DAYE--A KESSABTSI LEGEND REMEMBERED

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Vahe H. Apelian, Columbus OH, 2 August 2010

The Beirut branch of the Kessab Educational Association – Kessabi Oussoumnasisrats – published a pictorial album, in 1955, depicting the daily lives and endeavors of the Kessabtsis as they carved a living in the then desolate area at the foot of their beloved mountain – Gassios Ler. The late Archbishop Terenig Poladian is credited to have been the main thrust behind the publication of this memorial album, which to this day stands as the best pictorial presentation of Kessab before civilization with all its conveniences encroached it. The memorial album is dedicated to the famed Kessabtsi – *Daye**. The late Archbishop whose adult life was cut short by the stabbing of a deranged seminary student – eulogized *Dayen** in the album.

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My recollections of *Dayen* is through my father who, during a family conversation, said that *Dayen* always advocated keeping a rifle at home. *Dayen* would then elaborate in a light mood and add: "if your wife and friends will not be impressed by the site of your rifle hanging on the wall in your house, your enemies will think twice to dare break into your house."

This article may well be the very first in English about him. The Kessabtsis this year celebrate the centennial of the Kessab Oussoumnassirats (Kessab Educational Association--KEA). He was one of the founders of KEA United School in 1924 and physically worked to make the building a reality. I thought it is fitting that *Dayen* be presented to our younger generation who may have remained oblivious to his legend. I owe Haigaz Terterian, his son-in-law, the information I gathered for this article.

Daye, understandably, was not his name or his surname. His Saghdejian parents had baptized him Ovsia. His contemporaries however named him *Daye*, much like the contemporaries of the beloved Catholicos of All Armenians Mkhrditch Khrimian called the Catholicos *Hayreg***. Kessabtsis still relate to Ovsia Saghdejian as *Daye*. For some nowadays calling a person *Daye* may sound odd. After all it is a Turkish word and it means uncle. However, for the Kessabtis who long lived under Ottoman rule and adopted many Turkish words into their dialect, the word to them was then as Armenian as the word *Hayreg* is. Both of these names were made in reference to the all caring, selfless advocate the

people saw in these men for their inner most needs and concerns for safety, security and for dignified living.

Ovsia Saghdejian was born in 1887 in a non-descript house in Kaladouran, the coastal village of Kessab, where the Saghdejian family had their own hamlet known as Saghdejlek. Not much is known of his childhood and youth. The only certain thing about his childhood is that he never attended school. That's the way it was then for many toiling under the oppressive Ottoman regime. It is known that he learned rudimentary Armenian writing in America so that he would be able to write letters to his parents and relatives in Kessab, without asking others to write on his behalf. The other certainty of his early adult life is that he left for America before the 1915 Armenian Genocide. However, it is not known what compelled him, as a young adult, to leave his parents and relatives behind and emigrate to America.

His life as, we know it, for all practical purposes started in 1917. The previous thirty years of his life are lost in obscurity. We become aware of him when he volunteered from America and enlisted in the Armenian Legion under French command. On September 19, 1918, he took part in the famed Arara battle on the Palestinian front, where the French commanding officers credited the bravery of the Armenian combatants for being instrumental in defeating the Turkish army. Twenty-three Armenian volunteer fighters were killed in the battle. He continued to serve in the Armenian Legion under French command. However upon witnessing the French government renege the promises it had made to the Armenians for a secure homeland in Cilicia, he left the Legion and with his compatriot Missak Guiragossian returned to Kessab and took refuge in his ancestral village Kaladouran and organized a defensive force consisting largely of the former legionnaires who had the training and the materiel for self defense. The group undertook the security of Kessab and made a point of ceaselessly appearing in different locations at different periods of the day, but mostly under the cover of the night, leaving the impression that armed Armenian forces were stationed throughout Kessab safeguarding the security of the inhabitants who had survived the Armenian Genocide and were returning to their ancestral homes to start their lives anew.

