

ANNA'S LEGACY

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Vahe Apelian, April 2012

In memory of Kevork George Apelian

Kevork George Apelian's grandfather Kerop eloping Anna for his bride from the Titizian family of Kaladouran, Kessab undoubtedly was the sensational news of the time in greater Kessab even though young couples eloping against the patriarchal choice for a spouse was not that uncommon. Dr. Avedis Injeikian, the father of Gabriel, had eloped his wife Mary as well. She was the daughter of Dr. Soghomon Apelian, the first Armenian to graduate from the medical school of the American University of Beirut. The prominent good doctor had her engaged to someone else apparently against her wishes. Avedis and his friends saw to it that it would not come to fruition and that the lovers would unite.

Kerop's and Anna elopement, however, was altogether different. Anna had done the unthinkable. She had crossed all by herself in the darkness of the night and through the eerie silence of the gorge and walked all alone all the way from Kaladouran to Keurkune to her lover's house to the total surprise of Kerop's parents and his only sister, my grandmother Karoun. Something had gone terribly wrong. Trusted intermediaries had worked out a plan for them. Kerop and his friends were to meet her in the cover of the night and escort her. But the lovers missed either the rendezvous point or the timing and Anna took upon herself to finish the task and wait for her lover's return in her lover's parental house. Never in greater Kessab had a girl walked all by herself to her lover's house before. She had always been free spirited with a mind of her own and was also known for her beauty. Anna, however, was not to experience the tranquility of a family life with the man she chose to love.

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Their elopement resulted in a bitter family feud among the families involved. Anna's father had her engaged to a promising young Kessabtsi and their wedding was imminent. The families were in the midst of preparations for the upcoming wedding that would do justice to their social status. Their escapade must have been so sensational that over time a folk song evolved around them that continued to be sung during wedding celebrations in Kessab long after Anna, Kerop and most of their contemporaries were not around anymore.

Few years after the birth of their first child, a son whom they named Kevork, Kerop decided to move to America to join his two brothers in New York leaving behind his pregnant wife under the care of his parents. His brother Diran was a pharmacy graduate from Istanbul. His other brother Serop had run a store in Kessab selling candies and goodies of the day. That's why he had come to be known as *shakarji*, someone who deals with sweets. It was a moniker that stayed with him throughout his life much like the other endearing nicknames kessabtsis gave to each. Kerop was to bring his family after he settled in the New World and saved enough to cover the expenses for his family's journey to America.

In due time Anna gave birth to their second son. Kerop sent word from America to his wife letting her know that he wanted to have their son named James. The infant was destined to be an American citizen, therefore it was fitting for him to have a Western name. The family's reunion was never to be.

One June 1915 the local Ottoman authorities transmitted to the kessabtsis the order for their deportation. James was a child when he also embarked on the perilous forced march along with his mother Anna, brother Kevork, grandparents Hanno and Anna, and his aunt, my maternal grandmother, Karoun. It would not be hard to envision that all the adults shared in caring of the young deportees. The ordeals of their forced marches to their illusive final resettlement destination decimated the family. Only James and his aunt Karoun survived. She became his guardian angel even though she was still in her teens.

The popular account in Kessab is that their 1915 ordeal lasted three years and three months placing the return of the survivors to their ransacked villages sometimes in the fall of 1918 only to face the

bitter winter ahead without having the provisions to weather it.

The returning survivors had seen fit that the young orphaned girl, Karoun, be married to the most eligible bachelor, Khatcher Chelebian (Chalabian). Their wedding took place in their make shift camp in the outskirts of Deir Attiyeh on their way home. The town is an hour's drive from Damascus. They were married in their rag tags. Their wedding was officiated by the groom's brother Stepan who was known for his piety and knowledge of church liturgy. There was no registry to record their marriage. They were to do that after their return and when a semblance of law and order was established. They were married by the grace of God and consent of their fellow Kessabtsis. The young family moved to Karoun's parental vacant house when they reached Keurkune, Kessab. James became a bona fide an adopted son.

Once the overseas communication resumed, James' father Kerop managed to have his son join him in America. The records of Ellis Island indicate that James was in his teens when he embarked on his journey from Beirut on a French ocean liner. He was on his way to see his father whom he had not seen before. He was to live in a country that was alien to him. He had witnessed harrowing  realities of The Genocide and was growing up in Keurkune where electricity or a faucet at home was not even in their wildest imagination, let alone movie theaters or ice cream parlors. However enticing the latter may seem to be, they were alien to him along with language spoken. He spoke only Armenian and Kesbenok, the local dialect. His acclamation to the New World proved to be impossible even though he stayed in the country for many years. His father and his two uncles made arrangements for him to return home, to Keurkune where his grandfather's lands would secure him a livelihood. He was the only male inheritor among the three brothers.

The departure of his only surviving son must have been heartbreaking for his father. The 1915 Genocide had already deprived him of the cherished dreams he must have harbored with his wife. Anna, his first-born son Kevork, his parents had died during The Genocide. Throughout those heart-wrenching war years, Kerop must have kept faith to preserve his sanity and energy to work to make a living while awaiting news from home front. After the war was over the news that his son and sister had survived may have given him hope. After the return of James, the realization of the enormity of his loss may have weighed heavy on him anew. A sense of hopelessness may have dampened his spirits and broken his will. It was rumored that he even attempted to commit suicide. He passed away in Bronx, New York. It is not hard to surmise that he was a broken man, a far cry from the dashing handsome young man who stole Anna's heart. He had become another victim of The Genocide although oceans and continents away from the killing fields.

