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Music, Literature and Religion in German-Armenian Cultural Dialogue

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By Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Special to the Mirror-Spectator

BERLIN — The Armenian community had much to celebrate in Germany at the end of October: in Berlin it was the 90th anniversary of the founding of the community, commemorated with a formal ceremony on October 26 in the Charlottenburg Town

Hall, co-sponsored by the Minister for the Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia Hranusch Hakobyan and the Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf Mayor Reinhard Naumann. To the south, in Stuttgart, it was the 30th anniversary of the Armenian Holy Cross Church (Surb Khatch) in nearby Göppingen, and the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Baden-Württemberg Armenian community. The double jubilee was commemorated within the context of the third annual “Armenian Cultural Days” organized by community leader and parish priest Father Diradur Sardaryan from October 24-27, in collaboration with several state institutions as well as the Embassy and the Cultural Ministry of the Republic of Armenia.

In both Berlin and Stuttgart, it was culture that consolidated the bridge between the German and Armenian participants. Following greetings by Vartkes Alyanak of the Berlin Armenian community, representatives of the mayor and the Armenian Embassy spoke. Diaspora Minister Hakobyan reported on progress in the independent Republic’s political and economic development. In his keynote speech, Prof. Mihran Dabag, from the Institute for Diaspora and Genocide Research of the Ruhr University in Bochum, picked up the theme introduced by his predecessors, of the “homeland” — a question that has acquired new meaning for Armenians in the Diaspora since the establishment of an independent nation.

Among the many Armenians living abroad are world-class musicians who have succeeded in mastering the greatest achievements in both the European and Armenian traditions. Berlin had the honor of hosting soprano Hrachuhi Bassenz and bass Gor Harutyunyan as well as Anahit Ter-Tatshatyan on the piano, who presented works stretching from Giuseppe Verdi to Komitas.

In Stuttgart the cultural festival opened with music and concluded with a gala concert. Following an ecumenical prayer service by Father Diradur Sardaryan and Protestant minister Matthias Vosseler, pianist Ruben Meliksetian, who has been awarded the “Komitas medal” by the Armenian Diaspora Ministry, performed works by Rachmaninoff, Wagner-Liszt and Komitas. Four days later, the several hundred guests who filled the New Palace hall for the gala concert had the opportunity to hear magnificent soloist singers and instrumentalists who offered selections from the European and Armenian classical traditions as well as contemporary repertoire. Mezzosopranos Juliette Galstian and Anna Manasyants, and Baritone Mikael Babajanyan gave passionate renditions of arias from operas including “Sayat Nova,” “Carmen” and “Don Carlos,” whereas cellist Vache Bagratuni, violinist Kristina Altunjan and pianist Tatevik Mokatsian delivered a brilliant performance of the F-minor piano trio by Arno Babajanyan. The Acoustic Colors Quartet from Yerevan was the “surprise” announced for the second part of the concert: mezzosoprano Varsenik Avanyan joined with pianist Vahagn Hayrapetyan, saxophonist Armen Hyusnunts and Norayr Kartashyan, expert on the duduk and other traditional wind instruments (as well as drums), dazzled the audience with one vibrant piece after another. The quartet displayed technical and musical mastery of European compositional excellence in combination with traditional Armenian folk melodies, and transformed them through

“cosmopolitan free-jazz” improvisation into a unique musical experience. As one newspaper wrote: “Their repertoire consists of their own works as well as elaborations of model examples of Armenian music. All their arrangements reflect an excellent feel for musical forms and produce a lively mixture of different stylistic and sound levels which is internationally comprehensible.”

Between the opening and concluding musical experiences were a series of activities over four days whose aim it was to “bring the two cultures together and to present Armenian culture, which has had great significance for the European development, to a broader public.” The initiative carried as a slogan, “Enthralling Diversity, Fascinating Culture!” The events ranged from speeches, for example on “Armenia between Integration and Identity Safekeeping,” by Prof. Karen Swassjan, to a round table discussion on “The Diaspora as Bridge Builders in Development Cooperation – The Example of Armenia.” Participants could become acquainted with crucial features of Armenian culture, like its cuisine, through an introductory cooking workshop, for example, or learn some basics of Armenian in a quick language course. An event highlighting Armenian fairy tales provided a taste of folk culture.

German participants also had a chance to get sample Armenia’s rich literary heritage. Author Konrad Kuhn from Vienna presented an overview of the life and works of Yeghishe Charents, and Christoph Haacker delivered a fiery recitation of selections in the new German translation by Kuhn – who, for his part, recited a couple of poems in the original. A special treat at this event was musical accompaniment by Mikael Bagratuni (the 16-year-old son of the cellist), who played some of his original compositions on the piano. Authors also presented some new works on the history of Armenia: former Greek Ambassador to Armenia Leonidas Th. Chrysanthopoulos introduced the German edition of his book, *Caucasus Chronicles, Nation-Building and Diplomacy in Armenia, 1993-1994*, and I was invited to do a reading from my book, *Through the Wall of Fire: Armenia – Iraq – Palestine: From Wrath to Reconciliation*. The highpoint among the literary contributions was a performance of Dogan Akhanlı’s play, *Anne’s Silence*, which deals with a Turkish-German immigrant girl’s discovery of her Armenian roots. At the end of the emotionally powerful monologue, which was brilliantly performed by actress Bea Ehlers-Kerbekian, a Rainer Blankenburg opened a round table discussion with Sibylle Thelen, author of a book on the Armenian issue in Turkey, and myself, which members of the overflow audience joined. Most wanted to learn more about the background of the ongoing debate in Turkey and the perspectives for progress towards recognition of the genocide, especially in the context of the Gezi Park movement.

No portrayal of Armenian history and culture could be complete without exploring the role of the church. On Sunday, October 27, a special service took place at the Holy Cross Church (Surb Khatch) to celebrate its 30th jubilee, during which Archbishop Karekin Bekdjian, Primate of the Diocese in Germany, delivered the blessing of the Catholicos to church leaders and choir members. Later the same day, Margret Jaschke and Prof. Robert Stähle illustrated a project on the restoration work on biblical texts

being conducted at the Matenadaran in Yerevan, and Sardaryan presented a new volume of the complete liturgy of the Armenian Apostolic Church in a German translation, which he worked on together with Prof. Gabriele Winkler, a leading authority on the subject.

The Armenian Cultural Days in Stuttgart represent a considerable achievement, especially in light of the fact that Sardaryan, who initiated the project three years ago, came to the Armenian community in Baden-Wurttemberg only in 2007. The increasing number of Germans who attend the events testifies to their growing interest in Armenia, its history, culture and current political process. And now, from November 15-24, the Theater am Olgaek, which hosted the play and some readings, will hold an Armenian film festival including sessions with directors.

Such events also prove that language need not be an obstacle to cultural exchange as a part of understanding among different peoples. Music, of course, plays a singular role in the process because of its universality, as pianist Hayrapetyan from the Acoustic Colors Quartet emphasized. In impromptu remarks in English at the end of the gala, he said he believed “It is music that will save the planet.”

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