ARMENIAN AMERICANS

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From Being to Feeling Armenian

ANNY BAKALIAN

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To the memory of Haigouhie and to her American
great-granddaughter Anoush
and
to all Armenian grandparents
who provide that chain of memory and love linking the ancestral past
to future generations

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Acknowledgments

This book was written with two audiences in mind; social scientists concerned with race and ethnic relations and people of Armenian descent. Given my Armenian background and my sociological training, the motivation for researching and writing this volume might seem obvious. Yet, a number of fortuitous experiences led me to begin this investigation of Armenian-Americans. When I first came to New York City to pursue graduate work at Columbia University, I had not given ethnic studies much thought. Then, as I started attending functions hosted by the formally organized Armenian community and meeting people, I realized that ethnic identity and Armenianness in the United States were very different from what I was familiar with in the Middle East.

In May 1984, having finished my course work and comprehensives, I was searching for a dissertation topic when Loretta Nassar suggested I attend a conference on Armenian assimilation organized by NAASR (National Association of Armenian Studies and Research) in Cambridge, MA. In retrospect, that meeting was the catalyst that prompted this study. I found out that little had been written in the social sciences on contemporary Armenian-Americans, to the point where they had been labeled a "hidden minority." An empirical analysis was well overdue. It was an opportunity I could not miss. Not

only would a survey of people of Armenian descent in the United States satisfy my personal curiosity, it could provide much-needed scientific evidence to pull this largely overlooked ethnic group out of the academic closet. I also believed the results of the study would eventually benefit the Armenian-American community. The journey since has spanned several years and stages in my professional career. My debts are many and long-standing.

First, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee. It was my great fortune to meet Professor Viviana Zelizer during my first semester at Columbia. She has been a teacher, a role model, a mentor, and, to my delight, a friend. She was there for me when I needed advice, and when I decided to switch my research topic to ethnicity; she continued her advisory role even though it was not in her area of expertise. Her comments on earlier drafts were incisive; they helped shape the parameters of the argument and enhanced its creativity. Viviana has also been instrumental in getting my manuscript published. Somehow words do not seem adequate to express my affection and infinite gratitude.

I am much obliged to Professor Bernard Barber for having sponsored the dissertation. I could not have had a more supportive sponsor. He gave me the freedom to learn to become an independent thinker and writer. Professor Allen Barton suggested the use of a snowball sample, and was particularly helpful in the quantitative component of this study. He read through several drafts, and discussed with me the topic in question among others of more general interest. Those conversations were highly enjoyable.

I was honored that Professor Nina Garsoian agreed to participate in my doctoral defense. Her historical precision with dates and sources improved the quality of the final document. My intellectual debt to Professor Herbert Gans is clearly visible throughout my work, even in the title of this book. While taking one of his courses, I finally admitted to myself my interest in ethnicity and proceeded to read the literature for the first time. As a student, I found Professor Gans's criticisms of my academic performance well-deserved, though painful. He must have known what he was doing because it made me strive harder to meet his approval. I am deeply touched by his opinion of the end product. His compliment stands in a class by itself.

For this publication, the original manuscript was completely revised

to account for the rapid changes taking place in the Republic of Armenia and to include a discussion of all Armenian-Americans, not just those in metropolitan New York and New Jersey. In addition to interviews with California informants and visits to other communities, I have had to rely heavily on the previous works of my colleagues in this particular field. I have acknowledged each author in the text as I borrowed from his or her work, but I would like to single out Rouben Adalian, Claudia Der Martirosian, Vigen Guroian, Robert Mirak, Anahid Ordjanian, Susan Pattie, Harold Takooshian, and Khachig Tölölyan whose contributions were substantial.

Gerard Libaridian deserves special recognition. He read my work during different stages of its development. His criticisms were always incisive and constructive. Moreover, as director of the Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Documentation and Research, Inc., Gerard established the Open University Seminars and other colloquia that provided a forum for the exchange of ideas and observations on Armenianness in America and the diaspora. My participation in such meetings shaped many of my thoughts and arguments. In fact, it would be hard to delineate which particular insights are mine and which ones were generated from Zoryan-sponsored gatherings.

The late Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan also took an interest in my study. It was a humbling and encouraging experience to find such a remarkable individual who was still eager to learn something new. I will cherish his memory dearly. Louise Simone was generous in granting interviews and supplying mailing lists. Professor Irving Louis Horowitz reputed in the Armenian-American community as a friend of the Armenians, once again came through. I thank him for his courage in publishing this book. Esther Luckett at Transaction and Janet Schamehorn provided me with invaluable editorial assistance. At the College of Notre Dame of Maryland I found support for my scholarly endeavors especially from Sister Mary Ellen Dougherty and Sally Wall.

I owe much to my extended family. Without their help, in every sense of the word, I would have accomplished little. More specifically, I thank my Uncle Puzant and Aunt Shake for providing a home for me when I first came to New York; my Uncle Vasken for backing my goals without questioning them; my brother-in-law Hrant for keeping me up-to-date with the latest gossip on Armenia and the Armenians;

and my mother and sister for their love, understanding, and care, which typically for women, means feeding. I was particularly lucky, I ate haute cuisine.

