Critics' Forum
Literature
Preserving Armenian History and Culture: Moving into the Digital Age
By Tamar Boyadjian

As someone who attended Armenian private school, I consider the preservation of Armenian culture an extremely important matter. Preserving Armenian culture, or *hayabahbanum*, was a constant topic of conversation throughout my primary education – among friends, in class, and in public lectures; it was keenly emphasized for us as children and ingrained in our education.

Here are some of the ways in which *hayabahbanum* was defined according to that education: speaking Armenian with family and friends; reading and writing in Armenian; learning about Armenian history, culture, and literature; memorizing and reciting the works of the great poets of the 19th century; learning about the Genocide and being able to make others aware of the story; being proud to be Armenian; and surrounding oneself with Armenian friends while teaching non-Armenians about our culture and history.
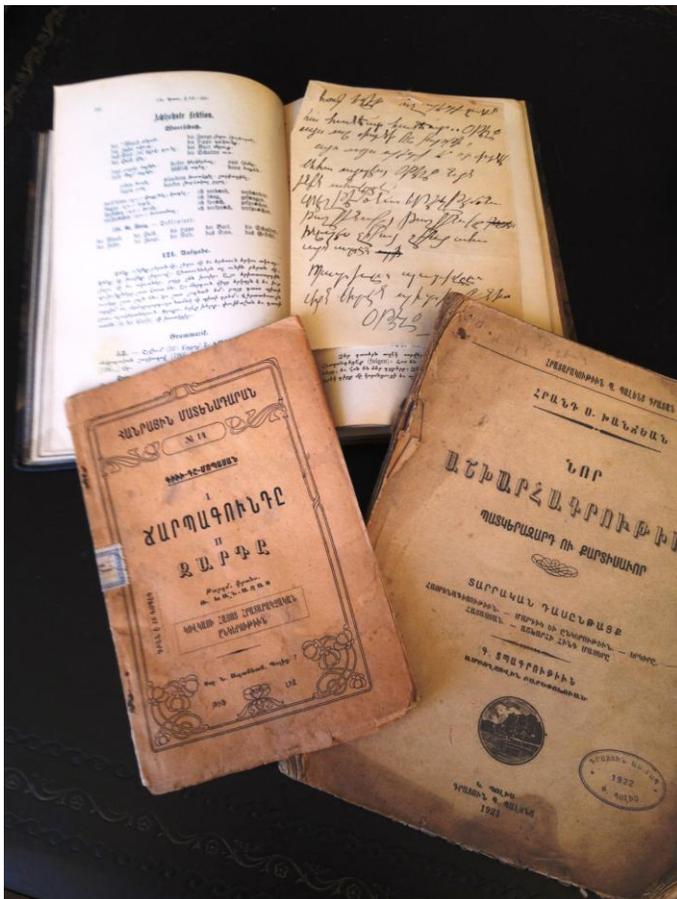
Photo 1
Collection of Armenian books from the turn of the 20th century, including a rare edition of a geographical reference, published in Constantinople in 1921 and an Armenian grammar book in German, published by the Vienna Mekhitarists in the 1880s, with handwritten inscription. Important but deteriorating books like these are good candidates for preservation and digitization.

