

Excellencies, Distinguished Guest, Mr. President, Board Members and members of the AJA, Ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honour to be here today in Yerevan and have the opportunity to address this conference celebrating the 15 years of the AJA.

I have been asked to talk about the foundation and the early history of the AJA.

It was the great American Armenian author William Saroyan who wrote with emotion about Armenians...obviously before the independence of Armenia in 1991.

“I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia . See if you can do it. Send them into the desert without bread or water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia.”

That is exactly what happened..Pierre Akkelian and I met on a flight to Tokyo in 1991- he was a Canadian businessman going to look for a market for his gold rings in Japan and I was a diamond dealer from Belgium going to visit my clients in Tokyo. I was able to give Pierre an introduction to the Japanese firm and he built a wonderful business together with them. We next met in 1995 at the wedding of the daughter of the Japanese businessman..I had just flown in from Armenia and was telling Pierre about how wonderful it was to be doing business in Armenia- not for the usual commercial reasons but as part of the nation building that was taking place post independence. And just as Saroyan predicted the 2 of us got together and started dreaming and planning how we could contribute to help create this New Armenia. Pierre was at that time serving as the President of the Canadian Jewellers Association and had got the Association bug. He proposed that we should create an Association bringing all Armenian jewellers together. We were both very fortunate and blessed to have friends in the business who shared our vision and slowly but surely the dream of the AJA became a reality.

I would like to remember and celebrate the people who bought into this vision and helped us get off the ground. The first was Karnig Nanagoulian who was in 1995 Ambassador of the ROA in Canada and then moved to Yerevan as Minister of Industry. His early exchanges with Pierre helped put some meat on the bone with regards to Government support for such a project. The second was Gagik Abrahamian a Member of Parliament since 1991 and the Director of the State owned Shoghakan Diamond Polishing operation. I was working very closely with him to make sure that Shoghakan kept operating during the post Soviet era. He immediately understood and embraced the vision and became beyond our expectations the best interlocutor in Armenia with the industry and the government. The contributions of Gagik Yegazarian at that time the Head of the Armenian Development Corporation in Yerevan and Hratch Kaspar as a special counselor at Armenian Embassy in Ottawa cannot be forgotten.

The decision was made to hold our first meeting in Yerevan in September 1997. Pierre sent out invitations to Armenian Jewellers all around the world. Generally the response was favorable, the usual skeptics and a few -12 to be precise accepted to attend. The greatest victory for us was

to convince Haig Arslanian to attend and accept Honorary Presidency of the first Assembly. Haig was a legend in the Diamond business and was a great benefactor to the Armenian nation. He used to say that the independence of Armenia in 1991 was perhaps the proudest time of his life. I remember vividly the first meeting- HH Karekin I had delegated a Bishop to come and offer us his support and pray for the success of our mission. The 12 Diasporan Armenians were joined by Industry leaders and government officials from Armenia. There was an opportunity for everyone to introduce themselves and then offer their vision of how the association would serve the industry and nation. We had visits with the Prime Minister Robert Kocharian who encouraged us and offered the full cooperation of the government for our projects. We were also received by HH Karekin I who offered his prayers for our success.

We all came away from the meetings with one message, let us bring together the Armenian Jewellers globally and work together to help develop the industry in Armenia. It was this message we sent out to the world from Yerevan and with the help of the internet in its early days we reached out to a lot of people. When we next got together in Basel in April 1998 we already had 150 Armenian jewellers attending the meeting and cocktail reception. The Basel meeting was hosted by Vartan Sirmakes and organised by Garen Nazarian the Consul of ROA to Switzerland. At the end of the Basel meeting we voted in a Board representing Armenian Jewellers from all corners of the world and the Presidency was shared by Haig Arslanian and Gagik Abrahamian. Committees were formed to write a constitution and prepare projects for the AJA to follow in order to fulfill its objectives- very clearly unite and develop the industry in Armenia. The Board met in Antwerp in June 1998 and decided to call for a Congress in Yerevan in October 1998 to officially approve the bye-laws and accept the various projects which were proposed.

The October Congress in Yerevan was a major success, 150 delegates attended from different parts of the world. There were heated debates and a wonderful energy of ideas. Haig Arslanian embraced Vahe Ishnar's idea of building a functional centre for jewellers- including not only showrooms, but banks, customs and other facilities. Djanik Oskanian wanted to open training centres to prepare the next generation of diamond cutters and jewellers. There were projects to set up a commercial company with larger shareholding to get involved with the Yerevan Jewellery factory and invest in new equipment. All wonderful ideas but perhaps ahead of their times. The Congress did however approve the Statutes of the association and the final Gala was a wonderful event in the Marriott attended by the President of the ROA and many high ranking government officials.

Soon after the Yerevan congress AJA branches were created in Los Angeles to cover the West Coast of the USA, New York to cover the East Coast of the USA, in Toronto and Montreal in Canada. Sydney, Paris, Antwerp, Geneva, Athens, Milan, Beirut, HK, Bangkok, Cairo followed. During the 2001 AGM held in Basel Haik Arslanian was elected President under the new statutes. Two years later his Vice President Sarkis Kitsinian from LA was elected President. In 2005 Ara Barmakian from Boston was elected as the 3rd President of the AJA, his term was sadly cut short through illness and his eventual passing. He was succeeded by his Vice President Gagik Abrahamian who remained President till 2009. In 2009 I had the honour to serve the AJA as President for 2 years and in 2011 Gagik Gevorkyan was elected as President.

Looking back on the 15 years it is easy to be critical of what was achieved. However, to me what is important today is that we are here celebrating 15 years of the founding of the AJA and we are still talking together..Circumstances have changed and the global economy has evolved and grown. The AJA has to address as to what role it wants to play in the Global economy and how it can bring benefits to Armenia.

15 years ago it was very difficult to get Diamond dealers and jewellers of Armenian origin to sit down together and discuss business development let alone share a meal together- we were all in competition with each other. Today as a result of AJA many joint business ventures have been launched, many relationships have been built and there is a true sense of community that transcends political or any other differences. During the past 15 years every year there has been a meeting and dinner held in Basel during Baselworld. There is hardly any major exhibition- be it in Las Vegas, Hong Kong, Vicenza, New York, Moscow that is held without an AJA cocktail or dinner reception. These are the results of the AJA and I am sure that the platform constructed is now so firm and secure that we will see great progress in the coming year. There is no doubt with the AJA magazine and the active website the AJA news is travelling far and generating more interest. The Yerevan International show now in its 2nd year will grow and become a regional leader in the coming years.

I would like to take this opportunity to remember all the founding members, all members who accepted responsibility as Board Members at local, regional and international level, all members of executive Boards at local and international level and all who had the vision and courage to take up the call of the AJA and create history.

My best wishes to the current President Mr. Gevorkyan and his Board as they take the AJA to a brighter and better future.

We did not perhaps create a New Armenia but contributed to the rebuilding of the Nation.

Thank You.