

SINGAPORE'S ARMENIAN CHURCH SURVIVED CLOSE TO 180 YEARS

SINGAPORE'S ORIGINAL ARMENIAN COMMUNITY DID NOT

Never large, Singapore's Persian Armenian community barely survived the war. Then came the demographic collapse.

By Alvin Tan

The Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator as seen from the south, 2024. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

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The *Straits Times*. The Raffles Hotel. The *Vanda* Miss Joaquim. These quintessentially Singaporean icons are associated with a community here that somewhat remarkably never exceeded 100 people – the Armenians.

To be clear though, while usually referred to as Armenians, the people who arrived in Singapore in the early decades of the 19th century did not come directly from Armenia, a landlocked country bordered by Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran. The early migrants were, instead, descendants of a population that had been resettled from the Armenian city of Julfa to Persia (present-day Iran) in the early 16th century. These Persian Armenians later settled in India, and then migrated to Java and the Malay Peninsula. Very soon after the British East India Company established a trading post in Singapore in 1819, the Armenians from nearby places like Penang and Melaka began arriving. By 1821, three Armenians – Aristarchus Sarkies, Arratoon Sarkies of Melaka, and another – had set up firms in Singapore.¹

Once in Singapore, the Armenians quickly established various businesses and made important contributions to society. Catchick Moses bought printing equipment from a fellow Armenian merchant who had gone bankrupt, and launched the *Straits Times* and *Singapore Journal of Commerce* with Robert Carr Woods, an English journalist from Bombay, in July 1845.² In 1887, the four Sarkies brothers – Martin, Tigran, Aviet and Arshak – leased an existing building and turned it into the Raffles Hotel, after previously establishing the Eastern and Oriental Hotel in Penang in 1884.³ Merchant and trader Parsick Joaquim came from Madras around 1840. His daughter Agnes Joaquim cultivated the hybrid orchid *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in 1893, which was chosen as Singapore's national flower.⁴

Founding of the Armenian Church

While the Armenians were certainly astute business people, they were also very religious. Christianity had been declared Armenia's state religion in 301 and being able to worship regularly was important to the Persian Armenians in Singapore.

When they first came here, the small community was served by Reverend Eleazor Ingergolie, who was based in Penang but travelled down to Singapore to conduct services. However, the Armenians here eventually wanted their own resident priest and in 1825, they wrote to the Archbishop in Persia asking for a priest to be posted here.⁵

Two years later, the Reverend Gregory ter Johannes arrived and the first services were held in a backroom at John Little & Co. in Raffles Place. The services were subsequently held in a small rented



A carte de visite albumen print of an Armenian by August Sachtler, 1860s. Collection of the Family of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

room at Powell & Co. located at what was known as "the Merchant's Square". The cost of supporting the priest, renting the premises and staff wages amounted to \$63 a month.⁶

Eventually, though, the community wanted their own dedicated building. In 1833, they wrote to Samuel Bonham, the Resident Councillor in Singapore, for the piece of land "lying at the Botanical Gardens facing the public road called 'the Hill Street'". Approval was given in July 1834 and George D. Coleman was commissioned to design the building. The foundation stone was laid in January 1835 by the Very Reverend Thomas Gregorian, who had come from Persia for the event, and the local priest Reverend Johannes Catchick. The cost of the building came up to \$5,058.30 (of which Coleman received \$400 as architect and engineer).⁷

Finally, on 26 March 1836, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator was consecrated by Reverend Johannes.⁸ In his sermon that followed the service, he told the congregation: "It now affords me uncommon pleasure to see you, brethren, assembled this morning under this roof, with joy in your hearts, because the house of God is much more fitting to worship in than our places of abode; there we enjoy bodily rest; here spiritual; as our Saviour observed – The soul is more worth than the body."⁹

(From left) Jacob Constantine (manager), Arshak Sarkies (founder and owner), Martin Sarkies (founder and owner) and Martyrose Arathoon (accountant) of the Raffles Hotel, 1906. Image reproduced from Nadia H. Wright, *The Armenians of Singapore: A Short History* (George Town, Penang: Entrepot Publishing, 2019), 86. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 305.89199205957 WRI).