For many Armenians, this definition of cultural preservation remains the prevalent one. But as we move deeper into the digital age, the question of preserving Armenian history and culture necessarily takes on an added meaning. The internet, for one, has dramatically improved and accelerated our access to all kinds of information. Libraries around the world have made books, manuscripts, and documents retrievable through web-based depositories, allowing users to have direct access to primary and secondary source materials. The last decade has seen a continuous increase in the conversion of print material into digital form, and in many cases, the creation of material that has no non-electronic source or analog. Consider for example, how many people around you prefer to read books on their Kindle e-book reader or similar electronic device as opposed to a hardcopy, or how many people bother to print copies of the digital photos they take on their iPhones.
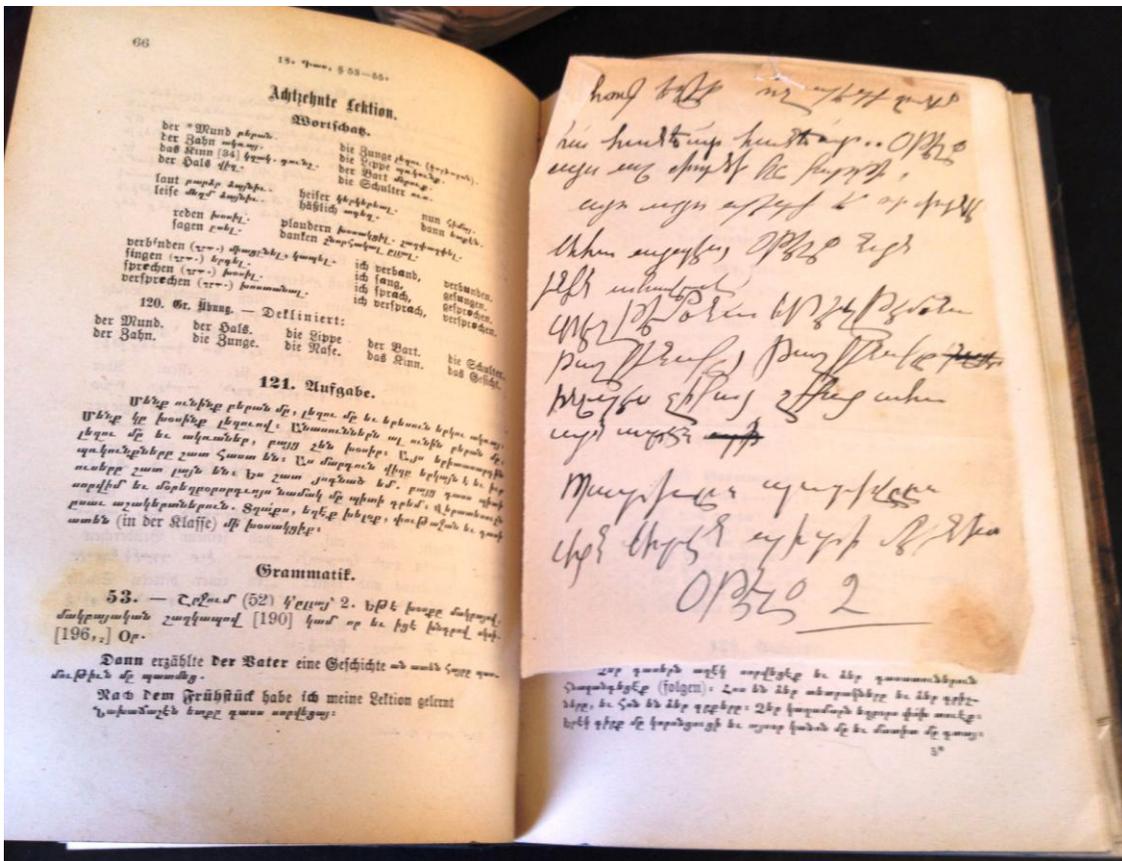

Photo 2
Close-up of the Armenian Grammar book in German, published by the Vienna Mekhitarists.

As a result, cultural preservation now has to encompass the broader definition of the protection and conservation of Armenian manuscripts, books, and archival material in both physical and digital versions, in past as well as contemporary settings, while keeping in mind that many physical archives still lack their digital counterparts. In that regard, some collections around the world have a great deal of Armenian material that has not been properly maintained. These books and manuscripts, which house the stories of

Armenian cultural and literary history, are in desperate need of physical maintenance. But as individual and collective archives are created organically in the digital world, the question of preserving Armenian history and culture must be re-defined and re-considered within their new and more complex parameters. A crucial element for cultural preservation, therefore, is the digitization of these archival materials.

As I suggested above, a number of books and manuscripts present in libraries, private archives, and other repositories around the world contain critical accounts of Armenian cultural and literary history. But since much of this "analog" material has simply never been digitized, the act of preserving it in its physical form must now also encompass the broader goal of creating, preserving and archiving its digital versions. Unfortunately, due to budgetary restrictions, many libraries around the world today simply do not have the necessary staff with the expertise to properly maintain their Armenian collections. And since there has been little in the form of advocacy to preserve and digitize Armenian collections, the libraries don't yet accept the added responsibility of cultural preservation, which has expanded to include the critical element of creating and preserving digital archives.

As preservation budgets suffer, therefore, the digitization process has become ever more crucial for the conservation of analog historical and cultural material. Take, for example, a rare book or manuscript that has suffered significant damage to its pages or cover. Digitizing such a codex, or manuscript, "freezes" the deterioration process, helping assure the manuscript's safety and longevity. Patrons interested in the manuscript would then be able to view it in digital form, in the process also limiting more damage to the original physical manuscript while making it available for future generations in digital form. Some scholars have expressed reservations about relying on digital copies of manuscripts and rare books. According to them, digital copies don't necessarily provide codicological information for every manuscript. And digital copies have their own preservation needs – like physical copies, they need to be backed up and preserved, following a "redundancy" protocol, in order to make sure they don't disappear into the virtual ether. But such reservations don't undercut the need for digital preservation so much as reinforcing its significance as a way of providing a backup as well as an additional medium for enjoying the physical manuscript materials.

