

Community

Celebrating a rich musical heritage

The Shoghaken Folk Ensemble in San Francisco

by Alexandra Bezdikian

SAN FRANCISCO — On March 2, the Armenian community of the Bay Area was given a remarkable gift. Through the epic melodies and outstanding musicianship of the Shoghaken Folk Ensemble of Armenia, featuring the hypnotizing vocals of Hasmik and Aleksan Harutyunyan, concertgoers had the opportunity to rediscover the soul of their culture and unearth the root of their Armenian pride. "Every region has its own culture, music, and folkloric songs and dances," said Anto Cingoz, an audience member. "A concert like this is wonderful because we like to learn those traditions, our music, so seeing this is so beautiful."

In the few hours it graced the stage of the Krouzian Hall in San Francisco, the Shoghaken Folk En-

semble reminded us simply yet eloquently that our people, our stories, our songs, are not only alive and vibrant in the land of our forefathers, but, more importantly, they are carried with us wherever we go.

"My grandparents kept the traditions of our people alive. They brought with them songs and dances and passed them to us," said Shoghaken member and vocalist Hasmik Harutyunyan. "Traditions are the future for us. For us, it's to keep our culture and to let others know of its beauty and richness."

Since its formation in 1991, Shoghaken has sought to restore traditional folk song and dance to an ever-modernizing Armenia and the rest of the world. With its soft melodic overtures, bold compositions, and subtle lyricism, the ensemble has stepped away from mainstream songs being played in Armenia today, instead returning to those of the past. "It is extremely important for today's generation to understand where they came from," Harutyunyan said. "Through us, they will understand the kind of people we are, our pain, what we've been through. Young people in par-



Shoghaken Folk Ensemble.

ticular need to know who they are and where they came from."

As a group dedicated to continuing the legacy of Armenia's rich cultural and musical heritage, Shoghaken features music from the heart of Armenia and stays close to traditional songs and instruments. Combining the authentic sounds of the zurna, dhol, kanon, kamancha, shvi, and duduk, the ensemble brings forth a vibrant display of where Armenian art and culture have been throughout history. "Ar-

menians have done a lot for the world's culture," Harutyunyan said.

In taking its message to the rest of the world, Shoghaken has toured throughout Europe, Russia, and, most recently, the United States, with concerts at Carnegie Hall, the Kimmel Center, Cornell University, Dartmouth University, and JFK Center for the Performing Arts. Fortunately for Armenians in the Bay Area, the ensemble's last stop was San Francisco. Roubina Kasparian, chair of the Hamazkayin Armenian

Educational and Cultural Society of San Francisco, was very pleased with the supporter turnout and overall success of the Shoghaken event. "Being the chair of Hamazkayin, I wanted to ensure the success of the concert and introduce more people to these exceptionally talented musicians, who surely brought wealth and pride to our culture," Kasparian said. "I really thank them, San Francisco being their last city. They really performed well and I'm really proud of them."

In a time when traditional folk music has perhaps come and gone, to be replaced with movements like pop and rock, the Shoghaken Folk Ensemble reminds us all of what was, where we came from, and where we as Armenians are going. With every performance, the group proves to the world that the Armenian songs of our great grandmothers and fathers are alive and thriving in the hearts and minds of those who keep it. Hasmik Harutyunyan believes that "if you don't know your blood, you can't feel your blood; you are nothing. We have to keep these traditions to pass them on to the next generation." ■

Student organizations hold panel discussion on genocide denial

Panel includes Jewish speakers

by Alene Tchekmedyan

LOS ANGELES — On March 6, the ARF Shant Student Association and the UCLA Armenian Graduate Student Association (AGSA) hosted a panel discussion to examine genocide denial from the points of view of nations that share a common history.

Held at the UCLA campus, the event, titled "Facing Denial: the Last Stage of Genocide," featured two Armenian and two Jewish speakers, who compared and contrasted methods of handling and coping with genocide denial.

