

HistoriaSG

2019 Lecture 4

28 July 2019, 4pm – 5pm

ENTERPRISE: THE ARMENIANS OF SINGAPORE

Dr Nadia Wright

Historian and author of *The Armenians of Singapore: A Short History*

Singapore is largely a nation of immigrants. This bicentennial year seems an apt time to acknowledge the significant contributions made to its development by one of its smallest minorities: the Armenians. Conspicuous in Singapore from 1820, individual Armenians have made their mark in the civic, social and economic life of Singapore. Two of Singapore's national treasures – St Gregory's Church and Raffles Hotel – as well as Singapore's national flower, *Vanda Miss Joaquim*, and its national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, owe their origin to this tiny but enterprising community. In this illustrated talk, Australian-based author and historian Dr Nadia Wright will discuss the dynamics of the Armenian community, its origin and achievements.

TIME (MIN)	
0:01 [Speaker: Moderator, Vidya Murthy]	Hi, good afternoon. It's a very heartwarming presence for an author, I would imagine, to see a full house. I welcome all of you this afternoon, especially because we have Dr Nadia Wright here who is going to share her research on the Armenians. She's kindly agreed to present her findings at our regular series, HistoriaSG. The National Museum is also very happy to welcome all of you as well as the publishers of her book, and also to sponsor the venue for the release of the book. I also welcome the publishers, Entrepot Publishing, Leslie, Marcus and all your friends. Please do stay back and help to fill up the feedback forms. Also just a couple of house rules: I would switch off all the mobiles and all the devices – this is a mark of respect to the author who has put in a lot of effort. Thank you very much.
1:21 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 1]	Thank you, Vidya, for those kind words and thank you everyone for turning up this afternoon. Now, I'd like to give you an overview on the Armenians, one of Singapore's smallest minorities, but an enterprising one which has made an indelible mark on Singapore's social, civic and economic life. The community, never numbering more than about 100 at any given time, was in effect a microcosm of society. It had its heroes: Kenneth Seth, who listened to Allied broadcasts on a hidden wireless in Changi Prison, plus scoundrels and black sheep. There were millionaires such as Thaddeus Paul and Arshak Galstaun and then there were paupers. It had its share of long marriages, divorces and the lodger who became far too intimate with the landlord's wife. And, not forgetting Emile Seth, who eloped to Batavia with his dead wife's teenage sister. And then there was Lloyd Joaquim, who accidentally killed his servant while fooling around with a rifle. Philanthropists

	<p>donated very generously to the church and charities. Bankruptcies, embezzlements, losses on the horses blighted some men's lives.</p> <p>So, who were these Armenians and where did they come from? Armenia today is a small nation in the South Caucasus mountains. And Ani from the church has kindly provided some brochures about the country, which are available at the table at the end. However, Singapore's Armenians did not come from Armenia itself.</p>
<p>3:34 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 2]</p>	<p>They or their parents were born in Persia – in particular, New Julfa, the Armenian quarter of Isfahan. Their ancestors had been marched there in 1606 after Shah Abbas destroyed their hometown of Julfa. The Shah treated the Armenians very well; the successors less so. So, the Armenians began to migrate – to India and beyond. Java was an early destination, then Penang and finally Singapore. The journey was arduous and dangerous.</p>
<p>4:19 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 3]</p>	<p>Mrs Mary Christopher described how, in the 1880s, her parents travelled overland through the Bakhtiari tribal territory to Basra. From Basra they sailed to Calcutta, then on to Singapore, which was the last trading settlement established in Southeast Asia by the Persian Armenians. The earlier ones were in Burma, the Dutch East Indies and Penang. Although some 650 of these Armenians and their descendants lived in Singapore, only about one-third were long-term residents. Others returned to Persia or migrated elsewhere. In fact, only about nine couples saw grandchildren born in Singapore. Among them are the family names that will crop up this afternoon: Carapiet, Chater, Joaquim, Johannes, Moses, Sarkies, Seth and Zechariah. Among the first arrivals in Singapore were Aristarkies Sarkies and an unrelated Sarkies Sarkies who both came from Melaka in 1820. Now, I should point out that the Persian Armenians anglicised their names to better assimilate into British communities. All but one family dropped the "ian" ending and all shortened their names. Thus Yedgarian became Edgar, Krikorian became Gregory, and Hovakimian became Joaquim. Furthermore, some adopted their father's first name as their family name. Jacob Carapiet was born Jacob Gulgad, while the Raffles Hotel's Sarkies were actually Ter Woskanians, but Sarkies is much easier to pronounce.</p> <p>By 1823, there were 16 Armenians out of a population surpassing 10,000. Now that seems a very minute number, but remember the Europeans themselves numbered only 74 and "European" embraced a wide number of nationalities. By 1890, there were about 70 Armenians, and the number peaked at about 100 in the 1920s.</p>

