

THE ARMENIAN MONTH IN BASEL

In a pretty Swiss town...

On October 26–November 27, 2005, in Basel (Switzerland) a festival took place titled “Culturescapes 2005 – Armenia.” After Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) the beautiful Swiss town hosted the Armenian artists. This event has been implemented due to great efforts of Jurriaan Cooman, manager of “Culturescapes” who visited Armenia three times in 2005, to prepare this even as good as possible. To assist the festival, he also visited Great Britain and USA hoping to obtain support from Armenian unions and foundations in those countries. However, no Armenian union showed any interest in it. Thus the Month of Armenian Culture has been conducted using the assets of Swiss and other European organizations. In different parts of Basel one could see a photo presenting the roofs of Yerevan and a brilliant Armenian boy, as well as posters advertising Parajanov’s films. An illustrated German catalogue was published along with articles of different authors on the Armenian nation, Armenian history, culture and the genocide.

A wide range of events took place for about a month (concerts, meetings, discussions, film screenings) in Basel and surrounding settlements, widely covered by Swiss press. More than thirty articles were published, introducing the Armenian history, genocide, art and social life to the German-speaking Swiss.

Discussions

The month of Armenian culture opened at Basel University with Swiss-based Armenian philosopher Karen Swassjan’s report – “Armenia as a Spiritual Experience.” Several interesting cognitive reports were delivered: “Franz Werfel and “Forty Days of Musa-Dagh” (Markus Schneider, Zurich), “The Grail in the East. Early Christian Art” (Frank Teichmann, Stuttgart), “Armenia: an Itinerary, 1998–2004” (John Hughes, Yerevan), “The Creation of Armenian Letters” (Vehanush Melikyan, Hamburg), “Eastern Anatolia – Armenia: the Genocide and the People” (Dominic J. Schaller, Basel). A round-table discussion

entitled “The Future Demands the Explication of History: Armenia, Turkey and Europe in the Shadow of World War First” took place in German, French and English, involving historians, political scientists and specialists in Armenian studies from different countries: Micha Brumlik (Frankfurt), Valentina Calzolari Bouvier (Geneva), Mike Joseph (Cardiff), Raymond Kévorkian (Paris), Hans-Lucas Kieser, Georg Kreis (Basel), Gérard Libaridian (Michigan), Jacob Tanner (Zurich), Halil Berktaş, Ayşe Gül Altınay and Hülya Adak (Istanbul). Two more discussions took place: “Genocide and the Future of the Nation,” moderated by Georg Kreis (Basel) and “The Future of Armenia,” with participation of Vigen Chitedjian (Geneva), Mark Grigoryan (London), Eva Khachatrian (Yerevan), etc.

The literary events included meetings with two non-Armenian writers – authors of books on Armenia – Andrey Bitov (Russia), author of “The Lessons of Armenia” and Edgar Hilsenrath (Germany), author of “The Tale of the Last Thought.” During the literary event entitled “Wild Cat; The Country of Saturday; A Journey to Ararat” Ralf Dutil (Heidelberg, Germany) read German translations of poems, prosaic pieces and letters by Ossip Mandelstam, dedicated to Armenia. During another event actor H.-Dieter Jendreyko (Basel) read the letters by Armin Teophil Wegner written in 1915–1919 on the Armenian Genocide.

Cultural Programs

The musical program was particularly rich. The honorary guest of the Armenian Culture Month was composer Tigran Mansurian from Yerevan, whose pieces were performed many times at different concert halls. Two concerts took place in Martins Church of Basel: the first one featured sharakans (traditional Armenian sacred songs), pieces by Tigran Mansurian and Guillaume de Machaut. Among the performers were Tigran Mansurian, viola-player Kim Kashkashian (Germany) and the Hilliard Ensemble (London). Various Swiss and German musicians performed musical pieces from Mozart, Mansurian and Shostakovich under the conduction of Christoph Poppen from Munich, performed in Basel and Bern. Basel-based musicians Christine Lacoste and Mark Varshavsky performed pieces for cello by Tigran Mansurian and David

Haladjian. The closing concert on November 20 featured pieces by Komitas, Tigran Mansurian, Claude Debussy and Vache Sharafyan, performed by pianist Mikayel Balyan (Yerevan–Bremen), duduk player Gevorg Dabagyan (Yerevan) and violinist Kamila Schatz (Basel). Emil Rovner, cellist and singer (bass-baritone) from Basel, performed songs by Komitas.

