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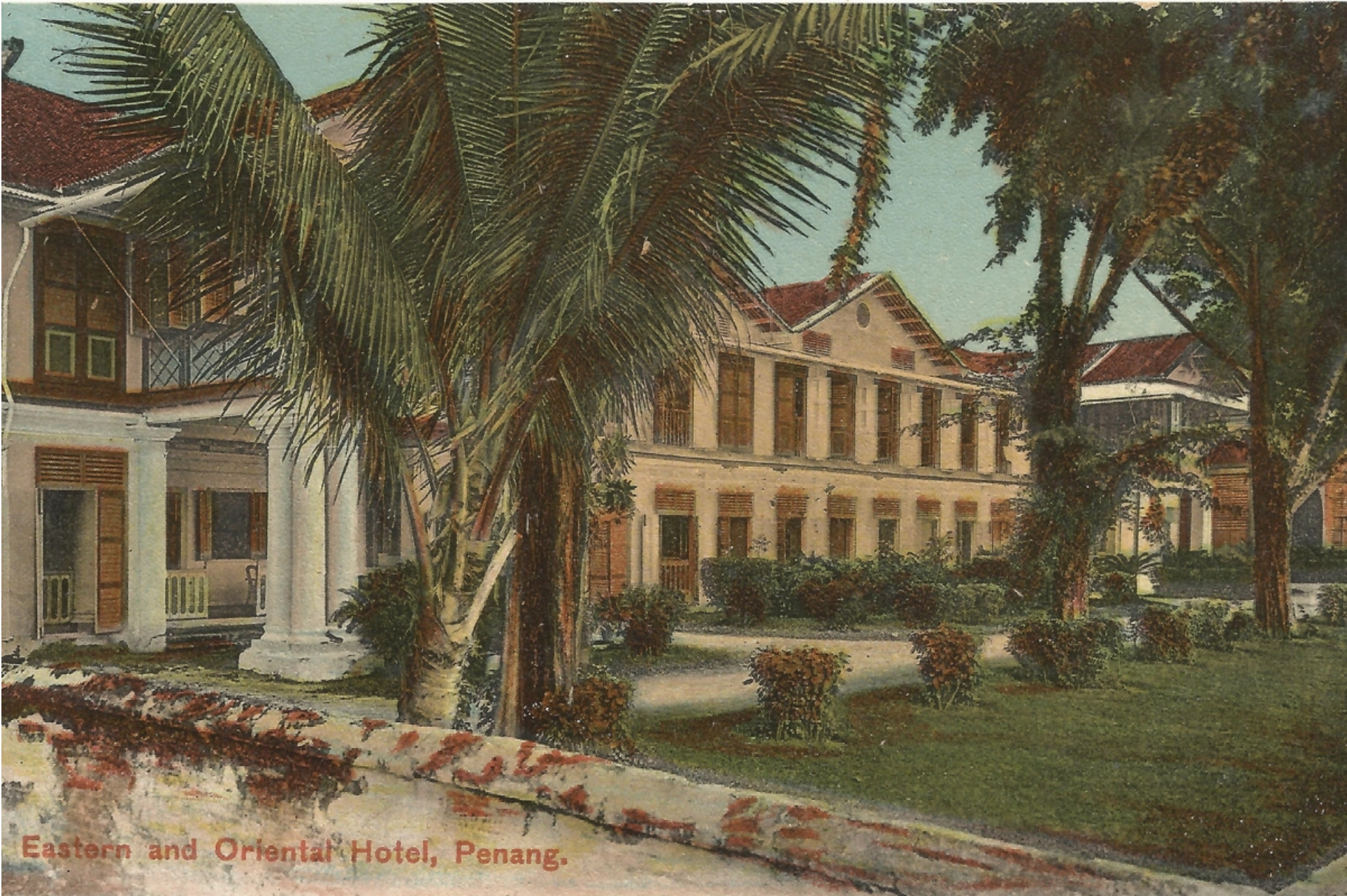
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# Penang’s Armenian Connection

By Enzo Sim

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The E&O Hotel in its heydays under the ownership of the Sarkies brothers. Photo by: Anthony Chan Guan Fook (L.C. Lee & Co. Stamp Dealers).

VISITORS TO PENANG often throng Armenian Street thanks to the numerous street art and cafés located in the vicinity. Lined with Straits Eclectic shophouses, the street stands as testimony to a distant connection between Penang and the Armenian people; a fact almost entirely forgotten today.

In 301 AD, Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as state religion following the conversion of its monarch, King Tirdates III. As a Christian kingdom, Armenia soon found itself wedged between two Muslim powers: the Persian and the Ottoman empires. Despite heroic resistance to maintain the independence and territorial sovereignty of the kingdom throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Armenia ended up being divided between the two competing superpowers.

At the worst point in this division of Armenia, Abbas I of Persia began resettling Armenians as part of his brutal “scorched earth” policy to slow invading Ottoman forces in his kingdom’s northwest frontier. The city of Julfa was promptly razed after its 25,000 inhabitants were resettled in Isfahan in Persia, in an area that would subsequently be known as New Julfa.<sup>[1]</sup>

Known for their business acumen, these Persian Armenians became the source of the Armenian diaspora in Southeast Asia. From India, they crossed the Indian Ocean and arrived in Penang as early as in 1800. Penang was by then already a bustling port.