<p>7:12 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 4 & 5]</p>	<p>And here we have a photograph of most of the Armenian community, which was taken in 1917. But the Second World War was a watershed. Over 10 percent of the Armenian population died as casualties, in prison camps and on the Siam Railway. 76-year-old Mrs Mary Martin who died in internment had earlier contributed this embroidered square to the famed “Changi quilt” and some of you may have seen the “Changi quilt” at the museum.</p> <p>After the war ended, although there was a temporary influx of refugees from Indonesia, Armenians with younger families began to emigrate to Australia and the United States. And by 1970, only a handful of the old people remained. Inter-marriage, death and emigration had taken their toll. In the mid-1990s, people, whom some of you may remember, Mrs Mary Christopher and Mackertich Martin died. And, in 2007, Mrs Helen Catchatour Metes, the last of the Persian Armenians, died. Today, however, a new Armenian community has emerged. In recent years, entrepreneurs and their families from Armenia and Russia have migrated, augmenting the numbers of expatriates posted to Singapore since the 1970s. These arrivals have brought the total number of Armenians who have lived in Singapore to about 750. The latest newcomers have rejuvenated the community and raised its profile by organising religious, cultural and social events.</p> <p>And, in 2016, arrangements were made for a priest from Calcutta to conduct periodic church services for the growing community, which now numbers about 50. Public attention has been drawn to the Armenian community by the recent visit of Armenia’s new prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan. And it seems that closer ties will be formed between one of the world’s oldest nations and one of its newer ones. So why did these Armenians come to Singapore? Briefly, to trade. Most set up as merchants, commercial agents, importers and exporters. They helped establish colonial Singapore as a trading centre. They revitalised trade with Borneo, and played a key role in the antimony trade of the 1830s and the opium trade, which was quite legal, of course, from the 1850s until the 1880s. Since 1820, Armenians have operated over 100 commercial enterprises. Most were trade-related and I’ll mention just a few of them. Stephens, Paul and Company, founded by Thaddeus Paul and Minas Stephens, were merchants and property investors, and they built this highly acclaimed commercial building in 1905.</p>
<p>11:12 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 6]</p>	<p>It’s the old Whiteaway and Laidlaw Building, of course. Its upper floors were later leased by Raffles Hotel to cope with a shortage of rooms, and this happened again in 1921. It later became the Stamford Hotel and Restaurant, the Oranje Hotel and, after the war, was remodelled into private apartments. In 1963, Klara van Hien, the granddaughter of Seth Paul, sold the building.</p>
<p>11:46 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 7, 8 & 9]</p>	<p>It reverted to commercial premises known as either Stamford House or the Stamford Building. Today, of course, it is been remodelled as part of the Capitol Kempinski Hotel. You can still see the beautiful outdoor and indoor architecture. Then we have Edgar Brothers, founded by the five Edgar brothers, which lasted from 1912 until the 1960s. The firm imported and exported regional produce, and, from the 1950s, specialised in providing construction equipment and industrial product for the changing Singapore.</p>

