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THE ARMENIAN-CZECH “CROSS-CULTURAL” PHENOMENON OF “MARLENKA”

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ABSTRACT

The Armenian community in the Czech Republic began to form more visibly and gain significance in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, particularly in the early 1990s. Prior to this period, the presence of the Armenians in the Czech lands was negligible but historically recorded. The Armenian community in the Czech Republic is a relatively new diaspora that is currently undergoing a process of diasporization and transformation. In this kind of dynamical processes, the key figures of the community are best outlined. Due to their activities and dispositions, they have a significant impact on community and identity formation in ethnically and religiously diverse environments. It was precisely in this context that Gevorg Avetisjan a world famous Czech entrepreneur by Armenian origin, that became well known as the founder of internationally popular confectionary company Marlenka, is widely recognized as the most prominent representative of the Armenian community in the Czech Republic and as one of the country's leading entrepreneurs. The article presents the phenomenon of Gevorg Avetisyan as a social actor both within the frame of the Armenian community and in the entire Czech society, whose entrepreneurial activity corresponds to the dominant values of the society in which he actively functions and the community, on the development of which he actively influences [1].

Keywords: entrepreneur, Armenian diaspora, Czech Republic, “Marlenka”, social actor, heritage.

Introduction

Modern social system consists of a plurality and diversity of social actors. According to their activity and practices in the frame of certain group actors can vary from personal to civilizational. Their primary roles involve strategic positions in decision-making and policy processes, representing certain group interests and safeguarding material, spiritual, and environmental values [2]. Here, we define a social actor as an individual whose intentional actions are guided by internalized societal or community expectations and shaped by others' interpretations [3].

The concept of the social actor provides a productive analytical framework for understanding the agency of individuals within diasporic and transnational contexts. Diaspora members, as social actors, operate at the intersection of multiple cultural, economic and symbolic systems. Their actions are shaped by internalized expectations and collective values, yet they remain capable of strategic adaptation and innovation.

Entrepreneurship within diasporas exemplifies this dynamic. Migrant entrepreneurs act as mediators between home and host societies, transforming social and symbolic capital into economic and cultural resources. Through their practices, they not only pursue individual advancement but also contribute to the reproduction and redefinition of ethnic (cultural) and religious (confessional) identities.

This approach situates entrepreneurship beyond mere economic rationality: it becomes a culturally embedded social process that sustains transnational networks, reinforces community cohesion, and symbolically marks ethnic space. Thus, diasporic entrepreneurs emerge as key agents of social transformation, whose actions illuminate the interplay between structure, culture and agency in contemporary global societies [4].

In this context the article aims to present and analyse the biographic details and the entrepreneurship activity of Mr. Gevorg Avetisjan as a social actor in both Armenian and Czech societies. Gevorg Avetisjan is regarded as a leading figure within the Armenian community in the Czech Republic and is recognized as one of the country's most successful entrepreneurs. Having arrived during the first wave of Armenian immigration in the 1990s,

notably, he is among the founding members of the Armenian community in the country. The life story and the activity of the famous enterpreneur and the key figure of the Armenian community in the Czech Republic was documented through qualitative research, specifically employing the biographical-narrative and in-depth interview methods that allowed the authors to reconstruct his authentic and "cross-cultural" activity dynamics.

The in-depth interview with Gevorg Avetisjan was conducted in November 2022 on-site at the Marlenka production facility in Frýdek-Místek, Czech Republic.¹ And the biographical-narrative interview with Gevorg Avetisjan was conducted in 2017 in Prague, Czech Republic.²

These methodological approaches enabled to capture not only the factual life and activity experiences but also the emotions, attitudes and the symbolic meanings associated with them and to unveil how his activity impact on vary spheres of community life.

Georgius and Gevorg: pattern or coincidence?

The Armenian community in the Czech Republic does not have a long tradition; mostly the Armenians began arriving in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before that, the Armenians living in the Czech Republic were a rarity. For centuries, Armenians have established larger or smaller communities in Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary etc., and the countries of the former Yugoslavia. During the existence of Austria-Hungary, Armenians tended to concentrate in Vienna, and therefore no significant community was established in the Czech or Slovak territories at that times. The earliest and most notable mention concerns the first known Armenian to settle in the region: the

¹ The research was carried out by Nelli R. Khachaturian the researcher of the Department of Diaspora Studies of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia within the framework of the state program "The main directions of the comparative studies of the Armenians in their own and foreign environments: the problems and the perspectives of the study" (2021-2025).

² The interview is related to research on the Armenian community in the Czech Republic, which has been the long-term focus of Marta Mezhlumyan, as a student of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague.

merchant Gevorg Astvacatur Damaskosci, also known as Georgius Deodatus Damascenus, who lived and conducted his trade in Prague during the 18th century [5].