In the aftermath of the First World War there was no centralized government in the region. The Ottoman Empire had crumbled and the Middle East, as we know today, did not exist yet. To organize their communal life and secure their safety, the Kessabtsis established their own *de facto* republic with elected officials heading an executive committee, a police force, a judicial committee and even operated a prison. The self-proclaimed republic that oversaw the daily lives of the Kessabtis lasted three years. During this period Ovsia Saghdejian was not elected to any office and yet for the Kessabtsis he personalized the spirit and the will that safeguarded and made this self-governing entity a functioning reality in Kessab. Throughout the three-year period, Kessab not only lived a secure life, but also provided refuge to people from the local Alawi and Greek minorities. It is thus that the legend of the *Daye* was born. His name, Ovsia Saghdejian, henceforth started to fade into oblivion while the stature of *Daye* started to emerge larger than life. The late Archbishop Terenig

Poladian wrote in his eulogy of *Daye* that the Kessabtsis noted with confidence that as long as *Dayen* was alive and well, no Turk would dare attack Kessab.

His compassion for the welfare of the Genocide survivors was not only manifested in his fiercely independent will to resort to arms for self-defense. He also established an orphanage and took care of over 30 young orphaned boys and girls. He resorted to every means to fund the orphanage. These efforts didn't stop him from setting his arms aside and roam from village to village, asking for sustenance whenever the funds he received became insufficient to take care of his orphans. It is also said that he acted as a matchmaker and found suitable mates for many of his orphans, and he married the last orphan.

In the late 1922, the French government took over the command of the region and dissolved the local self-proclaimed governing entity of Kessab. The French authorities also issued an arrest warrant for *Dayen* on the allegation that he was spearheading desertion activities from the French army. During this period *Dayen* was compelled to live a semi-nomadic life in Kessab always entrusting his fellow Kessabtsis his whereabouts.

In 1929 Ovsia married Marie Adourian who, as noted, was the last person of his orphanage. Marie and her mother were the sole survivors of their immediate and extended families and had managed to return to Kessab after an ordeal which, by popular claim, had lasted three years and three months since that fateful day in June 1915 when they were uprooted and returned in autumn to face the bitter winter ahead without being prepared for it. Marie's mother died soon after their return and Marie found refuge at the orphanage. In spite of their noted age difference they established a loving and nurturing family and raised 4 daughters to adulthood--Khatoun, Rahel, Manoushag and Yerjanouhe. Their last daughter is named after their first born who died of a freak accident at the age of three. In time their daughters married, raised their own families and added 13 grandchildren to *Daye*'s legacy.

After marrying, Ovisa settled down as a family man. He henceforth became an all-compassionate community leader. *Dayen* did not oppose the 1946-1947 repatriation to Soviet Armenia, but decided not to move. He had innate mistrust of the communists and did not support the 1920 Soviet take over of the short-lived first republic of Armenia. As an outcome of his stand no member of the Saghedijain clan left for Soviet Armenia.

He was tall, well built and had a commanding presence and was calm and composed with an enlightening spirit. No one had been a witness to his anger or fear during the inordinate pressure he faced in organizing round the clock defense of Kessab and in action. He was of modest means but was a much sought after companion and host. For all practical purposes he was illiterate and yet the Armenian literary titans of the day, such as Nicole Aghpalian and others, eagerly sought his company. He was a natural-born raconteur. He did not take part in the Armenian politics. He was a populist. However, many sought his advice. He was self reliant to the end and if he ever asked for a

favour it was for someone else. His requests on behalf of others were never turned down. For a person who never commanded a position, or elected to an office or had any formal education, he commanded an unusual degree of respect from individuals and organizations alike. He was a natural-born leader. Over time, Kessabtsi youth idolized him, even though he was bed- ridden in the last four years of his life.

On his tombstone it is carved that he died in 1953. Indeed, Ovsia Saghdejian died then, but the legend of the *Dayen* continued to live among his contemporaries and the generation that followed. *Dayen*'s legacy remains tied with Kessab Armenian history.

Note:

* The word *Daye* is used for "uncle" and *Dayen* as "the uncle".
** *Hayreg* is an endearing Armenian term for father.