<p>12:38 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 10]</p>	<p>And, finally, I'd mentioned Arshak Galstaun. Again, some of you may remember him, whose company operated from 1957 till 1982. He specialised in the reptile skin and regional produce trade. In private life, he was a philanthropist and doyen of the community. He and his wife established Galstaun College at Frenchs Forests in Sydney. Armenians ran or managed at least 12 different hotels. Complementing these were guesthouses, boarding houses, restaurants and cafes. Five established watchmaking or jewellery businesses, and two entered the photography business. The major player was George Michael, who eventually bought out his rival, the prominent photographer, G.R. Lambert. Several established legal practices.</p>
<p>13:47 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 11]</p>	<p>The first was Joe P. Joaquim. His first name was Joaquim but it was too confusing to talk about Joaquim Joaquim, so they referred to him as Joe. Joe later teamed up with Thomas Braddell to form Braddell and Joaquim. But after the two men went their separate ways, Thomas founded Braddell Brothers, which is a prominent firm today. And Joe and his brothers, John and Seth, ran Joaquim Brothers. After their untimely deaths, fellow partner Rowland Allen and one of their solicitors, John Gledhill, formed Allen and Gledhill, which also remains a leading legal firm in Singapore. Other Armenians worked as clerks, teachers, salesmen, and marine engineers, including Edgar Galstaun.</p>
<p>14:55 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 12]</p>	<p>A little bit different is Sarkies Martin, who was a bit of a colourful character. He and a Mr Shibata operated one of the first cinema shows in Singapore. Armenians also entered the hospitality field as I'm sure you all realised. But the first was Malcolm Moses, who ran the Pavilion Hotel and Bowling Alley in the 1860s. Later hoteliers included Philip Seth, who ran the United Service Hotel, and Eleazar Johannes, who ran Goodwood Hall, which you recognise today as the Goodwood Park Hotel. Sakooly Martin ran the Sea View Hotel, which was modernised when it was taken over by Eleazar Johannes in 1912.</p>
<p>15:50 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 13 & 14]</p>	<p>That's the old Sea View. Remarkably, for a short time at the turn of the 20th century, the three major hotels in Singapore were managed or owned by Armenians. Competing with Raffles was the Adelphi Hotel, run by Sarkies Arathoon and Eleazar Johannes, while the Grand Hotel de l'Europe was managed by Charlie Chaytor, who had been headhunted from Raffles Hotel. All tried to outdo the other with lavish dinners and musical entertainments. However, it was Raffles Hotel which remained unstoppable. It was established by Tigran and Martin Sarkies, who already ran two successful hotels in Penang: the Eastern Hotel and the Oriental Hotel. Now, you should note that the Sarkies brothers had no connection with hotels in the Dutch East Indies despite what you might read on the internet. Neither did the brothers actually own the hotel building; they leased it from Syed Mohamed Alsagoff.</p>
<p>17:15 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 15]</p>	<p>This is a composite photograph of the three brothers. At the top we have Arshak, who is mainly connected with Penang, not Singapore. Down there we have Aviet, the quiet one, and to his right, Tigran, who is a short, dapper, sartorial man. It was Tigran who opened the hotel in 1877 and managed it until 1910. The hotel quickly established a reputation for its banquets, specialty dinners, theatre suppers and curry tiffins. The latter was still being offered in Singapore in 1985. The hotel's fame escalated after this...</p>

<p>18:04 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 16 & 17]</p>	<p>That's the original building as you can see – it's a huge bungalow. Its fame escalated after this magnificent new Renaissance building was opened in 1899. Electricity was installed, and this was a first for a hotel in the Straits Settlements. <i>The Straits Times</i> representative, who went along after the grand opening to see what things were like on an ordinary night, was most impressed. Indeed, his only complaint was that the drawing rooms were unsuitable for flirting, as anyone who walked along the passageway could peek in. However, Tigran quickly assured him that when the drawing rooms were finished, they would “give every facility for flirtation”. Raffles Hotel was soon eulogised as one of the “lions” of Singapore. Australian politician Staniforth Smith declared that Raffles is “more than a hotel, it is an institution and it has made Singapore famous”. Tigran initiated on-shore programmes for around-the-world cruise liners and introduced roller-skating, which was an instant success, as were his free cinema shows. But in 1910, Tigran and his family left for England. He was dying of cancer.</p>
<p>19:54 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 18]</p>	<p>But he had left a thriving hotel complex and that is what it looked like. Younger brother Aviet, who had been managing the firm's hotel in Rangoon, or Yangon – at the time it was called the Strand – came over and took over Raffles Hotel. He modified parts of the hotel and introduced new dining and entertainment experiences. He also established Raffles Motor Garage and opened the bakery, replete with daily home deliveries, and finally, Raffles Café and Confectionery. By 1917, Raffles Hotel was a relatively self-sufficient little empire. It had its own electricity generator, water tanks, post and telegraph office, ice and cold storage plant, a shopping arcade and a slaughterhouse. In short, it was an early resort. In 1918, Aviet left Singapore, also in poor health. I don't know what Singapore did to people in those days. Martyrose Arathoon, who had been made a partner in 1917, took over the management and under his guidance, Raffles Hotel reached the peak of its fame.</p>
<p>21:26 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 19]</p>	<p>Now here you have a photograph of Martin Sarkies, whom you can see sitting down, and Arshak standing up. And to Arshak's left is Jacob Constantine, the hotel manager, to the far right is Martyrose Arathoon. You will often see that photograph described as the four Sarkies brothers. Again, that is quite incorrect. Martyrose introduced supper and tea dances, and the latest music craze, jazz. And he engaged jazz pianists from the United States. Martyrose was responsible for the famed Long Bar and the Grill Room, but the pièce de résistance was his new ballroom. In 1923, he acquired the Sea View Hotel from the Johannes family. Now again, the buildings were leased, this time from Manasseh Meyer. Martyrose revitalised the Sea View – and it's hardly recognisable from that little bungalow – into this modern complex, and he made it into a very popular seaside resort. Despite all this, Martyrose has largely been written out of the Raffles Hotel's history. By 1930, Sarkies Brothers had reached its zenith, but trouble lurked. Arshak Sarkies, who ran the E&O Hotel, had overborrowed and overspent on hotel expansions. And he died in January 1931.</p>
<p>23:25 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 20]</p>	<p>In May, Sarkies Brothers was declared bankrupt and it really threw shockwaves through the community. As the sole surviving partner, Martyrose fronted the bankruptcy court. He insisted that Raffles Hotel was just suffering a temporary cash shortage, but he was not believed. The hotel was put into receivership, then bought by a consortium and within a year, it was making a profit. Today, a totally remodelled</p>