Several institutions in metropolitan New York entrusted their mailing lists to me. Many people assisted with referrals, the pretests, and discussions. About thirty individuals on the East and West coasts became my informants for their local communities, sharing with me their expertise on things Armenian. I thank them all. Last but by no means least, my respondents, the 584 men and women who participated in the survey, deserve my deepest appreciation. They took time from no doubt busy schedules and demanding responsibilities to answer my long and detailed questionnaire. Their cooperation and enthusiasm for this study made the research personally and professionally rewarding. Without them all, I would have had no data and no book. *Shnorhagal yem!*

1

Introduction: Assimilation and Identity

My parents met through the Armenian Presbyterian Church, which both their parents helped found, in West New York, NJ. They were very active in the church and Armenian activities while they were growing up. [Father was U.S.-born and mother was born in Turkey but immigrated when she was four years old.]

After they married, and my sister and I were born, they moved to Fair Lawn, NJ, and bought a home. We were the only Armenians in town, except for an elderly minister who would visit us occasionally. I was two years old and my sister was five. That is when our separation from the Armenian community began. We grew up as Americans with American friends. Our parents didn't speak Armenian at home, and we never learned the language. As our older relatives became lost to us, our ties to our Armenian roots became obscure. As a teenager, I went through a time of intense pride and interest in my Armenian heritage, but with the turmoil of the 1960's, that was replaced by other concerns. My sister and I have married non-Armenians, and our children are another generation removed from our roots. We teach them, with pride, the history of the Armenians while we encourage their progress in America. (Forty-two-year-old male respondent)

I am a third-generation American-Armenian, regrettably I know little about the Armenian background of my grandparents. My grandmother came to this country when she was only sixteen, so she was more American than Armenian.

> I enjoy my Armenian roots, go to Armenian events whenever I can and always feel a common bond with other Armenians. (Fifty-one-year-old female respondent)

This book describes Armenian-Americans, individually and collectively. The above comments from two survey respondents illustrate the main themes that dominate the discussion: the assimilation of people of Armenian descent in the United States of America and their continued pride and identity in their ethnic heritage.

Assimilation has been a contentious subject for Armenian-Americans. With promises of wealth, power and prestige, the host society is assumed to lure immigrants and their descendants away from their ancestral roots. While few immigrants have actively embraced cultural change, welcoming a fresh start in life, most have tried to maintain their heritage and recreate new communities in the New World. The success of such efforts remains under dispute. The issue has consumed Armenian-Americans ever since they first landed in America over one hundred years ago. Assimilation has been widely debated by scholars and the lay public to the point where it has been likened to an obsession.[1] It has also been called the "white massacre," a poignant analogy to a people who have historically suffered numerous massacres and a genocide.[2]

Armenian-Americans see themselves as descendants of a very ancient people who emerged in the mountainous region of northeastern Asia Minor some twenty-five hundred years ago and have survived, against all odds, a long and turbulent history. At the threshold of the twenty-first century however, the Armenian people and their unique material and nonmaterial culture are perceived to be in jeopardy for lack of an autonomous homeland, their dispersion in a diaspora, and their small size (approximately 6 million worldwide). Moreover, to many, it seems that their very physical survival is repeatedly threatened by massacres, earthquakes, and political turmoil around the world. To mention but a few examples from the most recent past; one is reminded of the well-established Armenian communities in Lebanon and Iran that have been destroyed or uprooted, and the Armenians in Sumgait and Baku who have been killed or expelled from their homes. The precarious existence of the Armenian people and culture fuels this debate with urgency and timeliness. Armenian-Americans are burdened with the insecurity of a

collective future, locally and globally. Not surprisingly, for Armenian-Americans, assimilation is a very sensitive topic that hovers, like a specter, in the forefront of their being.

On the one hand, there are some who have accepted assimilation as a foregone conclusion perceiving ethnic maintenance efforts as temporary palliatives. They have been too keen to notice the galloping erosion of the immigrant language and culture. This position is not new; even the earliest settlers were cognizant of the forces of assimilation. This is illustrated by an editorial that appeared in the Fresno (CA) Armenian paper, *Asbarez*, on July 7, 1911:

> The most important question confronting the Armenians of California, and in the United States in general, is that of remaining Armenian.
>
> The Americanization of Armenians is certain to come, all we can do is to delay the day. (Quoted in LaPiere 1930, 316-17)

On the other hand, there are those who have argued that Armenians are distinguished by unique historical and cultural features that make them resilient to the forces of assimilation.[3] Armenians take pride in their history, their persistence as a people for thousands of years, their unique language and alphabet, their national church, which has since its inception in the fourth century A.D. fused together the sacred and secular destinies of its people. The Genocide and its subsequent denial by Turkish governments remain at the forefront of Armenian collective consciousness, serving as a common denominator and strengthening the boundaries that carve up a separate sense of peoplehood.

Most recently, the survival efforts of the victims of the December 1988 earthquake in Soviet Armenia, and the resistance of the residents of mountainous Karabagh against the Azeries are taken as illustrations of the indomitable will of the Armenian people to endure and perpetuate their culture, much like the heroic courage of David in his stand against the giant Goliath. These sentiments are best portrayed by fellow Armenian-American author, William Saroyan (1984):

> I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them into the

> desert without bread or water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia.

Indeed, the proponents of this viewpoint observe that, contrary to predictions, the Armenian-American community has grown and prospered over the years and many Armenian-Americans have achieved prominence without denying their ancestral origins.

All this preoccupation with assimilation remains mostly rhetorical and speculative. Armenians in the United States are a little-studied group that have hitherto been called a "hidden minority" (Rollins 1981). Studies in the social sciences on Armenian-Americans have been few and far between; mostly descriptive accounts of traditional Armenian institutions.[4] This book aims to fill that gap. It provides a sociological analysis of Armenianness as it unfolds with the passage of time and generations in the United States. This entails an examination of the processes of assimilation and ethnic maintenance in personal expressions and an ethnographic description of Armenian-American communal structures.