Despite numbering fewer than 180 people over the next 150 years, the Armenians, who mostly settled on Beach Street, made their presence felt throughout Penang. Many left an indelible mark, such as the Sarkies brothers, whose first hotel property in Asia, the world-renowned Eastern and Oriental Hotel, opened its doors in 1885 and still stands proudly today on Lebuhr Farquhar.





The Sarkies brothers made a fortune out of their mighty hotel empire as reflected by the extension of the E&O Hotel built in 1919 which they named the Victory Annexe to commemorate the Allied victory in World War I. Photo by: Anthony Chan Guan Fook (L.C. Lee & Co. Stamp Dealers).



A vintage picture postcard showing the main entrance of the E&O Hotel. Photo by: Anthony Chan Guan Fook (L.C. Lee & Co. Stamp Dealers).

## The Armenian Church

On their arrival in Penang, the Armenians used the services of the Catholic and Anglican churches for worship, and only when their numbers had increased substantially did they build their own church. In February 1821, plans for this church were presented to the British Governor of Penang, William Edward Phillips. Having determined that the required sum for building the church was \$7,000, a fundraising campaign was held, which





Having gathered the required funds, construction of the church then began in earnest under the supervision of British merchant and shipwright, Richard Snadden. In 1822, Bishop Abraham of Jerusalem officiated the laying of the foundation stone. The church compound was enlarged two years later for the construction of lodgings to accommodate Armenian priests.

On November 4, 1824, Penang welcomed its first full-time Armenian priest, Reverend Iliazor Ingergolie, who assisted Bishop Jacob of Jerusalem in overseeing the official naming of the church as the Armenian Apostolic Church of St. Gregory the Illuminator.<sup>[3]</sup> The Singapore Free Press described the building as “one of the best proportioned and most elegant” buildings in Penang.



The tombstone of Arshak Sarkies, the last of the Sarkies brothers who managed the E&O Hotel until his death in 1931. Photo by: Daniel Tan Lay Hong.

## Singapore Beckoned

The construction of the church testifies to the expectation that the number of Armenians in Penang would continue to grow. But as the economic and political focus began shifting to Singapore, which became the capital of the Straits Settlements in 1832, many Armenians left Penang. Despite the shrinking congregation, priests would continue, at least until 1885, to make their way from Persia to Penang approximately every three years to hold church services. After that year, services were held only whenever a priest visited Penang. The last of such service was conducted in 1906 by Archbishop Sahak Ayyatian from the Mother Church in Isfahan.

When the decaying beams of the gradually dilapidating church finally led to the collapse of a major balustrade and a large section of the adjoining walls in February 1909, the Armenian community agreed to raze the structure, retaining only the churchyard and parsonage.<sup>[4]</sup>

Rebuilding a new church was out of the question, but prominent members of the community insisted on building a structure within the churchyard to mark their presence in Penang. This idea eventually gave birth to the Armenian commemorative monument, commissioned by Joseph Anthony and Arshak Sarkies. This monument was demolished in the late 1930s, however, after the trustees of St. Gregory's Church in Singapore decided to sell the site on the instruction of the Mother Church in Iran. In a service conducted by Reverend Shamaian from Singapore in August 1937, the 20 Armenians buried in the churchyard were re-interred in the Western Road Cemetery.





The Armenian commemorative monument erected on the grounds of the churchyard after the demolition of the church as depicted in a picture postcard. Photo by: Anthony Chan Guan Fook (L.C. Lee & Co. Stamp Dealers).

The money received from the sale of the church compound was transferred to the Catchatoor Galastaun Memorial Fund managed by church trustees in Singapore, while the silverware and foundation plaque of the church dated 1822 were sent to the Armenian church in Singapore for safekeeping.<sup>[5]</sup>

Despite surviving until 1909, the church was rarely photographed and pictorial references to the later memorial only exist in the form of vintage picture postcards issued at the time. Unlike the Armenian church in Singapore, which is today preserved as a national heritage site, there is not even a plaque to mark the original location of the church in George Town.

Today, the only hints of the Armenians' presence in Penang lie in the E&O Hotel, the former family residence of the Armenian merchant, Arratoon Anthony, known as Clove Hall along Clove Hall Road and the Arratoon Road that runs parallel to it, as well as the Armenian tombstones at the Western Road cemetery. And Armenian Street, of course.





Preserved as a national heritage site, the Armenian church in Penang would resemble much of the architecture of its counterpart in Singapore. Photo by: Daniel Tan Lay Hong.

Footnotes:

- [1] Herzig, Edmund; Kurkchiyan, Marina (2004). The Armenians: Past and Present in the Making of National Identity. Routledge. p. 47. ISBN 978-1-135-79837-6. Retrieved on 1/9/2022.
- [2] 2 (1835, March 7). Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- [3] Prince of Wales Island Gazette, 6 November 1824.
- [4] (1909, February 8). The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, p. 5. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- [5] (1836, March 17). The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, p. 3. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

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“ is a Mass Communications graduate who has an unwavering passion towards international relations, history and regional affairs of Southeast Asia. His passion has brought him to different Southeast Asian capitals to explore the diverse cultural intricacies within the region. ”

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