	<p>Raffles Hotel is once more one of the world's luxury hotels. Designated a national monument, it retains a great drawcard for tourists – even if it's only to taste what I considered to be overpriced Singapore Slings.</p> <p>And, what of the Armenian community itself? Now, I'll talk a little in general about the community. They were listed as such in various population counts, from 1823 right up to the census of 1947. And even in the Changi list of prisoners, they got their own separate category. The merchants set up close to each other or shared offices in Commercial Square and later in D'Almeida Street and Robinson Road. Firms did business with their compatriots, many of whom were connected by family, marriage or hometown ties. Armenians tended to employ compatriots, and in times of difficulty, the more successful helped those who were in strife. Naturally, they tended to live close to each other – in Hill Street, and later River Valley Road and on the Oxley estate. The extended family was the norm, ensuring that the elderly and the single were always looked after. But it was the smallness of the community that proved its downfall. Simply finding a spouse within the community was too difficult. Some pioneers returned to their hometowns to find wives, some looked to other communities. And then, for the first Singapore-born generation, mixed marriages became very frequent, although these were not always welcomed by either side. Three Zechariah sons married non-Armenian women, as did four out of the five Joaquim sons who married. And only about one-third of the Armenians were actually married in St Gregory's Church. Fewer than 210 Armenian children were born in Singapore before 2002, and most Armenians had small families, while others had no children. A significant number of Armenians never married, including four of the Joaquims – they were a very large family – and the four sons of Catchick and Mary Moses. In the early years, children were given traditional names, which were usually religious or patriotic in origin, such as Ripsima (a martyred saint), Tigran and Arshak (former kings) and Arathoon, meaning "resurrection". But as the families began to assimilate, some gave their children English names.</p> <p>In civic life, Armenians served on various committees: Isaiah Zechariah was a member of the first Chamber of Commerce, which met in 1837. Leaping ahead to 1895, two out of the eight elected Municipal Commissioners were Armenian – and that's a very high ratio for such a small community. The Armenians were very loyal British subjects. Those from Persia usually applied to become naturalised British subjects. During World War One, Hoseb Arathoon donated an aeroplane to the British war effort. Others volunteered or gave most generously to funds. At the same time, they were digging deep to help the survivors of the genocide occurring in Turkey. The press in Singapore gave graphic details of the horrors which were taking place.</p>
<p>28:41 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 21]</p>	<p>Interestingly, nearly every issue of the leading English-language newspapers contained references to Armenians – whether in advertisements, domestic occurrences or news items. To change the topic a bit, a remarkable number of Armenians and their descendants were accomplished pianists – playing for pleasure, teaching the piano and performing professionally. In fact, in 1919, 12-year-old pianist Kathleen Seth toured Kuala Lumpur and after the war, she became the only woman in the 200-strong Singapore Musicians' Union. And then there was Gordon van Hien – a grandson of Seth Paul – was awarded an MBE for organising and conducting concerts and setting up choirs in Changi Prison and the Sime Road</p>