The empirical data used in this volume is based primarily on the results of a large questionnaire survey that was mailed to men and women of Armenian descent in metropolitan New York and New Jersey in 1986. The main sample was chosen randomly from mailing lists of all Armenian churches and voluntary associations in the study area. It was supplemented with a snowball sample of individuals who were not organizationally affiliated. The survey yielded 584 respondents; hereafter referred to as sample, survey, or New York study. The qualitative data was derived from in-depth interviews with informants actively involved in Armenian-American communities, both on the East and West coasts; participant observation of the New York/New Jersey community; and published material. Vignettes and anecdotal evidence gathered from these sources are used to buttress and humanize the quantitative evidence. Methods of data collection and a description of the sample are explained in greater detail at the end of this chapter.

Milton Gordon's (1964) conceptual framework on assimilation was used to collect and analyze the data on Armenian-Americans. He postulated that there are seven subprocesses of assimilation (explained fully below), and that immigrant groups proceed at a variable pace

along each of these continua. The underlying assumption of this study is the "straight-line" model (Sandberg 1974), which predicts a decrease in adherence to ethnic culture and behavioral forms with length of history in the United States. Nonetheless, assimilation is understood as a dynamic process that may be reversed, at least in theory. The aim here is not to measure how Armenian-Americans have become similar to other ethnic groups or mainstream Americans, but to measure their departures from traditional Armenian value systems, behavioral forms, and life-styles.

The results of this survey establish that generational presence in the United States is the most powerful variable in explaining assimilation. The immigrant generation's cultural and behavioral patterns are taken as the statistical baseline, and all departures from that imply a movement along the continuum toward more assimilation. Therefore, change is measured in the degree difference between the first and subsequent generations. The foreign-born or immigrant generation is defined as the first generation. The second generation consists of the U.S.-born children of the immigrants. The third generation are men and women who with one or both parents are U.S.-born. And the fourth generation are those who with their parents and at least one grandparent are also U.S.-born.

The observations presented here are believed to be representative of Armenian-Americans. This term encompasses a wide spectrum of people. The universe of Armenian-Americans consists of men and women who reside in the United States and trace descent from the ancient land and culture of Armenia. This is a subjective definition based on identity; it inevitably produces wide within-group variations 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 communal activities, and so on.

This study demonstrates that American-born descendants of Armenian immigrants have undergone significant assimilation in the United States. For example, the Armenian language is no longer used as a means of everyday communication. The secular culture, even cuisine, is relegated to special occasions and acquires symbolic connotations. Frequency of attendance at Armenian religious services

is gradually reduced, as is participation in communal life and activities sponsored by Armenian voluntary associations. Social ties, even intimate relations and conjugal bonds, with non-Armenians become increasingly the norm. But this is only part of the story. The majority of Armenian-Americans, even the great-grandchildren of the immigrant generation, continue to maintain high levels of Armenian identity, fierce pride in their ancestral heritage, and a strong sense of we-ness or peoplehood.

What might seem as two contradictory processes, a zero-sum pie, do indeed coexist. I propose here that processes of assimilation and maintenance of ethnic identity go hand in hand. This is possible because Armenianness changes in its form and function. Later-generation Armenian-Americans are best described by the concept of "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979). Symbolic Armenianness is voluntary, rational, and situational, in contrast to the traditional Armenianness of the immigrant generation, which is ascribed, unconscious, and compulsive. Symbolic Armenians acknowledge and are proud of their ethnic origin. Symbolic Armenianness pertains to the realm of emotions but makes few behavioral demands. The generational change is from "being" Armenian to "feeling" Armenian.

Human action is assumed to be purposeful, creative. People use the little margins of freedom and limited choices they have to play an active part in structuring their social world. Assimilation and ethnic maintenance do not just "happen" to immigrant groups. Immigrants are not passive victims in the drama that forces them to make choices between their cultural survival and their mundane, existential survival. Armenians, like most immigrant groups in America, have established churches, schools, mass media, and myriad other organizations to enact their cultural heritage in a new land, under new conditions, as they have tried to pass their ancestral legacy onto subsequent generations. It should be noted, however, that the emergent structures are rarely exact replicas of the ones left behind in the "old country" or countries, as the case may be. The Armenian-American subculture is a creative adaptation to a new and different life. Likewise, assimilation and the changing nature of Armenianness are not acts of callous betrayal, but innovative responses to changing structural conditions and personal needs.

The ethnicity of later-generation Armenian-Americans is different in nature and degree from that of the immigrant generation. Ethnic

identity for American-born generations is not at the core of their role expectations and self-image. American-born upper-middle-class symbolic Armenians have more freedom in deciding their personal identities. They may choose to be Armenian, Armenian-American, American-Armenian, American, or whatever else they want. Moreover, symbolic Armenians may change their identity as often as they want. Identities may fluctuate over the course of one's life, when facing specific audiences, and in response to changes in the larger environment or the diaspora.

For Armenian-Americans, the boundaries separating Armenians from non-Armenians, "us" from "them," are generally self-imposed, shallow, and mutable. By contrast, the identity of Armenians who lived in the Ottoman Empire, as those of the Middle East today, was ascribed by the social and political system they were born into. That is, the markers that separated Armenians from non-Armenians were imposed by forces outside the Armenian collectivity. It should be noted that an ascribed identity is far more likely to determine the life-styles and life chances of a group member than a voluntary identity. In sum, the varying versions of Armenianness should be recognized as the outcomes of complex historical and dialectical processes. Country of birth and childhood socialization, generation, and even cohort effect are important variables in understanding the behavior and attitudes of people of Armenian descent.