Perhaps the most overlooked benefit of digital archives is precisely their ability to provide additional access to far-flung physical archives. The growing efforts of libraries and universities to digitize their major collections of documents, rare books, and manuscripts have provided rare access to the literary and historical culture of the Middle East, the Near East, the Caucasus, and other areas of the world sometimes overlooked by traditional scholarship. These digitization efforts have therefore provided both academic and cultural support to recent trends toward expanding the definition of worthwhile scholarship beyond its often narrowly Euro-centric perspective. The expanded access that digital archives provide has also broadened and deepened textual conversations among scholars working in fields traditionally kept apart, increasing the number and reach of projects that are trans-cultural and interdisciplinary in nature. Armenian material has seldom received the same treatment. As such, digitizing it would provide the added

benefit of exposing Armenian archival material not only to Armenian scholars, but more importantly to their counterparts in other fields, moving the study and preservation of Armenia culture and history beyond the confines of its contemporary discussion in Armenian schools and circles and inserting them into larger inter-cultural conversations.
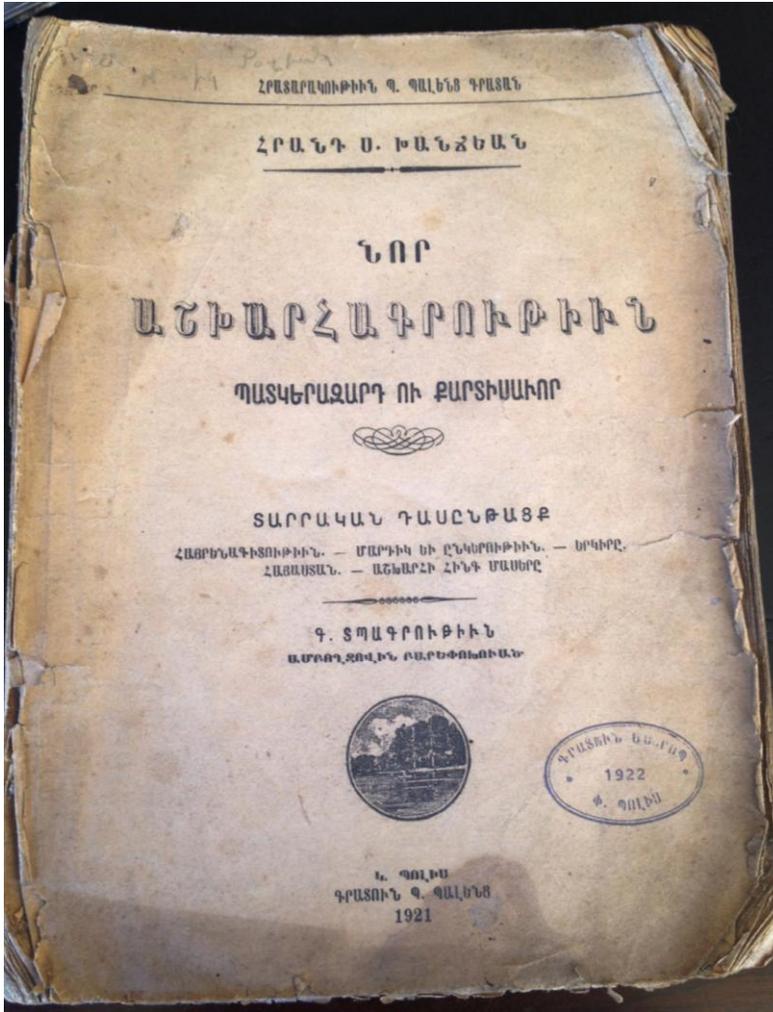
Photo 3
Close-up of geographical reference (Constantinople, 1921).

The process of digitizing archival material has seen considerable advances over the last decade, though unfortunately less in the Armenian case. The National Academy of Sciences in Armenia recently released a report regarding its own digitization efforts with rare Armenian books, through the British Library's Endangered Archive Program. Efforts have also been made at the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA to digitize the Caro Minasian Armenian materials collection, currently being processed by me and Persian and Armenian cataloger Nora Avetyan. UCLA acquired the collection of Dr. Caro Minasian, an Armenian physician working in Isfahan, Iran, in 1968. This rich collection includes correspondence, photographs, maps, books, and other material related to the Armenians of Isfahan and Southeast Asia.

