UNSUNG HERO ARA SARGSYAN

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By Hovsep Daghdigian, Harvard, MA, 2 June 2016

Those who have visited Armenia have undoubtedly seen the statues of writer Hovhannes Toumanyan and composer Alexander Spendiaryan in front of Yerevan's Opera House. Their creator, painter and sculptor Ara Sargsyan, has works displayed throughout Armenia, the former Soviet Union, and the world. His sculptured panels on the Moscow Cinema on Abovian Street, near Republic Square, depict scenes from classic Armenian dramatic and cinema productions.

Sargsyan was born on April 7, 1902 in the Marvi village near Constantinople. His mother taught at the local girls' school. Despite anti-Armenian incidents in the village, she was reluctant to move as she did not want to abandon the school and the village children. Ara learned Armenian, French, and Turkish at a young age. He loved history and languages but mostly painting, and he excelled at sculpture. He modeled family members and characters from stories he read. His uncle Sarkis, a prominent architect, told Ara's mother that the boy was gifted and that she should encourage Ara's talent. In 1914, the family moved to Constantinople where he attended the Yessaian School.

Ara's father Mihran, together with Gomidas, Krikor Zohrab, and other intellectuals was arrested in 1915. Despite his young age, Ara went to the prison to try to get his father released. His father was released because only top Armenian intellectuals were being targeted at that time. Apparently, Mihran was not an important enough intellectual for the wave of arrests. Meanwhile his older brother Badrig was drafted into an army labor battalion. Instead, Ara showed up at the recruitment office. The recruiting officer rejected him due to his young age or physical size. Thereafter Ara's uncle hid Badrig from the Ottoman authorities.

After his art studies in Constantinople, at the age of 19 Ara received a scholarship to study in Rome. Saying that Rome was too expensive, he moved to Vienna to attend the Academy of Fine Arts where his acceptance test was to sculpt a statue of an elderly woman. He did so masterfully and was accepted. He finished his Master's education in 1924, well ahead of schedule. Meanwhile, at the suggestion of a friend he started displaying his work, with great success.

To backtrack, in his mid-teens, Sargsyan had become friends with Arshavir Shiragian, a member of the A.R.F. and subsequent member of Nemesis – the operation which brought to justice key members of the Ottoman Turkish government responsible for the Armenian Genocide. Shiragian was two years older than Sargsyan. Sargsyan also joined the A.R.F., becoming its youngest member. He, with others, helped people escape from the Ottoman Empire and worked to support Russia and Italy against the Ottomans.

In Europe Ara learned Greek, German, Italian, and several other languages. He also secretly traveled to Germany, though there is little documentation about his presence there. He was a Nemesis operative, helping to locate and impose justice on the organizers of the Armenian Genocide.

Although he had a promising lucrative career, in the mid-'20s, he decided to emigrate to impoverished Soviet Armenia so as to help establish the new country. Around the same time other notables also moved to Armenia including architect Alexander Tamanian, historian and archeologist Hovsep Orbeli, painter Mardiros Saryan and sculptor Yervant Kochar. But unlike them, Sargsyan was

an A.R.F. member and a Nemesis operative. Since such militant nationalists were not welcome in the U.S.S.R. so he hid his affiliation. In his memoirs, Arshavir Shiragian didn't mention Sargsyan for Sargsyan's safety.
In Armenia Sargsyan immediately made friends within the artistic community and created many works of art which were placed in Armenia and throughout the Soviet Union. He was the first artist to receive the title "Academician, Sculptor of the People". He established the the Painters Union in 1932 and served as its president until 1937. Stalin rejected some of his work and he was accused of having a Western or A.R.F. mentality. Facing pressure, he secretly sent his family to live with his wife's relatives in Georgia. The family returned after WWII. In 1945 Sargsyan established the Yerevan State Academy of Fine Arts. International PhD candidates studying art came to Armenia to defend their theses in front of Sargsyan.
In the mid-'50s the KGB learned that Sargsyan's brother, Badrig, was an A.R.F. member in Greece, head of Homenetmen (A.R.F.-affiliated athletic group), an A.R.F. Bureau member, head of the Cilician Church's education committee, and was working with the U.S. government. They interrogated Sargsyan about his connection to Badrig. He replied, "*Half of Armenians are Sargsyans. How do I know who this other guy is*?" That got him off the hook temporarily. But at an exposition in Brussels in 1959 he, by chance, met his brother whom he had not seen for close to 40 years. Their embrace was noted by the KGB and while Ara's art was free to travel, from that time on he was not.
During the Khrushchev era friends of Sargsyan approached the artist, urging him to sign a petition for the reunification of Artsakh (Karabagh) and Nakhichevan with Armenia. He refused, explaining that any petition to Soviet authorities based on nationalism would fail. "*The Armenians of Karabagh are tough; they can endure a bit longer*," he said. Meanwhile Armenians were leaving Nakhichevan. He pointed out that the unification of Nakhichevan with Armenia, based on economic issues which would benefit the entire USSR, stood a much better chance of acceptance. This should be done quickly, he stated, while the Soviets have the authority to alter the borders. Later Artsakh would also unite with Armenia. He told friends that the Soviet empire would collapse as all other empires have. Then there would be an independent Armenia, he said.
In the winter of 1969 he attended a meeting to discuss the commemoration of Lenin's 100th anniversary. While leaving the building he was either pushed or fell, breaking his leg. He spent six months in a hospital reserved for treating prominent officials. While recovering, he began working on his memoirs which he hid under his pillow. In his will he stated that when he died, he was not to be buried until an autopsy was conducted. He said, "*It's a good thing my leg got broken, because otherwise it would have been my head, and then who would know what I did in my youth. Anyway, I wrote my will*."
The day before his scheduled release from hospital he received permission to travel abroad. The following day he died. An autopsy was performed by noted surgeons Dr. Antranig Tchagharyan and Dr. Badalyan. They found nothing wrong. Tchagharyan, a friend of Sargsyan's, exclaimed "*Ara, you are healthy, get up!*" A blood analysis similarly revealed nothing wrong.
Afterwards it was discovered that key sections of his memoirs had been removed.

According to some people the KGB had a hand in his death. Because he was an honored artist who had educated hundreds of students, organized numerous cultural organizations, and as an artist whose work was displayed throughout the Soviet Union, arresting Sargsyan or revealing that he was a member of the ARF and of Nemesis would have been a huge embarrassment to the KGB and Soviet authorities. Instead, it was decided to orchestrate his "death" and keep his background secret. His funeral was elaborate. He lay in state at Yerevan's Opera House.

His works reflect the experiences of his youth. They focus on rebirth but with an element of enduring sadness as well. He had promised to donate his time and talent to sculpt the long wall at the Genocide Museum at Tsitsernakabert. Each time I visit the museum from now on, the wall will remind me of the national and artistic contributions, the dedication, and the courage of Ara Sargsyan. The Ara Sargsyan and Hagop Kojarian Home/Museum" (70 Pushkin St. in Yerevan) has reproductions of Sargsyan's works, but nothing related about his Nemesis activities. The museum director, Anna Sargsyan, is Ara's granddaughter.