The study emphasizes the sentimental component of symbolic Armenianness, making a case for increased situational, individualistic forms of expression and the importance of convenience in its application. Most frequently, Armenianness is manifested during one's leisure time. Armenian identity for later generations is no longer exclusive, all-engulfing, but tangential to people's lives and daily preoccupations. Consequently, its liability is also limited, making it easier to be a symbolic Armenian.

It is generally hypothesized that the higher the social class, the less the ethnic identity and commitment. I find that Armenian-Americans with higher educational attainment in the sample are more likely to be structurally assimilated; that is, they are more likely to have non-Armenian friends and spouses. However, structural assimilation does not significantly alter their levels of Armenian identity. With continued assimilation and upward mobility, if Armenianness is to

survive in the United States among large proportions of men and women of Armenian descent, it can only do so in its symbolic form.

It should not be forgotten that the popularity and renewed interest in ethnicity in recent decades coincides with its increased societal legitimation and the improved socioeconomic status of most white ethnic groups including the Armenians. With higher levels of education, occupational prestige, and income, later-generation Armenian-Americans are less ashamed to be vocal about their immigrant roots. Ethnicity is less embarrassing today than it was during the first half of the twentieth century precisely because it is only sentimental, romanticized ethnicity. The results of this study clearly show that there is no "return" or "revival" to behavioral forms of Armenianness.

The argument that ethnic resilience is caused by instrumental motives or material "interests" is somewhat limited in its application here. Overall, Armenian-Americans are characterized by middle-class to upper-middle-class status, and their social mobility as a group has been remarkably rapid. They have few social and economic reasons to mobilize as a group in the urban political arena. This is not to say that Armenian-Americans have not jumped on the bandwagon alongside other ethnic and racial groups competing for their share of the American pie. In Los Angeles, for example, Armenian brokers compete for public monies targeted to finance social services for Armenian refugees. Elsewhere Armenians contribute dollars, and votes whenever possible, to elect people of Armenian descent to public office. More recently, Armenian organizations have received federal funds for earthquake relief. There is somewhat more support for the ideological component of ethnic resilience because Armenianness is sustained by a myth of a common ancestor, a shared history, and a sense of peoplehood with Armenians around the world. This ideology stirs the hearts and minds of Armenian-Americans to express their roots, make token contributions to Armenian philanthropies, write letters to newspapers or politicians regarding the denial of the Genocide, and so on. The most active forms of mobilization, such as rallies, public demonstrations, whatever the motivation, are confined primarily to the first and second generations.

A small core of highly active men and women, overwhelmingly from the first and second generations, make up the "Armenian-

American Community" and constitute the audience for the numerous events and activities hosted by the voluntary associations. The large influx of new Armenian immigrants in recent decades has revitalized the communal structures and provided a cadre to man the churches, the schools, the old people's homes, the media, and the various organizations. This community is unable to attract the attention, let alone retain the participation, of the vast majority of people of Armenian descent.

It is impossible for American-born Armenians to find Armenianness meaningful or functional if they are not taught how to appreciate it. The dilemma in ethnic continuity has always been the conciliation of the American Dream with ethnic ideology. Only the most convenient modes of socialization and manifestations of ethnicity are acceptable and feasible. They are the most symbolic: those that do not hinder personal achievements and do not get into conflict with mainstream American society. The concern here is not whether Armenian institutional structures and a community of sorts will survive. There is no doubt that there will be in the foreseeable future some men and women of Armenian stock who will find it expedient to maintain some form of Armenianness, and as long as the larger American society tolerates it, they will individually and communally try to do so. The real issue is what proportion of the universe of men and women of Armenian descent will do so.

Immigration and Settlement

Mirak (1980; 1983), who has written the most comprehensive social history of early Armenian-Americans to date, observes that very few pioneering Armenians came to America before 1890. The earliest recorded immigrant is one "Malcolm the Armenian" who came to Jamestown in 1618 or 1619. Before 1870, perhaps 60 adventurous businessmen who had been schooled by New England Protestant missionaries arrived from Asia Minor. By the late 1880s the number of Armenians is estimated to have risen to 1,500. These were mainly artisans and laborers seeking economic opportunities. Then, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, over 12,000 frightened Armenians, fleeing the massacres and political unrest of the decaying Ottoman

Empire, took refuge on American soil. The annual immigration figures peaked to 2,500 by the mid-1890s.

The pace of immigration accelerated dramatically between 1900 and 1914. By World War I, there were some 60,000 Armenians in the United States. For example, in 1910 more than 5,500 Armenians entered the United States, and in 1913, the records indicate that another 9,355 arrived. Both push and pull factors contributed to this increase. On the one hand, political and economic conditions were rapidly deteriorating in Ottoman Turkey. The most significant incident during this period was the Adana massacres in 1909 that killed between 15,000 and 20,000 souls. On the other hand, the presence of relatives and friends in the New World triggered the migration chain and eased the process.

The prewar immigrants were predominantly from Asia Minor. They arrived in New York and settled in eastern cities. A much smaller number of Russian-Armenians, about 2,500, came between 1898 and 1914. They initially settled in Canada and then moved to southern California after 1908. Mirak (1980) suggests that economic and political conditions in Russian Armenia, while serious, were not as oppressive as those in the Ottoman Empire, nor did they have the benefit of Protestant missionaries to lure them to emigrate.