	internment camp. And after the war, he set up and conducted the Singapore Musical Society choir and orchestra, which evolved into the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Now, to highlight a few prominent individuals, we have Catchick Moses, and he arrived as a 15-year-old in 1828.
30:22 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 22]	His descendants still live in Singapore, and I believe they're now up to the seventh generation. Catchick joined with his uncle Aristarkies Sarkies to establish Sarkies and Moses in 1840. It was a firm which lasted until 1914, but Catchick is better known as having founded <i>The Straits Times</i> newspaper in July 1845. He had bought the printing press to help his bankrupt compatriot, Martyrose Aparcar. But in September the next year, he sold the paper to his editor, Robert Woods.
31:07 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 23]	And that is the masthead of the first edition of <i>The Straits Times</i> , which had a much longer title, <i>The Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce</i> . But there was another newspaper in Singapore associated with Armenians.
31:26 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 24]	In 1849, Gregory Galistan began publishing an Armenian newspaper, <i>Ousamnaser</i> , or <i>The Scholar</i> . But publication stopped when Gregory left for Melbourne during the gold rushes. He and his followers hoped to establish a new Armenian community in Victoria in Australia, but that didn't work out. Joe Joaquim, the lawyer, served on the Municipal Commission for many years, including a term as the president, and later he became a member of the Legislative Council, served as coroner and as Deputy Vice Consul for the United States. Now he probably obtained that position because the Consul, Major Studer, was his father-in-law. Joe was also a very active Freemason and was Acting District Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the Eastern Archipelago when he died unexpectedly in 1902. And then we have George Seth from Calcutta. He joined the Malayan Civil Service and was posted to Singapore in 1901.
32:48 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 25]	And he rose through the ranks to become Deputy Public Prosecutor. In 1920, on the recommendation of the Governor, he was appointed Solicitor-General of the Straits Settlements. He was made a King's Counsel, which was an unusual honour for someone who was not a practising barrister. And although George served stints as acting Attorney General, his ambition to be made Attorney General failed. Such a post was not for an Armenian.
33:34 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 26]	And, of course, there is Agnes Joaquim, or in Armenian, Ashkhen Hovakimian. And she hybridised the orchid bearing her name.

<p>33:44 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 27]</p>	<p>The orchid was first exhibited in England in 1897 and drew much praise for its beauty.</p>
<p>33:55 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 28]</p>	<p>This is a picture of the <i>Vanda</i> Miss Joaquim of today. If we go back to 1897, the flower looked a little bit different. So it was first exhibited in England, but in 1899 it was displayed at the Singapore Flower Show, with the newspapers noting that Agnes had bred it. From Agnes's hybrid, thousands of plants were propagated by cuttings. And it was claimed that, in the 1930s, most house gardens in Singapore contained at least one bed of <i>Vanda</i> Miss Joaquim orchids. Cuttings of the orchid were also widely exported, and it became a popular plant especially in the Philippines and Hawaii. There, it was known as the Princess Aloha orchid and was used in the welcoming garlands. As well as being beautiful, the orchid was hardy and prolific, with a long shelf life, and it was perfect for the expanding domestic and overseas trade in cut flowers.</p>
<p>35:23 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 29]</p>	<p>In 1981, <i>Vanda</i> Miss Joaquim was selected as Singapore's national flower. But rather than crediting Agnes for her achievement, a story appeared that she had found the orchid in a clump of bamboo when "she was loitering alone in the garden one morning". This reconstruction was imaginary, and yet was repeated so often that nearly everyone believed it. However, Agnes had created her orchid by crossing the <i>Vanda teres</i> with the <i>Vanda hookeriana</i>. This had been clearly stated in 1893 and again in 1894 by orchid expert Henry Ridley, who was also Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.</p>
<p>36:16 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 30]</p>	<p>In 2015, Agnes was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame. And this award was accepted by her grand-niece, Mrs Hazel Locke. I'm not sure whether Hazel is with us this afternoon. Nope.</p> <p>Currently, four street names reflect the Singapore presence. We have Galistan Avenue, which commemorates Emile Galistan and his work as a member of the Singapore Improvement Trust.</p>
<p>37:11 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 31]</p>	<p>Also a noted orchid expert, Emile and John Laycock founded the Malayan Orchid Society in 1928. That's a photo of Emile. Then we have Sarkies Road – this is not named after the Raffles Hotel's Sarkies, but after Mrs Regina Sarkies. She was the wealthy daughter of Jacob Carapiet and married to Arathoon Sarkies. Mrs Sarkies owned Roseneath, a property in Bukit Timah and in 1923, when the reserve road alongside the property was made public, it was named after her. St Martin's Drive was the name chosen by the Martin family for the new road which cut through their old property, Eskbank, located in Tanglin. And the growing number of nearby apartments include St Martin's in their names. So we have St Martin's Residence, St Martin's Lodge, and so on. Now just like there is in Penang, Chennai, Kolkata and Dhaka, there is an Armenian Street – or rather there was, because today it is closed</p>

