

DISCOVERING AURORA MARDIGIAN

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Anahid Toutikian-Meymarian, Los Angeles, CA, 7 March 2015


Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian**

Sometime in the early 1990s, "Ungerouhie" (Friend) Yevgine Papazian, an elderly member of the Armenian Relief Society's Anahid Chapter of Greater Los Angeles, told me about a granny by the name of Aurora [Mardigian](#) (Mardiganian) who lived alone in Van Nuys and was in need of help. She also told me that Aurora had formerly lived in New York. 

A few days later Yevgine and I paid Aurora a visit. We knocked at her door and after a while a granny dressed in woolen clothes let us in. We passed through a narrow hallway into a fairly large room. We were astonished to see the room was full of cardboard boxes, as if she had arrived from New York only yesterday, although she had been living in Los Angeles for fifteen years. There was hardly any room to move around. Next to the entrance of the room there was a chair and a desk. Next to them, in large letters, there was a telephone number and on the wall was the calendar of the New York Prelacy.

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We sat over the cardboard boxes next to the entrance. On one of the walls there was a picture of a tall man with a teenage boy. The granny told us that the man was her son Martin and the teenager her grandson.

Granny Aurora had a likeable face with a smooth skin and a pair of black and expressive eyes. She spoke in a soothing and impeccable Armenian, although her accent was different from ours. I asked

her where was she born. She said she was from Chemeshgazak, a town about 20 miles from Kharpert.

I asked her who took care of her. She said her son visited her once a week; brought her necessities and left soon after.

"With the aid of my cane I used to walk to the grocery store on Burbank Street and purchase groceries. I am not able to do it any more."

"*Mayrig* (Mother), call me, and I will gladly bring to you what you need," I said.

We became friends. Every now and then she would call me and ask for grapes, pomegranate, her special brand of cheese and the like. One day I mustered the courage to suggest that she allow me to move the cardboard boxes and let us furnish the room for a more comfortable and pleasant living. She refused. "Let us open the windows so that you'd have sunshine in the room," I then suggested. She refused again. The sun would shine outside but we would be sitting in a nearly dark room.

Another time, a lady who lived in the same building stopped when she saw I was knocking at *Mayrig's* door. She had hardly finished telling me that I was knocking at the wrong door because no one lived in that apartment, when the granny opened the door to her neighbor's astonishment.

Granny Aurora had fallen from her bed the night before. She was bruised but she had not fractured any bones. For the very first time since meeting her I entered her bedroom to lower her bed. At that very moment she pulled a bundle and unwrapped a book. The book was *Ravished Armenia*.

- "*Mayrig*, let me borrow the book. I will read it and return to you in no time," I promised.

- "I cannot give it to you," she said. "Already people came and took everything away. Only this book remained," she said.

I was able to secure a copy of that book in microfilm in one of the public libraries. I could not believe what I read in the book: maybe one of mankind's worst crimes which were perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks against the Armenians.

Her baptismal name was Arshaluys Mardigian. She was born in 1901 in Chemeshgazak to a wealthy family. The Mardigians were one of the best-known and respected names in Chemeshgazak. Arshaluys was a vibrant girl with long black hair, expressive eyes, with a sunny disposition much like her name. She was the second eldest among her siblings. She had an older sister, a younger brother and two younger sisters.

On Easter morning in 1915 her father promised her that the following year he would enroll her either at a Constantinople or Paris school. In addition to attending the American College of Marsovan, she was privately tutored at home. Not long after the conversation with her father Turkish gendarmes entered the room to take her to the local pasha's harem. Her father sent the gendarmes packing.

Shortly after the incident, the deportations and the massacres of the Armenians began in full force. Her father and her 15 years old brother Boghos were killed almost right away. From April 1915 to November 1917 Arshaluys witnessed the killing of the rest of her family. She survived by taking refuge in a series of towns--Arapgir, Malatia, Diyarbekir, Urfa, Mush, Yerzenga, ending up in Erzeroum at an opportune time. The Russian army was advancing into the city.

In Erzeroum she took refuge at the doorstep of a building that carried the American flag. Exhausted, she passed away at the entrance. The house was the residence of American missionary Dr. F.W. MacCallum who took her under his protection. Gen. Antranig happened to be in town also. Having heard of her story, he visited her. The Armenian hero complimented her for her courage and took his parents' wedding ring from his finger and slipped it on her finger telling her to tell her story when she landed in America. The American Relief Organization sponsored her travel and on November 5, 1917 she arrived in New York.