After World War I, emigration resumed. Survivors from the Armenian Genocide (1915) and the deportations perpetrated by the Young Turk Government continued to come to America in comparatively large numbers until the quota system went into effect in 1924. For example in 1920 alone, 10,212 Armenians, a record number, entered the United States. Again, between 1920 and 1924 an additional 20,559 came. Unlike prewar Armenian immigrants, over half of these were women and a fifth were children; many were widows and orphans who had been maimed and psychologically scarred by the atrocities they had experienced. A few had been rescued from Turkish homes, many came from orphanages and refugee camps run by Armenian charitable associations or European and American missionaries in Syria, Greece, and Egypt.

The quota system, which admitted immigration from various nations by the proportion of their countrymen in the 1870 U.S. census, obviously did not favor Armenians and brought their immigration to a halt. Nonetheless, during the period when the quota law was in effect,

1924-1965, some Armenians were able to bypass the restrictive barriers to immigration. Initially, several Armenians entered with so-called Nansen passports; refugee documents supplied by the League of Nations. Then, ANCHA (American National Committee for Homeless Armenians), established in 1947, was instrumental in relocating about 4,500 Armenians, mainly from the Soviet Union, who had been stranded in settlement camps in Germany and Italy after World War II. These were exempted from the nationality quota by the Displaced Persons Act. ANCHA later helped Armenians from Palestine after the creation of the State of Israel, those fleeing communist regimes in Romania and Bulgaria and those escaping the socialist Arab governments of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. In all, about 25,000 Armenians immigrated to America as refugees under the auspices of ANCHA (Takooshian 1986-87).

The influx of Armenian immigration to the United States picked up once again, after the liberalization of the quota law in 1965. This time the Armenians were escaping the political turmoil of the Middle East. The rate peaked as never before with the start of the Civil War in Lebanon (1975) and the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978) (see Takooshian 1986-87). According to the 1980 U.S. census, only 8 percent of Iranian-Armenians immigrated to the United States before 1959, about 25 percent between 1960 and 1974, and 65 percent between 1975 and 1980. Nearly three-quarters of Armenian immigrants from Iran settled in Los Angeles. In an extensive survey of 195 Iranian-Armenian heads of households in Los Angeles, Der-Martirosian (1989) found additional evidence; 35 percent of her sample had arrived between 1952 and 1978, 24 percent in 1979 alone, the year following the revolution, and 41 percent since then.

The Armenian population of Lebanon is estimated to have decreased from well over 250,000 in the early 1970s to less than 100,000 in the late 1980s. Of course, not all those who left Lebanon came to the United States, though a large proportion did. Takooshian's (1986-87, 138) guesstimates range from 60,000 to 160,000 Lebanese Armenians immigrating to the United States. Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics to indicate how many Armenians from the Middle East, or elsewhere for that matter, have settled in the United States in recent decades. I should add that most of the numerical data on the Armenian population is based on conjecture. Armenian immigration to

the United States has been "lost" in official counts for over a century. Early immigrants traveled with Ottoman papers and were often mislabeled as "Turk" or "Arab" while more recent ones obtained visas on Lebanese, Iranian, or other passports.

A group that has received little scholarly attention are Armenians who had remained or returned to their homes in Turkey after the Genocide and deportations. Most of the Armenian population of Turkey after the establishment of the Republic in 1923 lived in Istanbul. In spite of severe restrictions on their personal and collective freedom,[5] Istanbul Armenians (or *Bolcetzi*) sustained a communal life as best they could. They maintained an Armenian press, operated Armenian schools, and continued to worship in Armenian churches. Discrimination has barred Armenians in Turkey from a wide range of occupations. At present, except for a few professionals, the majority of the population tends to earn its livelihood through business enterprises.

The situation of Armenians who remained in the hinterland was deplorable. While scattered in small towns and villages, deprived of economic and educational opportunities, lacking access to Armenian religious and communal structures, most were able to hold onto their Armenian identity in private. Over the decades, the vast majority of these by then Turkish-speaking, semiskilled, or unskilled Armenians gravitated toward Istanbul. The late Patriarch Shnork Kaloustian, who traveled repeatedly to the interior of Turkey, was instrumental in helping them relocate and be integrated in the Armenian community of Istanbul. In the pursuit of freedom, Armenians with Turkish passports have emigrated in unprecedented numbers. In the early 1960s, it is estimated that more than 120,000 Armenians lived in Istanbul. At present, only about 30,000 remain. Armenians from Istanbul have come to the United States; Los Angeles alone is reputed to have received some 10,000 Istanbul Armenians in the last twenty years. There is also a sizable *Bolcetzi* population in the New York metropolitan area. Others though have settled in Canada, Australia, France, Germany, and Argentina.[6]

Starting in the 1970s and most recently in late 1980s, large numbers of Armenians were allowed to leave Soviet Armenia.[7] These were mostly those Armenians and their descendants who had repatriated to Soviet Armenia between 1946 and 1960 (an estimated 250,000) and

had not been able to assimilate with the native population. Given a chance to leave, they did. Heitman (1988)[8] puts the total number of Armenians who emigrated from Soviet Armenia to the United States between 1971 and 1988 at 47,700 (71.3 percent came between 1971 and 1980, 13.4 percent between 1981 and 1986 and 15.3 percent came in 1987-88 alone). More are coming. Their favorite destination remains Los Angeles. Estimates suggest that between September 1988 and September 1989, another 13,500 Armenian refugees came from Soviet Armenia and Iran.[9]