Of course, the benefits of digitization are not limited only to the areas of rare books and manuscripts. UCLA's acquisition of the Minasian archive underscores the importance of extra-literary accounts of Armenian culture and history – Armenian newspaper accounts, maps, correspondence and other cultural artifacts and historical documents are vital to the development and preservation of Armenian cultural history. It is imperative not only to preserve such archives but also make them widely available to future generations, both non-Armenian students and scholars around the world but also, and perhaps especially, in places around the world with an already vital Armenian community – Los Angeles, Boston, Montreal, Beirut, Tehran, Paris, Marseille, London. Without the benefit of digital preservation, it is difficult to imagine how else the richness of Armenian culture and history would be fully preserved beyond its present historical moment.
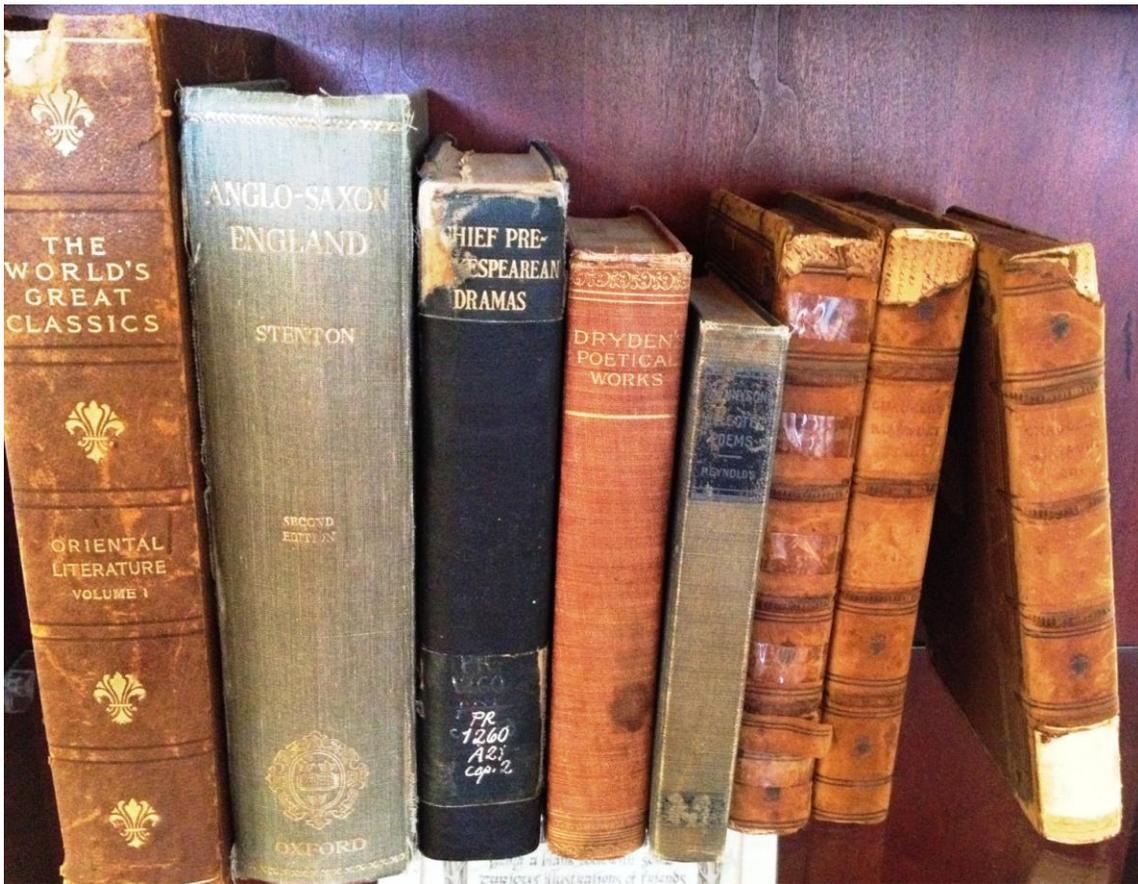
Photo 4
Examples of rare and early editions of English literary works.

Digital copies may very well never replace physical ones; analog is a fundamentally different way of reading material than the digital. One cannot smell or feel a digital book, although some efforts are being made in this direction, as well! And while such efforts are exciting, the fundamental challenge is making analog material more widely available through digital technology, a powerful tool for survival and enhanced accessibility and scholarship, extending information to all those who seek it, all over the world. As Armenians in the digital age, therefore, it is crucial for us to consider what I have called "the future of our past." How can we possibly talk about Armenian history and culture,

discussing both its great authors and everyday exemplars, while expanding that conversation to those outside our own circles, without relying on the books, manuscripts, newspapers, and other cultural artifacts on which this cultural history was once written? Let's make sure to broaden and deepen our preservation efforts, as we move rapidly into the digital age.

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