Georgius Deodatus Damascenus was born in 1668 in an Armenian family in Damascus. During his travels, he arrived in Vienna, and then he moved to Prague, where he succeeded as a coffee merchant [6, 7, 8, 9].

Deodatus was also engaged in theology. His latin theological manuscripts are stored in the State Archives of the Czech Republic and the National Library [10]. Besides theology, he wrote brochures in German and Latin about the life of Christians in the Middle East [11]. He died in 1740 and was buried in the cloister of the Monastery of St. Thomas in Prague [12].

And is this a coincidence, but another Gevorg, that is Gevorg Avetisjan, that firstly took care of finding, digitization and popularisation of Georgious’s manuscripts in Czech Republic among the Czechs and the Armenians decided to continue to promote and develop the friendship and commonality among two nations. And as he told, he felt a kinship with Deodatus and chose to follow in his footsteps as a kind of “cultural and national descendant” [13, 14, 15].

Since then, on the inner packaging of “*Marlenka*” products features, in addition to Armenian national symbols such as Mount Ararat and the Khor Virap Monastery (which were deliberately selected to underscore the Armenian cultural heritage associated with the brand’s origins), there is a portrait of Georgius Deodatus with a short historical note about his Armenian origin and the connection to the Czech lands (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Mount Ararat, the Khor Virap Monastery and a portrait of Georgius Deodatus on the inner packaging of “Marlenka” products.

Making the Phenomenon

Gevorg Avetisjan is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Marlenka International, the company specialized in the production of traditional Armenian honey cakes in the Czech Republic. The recipes utilized in production originate from his ancestral heritage and were transmitted through successive generations to his sister, who contributed her skills to establish the production process [16].

Avetisjan's professional orientation and activity have consistently emphasized the promotion of Armenian cultural heritage. His family lineage traces back to the city of Van in Western Armenia, where his ancestors were engaged in mercant activities. His maternal grandfather operated a factory producing lokum and halva, providing a historical and commercial precedent that influenced Avetisjan's later entrepreneurial endeavors [17].

Today Marlenka's production facilities are located in Frýdek-Místek, Czech Republic, and the company's products have gained recognition both domestically and internationally [18]. The company distributes products to over fifty-five countries worldwide [19], including regions in Europe, the Americas, Canada, Africa, China, Russia, Ukraine, Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea and the Near and Far East [20, 21].

In 2022, for the services to the country Avetisjan became the first Armenian in the history of the Czech Republic to receive the First-Class Medal of Merit, awarded by the President of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman. This recognition reflects his enormous contributions to economic development of the country, mutual cultural promotion and the community engagement.

Media coverage and recognition of Avetisjan's entrepreneurial activity has been consistent for years. For example, Forbes magazine devoted an extensive feature to Avetisjan and the Marlenka brand [22]. CNN and other international outlets have reported on the company and its founder, including coverage during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, highlighting his advocacy regarding the events in the region [23].

However, Avetisjan was born in 1959 in Yerevan, Armenia. He graduated from the Academy of Arts with a specialization in design [24]. In Yerevan, he established a furniture manufacturing business, achieving commercial success due to product quality and demand. The socio-economic circumstances of the 1990s, including the aftermath of an earthquake, regional conflict, blockades, and energy shortages, disrupted his production activities. Having visited Prague as a student, Avetisjan was influenced by the city’s social and cultural environment and later confronted with economic and social instability, he forced to migrate to the Czech Republic with his family. A chance encounter on a train led him to settle in Ostrava rather than Prague [25].

Upon arrival, they encountered various difficulties, and Avetisyan once promised that he would restore the cross on the Catholic church in Ostrava if he could survive. And he did what he promised as under the guidance of him and his sister, the customer acceptance of the production led to increased demand, prompting the establishment of structured production processes. Avetisjan personally supervised all stages of production, implemented large-scale operations, imported production lines from Japan and Norway, and developed “cross-cultural” design elements that integrated Armenian and Czech cultural motifs [26, 27, 28].

Marlenka International has become one of the most recognized companies in the Czech food industry. So, through his activity Avetisjan as a social actor has promoted Armenian-Czech relations, supported Armenian community in the country and contributed to the recognition of the Armenian Genocide in the Czech Republic [29]. He also played a role in securing a space for the Armenian Church in Prague [30]. Additionally, Avetisjan has provided financial support to Armenian-language media, *Orer*, which reports on both local and international Armenian community issues [31, 32].

