

# "HAYRIG HAYRIG"

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✘ **Vahe H. Apelian**, Loveland OH, 27 August 2015

Recently I read "HAYRIG HAYRIG" (ՀԱՅՐԻԿ ՀԱՅՐԻԿ) that shed a lot of light about the man, ✘ Mgrdich Khrimian, who would be known in Armenian history more by his nickname 'Hayrig' implying an endearing and concerned father. Ara Aginian, who has passed away in 1976, wrote the book, which was published as supplement to an Armenian newspaper. Aras Publishing published the edition I read, in 2004 in Istanbul.

The book, which is a biographical sketch, begins from the time sixteen-years-old Mgrdich set foot in Istanbul as another migrant and ends with his death at the age of eighty-seven in Echmiadzin. Some of the conversations noted in the book are commonly accepted to have taken place but the overall narration is likely partly figments of the author's imagination to give cohesion to the story and make it readable.

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Reading the book it becomes evident that Khrimian stood apart from the crowd. From his days as a teenage migrant in Istanbul to an aged pontiff, he attracted people by his physical attributes. He was tall, handsome and had expressive blue eyes. Even the eminent British historian H.F. B. Lynch, who met him at his inauguration as catholicos, commented to that effect. His endowments could have helped any ambitious person to ascend the social scale. He, on the other hand, loved to be with the common every day folks and remained totally oblivious to social status and to wealth. He gave away the salary he received as a high placed official of the Ottoman Empire often time rendering him penniless.

The upper class Armenians of Istanbul who wanted to rub shoulder with the Patriarch who sat at the apex of their social order, were dismayed at him visiting and staying with the Armenian migrants from the interior of the country who did menial jobs and lived in the communal housing (*khans*). When they vehemently objected to his hitherto unheard behavior that should have no place with a

sitting Patriarch, they said. He dismissed them saying, "It should not have happened, it happened. You had not seen it before, you saw it now". Five years after his resignation as the Patriarch, his successor Nerses II Varjabedian, appointed him in 1878 to head the Armenian delegation to the Berlin Conference even though Khrimian did not speak much of Turkish let alone other foreign languages and had no administrative position. He was chosen to lead the delegation because of his forceful personality and imposing physical stature and the loyalty he commanded.

Mkrtich Khrimian was born in 1821 (1820?) to a well-to-do family of merchants who may have originated from Crimea, *Khrim* in Armenian. His life consisted of two distinct phases. He spent the first 34 years of his life as a layperson in search for his niche. His first sixteen years were spent in Van with his parents and with the local priests learning how to read and write Armenian, a rarity at the time in the interior of the country. He came to Istanbul at the age of sixteen in quest of knowledge while the other migrants looked for work to get by. Pretty soon he established a reputation as a promising, out of the ordinary young man. Not long after his arrival he became the protégé of an Armenian Amira who hosted him in his opulent residence and appointed him as a tutor to his two children and had him placed as a teacher in an Armenian school.

His stay in Istanbul lasted four years. He returned home to find out that his father had passed away. He tried some business ventures that were financially disastrous. Fortunately his well-to-do family could absorb the losses. He reluctantly gave in to his mother's wishes and married the girl chosen for him, as was the customs of the day. He became a loving father to his daughter and through her felt bonded to his spouse with whom he shared nothing much. His wanderlust in quest of knowledge eventually took the better of him and he left home embarking on a pilgrimage to get connected to his nation's roots. He visited Etchmiadzin and other historical Armenian sites, wrote, returned to Istanbul and had his first book published through the generosity of Amira Ayvazian in memory of the Amira's son whom Khrimian had tutored. He returned home after an absence that had lasted seven years to find out that his wife, daughter and mother had passed away. It is then that he had a revelation that celibate priesthood is his calling and the best venue to enlighten his people who indeed lived not only in abject poverty but also in ignorance.

He remained a maverick during the second phase of his life as a celibate priest even though he ascended the hierarchy all the way to its apex as Catholicos of All Armenians. Instead of finding in the church the instruments and the support he needed to help him enlighten the Armenian masses he found the entrenched clergy vehemently objecting to his efforts along the Armenian landlords who opposed him. It became an uphill battle for him to establish the first printing press among the Armenians in their Anatolian heartland. He became a thorn and a rose, arousing heightened sentiments towards him either way. A segment of Armenians conspired against him and plotted two failed assassinations. They also instigated the Turkish authorities against him. But he won the hearts of the people at large, who started calling him *Hayrig*, an endearing moniker he cherished a lot. It is through their insistence that he ascended the ecclesiastical ranks always remaining true to them.

