



an interview with

TOM BOZIGIAN

by Jovana

TOM BOZIGIAN grew up in the Armenian community in Fresno, California, where he learned the dances and the music of the Armenian immigrants. Tom studied at Fresno State University, and until recently, he used his Master of Education to teach the Russian language in Los Angeles schools. He is especially interested in coordinating the Armenian community with the non-ethnic community: "I'm teaching about the Armenians, & I'm doing it through dance." He has given many dance workshops around the United States and in Canada and taught at several folk dance camps in 1973. Tom is also a solo dancer with the Armenian Folkloric Ensemble in Los Angeles. He is currently studying Armenian dance and folklore in Soviet Armenia under a grant program.

This interview was given in July of 1973 at Stockton Folk Dance Camp.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF ARMENIA?

The most accepted theory is that the Armenians migrated from Thrace, northern Greece or southern Bulgaria, around 2300 BC, across Anatolia to eastern Turkey and the Caucasus. They traveled with their leader, Haik, and from this we take our name, Hai. *Hai* in Armenian means "Armenian". They settled and assimilated with a group of people called Urartians and gradually built an empire. Armenia is first mentioned by chroniclers about 700 BC.

The dynasty got to a very strong point just prior to the birth of Christ and after. During this period, trade was going on with the Persians, or Iranians, and with the Greeks of course; the Greeks are very much a part of our history.

About 300 AD, two men wrote the Armenian alphabet, & we began writing, naturally. And in 301 AD, the Armenians accepted Christianity as their national faith. They were the first nation to accept Christianity; the Romans accepted it in 312 AD. Before we accepted Christianity, we were Zoroastrians, or fire worshipers.

One of the problems the Armenians had was continual subjugation under the peoples around them, which kept them from becoming a strong independent nation. We were under Iran, the Romans, the Greeks, the Byzantines, the Arabs, then Ghengis Khan in about 600 AD, and then the Seljuk Turks were coming in about 1200 AD, moving west until they took Constantinople in 1453 AD. Armenians were considered a separate entity in that they were tradesmen, trading with the other majorities.

All the people were subjugated under the Turks; people from the Balkans, the Greeks, and the Armenians. The majority of people in eastern Turkey were Armenians; we had the land, we just paid taxes and so forth. The Armenians naturally wanted their independence. In 1895, political uprisings began in major Armenia. Then around 1915, in western Armenia around Adana, there was an onslaught; 2,000,000 Armenians were massacred, & the rest ran for blazes: to China, to the Arab countries, to Russia. Many stayed in the Balkans, and most came to America.

Under President Wilson Armenia had two years of independence. But it didn't work, so we were forced to join the Trans-Caucasian Republics, of which Georgia and Azerbaijan are members, between the Caspian and the Black Seas. To me and to most Armenians, conditions are just 100% better than they were under the Turks.

The folklore in this area is very rich. Anytime you have a strip of land between two seas, a lot of people are going to pass through.

HOW DID SUBJUGATION INFLUENCE ARMENIAN DANCING?

The Turks have been in the area for 500 years; the Armenians were in the area a thousand years before that. Who's to say who influenced whom? The Turks had dominated much of the Balkans and North Africa and the Arab countries. Who's to say they didn't pick up dances from these countries and bring them back to Turkey? And who's to say the Armenians weren't dancing some old dances when the Turks came to conquer?

Armenian dances are quite different in Turkey and in the Caucasus; Turkish Armenians have a dance style which has more Middle Eastern influence.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE ARMENIAN LANGUAGE?

We have two Armenian languages: the Turkish and the Russian dialects. They differ in four aspects: vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. But we understand each other; the differences are not that much. Armenians are all over Turkey, and they speak Armenian and are still Christians. Russian Armenian is spoken in the Caucasus (Soviet Armenia), capital of which is Erivan, or Yerevan. Both (dialects) are spoken today. Each can understand the other, and we are borrowing from each other. So eventually, we will have one language; I'm sure it's developing that way.

Armenian is an Indo-European language, but it is not closely related to any other group. [*Most other Middle Eastern languages are of Semetic origin.*] It's in a (class) by itself, like Albanian; Armenian and Albanian are separate branches on the Indo-European language tree. The Armenian alphabet has 38 characters; it is completely phonetic--one sound for each letter, very flexible.

I hope to get back to Fresno and do some research work with Fresno State University, recording the dialects of the older Armenians, recording some of the music of the older musicians. This type of research has never been done in Fresno; it has to be done soon, because the immigrants are dying. We want to go from house to house to record how life was lived in Armenia. In Armenia they are very much interested in having us record the dialects of the Armenians who lived in the eastern provinces of what is now Turkey, dialects originating from the influences of the peoples around---the Kurdish people, possibly some influence from the Arab language, obviously from the Turkish language and the Assyrians. Eastern Turkey was kind of a melting pot for centuries.