	to traffic. Originally, it was called Armenian Church Street because it ran alongside the rear of the property.
38:34 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 32]	<p>And that's what it looked like in 1890. Three other streets named after Armenians no longer exist. There was Armenian Lane, which ran off Armenian Street; Narcis Road, comprising most of the carriageway which led up to the Joaquim residence, Mount Narcis; and St Gregory's Place. And this ran off Hill Street, opposite St Gregory's Church, but was built over in the 1990s. However, St Gregory's Spa is a reminder of it. It is St Gregory's Church which is the most obvious reminder of the Armenians both past and present. Now Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion, and that was back in 3001 AD. And I think you'll find more information on some pamphlets on the table. Wherever possible, the diaspora communities built churches. Thus, in Singapore, the Armenian Apostolic Church of St Gregory the Illuminator was built in 1835. It is the oldest existing Christian church in Singapore and its oldest building. The church was gazetted as a national monument in June 1973.</p> <p>Now, to look very briefly at its origins. In the early 1820s, Reverend Ingergolie, who was the priest up in Penang, used to come down and conduct occasional services. But soon the community wanted its own priest. So, in September 1825, it wrote to the Archbishop in Isfahan asking him to send a priest to Singapore. Eventually, Reverend Ter Johannes arrived in 1827. And then the next step was to build a church. After several attempts, the community finally obtained a piece of land at the foot of Fort Canning Hill. Construction began in 1835 and the church, which was designed by Coleman, was consecrated in March 1836. The total cost was just over 5,000 Spanish dollars, a formidable amount for that small community to find. However, by July 1836, they had over \$3,000 donated to them. And the shortfall was raised by 12 local families. The European community had in fact donated very little, which led to a very sharp rebuke from the <i>Singapore Chronicle</i>, as the Armenians had made very generous contributions to the funds for St Andrew's Cathedral.</p>
41:52 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 33]	Besides, having seen the plans for the early church... and this is an outline of what it looked like in 1835. The newspapers believed "it would form one of the best and most substantial ornaments of this settlement". But the newspapers' plea for generosity fell on deaf ears. Now this is the first known image of the church.
42:23 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 34]	You probably recognise it from the picture on the cover. And you can clearly see the original dome, the cupola with the gold cross on top. Now these two items were soon replaced by a square turret.
42:48 [Speaker: Dr Nadia]	So that's what the church looked like in 1847, except for some reason it has been cropped. This in turn was replaced by the current steeple in the 1850s. And those changes meant that the church no longer looked very Armenian. However, the