Kerop's surviving son James would start his own life in Keurkune, Kessab.

James married Sirvart Chelebian. They named their firstborn son Kevork in memory of the brother

James lost during The Genocide, their second son Kerop in memory of James' father and their daughter Annais in memory of James' mother Anna. The matriarch of the family, James' aunt Karoun, had ruled out using the name Anna. She had named her youngest daughter Anna in memory of her mother. Tragedy struck her teenage daughter as well. She died in her teens while her namesakes had become victims of The Genocide.

Kevork and his two younger siblings were raised in Keurkune. The allure of the village life did not seem to have left him. After graduating from Haigazian University, as one of the first graduates of the College then, he embarked on his career as a teacher in Anjar where he also settled down, married and raised his family. After a teaching career that spanned some two decades, he established a trade school and then his own business supplying school needs. In midst of his labor to make a living he made time to write. Writing was and remained his passion and over time he immersed as prominent writer.

✘ George published several books, namely, Հելլե, Հելլե, ՀելլեՔեսապ (*Hele, Hele Kessab*), «Աննահարսը (*Anna-the Bride*), «Ցկեանսնահատակութիւն (*Martyrdom for Life*), «Պէյրուք (*Beirut*), «Նետենք-բռնենք, Աղբարի՛կ, ափիկմըջուր (*Brother, A Palmful of Water*)» «Մաքարոնիթիլէ-թիլէ» (*Makarone Teleg Teleg*), «Քոյրիկսմի՛ծախեր, մա՛մ» (*Do Not Give Away My Sister, Mom*).

His first book «Հելլե, Հելլե, ՀելլեՔեսապ» (*Hele, Hele Kessab*), is a collection of stories about Kessab and Kessabtsis.

His second book «Աննահարսը (*Anna-the Bride*), is a novel whose central character is Anna, his paternal grandmother. In reading the novel Anna immerses as the independent, free spirited, stunningly attractive girl who wanted to live her life with the man she chose to love against all odds. However, The Genocide would deprive this young vibrant woman to live her God given life in dignity.

«Պէյրուք (*Beirut*), is a short novel about Beirut where George visited as a youngster and then moved to continue his education. No other city has had the allure Beirut has had for generations of Kessabtsis. The novel is a tribute to that allure.

His «Ցկեանսնահատակութիւն (*Martyrdom for Life*) became a popular reading and was translated into Arabic and Spanish. His second book of the same series «Աղբարի՛կ, ափիկմըջուր (*Brother, A Palm-full of Water*) posthumously was translated into Arabic as well. Hagop Pakradouny, a member of the Lebanese Parliament gifted a copy of the book to each member of the Parliament. Recently the former Prime Minister of Lebanon penned an appreciative letter addressed to the Lebanese Armenian community about the book. These two books are a collection of live stories of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide many of whom were raised by local Arab Muslim families and

had become Muslims themselves but still retained an allegiance to their Armenian roots. Some of these Muslim Armenians have organized themselves into a tribe in Syria known as the Armenian Islamic Tribe. George was the first to interview members of this tribe and write about them.

His last book **Մաքարոնիթիլե-թիլե** is titled after a satirical one liner – *Makarone Teleg Teleg* – sang during festivities in Kessab. It is reported to be a collection of folk stories about Kessab and Mussa Dagh.

George's other two books are for younger audience. **Նտտեք-բոնեք** is a collection of four stories from Kessab that stretched the imagination. **Քոյիկսմի՛ծախեր, մա՛մ** (*Do Not Give Away My Sister, Mom*) is reported to be a rendering of the stories that appeared in the *Martyrdom for Life* series intended for young readers.

Along with the books he authored, George kept a weekly column in Aztag Daily under pen name «**Չիւսական** (*Tsounagan*). The column depicted the ongoing issues with humor and satire but with much insight. Some likened his column to snow balls that hit the intended targets but never caused an injury. As one of his commentaries noted, he was a gentle and an unassuming man with a not unassuming literary talent and output.

George wrote that his natural inclination and preference is to write humorous and satirical stories. Oddly though he may be remembered by his solemn depiction of the lives of The Genocide survivors he presented to his readers in his two novels of the *Martyrdom for Life* series than for his satire or humor.

His baptismal name was Kevork but he remained socially known and continued to be addressed as George. A name he kept and often times used interchangeably with Kevork or at times as his middle name. He also adopted his father's name -James - as his middle name as his still Facebook account indicates.

George passed away on December 4, 2011. Among many of his peers the editorial board of Keghart.com also broke the news of his premature death. He was born on March 24, 1941. He would have celebrated his 71st birthday with his family, as I pen this article about him. George's still Facebook account continues to be an open forum where messages are left on his wall, a word Facebook has popularized as the forum for friends to keep in touch. In this new brave world, Facebook seems to have blurred the distinction between the dead and the living. He is reported to have left behind yet unpublished material comprising several more volumes.

Anna (Titizian), the beautiful and strong willed girl from Kaladouran who broke her father's heart and

left his choice for her to pursue her heart's calling did not live the promise the life she must have dreamed. She succumbed much like the rest of the 1.5 million Armenian victims of the first Genocide of the twentieth century. Much like the rest of The Genocide victims she also does not have a known burial site, let alone a tombstone. Unlike most of the victims who remain nameless and anonymous Anna became an exception thanks to an appreciative grandson named Kevork George James Apelian who never had the pleasure of knowing her in person but cherished the legacy she left behind.