Galvanising the Community

The church was an important part of Armenian life in Singapore. It was where the Sunday service – known as the Divine Liturgy – was celebrated, where major feast days were observed, and where life events such as baptisms and weddings were held.

The church was also important for fostering a sense of community. Unlike the other immigrants such as the Chinese and the Indians, the Armenians tended to come to Singapore in family groups. Weekly church services would have allowed the men, their wives and their children to meet others of the same cultural and religious background on a regular basis. Friendships were formed, children grew up together and business opportunities were discussed. Run and maintained by the community and volunteers, the church was where community ties were strengthened.

Historian Nadia Wright noted that various members of the congregation raised money to pay for modifications to the roof and dome in the 1840s and 1850s: “Over the years, generous individuals further contributed to improvements and additions. For example, in 1861, Peter Seth donated the bell in the steeple, although this was not hung until the 1880s. In that same decade, Catchick Moses paid for the back porch and a new fence around the compound.”¹⁰

However, the original dome and turret were deemed unsafe, and both were replaced by a square turret by 1847. The problem

persisted, and around 1853, the turret was removed and the pitched roof replaced with a flat one.¹¹

With the generous support of Seth Paul, the church and parsonage became the first church in Singapore to enjoy the comfort and convenience of electricity on 18 January 1909.¹²

Of course, the volunteers did more than build up the physical infrastructure. They were involved in other ways as well. Among her many talents, Agnes Joaquim was also skilled in needlework and she embroidered a beautiful altar cloth for the church.¹³

The tight-knit Armenian community also organised non-religious activities. The tragic events of the Armenian genocide in 1915 galvanised the community. Church trustees H.S. Arathoon and M.C. Johannes launched an appeal for funds on 16 October 1915 to relieve the plight of the Armenians. (They themselves donated \$500 each.)¹⁴

By 1931, there were 81 Armenians in Singapore, the highest figure reported by the census. But some time after this, the numbers appeared to decline. One indication was the last full service by a resident priest in 1938, which suggests that the community was too small to support a full-time resident priest by then.

Dwindling Population

The onset of World War II and the Japanese Occupation accelerated the decline of the community. During the Occupation, 19 Armenians who were British subjects were incarcerated. Civilians were interned in Sime Road Camp, while those who served in the Singapore Volunteer Corps or Local Defence Volunteers were interned in Changi Prison.¹⁵

The church itself took enemy fire during the war as its grounds had been requisitioned by the British Army. When the Japanese started dropping bombs on Singapore, some fell near the church, which loosened masonry and timber while the roof of the parsonage caved in. Subsequently, the building was looted by the Japanese who removed the crystal chandeliers and carpets from the church, and furniture and paintings from the parsonage; these were never replaced.¹⁶ During the Occupation years, the church was used by other Christian denominations – the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and Geylang Methodist Church – for their Sunday services.¹⁷

After the war, the population of Armenians in Singapore continued to fall as a result of emigration and as people died. In the 1947 census, which was the last to report the Armenians as a discrete category, there were just 62 of them.¹⁸ In December 1949, Arshak C. Galstaun, a trustee for the church, told the *Straits Times* that there were only about 40 Armenians left in the community.¹⁹

Because of the small numbers, the community found it hard to maintain the church. Four years after the end of the war, the *Straits Times* described the church as being “in a worse way than any other house of God in Singapore. Plaster is crackling and peeling from the walls, roof timbers are falling, white ants have made such inroads on the gilded centrepiece of the ceiling that you can break off chunks, like stale bread.”²⁰

Official compensation for war damage was paltry and church funds had to be used for repairs. Eventually, the parsonage was repaired with personal contributions from Walter, Robert and Looleen Martin.²¹

The small numbers also made it harder to keep regular church services going. In 1953, the *Straits Budget* noted: “Walking into the Armenian Church of St Gregory, the Illuminator in Coleman Street you will find every Sunday that the altar candles are lighted and the liturgy stands open. But there is no service. At nine every morning, the Churchwarden, ex-Japanese P.O.W. Mr Joannes, reads players [sic] to the steadfast remanant [sic] of the faithful.”²²