Wright Slide: 35]	interior reveals many features of traditional Armenian churches – for example, the east-facing chancel with the altar curtain, the vaulted ceiling and the circular layout.
43:23 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 36]	The Armenian Church was described in 1836 as one of the most ornate and best-finished pieces of architecture that this settlement can boast of.
43:39 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 37]	<p>And these words still ring true today. Now the priests were appointed for three years and some 24 were sent out from Isfahan. Although a few were accompanied by older sons, most left their families behind. And the last priest left Singapore in 1938.</p> <p>No one was buried within the church grounds, although it was customary. The pioneering Armenians were buried in the Fort Canning cemeteries, where today eight of their plaques can be seen embedded in the commemorative walls. Later, the Armenians were buried in the Bukit Timah Cemetery. But in 1971, when this cemetery was earmarked for redevelopment, Leon Palian from the United States rescued 24 Armenian tombstones, and these were placed on the front lawn of the church. This is what gave rise to the mistaken belief that Armenians were buried there. And by the way, the Raffles Hotel’s Sarkies brothers are not buried in the church grounds, despite what you may read. In 1988, another American Armenian, Art Ramian, paid for the tombstones to be laid out in a Garden of Memories, which was created at the rear of the church grounds.</p>
45:25 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright Slide: 38 & 39]	<p>And their numbers were later augmented by several tombstones from the Bidadari Cemetery and plaques commemorating recently deceased Armenians. There was a small parsonage, which was created in the northwest corner of the church grounds, and that lasted until 1906. It was then replaced by the beautiful Edwardian-style residence, paid for by Mrs Nanajan Sarkies, in memory of her late husband. This parsonage has now been remodelled into part of the Armenian Heritage Gallery, which opened in 2017.</p> <p>So to conclude, tiny communities often disappear over time, leaving little or no trace of their presence. This does not apply to the old Armenian community of Singapore. From 1820, the Armenians contributed to the growth of Singapore’s economic success and were active in social and civic life. And I find it almost incredible that four of Singapore’s icons owe their presence to the enterprise of this very small community: <i>The Straits Times</i> newspaper, Raffles Hotel, the <i>Vanda</i> Miss Joaquim orchid and St Gregory’s Church. And that, indeed, is a remarkable bequest from one of Singapore’s smallest minorities. Thank you.</p>
47: [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright, Q&A]	Now, if you’ve got any questions, I will bravely try to answer them.

<p>47:51 [Speaker: Moderator, Vidya Murthy]</p>	<p>If you have any questions, please wait for the mic because you are being recorded, so it will be more audible.</p>
<p>48:35 [Speaker: Audience, Q&A]</p>	<p>Hello, I wanted to ask about the... I guess prior to them coming to this region, Southeast Asia, they were already pretty far away from their homeland in Armenia, so what were their trade connections with this part of Asia before they came to Singapore?</p>
<p>49:07 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright, Q&A]</p>	<p>Alright, okay. As I mentioned earlier, these Armenians are not from Armenia; they are from Persia. And their ancestors were moved there in the early 1600s by Shah Abbas, who wanted the Armenians to improve his silk trade and silver trade. There were one or two earlier Armenians in Burma, but I think they were still from Isfahan. So it was these Julfa merchants who were setting up trading networks with China, the Philippines, Burma, Makassar, Penang, Melaka and finally Singapore. Does that make sense?</p>
<p>50:06 [Speaker: Audience, Q&A]</p>	<p>Thank you for that very interesting talk. Could you tell us a little bit about how and why you got involved in this book project and what's your connection with Armenians?</p>
<p>50:19 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright, Q&A]</p>	<p>Ah, I was actually going to leave that to the book launch, but I can explain now. As it often happens in life, it's a juxtaposition of several factors. One, my mother was Armenian. Her name was Varsnik Deukmedjian, but she was not from this region. Her parents and grandparents escaped the genocide in 1916 and fled to Egypt. It gets rather complicated. My father was sent to Egypt during the Second World War. My mother was translating for the YWCA, met my father, became a war bride. And he took her back to a very small town in New Zealand, where she was, I think, the only Armenian in the whole of the South Island, which made life very difficult. Then in the mid-1980s, my long-suffering husband over there was posted to Singapore for his work. I knew about Raffles Hotel, but I was very surprised to see an Armenian church, now I thought what on earth is an Armenian church doing here so far away from Armenia because I didn't know about the Julfa connections. So I asked around and really couldn't get much information at all, and gradually I thought, well if no one can tell me, I'll find out for myself. So I dug around and dug around and eventually built up a database of names. And the fact that so many of the Armenians had British names, such as Edgar and Gregory and Chater and Martin, made it very difficult to track down who was Armenian and who wasn't. Then when we got back to Australia, I had much freer access to church records, <i>The Straits Times</i>, journals, all sorts of other information. And so for 18 years, I gradually worked away and created that much larger book, <i>Respected Citizens: The History of Armenians in Singapore and Malaysia</i>. But obviously it was too big for people to bother reading through, so I decided to create a smaller book, especially as this is Singapore's bicentennial and I believe the Armenians have played a very important part for such a small</p>

