

Community

In Chicago, Ara Tekian describes the journey of a lifetime: climbing Ararat

by Gary Rejebian

CHICAGO, Ill. ▮ – Some people dream of going to the moon. But for two prominent Armenians already at the peak of their careers, the journey of a lifetime led them to the summit of Mount Ararat.

In an engaging talk at the AGBU Chicago Center on March 4, medical education specialist Dr. Ara Tekian, a professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago, described the pilgrimage that he and epidemiologist Haroutune Armenian (President of the American University of Armenia, AUA) made to Ararat last August, delivering a riveting presentation illustrated by more than 300 images.

The two professors were joined by Dr. Armenian's wife Sona, Dr. Varduhi Petrosyan (assistant professor of Public Health at AUA) and her husband Arsen Krikoryan, and Dr. Arthur Melkonyan (a former professor of Public Health at AUA).

For Tekian, who in his childhood began drawing Ararat and even dreamed of discovering Noah's Ark, the sojourn to the summit had become especially compelling in the last dozen years during which he had made annual trips to Armenia to teach a course at AUA. He and Dr. Armenian thus decided the best way to celebrate the 15th anniversary of both Armenia's independence and the founding of AUA was "to raise the Armenian flag on Mt. Ararat."

For the group of six Armenians making their way through eastern Turkey, however, not only the climb but the trip there and back became a spiritual journey.

Coming to the mountain required a more than 500-mile drive to and from Yerevan – all to reach a destination that was less than 50 miles away as the crow flies. Regional politics are, of course, in the driver's seat for the entry into Turkey from Armenia, with the group having only two options to reach Ararat from Yerevan: either travel through Iran, or take their selected route north to Georgia to double back along the sealed Armenian-Turkish border, which would afford them the chance to visit the ruins of three of the most significant locations in Armenian history.

Their pilgrimage began six months prior with extensive training to prepare for the strenuous climb.



At the peak of Mt. Ararat (l-r): Dr. Arthur Melkonyan, Arsen Krikoryan, Dr. Varduhi Petrosyan, Dr. Haroutune Armenian, Sona Armenian, and Dr. Ara Tekian.

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"The commitment to climb Mt. Ararat is both mental and physical," Tekian commented. "Mentally, you need to brainwash yourself that it's possible. Then, physically, you need to be in great shape."

Tekian began dieting and exercising daily. He took a cardiac stress test. His colleagues suggested "spending a night in your garden," so the cosmopolitan Beirut-born academician could decide whether he could endure camping outdoors in the rocky terrain. During the Chicago lecture, Tekian gleefully showed a photo of the bathroom facility at the first campsite: a hole in the ground behind a lean-to tarp. (Higher up, he says, "it's all barren and there is no place to hide.")

Meanwhile, Sona Armenian secured an official government permit for the climb – a process that takes at least three months – and made arrangements with a tour company that provided a guide, a van from the town of Dogubeyazit (the only starting point allowed by

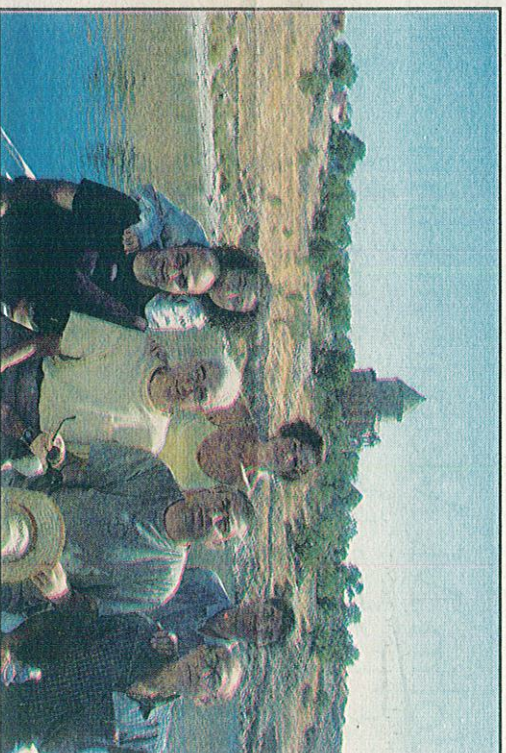
the Turkish government), and horses for the first two stages of the ascent to 10,560 and 13,800 feet, where there were campsites along the way. They had a different Kurdish guide for each elevation and campsite. The final hike started at 2:00 a.m. and they were at the peak (17,040 feet) at 6:30 A.M.

Once at the summit, "the sense of achievement and pride was overwhelming," Tekian said. "You feel so blessed and empowered – we were no longer looking upward to see the peak: we were at the peak. The first thing I did was to thank God for giving me the strength and opportunity to realize this dream. I prayed for my [late] parents who had always inspired me to visit historic Armenia one day. I prayed that my sisters, niece, nephew, and close friends could one day climb this mountain. So that was the first five minutes."

