ANNA, ANNIE AND ANNAIS: A RAMIFICATION OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Posted on April 9, 2010 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Vahe H. Apelian, Columbus OH, 4 April 2010
The name Anna first appeared in the maternal side of our family in the person of my maternal great-grandmother Anna, from the Boymoushakian family of Sev Aghbuir (black spring), one of the 12 villages of greater Kessab. Sometime late 19th century, most probably in autumn when the fields were harvested and the families had stocked the summer's bounty for the long winter ahead, young Hanno (Hovhannes) Apelian of Keurkune and Anna Boymoushakian of Sev Aghbuir were married.

Keurkune in late 1940's

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Anna's father and Hanno's prominent father Bedir most certainly arranged their marriage. Their wedding festivities would have lasted a week and held in Keurkune, the Apelian family's ancestral village, and would have culminated when the men circled the groom just prior to the wedding ceremony and sang an Armenian patriotic song of a mother exalting her son to ready himself for the ultimate sacrifice in defense of his nation. The name of the song is Zarter Vortiag (Arise son!). At the end of each of the four stanza of the song, the men who circled the groom would have shouted in unison "may God congratulate!" each time the best man mock dressed the groom by hovering over the groom a different piece of the groom's attire, such as his jacket or tie three times clockwise and three times anti clockwise and then placed it on him in a ceremony of mock grooming the groom. Kessabtsis who like to carry on aspects of the wedding tradition sing the same song and do the same ceremony to this day.

Meanwhile a similar ceremony would have capped the wedding festivities at the bride's home where the women would have congregated and sang a song in the person of the bride thanking her parents for having raised her, articulating her sadness in leaving her parental home and her joy in building her own. Anna's family would have then helped her mount a decorated horse and would have escorted her to the church in the groom's village accompanied by a group of the groom's relatives and friends who would have come to the bride's house to accompany her to the church. In a time honored wedding tradition in Kessab, at the outskirts of the groom's village bachelors from the village would have stopped the bridal procession and demanded that the groom, who is now leaving their rank to join the rank of the married men, treat them otherwise they would not let the bridal procession enter the village. After much mock negotiations of offers and counter demands a

settlement would have reached and they would have accepted the offer made by the best man on the groom's behalf. The bridal procession would have then headed to the church where the groom would be waiting.

Hanno's and Anna's wedding may have well taken place by Armenian Evangelical rite. Hanno's influential father Bedir was one of the early advocates for the village to embrace the Armenian Evangelical faith, which had started in Istanbul in 1846 by 37 men and 3 women who had tried to reform the Armenian Apostolic Church but ended up establishing a new denomination. Some of Bedir's sons later on would opt to take their prominent father's name as their family surname and branch out as the Bedirians of the Apelian family, which continues to this day.

My grandmother Karoun was born into Hanno and Anna's Apelian's traditional Armenian family along with her three brothers, Diran, Serop and Kerop. It also so happened that her brother Kerop eloped and married a girl also named Anna from the Titizian family of Kaladouran who was known in greater Kessab for her beauty. Kaladouran is the Kessab's coastal village and the Titizians have their hamlet within Kaladouran named after their family as Titizlek, much like the Manjikian family of Kaladourn who call their hamlet Manjeklek. Anna's elopement and the ensuing feud between the two families became part of the folklore in Kessab and for years to come a tune was sung to that effect during wedding festivities.

In time Kerop left his pregnant wife Anna and their firstborn child Kevork behind in Keurkune under the care of his parents, Hanno and Anna, and joined his two brothers in New York and have his family join him after settling down in the New World. But that was not to be. In June 1915, the once young bride and groom but now grandparents, Hanno and Anna were forcefully uprooted from their home along with their daughter, my grandmother Karoun, and their daughter-in-law Anna-the-bride (Anna harse) and her two children Kevork and James whom his father had not seen yet. Only my grandmother Karoun and her young nephew James1 survived. The rest fell victims to the first genocide of the 20th century. Young Kevork, along with her mother and grandmother succumbed to disease in the caravan's make shift camp on the outskirts of the Syrian city Deir Attiyeh. The patriarch of the family, Hanno, soon afterwards succumbed in grief. Deir Attiyeh is a town an our drive north of Syria's capital city Damascus.

By some accounts typhus had become endemic in the endlessly marching caravan to the elusive final resettlement destination. However, my grandmother Karoun thought it was cholera that caused the demise of her mother, sister-in-law and young nephew while they were under her immediate personal care. My grandmother would tell us that years later she related the story of her mother's and sister-in-law's deaths to the prominent Kessabtsi Doctor Soghomon Apelian who in turn would let her know that my grandmother Karoun is the only person he has come to know to have such an intimate contact with persons afflicted with cholera but not contracted the disease herself. Doctor Soghomon Apelian is credited to be the first Armenian to graduate from the American University of Beirut medical school. He was drafted in the Ottoman army where he served as a physician

throughout the World War.

After the World War I took its course and the Turks who occupied Kessab vacated it, my grandmother Karoun and her young nephew James, against seemingly insurmountable odds, managed to return to Keurkune and resumed their lives anew. My maternal grandmother Karoun nee Apelian, married Khatcher Chelebian and the couple named their last child and second daughter Anna most likely in memory of her maternal grandmother. Anna's elder siblings were named Antranig, Zvart, my mother, and Hovhannes. In time James Apelian married Khatcher Chelebian's niece, Sirvart Chelebian, and the couple named their first-born daughter Anna most likely in remembrance of the infants paternal grandmother Anna.

The victims' namesakes did not fare well. My grandmother's youngest child Anna died of pneumonia when still a vivacious seventeen years old beautiful girl and is buried in the Keurkune's ancient cemetery next to her father Khatcher who also had died due to pneumonia at the age of 38. Anna's tombstone reads in Armenian: "Here rests Anna K. Chelebian (1928-1945), "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mathew 5:8). James and Sirvart's first-born daughter Anna died in infancy only few months old.

The name Anna thus became prejudicial in the family. A variation of the name Anna evolved in the person of my maternal cousin Annie (Chelebian) Hoglind, my maternal uncle Dr. Antranig Chalabian's elder daughter who is now a proud mother of two adult daughters and a son and a grandmother to a healthy grandson named Kieran; and in the person of Annais (Apelian) Tootikian, my maternal grandmother's grandniece who is now a proud mother of two adult sons and a daughter and the family lives in Montreal.

1. James is George Kevork Apelian's father. George and his family reside in Anjar, Lebanon.