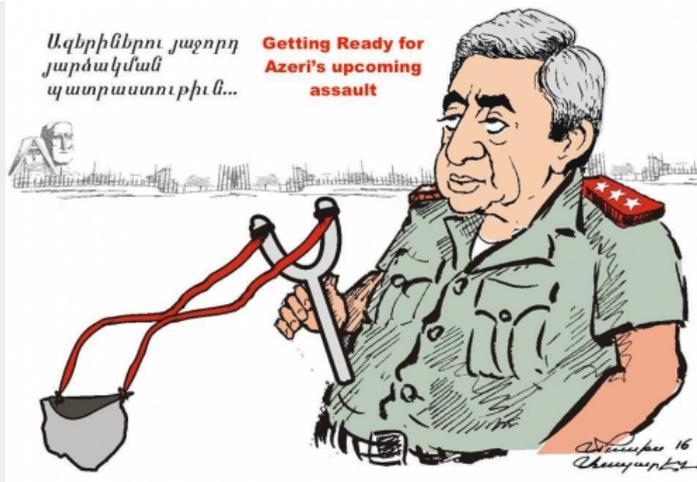


CARTOONIST ARARADIAN DEPICTS THE DIASPORA

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Vahe H. Apelian, Loveland OH, 9 June 2016

Ararat is a well-known name in Christendom, as it is the mountain where Noah's Ark landed. It is less known that 5th century historian Moses of Chorene (Movses Khorenatsi in Armenian) claimed that Armenians are the descendants of Noah's great-great-grandson Hayk and thus call themselves *Hai*. It might also be less known that the Armenians call the twin peaks of the Ararat Big Massis and Little Massis. When these two names come together as Massis Araradian, they form an unforgettable combination, which happens to be the name of the legendary *Diaspora Hai* cartoonist and caricaturist.

The naming of the family name is no less legendary. It was upon the urging of Catholicos Megerdich Kefsizian (1871-1894) of the Sis (Cilician) Catholicosate that Massis' ardently patriotic grandfather Khacher had changed his family name to Araradian. Khacher was outspoken in the closely-knit Aintab Armenian community and was unconcerned that Turkish officials would look with suspicion his hosting of Simon Zavarian, one of the founders of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (A.R.F). Years later, Khacher's son Megerdich, who had survived the Genocide and lived in Aleppo, named his firstborn-son and seventh child, Massis. Khachig Araradian, a cousin of Massis, was a noted stage actor and a solo reciter.

Few months ago when I was in Glendale, California, I purchased from Abril Bookstore its last copies of the two-volume "The Smile is Light" (ժպիտը լոյս է), Massis Araradian's massive opus. The set measures 11x8.5 inches in landscape. The first volume is 544 pages and the second 399. Together they weigh a hefty 6 pounds and 14 ounces. Each contains an index under almost all the 39 Armenian alphabet characters. Save for the few pages of introduction and testimonials, the two volumes are "wall-to-wall" cartoons and caricatures. They are not only a pleasure to view but are also educational because the Armenian Diaspora of the last six decades, with its denizens and events, unfolds right in the lap of the reader.

The cartoons and the caricatures cover the years from 1953 (Aleppo) to 1996 (Los Angeles) with a considerable amount of work produced in Beirut in between. The second volume starts in 1997 and ends in 2012. The over five decades covered in these two volumes depicts the Diaspora where I came of age. There does not seem to be any Diaspora individual of some prominence or any event that pertained to it to have escaped Massis' pen. Cartoons and caricatures speak with a universal language. Nonetheless, it would be most helpful if a companion book is published spelling the names and the events depicted in Latin character for the benefit of readers who cannot read Armenian.

Massis was born in Aleppo on December 29, 1929. As a young boy he found out that not only could he draw but also had an uncanny ability to observe and distill a person's character and the essence of events and present them with his agile pen. He started drawing on the margins of his textbooks, to the chagrin of his teachers who noticed they were often the subject of his acute pencil. His well-meaning parents were no less concerned by their son's obsession with drawing, almost to his total disinterest in learning a trade.

But Massis found encouragement too. During the Second World War, when paper was scarce, his family and relatives collected the 3 by 4 inch daily sheets of their calendars that were blank at the back and gave them to Massis to draw on. Thus was born his habit of drawing on similar size pads, he notes, while standing, sitting and kneeling in his younger days.

The gift nature had bestowed upon the young man did not go unnoticed. Aleppo Arabic newspapers soon invited him to draw for their pages. In 1953 he moved to Beirut where he worked for Antranig Dzarougian's "Nairi" weekly and "Aztag" daily. From 1955 to 1975 Massis was employed by now-defunct U.S. Information Service (USIS) where he worked his way up to its art director. The USIS shuttered its operations after its American directors were kidnapped. Massis recalls fondly and in appreciation his time with the American service. A year later, in 1976, he immigrated to the United States with his family and settled in Los Angeles where the family still resides. Right after his arrival he was hired by the "Los Angeles Herald-Examiner" and contributed to "Asbarez" daily. Within a few years he was promoted art director of the "Herald-Examiner's" California Living section. After the daily folded in November 1989, Massis continued to draw for the "Asbarez" daily.

Along with his cartoons and caricatures, Massis has designed more than 35 Armenian and Arabic fonts. The soul of his cartoons, caricatures and art works remain Armenian. He has been hailed by  reviewers such as Shahan Sanossian ("Armenian Reporter", February 23, 2008). In 1965 Mechag published Araradian's "Symphony of Life" (Կեանքի Սեմֆոնիկ) containing cartoons about the life and struggles of a Genocide survivor. In 1997 Araradian published "Smile is Light (Ժպիտը լոյս է): Cartoons by Massis, 1947-1997". It was reprinted twice but is now out of print. In fact, Araradian has only one copy left. In 2002 he released a CD-ROM version of the book, which is still available for purchase. In 1998, he published "Armenian National Figures" (Ազգային Դեմքեր), a slim volume containing drawings of Armenian heroes from the 1920s. Massis published his latest two volumes in 2012.

His cartoons continue to stir emotions, such as his recent drawing of President Serzh Sargsyan which depicted Armenia's third president with a comfortable girth in military fatigue and holding a sling shot. Massis continues to stir the Armenian public.

In his mid-eighties, Massis continues to draw at a prodigious rate. His latest drawings can be seen on his Facebook page and on his [website](#). He points out that while his hair, age, milieu, social circumstance and everything else around him have changed since he started drawing, the only things he claims that have not changed in his life are the pencil he holds with his right hand and the 3x4 inch size pads in his left hand, much like the calendar sheets his family and relatives gave him when he was a lad.

Massis and his wife Maro, née Der Ghougassian, were married in Beirut in 1965. They are the proud parents of two sons and four grandchildren.