"We had plans to dance an Armenian folk dance and to drink the Armenian cognac that Arthur had carried all the way up, but we only had some iyrani (yogurt diluted with water) because of the altitude. The temperature was minus 30 Fahrenheit, and our fingers were freezing in the wind. We stayed only 20 minutes. You can see three countries from the peak: we spotted Turkey and Iran, but it was foggy over Armenia so we could not see Yerevan."

Tekian explained that descending the mountain is more difficult than climbing; their return took them almost 12 hours. Along their way, they encountered two other groups: a large group of Iranians descending at the second campsite (13,800 ft), and another six Britons camping an extra day for acclimatization.

On the way home, the group continued tracing their cultural roots by visiting four illustrious relics in Armenia's glorious past: the ruins of the 1st-century royal capital of Ani, the Varagavank monastery (former repository for a fragment of Christ's crucifixion cross) and the Holy Cross Church of Aghtamar at Van, and the once cultured, diverse and wealthy city of Kars. While not expecting to find any breath of Armenian life among 1,000-year-old ruins, the natural and especially the man-made desecration to the sites stirred passions in them for all that had been lost in the Armenian culture.



The group in front of Aghtamar, the church of the Holy Cross.

Among the ruins of Ani

"After seeing the most beautiful churches in Ani totally destroyed, we were repulsed by the lack of effort to save these precious historical monuments," Tekian lamented. "Ani has for centuries been a ghost town, but since the area is declared a Turkish military zone, no excavations can be done. The Turkish government has not taken any measure to protect this world treasure. Negligence and vandalism have taken a heavy toll on Ani's monuments."

Indeed, on four consecutive occasions from 1996 to 2002, the World Monuments Fund listed Ani among the "100 Most Endangered Sites" on its World Monuments Watch. Only one other site ever, in Serbia, had been listed as many times. Especially in the last 30 years, the Armenian monuments of Turkey have also been subjected to cultural cleansing of their Armenian origins.

"There was no mention either at the gate of Ani or in the directory of the history of Ani that this city had been the capital of Armenia a thousand years ago. It was almost unreal to see so many churches renamed as mosques, and their Armenian identities just obliterated. This is the moment that your 'Armenian-ness' comes to a climax: when you decide you need to do something – anything – to protect your rich heritage."

In the end, having reached a pin-nade and nadir in feelings about his ethnic identity, would Tekian say the trip was really worth a mere 20 minutes of wind-chilled ecstasy

followed by desolation and heart-break?

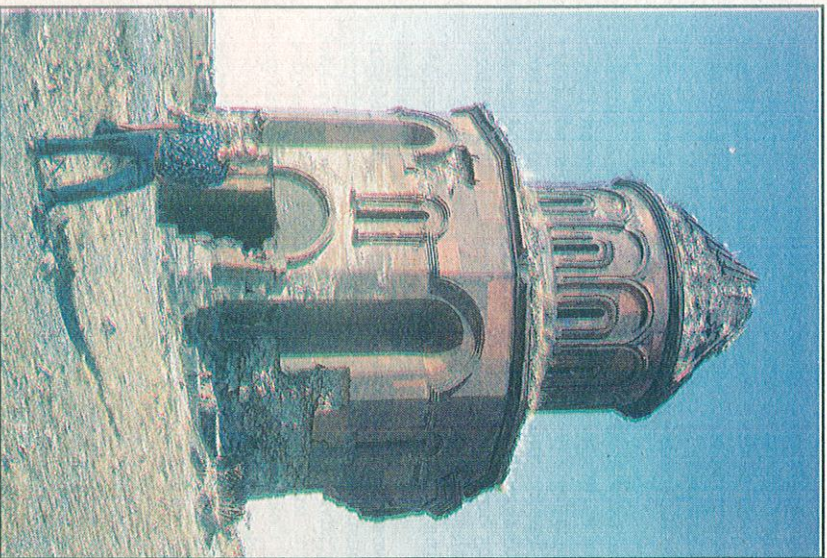
"This trip was a spiritual journey, climbing a sacred mountain and visiting some of the most important religious centers in Western Armenia. It was a pilgrimage for me to trace my roots," Tekian reflected. "Dreams do come true! Finally I climbed Mt. Ararat, and when the journey was over, I was a different person. I acquired such strength that gave me confidence, courage, and determination that there is nothing impossible in life. I now believe you can conquer any height and overcome any difficulty in life if you have the determination." ▮

Connect:

Dr. Ara Tekian's first presentation on climbing Ararat was delivered in Armenian in Geneva, Switzerland, last February. Schedule permitting, he welcomes invitations to give this talk elsewhere. E-mail him at tekan@uic.edu, or call (708) 445-0311.

AGBU Chicago is considering the possibility of arranging a group tour to climb Mt. Ararat in the summer of 2008. If you are interested in joining the group, contact AGBU Chicago Board chair Leona Mirza, at lmirza@northpark.edu, or call (773) 588-2844.

For a historical and contemporary tour of Ani, including background on the Turkish "restoration" of the monuments, visit www.virtuallani.org.



Dr. Tekian in front of the church of St. Gregory of the Abughamir family in Ani.