HOW WAS AKHTAMAR SAVED

Posted on March 6, 2015 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

As told by the great Kurdish writer **Yaşar Kemal**
Translated from Turkish by **Oşin Elagöz**, Istanbul, March 2015

We are in the lowland of Diyarbakir. The lowland is full of nomad families; they don't know where they are headed. I wrote their story too. After wandering many villages, I finished my work in Diyarbakir and I moved on to Van.

I was travelling from Tug to Van in a ferry. I didn't know if my interviews had been published in newspapers or not. On the deck, in front of me sat a military officer. From the badge on his collar I determined that he was a physician. Near him were about 20 'Cumhuriyet' newspapers. I saw my name on the newspaper and asked: "Captain, may I look at your newspaper?" He was surprised to see me so excited. I explained him that I would like to see if my article had been published.

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He asked: "You are Yasar Kemal, aren't you?"

"Yes," I answered and attacked to his newspaper.

My notes had been published under the title "Notes from Anatolia". I read them all.

The captain was an educated man. He was surprised to see me so excited. I explained that this was my first attempt at journalism and it was very important to see my interviews published. Otherwise, I would leave everything and go to Ercish to live with my relatives. But now I think I have succeeded in my job, I told him.

The captain said: "Great. It is a good luck to meet you. Here in Akhtamar there is a church that once belonged to Armenians. This building is a masterpiece but nowadays they are destroying it. Tomorrow I will take you there. This church is a treasure of this land, even if it was built by Armenians. It belongs to all humanity no matter who built it. Can you help me and our country?"

"I am a novice journalist, what can I do?" I replied. I was worried. My Kurdish past could come up and

I may lose my job before I started.

We arrived at the port of Van in the afternoon. Captain-surgeon Cavit Bey took me to the sole hotel in Van. The day after, in the morning, he came to take me to the Akhtamar Island. Our reporter of Van was Ilyan Kitapci, a 60-year-old man with serious disposition and good will. He told us that he had done everything he could to save the church from demolition but all had been in vain. Whatever he had tried had been insufficient to stop the demolition. The governor of Van was also a brave man and a poet, but he also had been unable to reverse the demolition order.

Ilyas Bey told me: "Let's call Nadir Nadi. He will understand us and he is the only person who can stop this. *(Nadir Nadi was a powerful media boss).* Let's explain to him the problem."

I said: "O.K".

We took the road to go to Akhtamar Island. The Lake Van was a magic lake. The color of the water changed continuously. We arrived at the island with a small boat. I saw that they had already demolished the small chapel but they hadn't reached the church yet.

The captain told the workers: "Now I am going to talk to the governor. You will not touch the church till I come back."

The head of the workers said: "Yes, sir," like a soldier.

We went back to Van and tried to reach the 'Cumhuriyet' till the afternoon but we couldn't make contact. The day after, in the morning, we called the newspaper once more. Some hours later Nadir Bey was on the line. I told him the story that I had heard from the captain.

Nadir Bey said: "Don't worry. Avni Bey can solve the problem. I know him very well. He is a civilized person." Avni Bashman was the minister of education.

Two days later Ilyas Kitapci and Captain Cavit Bey came to my hotel. They were very happy. Minister Bashman had sent a telegram to the governor of Van to stop the demolition.

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Akhtamar Church was saved on June 25, 1951.

Yaşar Kemal born Kemal Sadık Gökçeli (6 October 1923 – 28 February 2015) was a Turkish writer of Kurdish ethnicity. He was one of Turkey's leading writers.Kemal was a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, on the strength of "Memed, My Hawk".

An outspoken intellectual, he often did not hesitate to speak on sensitive issues. His activism resulted in a twenty-month suspended jail sentence, on charges of advocating separatism.

The famous "Turkish-Kurdish" author, had an Armenian father who had fled the Van massacres during the Genocide of Armenians and settled in the Cukurova region at the northeast corner of the

Mediterranean. In 1951 Kemal managed to stop the destruction of Akhtamar Church by the Turkish army. In 2013 the Republic of Armenia bestowed on him the Krikor Naregatsi medal for standing up to the Turkish army.