

Rita Balian and Hranush Hakobyan Receive Fridtjof Nansen Gold Medal

By Elizabeth Moranian Bolles

YEREVAN, Armenia – Rita Balian, from the United States, and Hranush Hakobyan, from the Republic of Armenia, were each awarded the distinguished Fridtjof Nansen Gold Medal Award by the Fridtjof Nansen Foundation on June 14, 2006 at a ceremony in Yerevan, Armenia.

The Fridtjof Nansen Gold Medal Award is given to people who engage in daring, pioneering humanitarian work. Recipients reflect the spirit of Fridtjof Nansen, the 1922 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, in their dedicated work to make a difference in the lives of others. Nansen, a scientist and humanitarian, first achieved fame as a polar explorer, later became a prominent Norwegian diplomat, and ultimately came to occupy a unique role on the international stage as he fought tirelessly for the rights of refugees. In 1922, the same year of his Nobel Prize win, Nansen designed the “Nansen Passport” which, supported by the League of Nations, ultimately allowed nearly half a million stateless refugees, many of them Armenian, to immigrate to any of the 52 countries that honored the passport. In 1938, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Nansen International Office for Refugees in honor of the tremendous impact of the “Nansen Passport.” Nansen’s final great effort was for the establishment of a secure Armenian state within the Soviet Union to which refugees stranded in Turkey could easily flee. He had previously arranged for the transfer of approximately 1.2 million Greek refugees in Turkey to Greece.

Mrs. Balian and Mrs. Hakobyan were honored for their extensive humanitarian work and dedication to the Armenian people through the Armenian American Wellness Center, which the pair launched in 1997. Today, Mrs. Balian and Mrs. Hakobyan serve as Co-Presidents of the Wellness Center. Mrs. Balian, an internationally renowned philanthro-



Award Recipients Rita Balian and Hranush Hakobyan wearing the Fridtjof Nansen Gold Medal

pist, is also President and CEO of the Armenian American Cultural Association, Inc., the primary US sponsor of the Wellness Center. Besides this work, Mrs. Balian and her husband, Mr. Vartkess Balian, co-founded the AGBU New York Summer Program in 1987, as Co-Chairs of the AGBU Presidential Club, which they still manage in its twentieth year. Mrs. Hakobyan is a Member of the National Assembly of Armenia, and chairs its Standing Committee on Science, Education, Culture and Youth. Mrs. Hakobyan is also a Vice-President of the European Union Parliamentary Executive Committee. She heads the Armenian delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and represents Eurasia on its Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians.

The Nansen Gold Medal award ceremony was held at the Armenian American Wellness Center. Opening remarks were made by Felix Bakhchinyan, President of the Fridtjof Nansen Foundation of Armenia, followed by Dr. Norayr Davtyan, Armenia’s Minister of Health, who spoke about the importance of the Armenian American Wellness Center, which has saved, prolonged and improved thousands of women’s lives by introducing high quality, Western-style breast and cervical

cancer screening and early detection methods with appropriate diagnosis and referrals for treatment. Dr. Davtyan noted that modern mammography services were not available in Armenia before Mrs. Balian and Mrs. Hakobyan introduced them in 1997, and on behalf of the Armenian government and the people of Armenia, he thanked them for their tireless dedication to saving the lives of Armenian mothers, sisters, daughters and wives.

The Armenian American Wellness Center enjoys the respect, confidence and generosity of thousands of donors from the Diaspora, as well as generous support from the government of the United States through USAID. Karl Fickenschner, USAID Deputy Mission Director in Armenia, represented the United States Ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, as well as Robin Phillips, the Director of the USAID Armenia Mission, who were both traveling, at the ceremony. Mr. Fickenschner spoke of the incredible work accomplished by the Wellness Center and congratulated Mrs. Balian as a US citizen who has worked tirelessly for the people of Armenia. As he prepared to be stationed in Armenia, Mr. Fickenschner recalled having been told that Mrs. Balian is someone “who gets things done.”

USAID, he said, is extremely proud of its affiliation with the Wellness Center. Mr. Fickenschner lavished Mrs. Hakobyan and Mrs. Balian with praise for the wonderful work they consistently do for Armenia, its women, and humanity.

The celebration was attended by eminent members of Yerevan’s international community, including Gabriel Geara, the Lebanese Ambassador to Armenia; and David Brown, the USAID Contracting Officer in Armenia, accompanied by his wife Tram. Many Armenian dignitaries and prominent citizens also came to the celebration, including Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Arman Kirakossian, Ph.D., the immediate former Ambassador to the United States, as a close friend of both recipients, and also as the son of previous Nansen Gold Medal recipient John Kirakossian, who was honored posthumously. Dr. Kirakossian spoke eloquently about the work Nansen did for Armenian refugees in the early 1920s, and underscored with his remarks the deep meaning and importance of the Nansen Gold Medal. Other distinguished guests included Hayrapet Galstyan, Director of the Oncology Scientific Center of Armenia; composer Edward Mizozyan, past President of Armenia’s Composers Union and

current President of the Peace Foundation of Armenia; Karlen Dallakyan, reputed Historian, past President of the “Spurk Committee;” and Arpi Vartanian, Country Director of Armenia and Karabagh for the Armenian Assembly of America.

Asdguik Gevorgyan, President of Armenia’s Journalists Union, remarked that journalists always enjoy writing uplifting and refreshing news stories about the Wellness Center. Ms. Gevorgyan called Mrs. Balian and Mrs. Hakobyan “the pride of our nation,” and hailed their honesty and dedication.

When Professor Radick Martirosian, the newly elected President of Armenia’s National Academy of Sciences and immediate former Rector (President) of Yerevan State University, addressed the crowd, he highlighted the important contributions that Vartkess Balian has made to Armenia, especially since 1992, in his efforts to renovate and expand the buildings of Yerevan State University as President of the Friends of Yerevan State University. Mr. Martirosian described Mr. Balian as “the solid rock standing tall beside his wife,” and mentioned that he was glad to hear of Mr. Balian’s deep involvement in the renovation and expansion of the Armenian American Wellness Center facility.

Entertainment was provided by opera lyric soprano Lilit Gevorgyan, who performed Armenian and European arias appropriate for the occasion. Silva Yuzbashyan, radio commentator and Armenia’s premier reciter, shared works by the great poets Hamo Sahyan and Vahagn Davtyan.

Rita Balian and Hranush Hakobyan thanked all present, and expressed their gratitude to the Fridtjof Nansen Foundation for the honor given to them, and pledged to continue to work with as much commitment and dedication as ever before. “In spite of so many accomplishments,” Mrs. Balian remarked, “we feel the journey has just started because there is so much more to do.”



Hranush Hakobyan addresses the crowd with (l-r) Minister of Health Norayr Davtyan, Rita Balian, Arman Kirakossian, and Karl Fickenschner behind her



On the podium Karl Fickenschner addressing the crowd, with Rita Balian and Hranush Hakobyan on either side with Minister of Health Norayr Davtyan