With the exception of Fresno (CA), the earliest Armenian immigrants settled predominantly in urban industrial centers of the Northeast such as New York City, Providence (RI), Worcester (MA), and Boston (MA). Some moved soon to midwestern cities such as Chicago, Detroit (MI), Racine (WI), and Waukegan (IL) where jobs were more plentiful. The social and demographic characteristics of the migrant population determined their early settlement patterns. Typically at the beginning, when the immigrants consisted of single young men or married men who had journeyed without their families, Armenians shared living quarters in cheap, overcrowded boardinghouses or tenements. These residences tended to be in densely populated areas of the state with easy public access to factory jobs. The immigrants' aim was to save as much money as possible to send back home or to finance the travel of other family members. For many of this first wave of immigrants, their stay in the United States was perceived as temporary. However, the situation in Ottoman Turkey soon terminated such aspirations. In time, they were joined by women and children. As families regrouped, and others were formed, their living conditions improved and communal life flourished.

Compared to other immigrants of that period, the majority of the Armenians were literate, over a third were skilled artisans, and a few were businessmen and professionals. In spite of their skills and business acumen, most had no choice but to become laborers in manufacturing industries because they did not have proficiency in English and their capital resources were almost nonexistent. For many though, that was just a stepping-stone for private ownership in a small retail store. Fresno again was the exception. There, Armenians were engaged in agricultural production and packaging. Hard work (and the expansion of the U.S. economy) eventually paid off, especially after

World War II. Large proportions of the immigrants' children went to college, and entered white collar or professional occupations. The road to success was also the move to suburbia in the 1950s and 1960s.

Recent Armenian immigrants, like other post-1965 (legal) immigrants to the United States, do not conform to the stereotype of the poor, often illiterate peasant of earlier generations. For the most part, the newest arrivals come with greater resources than in the past. They are more likely to be proficient in English, have higher levels of educational attainment and occupational skills, and a few seeking political asylum from the turmoils of the Middle East have brought with them their fortunes. At the very least, the vast majority of these newest immigrants have experienced modern urban environments. Thus, it is possible to concur with Mirak's (1980, 142) suggestion that socioeconomic success for these newcomers was achieved at a faster pace than for those who came at the turn of the century. He explains that the majority of refugees who received loans from ANCHA were able to repay their debts within a few years.[10] Small business ownership was and continues to be the typical route to the American Dream for many Armenian immigrants. However, increasingly, one also tends to find among the immigrants sizable proportions of professionals, such as physicians, dentists, pharmacists, engineers, architects, scientists, and academics who manage to establish themselves relatively quickly in the United States.[11]

Estimates of Size and Location

Often-quoted estimates of the number of people of Armenian descent in the United States at the present time range from 600,000 to 800,000.[12] In the mid-1970s, the estimates stood between 350,000 and 450,000, with about 45 percent living in New England and the mid-Atlantic states, another 15 percent in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin, and the remaining 25 percent in California (Mirak 1980; Avakian 1977b). In recent years, as the demographic characteristics of the Armenian-American population have changed so has their geographical distribution. Sizable communities have sprung up in Florida and Texas warranting the establishment of churches. Others, such as those in Seattle (WA) are in the process of organizing a congregation. Elsewhere, such as in Tucson (AZ), Atlanta (GA),

Baton Rouge (LA), Minneapolis (MN), Las Vegas (NV), voluntary associations were created. On the other hand, once well-established Armenian churches and communities have lost their vigor or ceased to exist. For example, the Protestant Armenian church of Haverhill (MA), emptied of parishioners, was dismantled in 1977 (Mirak 1980, 141). Similarly, the St John the Baptist Armenian Apostolic Church in Syracuse (NY) is apprehensive about its future. Its congregation has aged or died and few newcomers seem to be drawn to Syracuse (*Armenian American Almanac* 1990).

A rough measure of the dispersion of the Armenian-American population in various regions of the United States at the present time would be to count the number of Armenian churches that hold regular services in any given area. Typically, Armenians have established a church in a new location as soon as an optimum number of congregants were able to sustain one. I have tallied the total number of Armenian Apostolic, Protestant, and Catholic churches in the country and calculated their geographic distribution (see table 1.1). Fifty percent of all Armenian churches are located in the mid-Atlantic states and New England, 33 percent in California alone, 14 percent in the Midwest (WI, IL, MI), and the rest are in Texas and Florida. The fastest-growing Armenian-American population is undeniably the greater Los Angeles area.

The Armenian settlement in Los Angeles had a slow start. According to Aram Yeretzian, the very first Armenian in Los Angeles was a student who came from the East Coast for health reasons around 1900. Then an Oriental rug merchant arrived; and soon they were writing letters to their friends and relatives and asking them to join them. Yeretzian was a Protestant minister and social worker who had the opportunity to gather firsthand information on the Armenians in Los Angles which he presented as a thesis at the University of Southern California in 1923. He writes that there were between 2,500 to 3,000 Armenians at the time of his study. The majority had come from Turkey, but there were a few from Russian Armenia. There were three Armenian women who had married American men, and twelve men who had married American, Spanish, and other women. Armenians had established a number of voluntary associations and two churches; one Apostolic and one Protestant, the Armenian Gethsemane Congregational Church, which had more than seventy

members. Yeretzian notes that 2.3 percent of the Armenian population in Los Angeles in the early 1920s were professionals, 39.5 percent were skilled laborers, 23.5 percent were farm laborers and the rest laborers in other occupations. In general, Yeretzian found Los Angeles Armenians to be hardworking, thrifty, enterprising, resourceful, and highly individualistic; most of all they were loyal and obedient citizens.

