

IMMORTAL "GILIGIA"

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✘ **Krikor Pidedjian**, NY, 5 December 2015

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Any discussion of nationalistic songs such as "Giligia," "Hayasdan Yergir Trakhdavayr," "Der Getzo Tou zHays," "Mer Hayrenik," "Dzidzernag" and others must place them in their historical context. Fortunately, in the case of "Giligia" we are assisted by the fact that we know the names of its lyricist Nahabed Rusinian and its composer Capriel Yeranian.

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Born in Efkere, Gesaria, Rusinian was a physician. He was also a political activist, nationalist philosopher and well-known writer. He received his primary education in the village Armenian school which had been founded by his father. In 1829 young Rusinian moved to Constantinople and studied at the St. Garabed School of Scutari.

Like many other promising Armenian students of the time, Rusinian continued his higher education in Europe and in 1844 began his studies of medicine at the Sorbonne in Paris. While in the capital of France, he also absorbed the spirit of nationalism sweeping Europe. In this atmosphere, Rusinian and Dzerents (Hovsep Shishmanian, 1822-1888) founded the Araradian Association, whose goal was to raise patriotic awareness among Armenians. Rusinian thus was a contributor to the renaissance of Armenian nationalism. After graduating in 1851, he returned to Constantinople. There, along with other leading Armenian minds such as K. Odian, N. Balian, S. Vichenian, G. Utujian, M. Aghatone and K. Aghatone, he immersed in the mission of the cultivation of modern Western Armenian by refining the language, expanding the Armenian press and opening schools to educate the upcoming generations.

With "Modern Armenian Grammar" ("Oughakroutyoum Arti Hayotz Lezvi"), Rusinian started the battle for the use of standardized modern Western Armenian rather than classical Armenian. In 1854 the Patriarch of Constantinople, a supporter of the traditionalists, forbade the reading of the book and burned all copies. Until the formation of the National Constitution, the religious, educational and other communal institutions were run by the wealthy sarafs (bankers, money changers), amiras and the Patriarch, to their discretion. The Armenian working classes were deprived of civil rights.

However all changed when enthusiastic, young and European-educated Armenians attempted to enter Armenian public life upon their return. In 1853, with the agreement of the national religious and higher committees of the Armenian community of Constantinople, the National Council ("Azkayin Jhoghov") was formed with the above-mentioned individuals and was based on the principles of the Belgian Constitution and the spirit of the French Revolution. After sharp arguments between the reformists and their supporters on one side and the Church, the circle of amiras and their supporters on the other, the reformers won. On May 24, 1860 the National Council accepted and adopted the new by-laws which, at the suggestion of Rusinian, was called the "National Constitution." The Armenians of the Ottoman Empire became known as "Nezamnamei Milleti Ermenia" and were considered a distinct religious community. Armenian communal life in Constantinople started to be organized accordingly.

During these nationalistic times, Rusinian wrote poetry, including "Giligia." The poem was dedicated to that part of Western Armenia which was once home of the last Armenian kingdom and was still populated by Armenians. As such, "Giligia" was a representation and true expression of the Armenian peoples' longings for their lost statehood and aspirations for their homeland. "Giligia" was inspired by the French poem "Ma Normandie" by Frédéric Bérat.

In 1862 well-known composer Capriel Yeranian formed the "Armenian Lyre" ("Knar Haygagan") Musical Association, not only the first of its kind in Constantinople but also in the Middle East. The members of the association were renowned musicians like D. Tchoukhadjian; Y. Dndesian, N. Tashjian; H. Cherchian; K. Khanjian; K. Sinanian; R. Papazian; the Italian composer K. Foscini and prominent intellectuals, writers, journalists, lecturers such as M. Beshigtashlian; K. Odian; N. Rusinian; H. Svajian, K. Aghatone, M. Mamourian; M. Hekimian; S. Papazian and others.


This association, along with its activities, free lectures, the teaching of Armenian and Western notations, formed the first symphony orchestra in Constantinople. It was conducted by K. Sinanian. The association and its orchestra offered special programs that opened peoples' minds and tastes to Western musical culture and presented and spread new Armenian patriotic songs.

It was at this time that Capriel Yeranian, along with other patriotic songs, printed "Giligia," with notes in the "Knar Haygagan" musical journal.

