa Maria Egiziaca was declared a Roman

temple and deconsecrated within several years. Some artifacts like old tombstones were removed by the Armenians and preserved in St. Nicolas of Tolentino Church [18]. Today the tombstones are presented in lapidarium at the premises of the College. They resemble similar collections of Armenian tombstones in Bulgaria (the largest are in the Armenian churches in Rousse and Shumen) [3], [4]. The difference is that in Rome collections are indoors, while in Bulgaria the practice is to be held outdoors.

The Pontifical Armenian College in Rome has a remarkable library – the Agagianian Library. Thanks to a donation from Cardinal Agagianian the new library of the Armenian College was inaugurated in 1961 to complete the work of organizing the internal structures of the College. Agagianian was born in 1895 in Akhaltsikhe, in present Georgia, rose to the rank of Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, and became a candidate for Pope in 1958 and in 1963. The library contains more than 30 000 books and volumes in numerous languages and around 150 manuscripts from the 14th century. They are preserved in separate depots and depending on value they are stored in various security conditions. The library has developed finding aids that assist the readers.

### **3 Role of the Church in Preserving the Intangible Heritage**

Unlike the case of the Armenian tangible cultural heritage where the Church has a major role in the preservation of the religious heritage, the Church's role is much wider in scope in terms of the intangible cultural heritage. The Armenian Catholic Church leads exclusive social policy which has both direct and indirect benefits for the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage of the Armenians in Rome. They concern the religious and holiday traditions, language, and partly, the traditional cuisine.

Armenian community in Rome cannot be characterized by religion as Catholic, but by ethnicity as Armenian. However over the years the Pontifical Armenian College has been a reference point for the Armenians in Rome. The Church of St. Nicholas of Tolentino, adjacent to the College, serves as a “cradle” for passage of thousands of Armenians in Rome. The College and the church have been in a time point of reference for the Armenian population of the capital, and the church structure has fulfilled the task of gathering the faithful inhabitants in the city, thus carrying out the function of a real parish [13].

Every ethnic community is at risk of acculturation in terms of conditions of life in the diaspora. As a result of social, cultural, economic, etc. interactions some elements of cultural heritage, especially intangible cultural heritage, become more vulnerable. Therefore the institutes and institutions that keep traditions alive are so important. The role of the family is certainly essential, but it is difficult to ensure the sustainability of preserving the cultural heritage by itself. Usually Armenians in diaspora establish their own NGOs to take care of educating children in their mother tongue, socio-cultural problems of community, preservation of cultural heritage, etc. In Bulgarian cities with Armenian population there are various NGOs that unite Armenians around common values, origins, history, and culture [8]. In Rome these functions are carried out by the Armenian Catholic Church and its College. There are many activities with-

in this structure, ranging from religious backgrounds to those of a social nature. In the first place at the church of St. Nicholas of Tolentino a Mass according to the Armenian Rite, and in Krapar language (ancient language), is weekly celebrated. An interesting practice is that the liturgy is carried out with special booklets with the translation and transliteration of the prayers. They help people to follow and understand the mass better. It is very useful for the socialization of the religion and corresponds to the problems with the language of young people living in a foreign language environment. The mass is accompanied by songs performed by choir “Our Lady of Narek”, composed by seminarians of Pontifical Armenian College and Armenian youth of Rome. Based on the observations of the authors it can be noted that the masses are relatively well visited. At wider aspects this opportunity to meet weekly goes beyond the purely religious context. On Sundays, after the divine liturgy, the College is opened to small refreshment that occurs in cloister adjacent to the church, where the Khachkar (stone cross) commemorates the Armenian genocide in 1915. This practice is an opportunity for developing a set of social relationships. On the one hand it offers a possibility of direct contact between the ecclesiastic body and the lay members of the community. On the other hand, it is a way relationship between the members of the community to be established and preserved. This socio-cultural environment represents an opportunity for the conservation and transmission of tradition.

Attached to the Church of St. Nicholas of Tolentino is the Blessed Maloyan cultural center where many activities of the Armenian community in Rome are carried out. Some cultural and religious events are organized there, as well as courses in the mother tongue, catechism courses for children, and choral activities. The College organizes celebrations of major traditional holidays that also unite the community [20]. Typical for the Armenians in Rome is a traditional trip to Poggio Catino in the Province of Rieti which takes place every year on the last Sunday of May. Most community members visit it, including the children and friends. There the mother tongue is spoken, Armenian takes place, and traditional Armenian food is prepared. Thus not only the traditions are kept, but the cultural heritage is promoted among parts of the non-Armenian population. In this sense the College holds a very important social function which corresponds to the problems of preservation of cultural heritage of the community in Rome.

The remembrance day of the victims of the Armenian Genocide, 24 April, is also a significant event for the Armenians all over the world [8]. At St. Nicholas of Tolentino a holy liturgy in the memory of the 1.5 million martyrs of the Genocide is served every year and wreaths at the khachkar are laid. On the initiative of the Municipality of Rome and with the support of the Pontifical Armenian College, a remarkable inscription at the bottom of the monument was made: “Symbol of the friendship between the two peoples - Armenians and Italians.” On the occasion of 93rd anniversary of the Genocide, the Armenian community in Rome promoted awareness. A campaign in memory of the victims of Metz Yeghern (Great calamity) was made. This was a unique campaign that included a poster, publications in some newspapers as well as transmission in spot form at the public transport (Metro, TV Channel and Moby Columbus for buses) equipped with video.