The first Divine Liturgy to be served after the war was on 9 May 1954. It was an important moment for the Armenian community because the last time the Liturgy had been celebrated in Singapore was some 16 years earlier. “Armenians have bought a new altar cloth (the one old having rotted away). They have scrubbed the floor and whitewashed the walls,” reported the *Straits Times*. “The church is fragrant with fresh flowers, candles are lighted and a choir of seven have been practising hymns unsung here since 1938.”²³

This was not the start of regular services though. In fact, the priest who came, the Surabaya-based Father Aristakes Mirzaian, was only able to be in Singapore after an Armenian woman in Surabaya established a fund to enable him to travel outside his parish to serve Armenians in the region.

Three years later, in May 1957, the *Straits Times* reported that the first Divine Liturgy in 30 years to be celebrated by a bishop would take place. Monsignor Tereniz Poladian flew in from Beirut to do so. “On Sunday, the Colony’s community of about 70 will attend a long-awaited pontifical service. The church which has been renovated at the cost of about \$20,000, has just been completely refurbished. A choir of eight has been practising for the past two weeks for the big occasion.”²⁴



Preserving the Church

Although the Armenian community in Singapore was small and the church suffered because of the lack of funds to maintain it, the church, to the Armenians, was and still is a sacred space. But from the 1950s, there was a growing sense in Singapore that the church building was not just a sacred space, but an important part of Singapore’s history.

In May 1954, a local group began to advocate publicly for its conservation. The *Straits Times* reported that the “Friends of Singapore, a cultural society, plans to rescue the old Armenian Church in Coleman Street because of its historical interest. It also plans to save the house of its architect Mr. Coleman... the society will make local Armenians an offer of help in the rehabilitation of the building.”²⁵

The church was indeed fixed up, though apparently without using funds from outside. This meant that it was done on a relatively small budget.

A painting of the Armenian Church by John Turnbull Thomson, Government Surveyor of the Straits Settlements, 1847. Image reproduced from John Hall-Jones, *The Thomson Paintings: Mid-nineteenth Century Paintings of the Straits Settlements and Malaya* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43. (From National Library, Singapore, call no.: RSING 759.2 THO).



Photo of Agnes Joaquim on a locket that once belonged to her, with an inscription of her name on the reverse side. She cultivated the hybrid orchid *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in 1893, which became Singapore’s national flower. Courtesy of Linda Locke.



The Armenian community during Bishop Thorgom Gushakian’s visit to Singapore in 1917. Image reproduced from Nadia H. Wright, *The Armenians of Singapore: A Short History* (George Town, Penang: Entrepot Publishing, 2019), 4. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 305.89199205957 WRI).

The results of the restoration did not please everyone. In a commentary in April 1956, *Straits Times* contributor Stanley Street criticised the community's restoration efforts that had left the church, in his opinion, unrecognisable.

Street wrote: "Had they possessed the means to carry out the long-delayed repairs while still preserving the charm and irreplaceable craftsmanship that has been lost, be sure they would have done so. But the community wished to restore their church from the slender funds at their disposal. Offer from other sources to help in this endeavour were declined, and for that we must respect the Singapore community of perhaps the oldest church in Christendom."²⁶

The traditional Armenian *khachkar* (cross-stone) erected in 2015 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. It is located in the Memorial Garden of the Armenian Church. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

In response, Arshak C. Galstaun, the church trustee and warden, wrote that his "first reactions to the article... were violent and I have, therefore, waited a few days to simmer down and to consult my church board". He noted that the parsonage had been completely repaired through the generosity of the Armenian Martin family and that the church spent several thousand dollars about five years ago to ensure it was structurally safe. He ended his response with a strongly worded reminder to the writer. "I would impress upon Stanley Street that the Armenian Church is private and sacred. We desire to be left alone to manage our own affairs as we think fit."²⁷ Yet, this view that only Armenians had a say over the church was increasingly untenable as the 1960s unfolded. In addition to being an Armenian property and a consecrated space, the state was beginning to recognise it as a heritage building with great historical value, especially to a new nation.