	community. And I've always been interested in history.
53:17 [Speaker: Audience, Q&A]	Hi, thank you for the very interesting talk. I have two questions. The first question is whether the Armenians in Singapore retained the linguistic affinity – do they speak the language? And secondly after the First and the Second World Wars, for the very few remaining Armenians in Singapore, do they feel that kind of affinity to Armenia, do they feel that it's their motherland, that it's now safe to return, and things like that?
53:47 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright, Q&A]	The old Persian Armenian community kept up the language until you had the children being educated overseas, say, in England and Germany and also in India. And not many... By the third generation, there were very few Armenian families speaking the language. The old people still spoke it, the children would have understood it, but the grandchildren very rarely spoke the language from what I understand. Today's Armenians, of course, speak fluent Armenian – And I think Ani here might later perhaps talk about that – and their connection is perhaps more to Armenia. Now after the Second World War, to deal with your second question, Singapore was changing its focus and some of the Armenian families felt there wasn't so much of a future for their sons and daughters here, and they then moved to Australia and the United States. They had no connection with Armenia, whatsoever.
55:15 [Speaker: Audience, Q&A]	Although I read the first book, <i>Respected Citizens</i> , but I cannot recall whether... I'm very interested to know what happened during the Japanese Occupation with the church and the community. It would be interesting for the people to know what happened to the church. Because you didn't mention this.
55:40 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright, Q&A]	During the Second World War, there was a British field artillery unit which was based on the church grounds. Some of you go to the church grounds and you see what look like large slabs of concrete. Those were the bases for the anti-aircraft guns. Those guns made the parsonage and the church a target for Japanese bombers. The parsonage itself was badly damaged. Most of the roof went. The church itself wasn't so much damaged, but it was looted and the parsonage was looted too. So the silver went, the chandeliers, a beautiful old bible dating back to the 1700s disappeared, and the parsonage was just left in a pretty derelict state till well after the war. After the war, the trustees applied for a compensation from the British, the War Compensation Board [War Damage Commission] I think it was called, they got a small amount of money to deal with urgent repairs. But it was one family, the Martin family, who donated most of the money to repair the parsonage and the church. It was another Armenian from Rangoon, Ka Johns, who was a civil engineer, and he organised the structural changes. But as well as the war doing damage, you've got a local enemy: the little white ants or termites, and they have wreaked havoc throughout the church and the parsonage, which required constant work to maintain.

<p>57:50 [Speaker: Audience, Q&A]</p>	<p>I'm curious about the personal history of Agnes Miss Joaquim – she never married? Can you tell us a bit more about her and her life in Singapore?</p>
<p>58:04 [Speaker: Dr Nadia Wright, Q&A]</p>	<p>Right, she never married. I see, we have descendants of the family who have arrived in the back. We have Mrs Hazel Locke and her daughter, Linda Locke. Hazel is the great-niece of Agnes Joaquim, so we are very, very pleased to see you here. We know very little about Agnes because it was the lives of the men who were documented in the newspapers. They belonged to the clubs and the organisations, and the women really played a back role. Agnes never married – that's true. Possibly because she was the eldest daughter and she was helping look after her widowed mother because her father had died when some of the boys were very, very young. I think the youngest was about four. So Agnes as the eldest daughter would help her mother a lot. She was known to be a skilled embroiderer and had bequeathed or donated a beautiful piece of embroidery to the church. She developed cancer and then died from its side effects – I think it might have been pneumonia. But that's about all we really know about her. Apart from the fact that she hybridised the orchids, of course. And she was well known for winning many, many prizes at the flower shows for a range of vegetables and flowers, ferns, etc. And she actually grew these herself. Don't believe what you might read that she won so many prizes that the gardener must have grown them for her. It's not true at all; she did it.</p>

About the speaker

Dr Nadia Wright is a retired teacher and active historian living in Melbourne, Australia. Her research focusses on the Armenians in Southeast Asia as well as the founding of Singapore. She is the author of *Respected Citizens: The History of the Armenians in Singapore and Malaysia* (2003); *William Farquhar and Singapore: Stepping out from Raffles' Shadow* (2017); *The Armenians of Penang* (2018); and *The Armenians of Singapore: A Short History* (2019). She co-authored *Vanda Miss Joaquim: Singapore's National Flower & the Legacy of Agnes & Ridley* and has published numerous scholarly articles.