To merit of its rectors the College founded and promoted various realities, such as the Armenian section of the Vatican Radio, and immediately after the second independence of the motherland, encouraged and contributed to the opening of the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia, both at the Quirinale and the Holy See.

## 4 Conclusion

Observation and participant observation as a research tools as well as the long experience in preserving the cultural heritage of the Armenians in Rome revealed the important role of the Church to preserve the cultural heritage of Armenians in Rome. Furthermore, in Rome there do not operate any NGOs that are typical in the Armenian diaspora for carrying about preservation of cultural heritage and cultural identity. This fact adds to the importance of the Church as the center of attraction and guardian of the ethno-cultural essence of the Armenians in Rome. In turn, the Church and the College are very responsible for this task and make many efforts to respond in line with the modern requirements of the cultural heritage and the Armenians in the diaspora. Studies on the the cultural heritage of Armenians and other ethnic communities either in diaspora or not may be used in multi-cultural digital libraries for the purpose of conservation and preservation of their cultural heritage.

## References

1. Church of St. Nicolas of Tolentino. Rome, Aramagan design (2014).
2. Garabedian, A.: Formirane na armenskata obshtnost i neinata rolia v razvitiето na bulgarskata darzhava [Formation of Armenian Community and Its Role in the Development of Bulgarian State]. In: Bulgari I armenci zaedno prez vekovete [Bulgarians and Armenians Together for Centuries] (in Bulgarian). Sofia, Tangra TanNakRa, pp. 231-272 (2001).
3. Giligyan, A.: Armenski nadgrobna po bulgarskite zemi v perioda na osmanskoto vladichestvo (XVII - XIX v.) [Armenian Tombstones in the Bulgarian Lands during the Period of Ottoman Rule]. In: Bulgarski Folklor [Bulgarian Folklore] (in Bulgarian). Vol. 1-2, pp. 129-135 (1999).
4. Giligyan, A.: Armenski nadgrobna v Ruse: Nadgrobni plochi i pametnici v dvora na armenskata curkva "Surp Astvazdzin" ("Sveta Bogorodica") – XII-XIX v. [Armenian Tombstones in Rouse: Gravestones and Monuments in the Courtyard of Armenian Church Surp Astvazdzin (St. Marry) – XII-XIX. In: Izvestia – Regionalen istoricheski muzei – Ruse [Proceedings of the Rouse Regional Museum of History] (in Bulgarian). Vol. 7, pp. 68-77 (2002).
5. In May 2014 a field research was conducted by Nadya Vladimirova in Rome due to the financial support of Project BG-051PO001-3.3.06.0055 "Creating an Information Environment that Motivates and Provides Incentives for Young Researchers at the SULSIT" under Grant Scheme "Support for Development of Doctoral and Post-doctoral Students, Graduates Pursuing Specialists Studies and Young Researchers" of the HRD Program co-financed from the ESF of the EU.
6. Lang, D.: The Armenians: a People in Exile (in English). London (1981).
7. May 20, 1985 established by Law no. 222.

8. Mitseva, E.: *Armencite v Bulgaria – kultura I identichnost* [Armenians in Bulgaria – Culture and Identity] (in Bulgarian). Sofia, Imir (2001).
9. Pane, R.: *La Chiesa Armena, Storia, spiritualità, Istituzioni* [The Armenian Church, History, Spirituality, Institutions] (in Italian). Bologna (2011).
10. Pontifical Armenian College, Pontificiocollegioarmeno.org 11.07.2014  
<<http://www.pontificiocollegioarmeno.org/>>
11. *Regolamento del Pontificio Collegio Armeno, Tipografia Poliglotta* [Rules of the Pontifical Armenian College, Typography Poliglotta] (in Italian). Roma (1883).
12. Such as January 6 (Epiphany of the Lord), February 3 - Feast of St. Blaise of Sebaste; Commemoration of Martyrs and St. Vartan Avarayr - last Thursday before Lent; April 24 - Commemoration of the Genocide of the Armenian people. St. Blaise, the bishop of Sebaste in Armenia is given a special recognition on February 3 by the Armenian Church in Via Giulia, not only with the divine liturgy but with a unique ceremony that parallels the practice of anointing the sick.
13. The College has hosted several high-level initiatives, including synods and historical conferences. It gave the Armenian Catholic Church priests who have distinguished themselves for their wise and holy life. Among them a special remembrance of the great and humble intellectual deserves Rev. Father Gregory Petrovich.
14. There is no official statistics on the number of the Armenian community in Rome. This information is based on observations of Robert Badichah.
15. This applies to the Armenian churches in city of Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Sofia, Rousse, and Varna.
16. UNESCO Doc. 33 C/23 of 4 August 2005.
17. Vladimirova, N.: *Aktualno sustoianie I problemi na opazvaneto I sahraniavaneto na dvizhimoto religiozno KIN na armencite v Plovdiv I Burgas: danni ot terenno izsledvane 2013 g.* [Current Status and Problems of Conservation and Preservation of Movable Religious Cultural Heritage of Armenians in Plovdiv and Burgas: Data from Field Research in 2013]. In: *Studentski digitalen arhiv po religiozno kulturno-istorichesko nasledstvo* [Student Digital Archive on Religious Heritage] (in Bulgarian). Vol. 2, pp. 208-219 (2013).
18. Zandri, G.: *S. Nicola da Tolentino* [St. Nicolas of Tolentino] (in Italian). Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani [National Institute of Roman Studies], Rome (1987).