

Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community

by Susan Paul Pattie, Smithsonian, (Washington D.C., 1997) 282 pp.

Although I have several Armenian Cypriot friends, my knowledge of the Armenian community in Cyprus has been rather limited and, as it turns out, not very accurate either. I knew of course about the 1915 massacres in Turkey and had assumed that was also the time when Armenians first arrived in Cyprus. As Susan Paul Pattie shows in her informative book, some Armenians were here long before the massacres, when Cyprus was still an Ottoman province. I had also assumed that Armenian Cypriots speak Armenian as a matter of course—the same way, for example, that Greek Cypriots learn to speak their own version of Greek. The truth of the matter is that the mother tongue of the Armenian refugees who came to Cyprus was Turkish; in fact, some are still comfortable only in that language. If my Armenian Cypriot friends—the younger generation—speak fluent Armenian, it is only because their grandparents and parents had made a concerted effort to learn the language themselves and to pass it on to their children. As for the Armenian community itself, I had always thought of it as a rather tight-knit group—Armenians sticking together in a foreign, if not hostile land. Although this image is not altogether false, it is also the case that the community is deeply divided on ideological and political grounds.

Faith in History is the story of Armenian Cypriots living on the island or in London. It is about their struggle to maintain a sense of community and to rebuild their all-too-often disrupted lives—disrupted by the 1915 massacres and deportations, by the outbreak of ethnic violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots in 1963, and by the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. On a larger canvas, the book tells the story of the Armenian diaspora, of a people being at "home away from homeland". For the older generations, homeland is the towns and villages in Cilicia, Turkey, that they left behind in 1915. Indeed, the main reason that many chose to come to Cyprus was the island's proximity to Anatolia, thinking that when peace was restored, it would be much easier for them to return. For the younger generations, particularly those rallying behind the nationalist cause, homeland is something far more idealistic, Hayastan, the Republic of Armenia—idealistic because they did not originate from there and because those who actually "returned" and tried to settle in Armenia soon found out that "homeland" was very different from what they had imagined. Hence the fact that many gave up trying to adjust and came back to Cyprus.

On this larger canvas, being at "home away from homeland" means being comfortable in one's adopted country and at the same time haunted by the fear of losing oneself in it. Indeed, this is the major theme that runs through the entire book, and the horns of the dilemma of the Armenian diaspora. For too much comfort in one's host culture suggests that one has been assimilated by it to such an extent as to have no clear sense of one's identity. The question, then, is how to remain Armenian when one is surrounded by an overwhelmingly non-Armenian population. And this in turn raises a related and more controversial question: What does it mean to be Armenian in Cyprus, in London, or in other parts of the world anyway?

As Pattie shows, family has been the backbone of Armenian identity in the diaspora. It is for this reason that intermarriage is perceived by many as the greatest threat that the Armenian nation currently faces and is often referred to, tellingly enough, as a massacre— "the white massacre" (p. 24). This is why the younger generation, being much more comfortable in the wider culture, are strongly discouraged from marrying outside the Armenian community. This fear is not altogether unfounded, insofar at least as the family is seen by most Armenians as the very mechanism by which the two most fundamental characteristics of Armenian identity—language and religion—are inculcated and reproduced.

Pattie takes a rather different view on this sensitive issue. Being the product of a mixed marriage, a Protestant, and someone for whom Armenian is a second language, she is in many ways a living proof that the conventional understanding of Armenian identity may be in need of modification. Already in the preface of the book, Pattie points out that when people in Cyprus praised her (Armenian) mother "for having raised her children to be aware of being Armenian," she found it difficult to explain to them that her mother "had not consciously tried to do this" (p.ix). This sets the tone for the book's main argument, which Pattie develops fully in the last chapter. To be Armenian does not only or even mainly mean to speak the Armenian language or to be a member of the Apostolic Church. Religion in particular has now been co-opted by nationalism and fulfils a largely symbolic function. For Pattie, to be Armenian primarily means to have faith in history, to belong to a group of people who remember and believe in a common past. For it is the past, above anything else, that unifies them in the present and opens up the future.

Pattie has written an informative, sensitive, ethnographically rich, and theoretically sound book. Although I felt that it could have been shorter without compromising any of its strengths—indeed, at times it is repetitive—this is only a quibble. The book certainly deserves to be read widely in Cyprus, and this means by Greek Cypriots as well.

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