Since 1965, Los Angeles has attracted a large proportion of immigrants from Lebanon, Iran, Turkey, and the bulk of refugees from Soviet Armenia.[13] Metropolitan Los Angeles boasts twenty-two churches, more than three-quarters established after World War II. It also claims the lion's share of Armenian all-day schools (twelve schools, including five high schools). Indeed, all available data indicate that the Armenian immigration boom in Los Angeles is about twenty years old. According to the U.S. census, 52,400 Armenians lived in Los Angeles in 1980 (reported in Der-Martirosian, Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1990).[14] Of these, only 28.1 percent were born in the U.S. (including 19.5 percent born in California), while the overwhelming majority (71.9 percent) were foreign-born.[15] The foreign-born consisted of those born in Iran (14.7 percent), the USSR (14.3 percent), Lebanon (11.5 percent); Turkey (9.7 percent), and other Middle Eastern nations (11.8 percent). The remaining 9.9 percent came from Eastern Europe or elsewhere. Furthermore, only 17.1 percent of those born in Turkey and 15.1 percent of those born in the USSR immigrated before 1950. The biggest influx of immigrants arrived after 1975: 74.8 percent of Iranian-born Armenians, 71.4 percent of Lebanese-born Armenians, 66.9 percent of those born in USSR, and 53.1 percent of those born in Turkey.

It should be noted that scholars find that these statistics from the 1980 census underestimate the actual number of Armenians in Los Angeles,[16] and elsewhere in the U.S. for that matter (see Lieberson and Waters 1988). Moreover, the massive influx of Armenians to Los Angeles did not stop in the 1980s; on the contrary, it seems to have accelerated (Der-Martirosian, Sabagh, and Bozorgmehr 1990). Elsewhere in the United States, foreign-born Armenians are estimated to constitute about 40 percent of the Armenian-American population. More specifically, the foreign-born make up 43.2 percent of Armenian-American population in San Francisco, 26.5 percent of

those in Fresno, 30.7 percent of those in Boston, 32.3 percent of those in Worcester, and 33.3 percent of those in Chicago (Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, and Der-Martirosian 1988). These figures are comparable to the proportion of foreign-born found in the New York sample (38.8 percent).

In metropolitan New York and New Jersey where the survey was conducted, the Armenian-American community is relatively large.

TABLE 1.1
Distribution of Armenian Churches by Geographical Location

	Diocese	Prelacy	Protestant	Catholic	Subtotal	Total
California						38
Los Angeles	6	5	10	1	22	
Fresno	3	1	4	-	8	
San Francisco	2	1	3	-	6	
Sacramento	1	-	-	-	1	
San Diego	1	-	-	-	1	
Mid Atlantic						57
Metro NY & NJ	10	3	3	2	18	
NY State	4	3	-	-	7	
Watertown	2	1	2	1	6	
Worcester	1	1	1	-	3	
Massachusetts	4	3	-	-	7	
Providence	1	1	1	-	3	
New Hampshire	-	-	1	-	1	
Connecticut	3	1	-	-	4	
Philadelphia	2	1	1	1	5	
Washington, DC	1	1	-	-	2	
Richmond	1	-	-	-	1	
Midwest						16
Detroit	1	1	1	1	4	
Chicago	4		3	1	8	
Wisconsin	3	1	-	-	4	
South						4
Florida	2	1	-	-	3	
Houston	1	-	-	-	1	
	53	28	28	6		115

Unfortunately, the exact number of people claiming Armenian descent who live in this area is not known. Avakian (1977b) has estimated that 175,000 Armenians live in the Middle Atlantic States (NYC, Northern and Eastern NY State, NJ, Eastern Pennsylvania, metropolitan Washington, DC, and Richmond, VA). More specifically, he has estimated 35,000 people for the state of New Jersey and 132,000 for the state of New York. If I were to calculate my own estimates from the number of addresses on the mailing lists I was able to generate, the total number of households in the study area would number approximately 13,000. This figure translates roughly to 65,000 people (averaging five persons to a household), an estimate far below the figure provided by Avakian some ten years earlier. Probably, the universe of Armenian-Americans who are highly active in communal life and those in the periphery who identify as Armenian-American but attend communal events only sporadically, if at all, is nearer to 100,000 persons in the survey area.

Armenians have lived in New York and New Jersey since the beginning of their immigration to the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Unlike other ethnic groups, Armenians were too few in number to take over entire city blocks to recreate a "little Armenia" in the New World. Nonetheless, there were some areas where their residential concentration warranted the building of a church and eventually a community hall for social activities. In Manhattan, on East Twenty-seventh Street[17] an Apostolic church was organized in 1903. Nearby on East Thirty-fourth Street, Protestant Armenians purchased a building in 1921, though prayer meetings had been held in the vicinity as early as 1881. In 1925, when the Armenian population increased in the Washington Heights area on One Hundred and Eightieth Street, the Holy Cross Church of Armenia was established (Mirak 1983, 125, 147-48, 198; Megerdichian 1983). In New Jersey, there were large groups of Armenians in Union City and Paterson (Kulhanjian 1986-87).

As the second-generation moved to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, new churches, each with its own community center were established in Queens, Westchester, and New Jersey. At present, Armenian-Americans are residentially spread throughout the metropolitan area. Many of the more affluent families live in Bergen County (NJ), Westchester, and Long Island, while Sunnyside (borough

of Queens) has a concentration of less-prosperous, relatively recent immigrants.

