



Identity Crisis at the Pan-Armenian Games

By Setrag Balian



After witnessing the Pan African Games, Ashot Melik-Shahnazaryan had the idea of Pan Armenian Games in order to unite Armenians from all over the world in the name of sports. Conceived long before the first games, the Soviet Union became a big obstacle to the events due to its extreme nationalism. As Armenia gained its independence in 1991, preparations were underway, and the first games were held in 1999, gathering about 1,000 athletes from 23 different countries.

In 2003 due to lack of sufficient funding, the decision was made to have the games on a quadrennial rather than biennial basis, and the nickname "Armenian Olympics" started to spread.

The 2007 Games saw a noticeable increase in the number of participants, which totaled more than 3,000 athletes. Yet the real breakthrough came with the 2015 edition that was held during the first two weeks of August (2 to 13) in the capital Yerevan, with the participation of more than 6,000 athletes coming from 34 countries around the world. The event's motto was "Unity through Sports."

Team Jerusalem had more than 50 athletes participating in seven different sports: table tennis, tennis, football, swimming, track and field, arm wrestling, and chess. The number of participants from Jerusalem was rather small compared to other communities, but in this regard we have to consider that the Armenian community in the holy city is very small. We are only 2,000 people.

The first months of preparations were quite hefty, especially for our committee. We had the obligation to raise funds for our participation, so



The Armenian delegation from Jerusalem during the opening ceremony of the Pan-Armenian Games 2015.

we targeted the Armenian community and related organizations, which spared no effort in supporting us. We also had contributions from the Christian organizations in Jerusalem, such as the Austrian Hospice and, finally, we focused on Palestinian foundations. Surprisingly, we were not disappointed by the latter.

To understand our awe you must know that Armenians, throughout the conflict, have tried to keep a somewhat neutral position. We own 14 percent of the Old City and have been in Jerusalem since we adopted Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD. In order to protect ourselves from the various changes that witnessed occupations, crusades, and wars, we became quite hesitant about actively participating on the political level.

The second phase of the preparations was focused on the athletic level. For people who are not even close to being professional athletes, it was a big challenge. Being a small community, we were much more worried about our identity and our cultural heritage than our athletic abilities and were quite indifferent or maybe ignorant when it came to sports. We needed an adrenaline rush to get us going.

At this point, instilling this spirit was not possible for many reasons. The factor of time was not in our favor, not to mention that being an athlete is a decision not an application to be downloaded! We had to go old school: teaching discipline and encouraging participants to do the best they can, knowing that our main objective was not to win the games. Rather, we were there to participate, meet new people, discover our motherland. If we were to win a medal, then this would crown our trip! We came back to Jerusalem with a prize indeed: we were ranked the second-best delegation, which reflects good behavior and discipline.

I was there to participate in the tennis competitions. Not having had contact with a racquet for four years, I thought that wearing a really good uniform and looking professional would intimidate my opponent. That strategy did not work very well...

Arriving in the "Fatherland"

It is the first day, and we gather to head to the stadium for the opening ceremony. We are wearing purple shirts (the color of the Armenian Genocide Centennial), beige shorts, and white shoes. We are called a few hours

Following the Armenian Genocide, Armenians today are scattered all over the world. The Armenian diaspora is estimated at 11 million, or about 4 times the population of Armenia.

early in order to be prepared and meet athletes from other countries. Our seats are surrounded by many cities. To our right is Aleppo and next to them Kuwait. The rows below have competitors coming from Brussels, Vienna, Sydney, and Montreal; Marseille competitors are on top, and Beirut and London to our left.

Naturally, the Middle Eastern cities are the loudest. After a few minutes of waiting, the *chaos* begins. Kuwait has a *darbouka*, Aleppo and Beirut are singing in Arabic, and of course the Commonwealth is screaming football chants. Jerusalem on the other hand is much more diverse and chaotic.

The chairs are used as drums, Frisbees as cymbals, and we sing in many different languages: Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew... you name it. However, what draws the most attention to us is our mascot, Gaydar: a small stuffed camel that is wearing our uniform. A few hours are killed and everyone is tired from all the chanting and the singing. At last the presenter starts to announce the names of the cities and the athletes make their way to the field. "Paris, France"; "Moscow, Russia"; "London, United Kingdom" ... and finally "Jerusalem." No comma, no space, no country. We proudly march onto the field with our special Jerusalem flag whilst all the other teams have the flag of their country. Odd but necessary, our dilemma continues...

Jerusalemite Armenians have always had this identity crisis, not knowing which country they belong to. Surely, being a persecuted people, we have a very strong connection to our Motherland and we all feel very Armenian; but still, there is something missing. When Lebanese Armenians

sing *Kulluna li'l Watan*, when British Armenians sing Long Live the Queen, we feel an emptiness: What should we sing? When Spanish Armenians dance the flamenco, when Italian Armenians dance the tarantella, what do we dance? When French Armenians praise Napoleon, when American Armenians praise Lincoln, whom do we praise? Certainly not Golda Meir, but perhaps Arafat...

To me the answer is very simple, though some would disagree.

Most of our families arrived in Palestine after fleeing the Genocide of 1915. We were accepted with open arms by the natives of this land, Palestinians. Our cuisine is more Arab than Armenian. Armenian hospitality, culture, songs, dances, though they all have their uniqueness, they are very similar to the components of Palestinian culture. Today, Palestinian foundations renovate houses of Armenian families inside the Armenian Quarter. A Palestinian Armenian, Manuel Hassasian, is

the ambassador of Palestine to the United Kingdom. Most important of all vis-à-vis this trip is that we were sponsored by the Bank of Palestine and received a donation from the Palestinian Presidential Office. We might not have won any medals, but I think we won an identity, we rediscovered our roots.

Sitting on those benches in the stadium and seeing all the other flags, I wasn't wishing for a blue and white flag. I was wishing for the "*White are our deeds, black are our battles, green are our fields, red are our swords*"* flag; I was wishing for a Palestinian flag. We should henceforth proudly say that not only are we Jerusalemite Armenians, we are also Palestinian Armenians.

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Article photos courtesy of the author.

* Quoted from the thirteenth-century Arab poet Safi a-Din al-Hili.

Our Readers Say ...

I chose to do sports in university because I believe that it is a tool of resistance. I have faith in what sports can do to bring our cause to a broader international audience.

Ehab Abdulhaq, student

Sports in Palestine requires much attention. It is on the bottom of the list of NGO priorities. The facilities we have are basic. I think we have to have plans and programs to develop a culture of sports.

**Manal Taha,
environmentalist**

The Armenian delegation from Jerusalem to the Pan-Armenian Games 2015.