"The main purpose was to examine the denial of genocide as being the final stage of genocide," said **Levon Baronian**, chairman of the Shant Student Association. "We wanted to draw similarities and differences between the denial of the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust and also examine why the repercussions or response to these denials have been different," he added.

The panel comprised Professor **Richard Hovannisian**, Chair in Modern Armenian History at UCLA; Dr. **David Meyers**, director of UCLA's Center for Jewish studies; **Aram Hamparian**, executive director of the Armenian National Committee of America; and **Joey Kurtzman**, executive editor of the progressive Jewish website, jewcy.com.

Catering to a younger demographic, the panel discussion sought to draw attention to the importance of persistence and consistent activism against genocide denial. "This event is immensely important because not only will it further our education about current and historical genocides, but it also serves as a good reminder about our community and our efforts to continue to proactively advocate our issues," said **Raffi Kassabian**, president of the AGSA.

Moderated by Glendale City Clerk **Ardashes Kassakhian**, the panel addressed a wide range of issues including the importance of the current campaign against the

genocide in Darfur as a catalyst for recognition of past genocides.

Hamparian said he considers the fact that Darfur has become a US presidential-campaign issue as a healthy development. "It is part of what [journalist and former Barack Obama adviser] Samantha Power described as the growth of an anti-genocide constituency in America, which is very important because historically the opposition to genocide is a moral opposition, but now we have force of politics and force of voters," Hamparian said.

Along with drawing parallels between past and present genocides, panelists also delved into the reasons behind denial and why it is crucial that activists continue the fight for recognition. Hamparian listed four reasons why Armenians should support ongoing genocide-recognition efforts: morality, prevention, deterrence, and rehabilitation.

The juxtaposition of these four points raises a moral obligation among Armenians to continue the campaign to prevent future atrocities, Hamparian said. "[Armenians] bear a special burden, having seen the depths of human suffering," he explained.

"Genocide followed up by a powerful campaign of denial, a genocide committed with impunity, makes the world a more dangerous place," Hamparian continued. "Once we can get to the day where Turkey has ended its denials, we can talk about the modern consequences of that crime. Certainly, we have worn the burden of that crime; it comes with population loss, the border is compromised in terms of the trade routes, agriculture, and resources. Once Turkey ends the denial, we can open up about what is owed to the victims."

Meyers pointed out that ongoing denial prevents wounded nations from moving forward to constructive activities. "If we don't name criminal acts, we are somehow paralyzed from preventing it... it is not just international law that's important, it's our own sense of moral responsibility," he said. "As descendants of those who suffered, we have a particular obligation to not just trumpet our own victimization but to call attention to examples of genocide or ethnic cleansing, wherever they occur."

Hovannisian discussed the strategic forms of Turkish denial, which have made their arguments more credible, as Turks no longer practice absolute denial. "They use what is much more effective," he said. "We have professors in main universities in the United States who are central to the [Turkish] thesis and they do not absolutely deny," he said, explaining that these scholars admit the deaths occurred but rationalize them by claiming that they were justified.

Hovannisian also urged the audience to remain optimistic. "There is hope because, on the other hand, we have the Turkish scholars who are challenging the

state narrative and are much more effective in combating Turkish denial," he said.

When an audience member asked why Armenians are so adamant about achieving recognition in America, Hamparian alluded to the United States Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. "Americans and the international community believe that genocide should be punished and that the victims should not be the only ones that bear the consequences of the crime," he said. "Those who committed the crimes should bear consequences as well. That's a basic requirement of justice."

Hovannisian also said that the panel discussion reflects the importance of collaboration between the Armenian and Jewish communities to achieve justice. "Without our Jewish scholars or Jewish colleagues... we would be way back in the dark ages," he noted. "They opened the doors for us; they have brought us forward."

Hovannisian added that Armenian-Genocide denial stems from one overbearing source in Turkey. "If you are able to shut down the denial from Ankara, all of the other fires that have been lit will immediately extinguish themselves," he said. ■

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