Thus, by his (diasporic) entrepreneurship, activity and dispositions he illustrates the mediating role between home and host societies, converts social and symbolic capital into economic and cultural resources, simultaneously shape (or reshape) community’s collective ethnic and religious identities by supporting collective historical memory, religious

and media institutions, that are practically the main layers of the basis for the further formation of a community.

The company's clientele includes national and international figures. Even in 2016, the British Ambassador to the Czech Republic commissioned a cake for Queen Elizabeth II's 90th birthday, designed by Avetisjan and presented as a formal gift [33]. Among his individual customers are ministers and presidents of various countries, firstly the previous and the present presidents of the Czech Republic. And despite his busy schedule, he invariably finds time for dialogue – answering questions, giving interviews, and sharing stories about his origins and Homeland, always offering Armenian brandy as a token of hospitality [34].

Planned expansions include not only the additional production facilities, retail and hospitality infrastructure, but an interactive museum dedicated to «Marlenka» and its connections to Armenian cultural heritage [35].

Nowadays Mr. Avetisjan's activity can be considered as a model of intercultural synthesis and dialogue, while embodying the essence and commitment to Armenian cultural identity, enriched by the formative influence of Czech social and cultural foundations and values. And the current Marlenka International facility, displaying the national flags of the Republic of Armenia and the Czech Republic on its premises becoming a type of “diplomatic bridge” between two nations.

Conclusion

In diaspora context, entrepreneurship extends beyond economic activity. It is carrying ethnic symbolism (especially when the bond with national identity remains strong) and becoming a symbolic practice and a kind of ethnic space through which migrant entrepreneurs articulate prestige, belonging and continuity of the certain ethnocultural domain. The establishment of businesses and enterprises often carries meanings tied to collective memory and cultural identity preservation. Through the reproduction of traditional products, names and etc., entrepreneurs symbolically reconstruct fragments of the Homeland in the host

environment. These practices serve as markers of ethnic visibility and resilience, transforming material success into moral and cultural capital. Thus, entrepreneurship in the diaspora becomes both an act of adaptation and a performative reaffirmation of communal identity across the transnational spaces.

Avetisjan’s life story and his activities reflect that harmonious connection between Homeland and host country: representing Armenian roots and culture through his personal achievements while honoring the Czech Republic, which provided the opportunities and environment that enabled him to prosper.

As a representative of the first generation of Armenia’s immigrants of the 1990s, he embodies not only the exceptional professional achievement. A defining characteristic of this kind of social actors is also their motivation driven by their dispositions, feelings and evaluations.

His activity may be understood as a culturally structured system [36], reflecting the interplay between personal values, national identity and socio-cultural context.

There is little doubt that his decisions and actions laid the groundwork of the formation of the contemporary Armenian community in the Czech Republic. Through the interviews, we also obtained insights into his personal narrative, perspectives, thereby capturing valuable testimony about a social life that shaped deeply held values – factors that have influenced not only his individual trajectory but also the evolution of the Armenian community in the Czech Republic.

And, it can now be stated with confidence that Marlenka – while firmly rooted from Armenian cultural heritage – has alongside iconic Czech brands such as Škoda come to symbolize the Czech Republic itself. In this way, the brand embodies a dual cultural identity, simultaneously representing the traditions of the Armenian homeland and the values of the Czech host country, thus serving as an overpass between two nations.

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**АРМЯНО-ЧЕШСКИЙ «КРОСС-КУЛЬТУРНЫЙ»
ФЕНОМЕН «МАРЛЕНКИ»**

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Армянская община Чехии начала более заметно формироваться и приобретать значимость после распада Советского Союза, особенно в начале 1990-х годов. До этого периода присутствие армян на чешских землях было незначительным, хотя и исторически зафиксированным. Армянская община Чехии представляет собой относительно новую диаспору, которая в настоящее время проходит процесс диаспоризации и трансформации. В таких динамичных процессах наиболее ярко проявляются ключевые фигуры общины. Благодаря своей деятельности и установкам они оказывают значительное влияние на формирование общины и идентичности в этнически и религиозно разнообразной среде. Именно в этом контексте Геворг Аветисян, всемирно известный чешский предприниматель армянского происхождения, прославившийся как основатель популярной во всем мире кондитерской компании “Marlenka”, широко признан самым выдающимся представителем армянской общины в Чехии и одним из ведущих предпринимателей страны. В статье представлен феномен Геворга Аветисяна в качестве социального актора как в системе армянской общины, так и всего чешского общества, чья предпринимательская деятельность соответствует доминирующим ценностям общества, в котором он активно функционирует, и общины, на развитие которой он оказывает активное влияние [1].

Ключевые слова: предприниматель, армянская диаспора, Чехия, «Марленка», социальный актор, наследие.