WHAT IS THE ARMENIAN POPULATION IN THIS COUNTRY?

The population is 400,000 Armenians. They are all over; there are 50-60,000 Armenians in Los Angeles, where there is a large community of Russian Armenians, who moved there prior to 1915. Fresno has a large Turkish-Armenian community, which moved there in 1915. Armenian lifestyle was very much agricultural, and that was one of the reasons they decided on Fresno. Fresno is very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer, with no humidity. Good for growing grapes.

HAVE ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES IN AMERICA RETAINED THE DANCE STYLE OF THEIR HOMELAND?

First of all, you must understand, I've never been to Armenia. My dancing has been in this country, but I've seen a change in my lifetime of 35 years. When I was a youngster, I danced where there was still much of the old tradition. But the freedom in this country, the freedom of expression, rubbed off on the Armenians in this country. So as the second and third generations



Armenian Women of the Village of Sevan Have Kept Alive Their Colorful National Folk Dances

were born, they continued to do the dances, but the dances began to change. The style became less dramatic; the original style was lost.

The original immigrants brought their dances with them, and when they had children, many didn't take an interest. But right now, there's a rebirth, a rediscovery of the national identity. Interest is rising in learning the Armenian language, in learning the history of the culture and the literature, in the Armenian church and the social life through the church. But it's unfair that, here with this rebirth, we can't have a rebirth of the original style. Do you understand?

Many Armenian dances have originated recently. Some people say, Tom Bozigian makes up much of his material. Well, in a way they're right. A few of the dances are choreographed, but I've always admitted this. Back ten years ago, there were ten to fifteen dances that all Armenians did all over the country. So for more dances, they started creating them. They used to have contests, and the best dance creation would win a trophy. I teach some of these dances. I still remember the 1956 contest; about ten dances originated there.

These bleeding-heart non-Armenians are the ones that are crying, not the Armenians. I'm more interested in the Armenians. If they are dancing the dances that were made up 15 years ago, or if they're dancing a couple of dances that I choreographed, more power to them. I teach the dances that are being danced.

And when I go to Armenia and come back, I'll have many dances, and THEY'LL be made up! The people and the dances are changing. Choreographers change. But most of my dances are original. There are traditional dances, and we keep doing them.

(continued on page 29)

(continued from page 7)

HOW DID YOUR FORTHCOMING TRIP TO SOVIET ARMENIA MATERIALIZE?

I was always interested in the Armenian culture around me. I would sit with the older men and listen to them talk, watch them dance and play the drum. I sat down with this older Armenian drummer, watched him, became interested in his fingers, his technique, his rhythms. Anyway, I finally persuaded him to let me use his drum, and I started pounding out rhythms. Eventually I got better and better, and I took some lessons from good drummers and started traveling around with an Armenian orchestra. We got jobs at different Armenian doings, always picking up more & more dances.

As I got better in my playing and more knowledgeable in my dancing, I wanted to go to Armenia to study more. This was my hope at least ten years ago. It took this long to materialize, and it looks like now I'll be going to Soviet Armenia in the Fall of '73 for from six months to a year.

WHAT OTHER DANCE EXPERIENCE HAVE YOU HAD?

In 1968 I went to Los Angeles to try out for the Olympic volleyball team, and I hurt my left knee and haven't competed on the hard indoor courts since then. So it was then that I started taking ballet, and it's been a blessing, not just to improve my dancing, but to cure my left knee. Through proper *plié*, you take the pressure off your knee. Also, I used to have a little back trouble, from all those years of jumping on the volleyball court, and it took that away too. I want to take more ballet, so I can be ready for Armenia. I still play volleyball on the beaches; I like to keep in shape.

HOW DOES BALLET CORRESPOND WITH ARMENIAN DANCING?

Ballet does not correspond with Armenian folk dancing; ballet corresponds with a performing dancer, a dancer on stage. Any professional ensemble you see from the Communist countries, the dancers are definitely ballet trained. Ballet has affected my folk dancing; it's improved my technique and my form, presentation, and strength. But when I go to Armenia, I'm going to be studying strictly folk dancing.

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO AMERICANS HAVE TO DANCE WITH ARMENIANS?

First of all, find an Armenian church in your city. Call up the Rector, or the office. They'll tell you (about Armenian doings). There are Armenian newspapers, printed both in English and Armenian; they all give news on what's happening. And there are radio programs utilizing both English and Armenian languages.

When you find the Armenians, meet some of them and go to the doings with an Armenian. Or go by yourself or with a friend. If you go in a bunch, there might be a little animosity, but not if you just go with a friend, just two of you. At picnics they always have food. Buy some food, sit down and watch them dance. Meet somebody, and you have a channel through which to work the next time. Just go; attend.