Armenian immigration to the United States is a continuing process.[18] As long as the U.S. government welcomes new immigrants, there will be some Armenians among the hordes of newcomers who will seek refuge on its soil.[19] Even when gatekeepers deny official access, men and women who want to emigrate, like those in the decades before them, will try to circumvent the law. In the past, many Armenians entered the United States on student or tourist visas, then decided to stay; a few may have even jumped ship or entered illegally. As Nathan Glazer has accurately remarked, "the United States, it seems, remains the permanently unfinished country" (1985, 3). So too it seems, Armenianness in the United States continues to be shaped and reshaped with the influx of new immigrants.

Local Reception to Armenian Immigration

What kind of a reception did Armenian immigrants face in the United States of America? Borrowing Talai's characterization of London Armenians, in general, Armenian presence in American towns and cities has been described by "relative anonymity"; that is, they "encountered blankness or at the very least decided vagueness as to their origins or ethnic identity" (Talai 1984, 203). Their small numbers and dispersion throughout the United States, with one notable exception, prevented outright discrimination or prejudice against Armenians.[20] Yet, they have not been spared stereotypes.[21] Because it would have been too much of a distortion if they were called lazy, stupid, or irresponsible, Armenians together with Jews, Greeks, Syrians, and American-Japanese are in a category that brands them as "too ambitious and with a crafty kind of self-interested intelligence" (Simpson and Yinger 1985, 101). The archetypical Armenian rug merchant is portrayed as a cunning trader, a wheeler-dealer, a person with haggling in his blood.[22] The rug merchant stereotype[23] may linger on but Armenian-Americans have come a long way and have achieved too many significant socioeconomic gains to allow such disparaging images to bother them or hinder their further progress into the American mainstream.

Fresno, California, from the turn of the century until World War II was the exception to the generally indifferent reception Armenian immigrants encountered in America. Mirak (1983, 144-47), in his historical survey of early Armenian settlements in the United States, found overt discrimination only in Fresno. In 1909, the state of California attempted to prohibit Armenians from purchasing land because of their alien, "Asiatic" status, until the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in the case of *re-Halladjian* ruled that they were indeed "Caucasian" upon the expert testimony of anthropologist Franz Boas (Ordjanian 1991, 60-61).

Still, Armenians in Fresno were prevented from owning property in the "better neighborhoods"; they were excluded from social clubs and professional associations, even from local Protestant churches; they were ill-treated by clerks, salesmen, and other townspeople in their daily transactions. Armenians were called "Turks," a label they resented bitterly, and other equally demeaning slurs. Schoolchildren were open to abuse from teachers and classmates alike, which often ended up in fights. Sociologist LaPiere (1930, 390-415; 1936), who studied the Fresno Armenians in the 1920s, discovered that they were stereotyped as dishonest, lying, deceitful, parasitic, relying heavily on community welfare, responsible for most crimes in the county, and of inferior morality; all claims that LaPiere was unable to validate. The more educated among the first generation, and the second generation were most conscious of the prejudice that existed in Fresno against Armenians.

Mirak (1983, 146) postulates that the hostility against Armenian immigrants in Fresno was caused by a combination of economic and social factors. A critical mass of Armenians settling and buying land in one county induced the fears of the natives; besides, these new immigrants appeared to be stubborn, proud, and independent in spirit, contrary to the servile attitudes the Fresnans expected from aliens. Furthermore, like many other immigrants, the Armenians dressed differently, had a darker complexion, and talked in a foreign language. Fortunately, Armenians avoided direct confrontation with the natives, a trait they had mastered under Ottoman rule, thus preventing the bloodshed that was the fate of other ethnic groups elsewhere in America. Moreover, because the Armenians were relatively anonymous in the rest of California, native Fresnans were unable to

mobilize opposition against Armenians in their state to pass discriminatory legislation similar to the exclusionary laws against the Chinese. Rapid Americanization soon reduced the most visible distinctions between the Armenian immigrants and the host society.

Mirak observes that throughout the United States, "children of the pre-World War I years grew up amidst a virulent nationalist atmosphere characterized by 100 percent Americanism, which held in contempt most foreign habits and foreign-born peoples" (1983, 161). Second-generation Armenian-Americans, like most of the offspring of the immigrants arriving at the turn of the century, grew up in discriminating schools and with prejudiced teachers who called them names such as "immigrant" and "foreigner." Even later, children of ethnic descent were not spared discriminatory treatment. In the 1970s, after the civil rights movement, ethnicity become popular, something one could be proud of, though by that time, Armenian-Americans, like many other white ethnic groups had shed most of the visible peculiarities of their heritage and their ethnicity had become symbolic. Discrimination however, has not been wiped out.

The heavy concentration of Armenian immigrants in metropolitan Los Angeles in recent decades and their attempts to get organized has no doubt increased their visibility and alerted other ethnic groups competing for scarce resources in the public arena that they are a group to be reckoned with. Sociologists contend that such forces of boundary formation in the urban opportunity structure give rise to misunderstandings and stereotypes. Little is known of what non-Armenians think of Los Angeles Armenians; however, within the Armenian-American community, Soviet Armenian immigrants have become the butt of jokes and stereotypes. A well-circulated rumor suggests that supermarkets in Hollywood post signs saying; "No Dogs, No Armenians," presumably because Soviet Armenians are skilled shoplifters. These newcomers are also accused of cheating the welfare system,[24] of engaging in gang-related crime, for crowding the county jail, and for giving Armenians a negative press.[25] I should add that many individuals in leadership positions in the Armenian community in the United States have opposed Soviet Armenian emigration, interpreting the new immigrants' desire for a better life as a desertion, a betrayal of the nation.[26]