TALE OF AN ARMENIAN HYMNAL

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Vahe H. Apelian, 9 May 2011

Several years ago I purchased an Armenian hymnal on eBay from a bookseller in Turkey. It is titled 'Hayoun Yerkaraneh' (The Armenian's Hymnal) by Hmayag Aramiants. The hard-cover hymnal was printed in Istanbul in 1911. Its 318 pages are very well preserved. There is a signature on the inner page that is hard to decipher to ascertain the name of the person who, in all probability, owned the hymnal at one time.

The hymnal is dedicated to the legendary Armenian woman named Shake' who hurled herself down a precipice in Sassoon lest she be abducted by a Turk or a Kurd. There is a drawing of her with a rifle on her shoulder and a child in her lap looking down the precipice. The following is inscribed as the bottom legend of the picture: "Shake', The Immortal Heroine of Sassoon".
The dedication reads in part as follows: "Adorable Shake', you illuminated a page of our modern day history with your heroism and you elevated the honor of the Armenian Woman and of the Armenian Race. Forgive me to dedicate this modest work in your memory as a token of my deep admiration towards you and to your innocent child".
Recently, I gifted the book to Bedros Alahaidoyan, the eminent musicologist, whose life-long goal has been and continues to be the preservation of Armenian folk songs. He has single handedly salvaged the folk songs of Palou and preserved them by publishing the words and the musical notes of the songs in an exhaustive study titled *Balui (yev Taratsashrjani) Yerazhshtakan Azgagrakan Havakatso* (An Ethno-Musicological Collection of Palou and its Neighboring Areas).
Upon receipt of the book, Bedros published an article in Armenian in this year's April 24 special issue of Asbarez Daily. However, it's the naïveté in the introduction that has caught my attention.The hymnal definitely leans toward the Social Democratic Hnchak Party, as Bedros assesses and claims that 90% of the songs and the majority of the pictures relate to that Party. However, the hymnal also carries the pictures of two prominent Tashnag freedom fighters – fedayens-, Kevork Chavoush and Hrair Tjoghk. There are also pictures of armed fedayen groups. Few of the songs of the hymnal have survived the test of time and are sung to this day.

The hymnal leans as well towards international brotherhood, the cornerstone of socialism. There is a picture of Karl Max along an Armenian song titled 'Heghapokhoutiun' (Revolution). There are Armenian songs dedicated to the social brotherhood, such as titled 'Proletariat' (in Armenian characters), 'Enger Panvor' (Comrade Laborer), 'International' (in Latin characters). The hymnal also contains at least one Turkish song tiled 'Ittihad Marshe' (The March of the Ittihad) in Armenian characters reading Turkish. Bedros Alahaidoyan claims that the few pictures of the non-Armenians in the hymnal are that of noted European socialists.

The hymnal is full of pictures as claimed by the compiler, Hmayag Aramiants. Most of the pictures are of Armenian freedom fighters -fedayens- some of whom are armed. There is a full-page picture of a poster of two armed freedom fighters displaying a flag that reads 'Mah gam Azadoutiun'

(Freedom or Death). The poster header reads 'kharperti Hnchagian Voghpatsial Nahadagner' (Kharbeti Hnchak Martyrs).

All these fedayens pitted themselves against oppression. The arms they carried in the pictures were directed against the Hamidian regime. Many if not most of the songs are in praise of their bravery. How is it, I thought, Hmayag Aramiants mustered the courage to publish such a hymnal in Istanbul in 1911? The answer is in the introduction of the hymnal.

The Armenians of Constantinople celebrated the Ottoman constitution of 1908 and the establishment of the government led by the Committee of Union and Progress with unprecedented zeal. Posters appeared in Armenian and Ottoman Turkish languages proclaiming the dawn of the new era for "Liberty, Equality, and Justice". The euphoria for the new social order seems to have blinded the Armenian community in Constantinople. Even the 1909 Adana Massacre, referred as such but was not confined to Adana only, did not seem to have awakened the Armenians in the capital of the Ottoman Empire or dampened the spirits of Hmayag Aramiants.

In the introduction, Hmayag Aramiants, trusting the "new order" of "Liberty, Equality, Justice", naively notes that the Armenians living under the Hamidian regime could not have possibly chosen any other path towards social justice and could not have adopted political alignment other than manifested in the Armenian revolutionary movement. Furthermore, he notes, the self-preservation efforts of the Armenians under Hamid's Armenocidal policies are in fact manifestations of noble and obedient citizenship that were eventually manifested "on the flag dedicated to Liberty, Equality and Justice". Therefore, Hmayag concludes that "the just manifest of rightful Anger and Racial Self-Determination against the oppressive regime, cannot disturb the spiritual tranquility of free citizens, be they government employees, be they servants of laws, or just citizens".

I do not think I need to elaborate on the sinister plans that were being laid down as Hmayag was writing the introductory notes of the hymnal he published. The naïveté of Hmayag and the majority of the Armenians in opening themselves to their inner most humane needs, I believe, played in the hands of those who were planning the "final solution" and served to justify the "righteousness" of their cause. That is not to say that the absence of such overt humane outbursts by the Armenian subjects would have changed the hearts and the minds of the new masters of the Ottoman Empire to set aside their policy of "cleansing" the Empire's "heartland ".

With regard to the Armenians, including the flamboyant intellect and lawyer Krikor Zohrab, I believe, it would have been humanly impossible to imagine that extermination of such a magnitude, we have come to term as Genocide since 1943, could have possibly be fathomed and planned for execution by other human beings, be it Turks.

Over the years I have perused the hymnal many a time and wondered what happened to Hmayag Aramiants four years after publishing his hymnal. In his introduction he promises, if circumstances permit he writes, to publish a second volume of the hymnal to complete the compiling of the

Armenian revolutionary and nationalistic songs that were not included in this volume. Did he survive? I do not know of any other hymnal from Hmayag Aramiants.