A New York Armenian family took her in. Not long after, Harvey Gates, a writer, asked her to tell him of her experiences during the genocide. The Armenian family had her narration translated into English. In 1918 *Ravished Armenia* was published. The book was reprinted in 1919 as *Auction of Souls*.

✘ In November 1918 *Ravished Armenia* was made into a film. Gates and his wife, Eleanor, changed her name to Aurora and put her on stage. From 1919 to 1920 Aurora Mardigian, as the author of the book, the star of the movie and as a witness to the Armenian horrors, was presented to the public whenever the movie was shown--in the United States and Britain. She became an instant star. People wanted to see her in person as much as see the movie. Screenwriter Gates and producer Col. William N. Selig became the prime beneficiaries of the profits generated from the movie. By 1920 Aurora was worn out. Physically and emotionally drained, she refused to make further public appearances.

She married in 1929--after overcoming her long-time aversion to the company of men. She tried to live a normal life away from the limelight. The couple had a son, Martin Hovanian.

I met Aurora when she was 91-years-old. Her daughter-in-law was not Armenian. Relations between them had soured to a point that her daughter-in-law did not let her grandchildren visit her. Over the years, people who had been interested in her and had visited her, gotten what they wanted, and had

moved on. Joy and contentment had long ago abandoned her. The fear that that she would be harmed had never left her. She lived alone, praying, reading the bible and the periodicals she received from the Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church in New York.

One day, when I visited her, I found Aurora Mayrig very weak and withdrawn. It was obvious she had not slept well the night before. She had had a nightmare. She told me that the "Turks had cut the rope". In the movie there is a scene where Aurora escapes from the harem by jumping from the roof of a building. But instead of landing on the next roof, Aurora fell 20 feet and broke her leg. The movie producers continued shooting despite her pain.

Aurora Mayrig was meticulous in grooming herself. That day I noticed that she was not her normal self. She seemed too weak even to wash her hair.

Not long after, on January 3, 1994, she moved to the Ararat Nursing Facility in Mission Hills. I continued to visit her. I found her sitting on a wheel chair, withdrawn and not taking notice of her surroundings or participating in the social activities the social workers were conducting. She was in no mood to engage in conversation. That became my last visit.

On January 17, 1994 earthquake damaged our Los Angeles home. Busy attending to the repairs and certain that Aurora was in safe hands, I had not visited her for some time.

Months had passed by when I heard that she had died. I went to the Ararat Nursing Facility to find out the circumstances of her death. "Who was she?" Mrs. Evelyn Jambazian, the nursing director, asked me. Then she said that the only thing she remembered of Aurora was that one day a limousine had stopped in front of the facility and out had come a granny--Granny Aurora.

I smiled. Of course, she was Aurora Mardigian, the one-time movie star. If others did not pay her attention, it's fair that she treated herself, I thought. Mrs. Jambazian told me that Aurora had passed away not long after. She became ill on February 5 and was taken to the Saint Cross Hospital where she had passed away.

Mrs. Araksi Haroutunian, who for many years had attended to her as well, I tried to find out where she was buried so that we could visit her grave, offer a prayer, place a wreath and burn incense in her memory. However, we could not get any information. The hospital would not tell us because we were not related to her. Her son's telephone number had been cut off; we did not know any of her relatives to get the information we were looking for.

We found out that we had to go to Norwalk where personal public records are kept. My husband and Hagop Arshagouny went there and after searching unearthed the following.

Aurora Mardigian had died on Feb. 6, 1994. Her remains were cremated in the U.S. County Hospital public crematorium. Two individuals unknown to us had witnessed the affidavit. Her ashes? No one knew where they were scattered.

The news was heartbreaking. The one-time Arshaluys Mardigian of Chemashgazak had ended up not having a grave. What remained of her? Sweet memories and her book that Kourken Sarkissian translated into Armenian in 1995. In 1997 a new edition of her book appeared, edited by Anthony Slide. Plans are underway in Argentina to have the book translated into Spanish.

From Arshaluys Mardigian and from all those who became victims of the Armenian Genocide another major 'relic' also remained: their just cause. The world may disavow the Genocide of the Armenians. Eventually we will prevail because our cause is just.

There is controversy regarding Aurora's family name. Some quote as Mardiganian and others as Mardigian.-Ed