In 1969, it was reported that the government was looking into setting up a national monument trust to preserve buildings of historical importance and the Armenian church was on that list.²⁸ In 1970, the Preservation of Monuments Act was passed, and in July 1973 the Preservation of Monuments Board gazetted the church as a national monument alongside seven others.²⁹

The church trustees now had to balance this status with that of a consecrated space for the practice of Armenian Christianity. It was



Tombstones of prominent Armenians in the Memorial Garden of the Armenian Church. The parsonage is located on the right. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

not easy, especially since the church in the 1970s and 1980s was thinly used as the population continued to dwindle. The *Straits Times* reported in December 1978 that "the Armenian community now barely raises the required quorum of 12 at the church's annual general meeting to keep the church going as a registered society."³⁰

This tension came into sharp relief following a piece written by Australian architect Peter Keys in the *Straits Times*. After a visit to the church in September 1981, he had obviously been enamoured with the buildings and the grounds, and suggested ways in which they could be used.

The grounds, he wrote, "could be opened more to the public, mainly for passive recreational uses, although the odd fete-like occurrence would not be objectionable". He also suggested that the church itself could be used for a variety of purposes. It could be "one of the central spaces for people to congregate when exploring their city, with a large model and photographs" and for "small and intimate performances of music and drama". The building, he noted, is "too entrenched in our history for its preservation and conservation to depend on a few funds and the love and care of a few dedicated Armenians". "The buildings and their grounds are for us all to enjoy and take pleasure in. As such, their use should be carefully considered," he added.³¹

Church trustee Art Baghramian pushed back against these well-meaning suggestions. "First, I would like to point out that the Armenian Church is and has always been supported and maintained solely by private sources," he wrote. "Therefore, the use of the church and its grounds is not open to public debate. Second, and more important, is the fact that though religious services are not held at the church on a regular basis, it maintains a sacred and holy place. As such, it is not maintained for profane or secular use."³²

In the quest to maintain the church as a sacred space and also allow it to be enjoyed as part of

Singapore's heritage, the church accepted a proposal from the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now Singapore Tourism Board) in 1985 to allow the premises to be used as a wedding venue for Japanese tourists.

"Wedding bells will ring again at the Armenian church next month when visiting Japanese couples walk down the aisle as part of a newly launched holiday package for Japanese honeymooners," the *Straits Times* reported. "The couples will go through a simple ceremony at Singapore's oldest Christian church, which is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year."³³ At that point, the church served about 20 Armenians still living in Singapore.

This proved to be a short-lived engagement though. Only one such wedding eventually took place before things went awry. "Church elders objected on grounds that marriage is a serious affair and should not be treated lightly."³⁴ Although the *Straits Times* did not elaborate, it did report that the plan had been to allow Japanese newly-weds to tie the knot again in "mock church weddings". It was a popular custom among Japanese honeymooners to go abroad to get "married" and have photos taken in a picturesque church, even though they had already undergone a traditional wedding back in Japan.

The Last of the Armenians

By the late 1980s, the Persian Armenian community had shrunk to about a dozen people. A 1988 report by the *Straits Times* said that there were just four "pure Armenians": Mackertich Zachariah Martin, Rita Poon, Mary Christopher and Helen Metes. (It is not entirely clear what the newspaper meant by the term "pure Armenians".) At 39, Mrs Rita Poon was the youngest of the four. She had been born in Iran but married a Chinese Singaporean. In addition to the four, the paper wrote that there were about a half-dozen half-Armenians and about 20 or 30 expatriates.³⁵

Helen Catchatoor Metes, the last Persian Armenian in Singapore, died in 2007. After that, what was left comprised a handful of people who only had a distant Persian Armenian connection, perhaps a last name, but who were no longer Armenian Orthodox, and who no longer spoke the language.³⁶

Among them was Loretta Sarkies, who was profiled in the *Straits Times* in September 2015. Then 74, she was the oldest daughter of James Arathoon Sarkies, who ran the Happy World Cabaret in the 1940s, and Mae Didier. Her granduncle was Tigran Sarkies, one of the four brothers who set up the Raffles Hotel. One of Loretta's daughters, Debra, eventually decided to change her last name from Aroozoo (Loretta had married Dutch-Eurasian civil servant Simon Aroozoo) to Sarkies at the suggestion of a visiting Armenian priest in an effort to keep the Sarkies name alive.³⁷