Six years after the ratification of the Armenian National Constitution by the Ottoman High Porte, he was elected the Patriarch of Constantinople in 1869. Not long after his election he made amending the constitution his prime agenda. The hundred thousand or so Armenians in Istanbul commanded three times more representation in the National Assembly than the entire Armenians in the interior of the country, he estimated to be three millions. A plausible figure given that Hamidian, Adana massacres along with the rampant usurpation of Armenian lives and property had not yet run its course decimating the people to two million at the dawn of the Genocide.

He faced a vehement opposition by who's who. Unable to amend the constitution to have a fairer representation of his flock to have their grievances heard and acted upon, he resigned in 1873 but continued to remain a moral authority and an intellect to reckon with. With the collusion of Armenians, the Sultan's Sublime Porte eventually had him banished on a "permanent pilgrimage" to Jerusalem in 1890. To the outrage of the people, in Jerusalem his spiritual brethren treated him more as pariah in his own home. Yet everyone, foe and friend alike, knew that they were dealing with an out of the ordinary individual who commanded an unwavering loyalty and esteem by the people. When the seat of the Catholicos of All Armenians became vacant with the death of his predecessor, he was unanimously elected Catholicos of All Armenians in 1892. His move from Jerusalem to Etchmiadzin took months. There was not a community that did not want to host the newly elected pontiff on his way to occupy the throne set by Gregory the Illuminator.

His reign as the Supreme Head of the Armenian Church may be the crowning years of his long service to his people. He might have been mellowed a bit. The people at large might have understood the person more. Those years proved to be a harmonious years between the shepherd and his flock from all walks of life. His reputation as the champion of the Armenian nation was further cemented when the aging Eagle, as he himself would liken to one, stood his grounds against the orders of the almighty Tsar to have the Armenian Church properties nationalized and he won.

He was a prolific writer and publisher. He established the first printing press in Western Armenia and started publishing a journal titled *Artzvi Vasburagan (Eagle of Van)* in 1855. In 1863 he started a similar journal titled *Artzvik Darno (Eagle of Daron)*. Along with these journals, the book I read credits him with fifteen literary titles spanning from 1849 to 1909. Like Khatchadour Apovian (1809-1848) in Eastern Armenia, he wrote in local Western Armenian vernacular peppered with literary and classical Armenian. He had special reverence to Armenian authors. When the young poet Bedros Tourian, who had dedicated a poem to him as the newly elected Patriarch of Constantinople, died at the age of twenty-one, his followers wanted a music band play accompanying his coffin to fulfill the wishes of the young poet. It was unheard of to have a music band in a burial procession, so the Church did not give them permission to do so. In desperation they appealed to Patriarch Khrimian who famously told them that he too would not give them his permission, but he would forgive them for doing so.

Khrimian Hayrik to this day is referenced more as the messenger of the famous speech he delivered

in 1878 upon return as the head of the Berlin Armenian delegation. The speech remains known in Armenian history as the "Iron (or Paper) Ladle Speech". He likened his experience at the Berlin Conference to a feast where the attendants with their iron ladles took their share from the favored Armenian dish *Herissa*. He, on the other hand, was carrying a paper ladle and thus could not scoop anything for himself even though he was the taller and the more imposing among the delegates. He urged the people to arm themselves and to gift each other arms and only arms.

To this day it is not uncommon to read that he was a revolutionary citing his famous speech. Reading this book has made me realize that such an interpretation is way too simplistic. Revolutionaries aim to topple an existing order and have it replaced with an ideologically more conducive one. To draw a parallel to modern parlance, Khrimian was more of an advocate of the people's right to bear arms, a holy grail in the American Constitution, and not an advocate of revolution. He never advocated raising arms against the State be it Sultan's or the Tsar's. He had no vision to have these states replaced.

Members of the oldest Armenian political party, *Hnchag* Party, tried to entice him to work with them when he was in the Western Armenian homeland. He refused to deal with them. The Tashang party was established in Tiflis in 1890, two years before his ascendancy as Catholicos. The party stood with him against the nationalization of church property but it is not likely that there was an ideological parity between him and the party. He was and remained a clergyman at heart safeguarding the institution that was the Armenian Church. He wanted to ameliorate the lot of the Armenian people through the established orders. The concepts of free and independent Armenia or of social-isms were alien to him. All he wanted was to assure Armenians against unlawful usurpation. When the Sultan's Sublime Port and the European Powers proved to be unable or unwilling to assure the sanctity of their labor, honor, lives and property of the Armenian people, he appealed to them to take matters in their own hands and assure those rights for themselves by themselves.

He passed away on October 27, 1907 and is buried at Etchmiadzin.

The book "HAYRIG HAYRIG" made for a fascinating reading and portrayed a way of life and living the Genocide would end up obliterating.

