'GNA MERIR, YEKUR SIREM'

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Raffi Bedrosyan, Armenian Weekly, 22 January 2018

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Born in Adiyaman in southeastern Turkey (former Cilicia), he had left for France in 1980 to avoid persecution of the military dictatorship in Turkey. In 1990, he moved to Armenia to join the Artsakh War effort. Sarkis participated in the liberation of the Karvajar (Kalbajar) region, which unites Artsakh and Armenia. A photo of him with an elderly woman became a symbol of the war.

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The real story was as reported by a French journalist who accompanied the Armenian forces during the campaign, depicting Sarkis with an 80-year-old Azeri woman, Shaikha Hanum. She was left behind, along with other elderly Azeri women and children in the Karvajar district, when all the able-bodied Azeris had fled ahead of the advancing Armenian forces. Her son was a police commander in the district. Sarkis was in charge of taking care of the Azeri civilians, and eventually providing safe passage for them to Gandzak (Kirovabad). Armenians took such good care of the civilians that Shaikha Hanum stated she loved Sarkis more than his cowardly son who had abandoned her. On the

same day that this story and photo was published in France, a fake story was posted in the Turkish daily Milliyet using the same photo. Sarkis was described as an Azeri soldier rescuing his Azeri grandmother from the Armenian enemy.

After the war, he became politically active and a fierce critic of corruption in Armenia, particularly of the oligarchs who had stakes in the government and in the Armenian Church, expressing his views eloquently and articulately during frequent television appearances. Sarkis and I met and became fast friends when I took groups of hidden Armenians from Turkey to Armenia. He was fascinated by this new Armenian reality. He would follow our tour itinerary and meet us at museums and churches that we visited, becoming a volunteer guide, counselor, mentor, and lifelong friend to our "once hidden" Armenians.

When he was struck by cancer this past summer, he had to move to Lyon to receive the required treatment in a race against time. He needed a place to stay during the treatments and was in dire financial need. Our numerous pleas for some financial assistance from heads of Armenian organizations, influential or politically active Armenians in France or Europe, unfortunately fell on deaf ears. Ultimately, a fundraising campaign was organized in Canada to send emergency funds to Sarkis and family, with a few anonymous donors from Turkey also contributing. He passed away disappointed and dejected by the apathy of his fellow Armenians.

And now, as soon as he passed away, the accolades and eulogies by Armenian Diaspora leaders rise to the sky for the "Artsakh war hero." We have a saying in Armenian: *"Gna merir, yekur sirem"* ("Once you die, then you're loved"). Perhaps this attitude is unique to Armenians, because I cannot find such a cruel yet poignant proverb in any other language.

I remember a similar situation with my other hero friend, Hrant Dink. He was disliked and heavily criticized by most Diaspora Armenian leaders for his readiness for dialogue with Turks. We were chatting after the first Ottoman Armenian conference held in Istanbul Bilgi University in Sept. 2005, where he and other speakers were pelted with eggs, tomatoes, and coins. I had suggested that perhaps a similar conference can be organized somewhere in U.S. or Europe, by inviting both Turkish and Armenian historians. He smiled bitterly: "Raffi, you would have more problems with the Diaspora than I have here with the Turks." Unfortunately, Hrant became a unanimously accepted hero only after he was shot dead.

In the last few months of their lives, both Sarkis and Hrant felt alone and abandoned in their struggles, one fighting the ever-increasing cancer eating at him from the inside, and the other fighting the ever-increasing death threats eating at him from the outside.

I hope Armenians can adopt a new proverb by reversing the order of the four words: *'Yekur sirem, gna merir"* ("Let me love you, then you may die").

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