Other Artists

The “Kairos” string quartet from Berlin performed pieces by contemporary German and Armenian composers – Thomas Buchholz, Georg Friedrich Haas, Petros Ovsepyan, Khachatur Kanayan (the latter is the second violin of “Kairos”). By the way, the popular Armenian song “Krunk” was the source of inspiration for Thomas Buchholz’s musical piece, “Crane.” A great discovery for the listeners (including those from Armenia) was the young virtuoso pianist Shushanik Hovakimyan (Yerevan-Los Angeles), who performed two concerts having Sergey Prokofyev, Komitas, Arno Babajanyan, Tigran Mansurian, Martun Israelyan and Ashot Zohrabyan in her repertoire. On different days the Basel and Zurich audiences attended performances by Gevorg Dabagyan duduk trio (Komitas, Sayat-Nova, Medieval songs), as well as the “Sanctus” vocal quartet of Yerevan led by Radik Melikyan, performing Komitas, Mansurian and David Haladjian (“Sanctus” gave concerts also in Geneva). Incidentally, Gevorg Dabagyan delivered two concert-lectures “Armenia and Duduk” as well as a lecture in the Central Museum of Bern on the same subject. In Basel Dabagyan received a proposition from a Swiss film company to record a soundtrack for a motion picture in 2007. In connection with the Armenia month the “Pre-Art Quartet” of Zurich performed pieces of young Armenian composers Seda Babayan, Aram Hovhanesyan and Arthur Akshelyan in the presence of the authors.

Modern Armenian art and video art was presented in an exhibition titled “Memory and Identity” arranged by Eva Khachatryan, curator of the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art. The exhibition showed pieces by artists Arman Grigoryan, Grigor Khachatrian, Vahram Aghasyan, Diana Hakobyan, Karine Matsakyan, etc. The exhibition’s

concept was as follows: while speaking about the past of Armenian people (“memory”) usually the genocide issue is being emphasized, yet this exhibition highlights the Soviet past of Armenia. As for “identity,” the exhibition presents personal identities of different artists, not the common national one.

During the month, the Basel City Movie Theater screened eight films by Sergey Parajanov each one on three different days. Posters of five films presented at the Basel City Movie Theater were dispatched from the Yerevan Parajanov Museum were. The cinema hall was almost full; particularly the film “The Color of Pomegranate” was of big success. Two more films were included in the film program: the documentary of Munich-based director Rom Holloway, “Requiem” about Parajanov and Canadian feature film “Ararat” by Atom Egoyan. All the films were presented by Artsvi Bakhchinyan (Armenian Association of Film Critics and Cinema Journalists).

Our Closest Neighbors

In Basel the second most frequently spoken language is Turkish. One of the city areas is called by locals Little Istanbul. That environment was clearly not too welcoming for the Armenian Culture. Once a Turk entered the anteroom of the Armenian art exhibition and started to shout and tear down articles on Armenians published in Swiss media pasted on the walls. He stated that no genocide had ever occurred, and he had written a book on the subject. On another occasion at the time of an Armenia-related discussion, the Turks organized a small meeting, which lasted only fifteen minutes because of lack of serious attitude of the organizers. However, the real Turkish image was shown to the Swiss in full view when following evening after the Turkey-Switzerland football match the Turkish footballers gave a brutal beating to their contestants, one of whom was rushed to hospital for internal injuries.

Local Armenians

It is interesting to find what were the relations, both past and present, of that city with the Armenians. The evangelic preachers of Basel visited

the Armenian-populated areas of Caucasus in mid-19th century to teach Christianity to those “pagan” Armenians. Abraham Amirchanyantz, a notable representative of Armenian Evangelical movement, who had translated the Gospels into different Turkic languages studied in Basel. From time to time the Eastern Armenians came to study at Basel University. Minas Minasyan in 1895 and Hayk Melkonyantz in 1905 defended their medical dissertations at this university.

Even today Basel has very few Armenian residents. There are several girls from Yerevan, singles or those are married the locals. Almost they all are specialized in eurhythmics. It was a great joy for the Armenian guests to meet young designer Sona Ovsepian and her parents, former residents of Yerevan, who tried hard to help the visitors from homeland in every way, surrounding them with warmth and care.

ARTSVI BAKHCHINYAN

Basel - Yerevan