Although the Persian Armenian community was shrinking, it was somehow able to find the funds to restore the church in the mid-1990s. The roof was waterproofed, the electrical system upgraded and the



Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian, with the Ambassador of Armenia to Singapore Serob Bejanyan beside him, and congregants at the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator, 9 June 2024. Courtesy of the Embassy of the Republic of Armenia.

termite-infested windows replaced. The walls were also replastered and treated to prevent dampness. The building was restored in 1994, just in time for a service by visiting Armenian Orthodox Bishop, Oshagan Choloyan. According to the news report, the conservation project had been financed by the church.³⁸

The restoration of the church came just in time because even though the number of Persian Armenians was getting smaller, the community of Armenian expatriates was growing. There were Americans and Australians of Armenian descent in Singapore. There were also Armenians from Armenia, especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. (Armenia had come under Soviet domination after World War II.)

While this influx boosted numbers, the newcomers were culturally different from long-time Singapore Armenians. For one, there was the issue of language. The newcomers, especially those from Armenia, could speak Armenian while the descendants of the Persian Armenians in Singapore could not. In an oral history interview, Jessie Sarkies, the sister of Loretta Sarkies, described how she felt left out at an event because everyone was speaking Armenian and she couldn't:

"I would say the Armenian people are nice, but they are very proud of whom they are. They are, on Saturday I found out, when I was told that I have to know to speak Armenian. Yah, and it's like there's distinction, and then I felt oh, I was so left

Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian (left) celebrating the Divine Liturgy at the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator on 9 June 2024. Courtesy of the Armenian Church.





A small memorial dedicated to Jessie Sarkies in the Memorial Garden of the Armenian Church. Her grandfather, Arathoon Martin Sarkies, was the cousin of the Sarkies brothers who founded Raffles Hotel. Photo by Jimmy Yap.

out after that. Because I couldn't mingle with everyone, because everyone down there all talks Armenian... So there's this distinction between me and them, because they all talk Armenian. I felt very down."³⁹

The newcomers did rejuvenate the community though. In 2010, violinist Ani Umedyan and her musician husband Gevorg Sargsyan, vocalist Gayane Vardanyan and pianist Naira Mkhitarian formed the Armenian Heritage Ensemble to bring the Armenian culture to the people in Singapore. The ensemble plays music by Armenian composers in the church four times a year.⁴⁰ In 2011, some 60 Armenians gathered to commemorate the Armenian genocide and also to celebrate Easter.⁴¹

At one point, according to a 2017 news report, a priest from Myanmar would come to Singapore five to six times a year to celebrate the Divine Liturgy here. In that report, Umedyan, who is also a regular church volunteer, said that when she first started worshipping at the church, there were only about 20 or so people. "Now that more expats have come, there are more people and we are happy to see the church crowded with about 40 to 50 people at each service."⁴²

Another boost to the community and its profile came in May 2018 when the \$1.2 million Armenian

Heritage Gallery, housed in the historic parsonage building, opened.⁴³

Today, there are about 100 people in the community, a quarter of whom are from Armenia while the rest are from the diaspora. While small, the community is determined to keep its culture and traditions alive.

On 27 March 2022, the Divine Liturgy resumed for the first time following Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings.⁴⁴ The Liturgy was celebrated most recently on 9 June 2024 by Archbishop Haigazoun Najarian. The Ambassador of Armenia to Singapore – Serob Bejanyan, who is based in Jakarta – attended the service.

According to church trustee Pierre Hennes, the church is now committed to the construction of a community reception hall next to the parsonage. "The hall will serve as a unique venue for community gatherings, wedding receptions, and other cultural outreach programmes hosted by the church and community," he said. Work has already begun on building this hall.

Hennes added that he saw the role of the church as being a "beacon for all Armenians and Singaporeans – whether visitors or residents – that serves as a platform to expose, maintain and advance the Armenian religion, culture and heritage". Not just a religious centre, the church was also a physical space for "connecting with each other and reinforcing the culture, highlighting our contributions to Singapore's past and present, and to be a part of the fabric of Singapore's future".⁴⁵ ♦

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