Who was Capriel Yeranian?

Yeranian was one of the several brilliant composers of the time. He was born in Constantinople in

1827. His father Ohan Yeranian was a mason and had four sons and two daughters. Until fourteen Yeranian attended Constantinople's "Mother School" ("Mayr Varjaran") after which he worked for his maternal uncle, Antreas, who had a fez making business. A year passed and Yeranian showed no interest in his uncle's business. His co-workers used to snatch his papers about music and take them to his uncle to demonstrate that the apprentice was hopeless.

His parents then sent him back to school. He participated in student productions ("hantesses") and on church singing. His beautiful voice attracted attention. Besides the Limonjian notation system then in use, which was also called the "Armenian notation system", Yeranian soon mastered the  European notation system. As mentioned, one of the members of the Armenian Lyre Musical Association was Rusinian.

Their membership in the musical association lead to their partnership and to eventually turning the "Giligia" poem into the famous "Giligia" song. They published it in one of the 1862 issues of "Knar Haigagan", of which there is no copy. The melody and lyrics of the song were so beautifully interwoven that since then it has become an eminent part of the modern Armenian song book.

Yeranian's creative life was cut short with his untimely death at the end of 1862.

The secret of the song's longevity lies in its lyrics which were the central national Armenian philosophy of the time. The music is deeply emotional yet has a simple melody: the perfect marriage of lyrics and melody.

I will forego an analytical presentation of the musical structure of the song as this article is addressed to the general public and not to musicologists or specialists. However, as with other aspects of Armenian life, unfortunately, patriotic and revolutionary songs were eventually politicized. Although not a revolutionary song, "Giligia" was a nationalistic song. As such, it was counter to the internationalist philosophy of the Bolsheviks. Consequently, it was forbidden soon after the 1920 Bolshevik takeover of the Republic of Armenia. Nonetheless, Diasporans continued to sing it as a patriotic song.

This changed in 1956. With the election of Archbishop Zareh Payaslian as Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia (Giligia in Armenian) the Catholicosate became dominated by Dashnagtsoutyoon. In protest, most non-Dashnags stopped singing "Giligia". Thereafter the song remained primarily in the realm of pro-Dashnags, the Catholicosate of Cilicia and the churches under its dominion.

With the surfacing of Armenian nationalism in Soviet Armenia after 1965, patriotic and revolutionary songs started to be resurrected by Soviet Armenians as national treasures. I remember, towards the end of the '70s, attending a concert at Saint Vartan's Cathedral in New York City where stars from Soviet Armenia presented a superb program which ended with the famous and unparalleled singer Hovhannes Badalian singing the revolutionary song "Zartir Lao."

Given the enthusiasm of the audience and the apparent stamp of approval of Soviet Armenia, an

impressed AGBU dance group presented that song in special dance steps. I do not know if the instructor of the group knew that the song was written in praise of the fedayi Apo (a.k.a, "Arapo"). "Giligia" had the same fate. Once it was sung in Soviet Armenia, it again started to enjoy universal popularity in the Diaspora.

"Giligia", born of the partnership of Rusinian and Yeranian, presents the Armenian people with a timeless combination of poetry and music that encapsulates the Armenian sense of loss and hope. Having accompanied many generations through national rebirth, Genocide, statehood, loss of statehood and statehood regained, "Giligia" still inspires, is still fresh and possesses the prerequisites to remain so for many more generations.

GILIGIA

When the doors of hope open,
And winter has fled our land,
O, beautiful land of Armenia.

When your sweet days shine brightly,
When the swallow returns to his nest,
When the trees bloom,
I wish to see my Giligia.
The country that gave me the sun.

I have seen the plains of Syria,
The mountains and cedars of Lebanon,
I saw the land of the Italians,
Venice and its gondolas.
There is no island like our Cyprus,
But, no place is more beautiful
Than my Giligia,
The country that gave me the sun.

There is a time in life,
When desire comes to an end,
A time when the soul
Longs for its memories.
When the lyre becomes cold,
Bidding a final farewell to love,
I wish to fall asleep in my Giligia,
The country that gave me the sun.

By **Nahabed Rousinian**

Translated by **Iris Papazian**

