

HAYRIKYAN NOVEL WILL DELIGHT READERS

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The recently published English translation (by the late Aris Sevag) of Paruyr Hayrikyan's autobiographical novel, *On a Quest of the Light*, a tragic love letter and memoir, had a riveting effect on me. The story is so raw, tender, and innocent that I read it in one swoop.

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The recently published English translation (by the late Aris Sevag) of Paruyr Hayrikyan's autobiographical novel, *On a Quest of the Light*, a tragic love letter and memoir, had a riveting effect on me. The story is so raw, tender, and innocent that I read it in one swoop.

I became acquainted with the name "Paruyr Hayrikyan" in early 1988, courtesy of *The New York Times*. The year before I had started to compile newspaper and magazine clippings and place them in chronological order in a scrapbook. By 1987-1988 the scrapbook had filled up quickly as a result of regular coverage, especially by the *Times'* Moscow bureau chief, Bill Keller, of massive demonstrations in Soviet Armenia. The protests initially covered the republic's alarming environmental situation. They then transformed into chants in condemnation of the Azerbaijani mob pogroms of the Armenian minority population of Sumgait. This was followed by demonstrations in affirmation of the right to self-determination and national liberation of Artsakh, and a concomitant unification with Armenia. The demonstrations grew larger as chanting people poured into the streets.

Significantly, the first ever mass protests in front of a KGB headquarters occurred in Armenia during the summer of 1988 demanding the release of long-time dissident and political prisoner, Paruyr

Hayrikyan, who had been imprisoned earlier that year over trumped up charges. The demonstrations' demanding Hayrikyan's release snowballed into an international call for justice, with fellow dissidents from throughout the Soviet Union, led by physicist Andrei Sakharov and his half-Armenian wife Yelena Bonner, joining President Ronald Reagan and mainly Republican members of the U.S Congress. This unusual grouping put significant pressure on then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev to release the Armenian dissident. Although Hayrikyan was soon released, he was temporarily deported from Armenia, for where he and his non-violent, dissident colleagues had struggled since the late 1960s.

My fascination with the *Times'* coverage devoted to Armenia's history-breaking demonstrations – which helped precipitate the dissolution of the Soviet Union – soon shifted to disbelief when the earthquake on Dec.7, 1988 struck northern Armenia. It wasn't just the *Times* now devoting space to Armenia, but the world media.

Hayrikyan and fellow leaders and foot-soldiers of the underground National United Party-NUP (*Azgayin Miyatsyal Gusagtsutyun*), established in 1966 by Haykaz Khachatrian, Shahen Harutunian, and Stepan Zatikian (the latter executed in 1978 by the Soviet authorities) and active throughout the 70s and early to mid-80s, were the catalysts for the 1988 mass demonstrations in Armenia calling for its unification with Artsakh. Despite the high cost of sacrificing their lives, their families, and their health, the spark lit by Hayrikyan and his colleagues could never be put out judging by the groundswell of humanity raising its voice at the 1988 protests for peace, unity and justice.

The spark was lit to the public's growing awakening towards a national consciousness, which had permeated the hearts and minds of the masses at the April 24, 1965 demonstrations in Yerevan demanding, for the first time, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by Soviet authorities amidst chants of "*mer hogheruh, mer hogheruh*" – as well, with respect to the National United Party's successful "Ringing Slap" operation almost a decade later. The latter resulted in burning Lenin's large portrait in Yerevan's central square while politburo member Andrei Gromyko was visiting Armenia, and for which the author devotes detailed attention in his letter/memoir, *On a Quest of the Light*.

The book, however, depicts an additional "spark," involving two free-spirited young adults, whose attraction to each another grows over time. The author is the protagonist, while the studious and innocent Lusineh is the heroine. Their mutual physical attraction takes sufficient strides to understand each another, learn about each other's likes and dislikes, and develop a sense of trust and concern for the other. Lusineh initially feels hesitant to introduce her *hamakursetsis* to her new friend, who wisely keeps his distance from Lusineh's classmates in the early going. As soon as the couple's bonds begin to solidify, however, Yerevan transforms into an ocean of adventure for the couple: they attend concerts, although usually with a third person on hand; the protagonist composes poetry and music. Vignettes of his songs, with themes of love and loss, appear throughout the author's letter to Lusineh, and emit freshness and purity amidst a decaying society

swept in cronyism, fear-mongering, and repression.

Unbeknownst to the heroine yet sensed by the protagonist, every move that Lusineh and her beau make in the nooks and crannies of Yerevan are under surveillance by the KGB. At the time of their courtship, the protagonist has already been imprisoned twice (1969 and 1973), and knows the extent to which interrogators will abuse their authority, in order to quash any semblance of Armenian national consciousness.

While the author tends to be punctual during rendezvous with Lusineh, to the heroine's surprise and - on one occasion - dismay, some dates fail to materialize or occur later than scheduled, due to the protagonist's focus on the meticulous coordination and execution of the NUP's underground activities.

Throughout 1973 and 1974, Armenia's security services, with assistance from their counterparts in Moscow, begin putting the pieces together to dismantle the leadership of the NUP. While the protagonist's friends are arrested, interrogated, and ultimately convicted in sham trials, our hero eludes his minders until he takes a trip to Moscow in 1973. There he meets fellow Soviet dissident leaders, who successfully share information about the plight of imprisoned Armenian activists with the international community. Unbeknownst to the protagonist, the meetings are surveilled by the secret services, which end up sharing the "gold mine" of information with Armenia's "kid-in-a-candy-jar" KGB. Upon the protagonist's return to Armenia and subsequent reinstatement as a student at Yerevan's Polytechnic University, the winds of evil blow away the hero's efforts to pursue a higher education and his *White and Delicate Bird of Love*, paraphrasing one of the author's songs. The protagonist attempts to reveal his identity to Lusineh during what ends up becoming their last meeting, late at night at the heroine's home. But it's not meant to be. Our hero rationalizes his decision to keep things mum out of concern for her safety.

As if four years in the gulags was not enough, the security services, prosecutors, and judges of the Brezhnev and Andropov eras sentence the hero to 13 years of imprisonment and hard labor. And while the remembrance of his love gives him the willpower and stamina to endure the abuses, isolation, and heavy labor, the hero would have likely had an unpleasant demise - like his fellow dissident friends- had it not been for his guardian angel, his soul mate, his future wife - the indefatigable Elena Sirotenko - who stands by and with him for several years, who moves into a Siberian town near the labor camp where her love toils, during his 13 years in captivity.

Hayrikyan's letter to Lusineh, *On a Quest of the Light*, is a must read for people from all walks of life, be they lovers of literature, history buffs, political animals, or civic-minded activists protesting for just and noble causes. While the author is ultimately unable to find the personification of this light, his dear Lusineh, later in life, there is no doubt that his sacrifice and struggle for independence sparked a new light for his nation, a light that has faced the vicissitudes of statehood since 1991, yet keeps aflame proudly, like our ancient and majestic mountain, Ararat.

