KEURKUNE'S CHURCH, A CULTURAL LANDMARK

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Vahe H. Apelian, Loveland, OH, 14 October 2010

Keurkune in 1950s

This article is about the Armenian Evangelical Church of Keurkune', the only church of the village. I characterized the church as a cultural landmark. While it is the only house of worship in the village since its foundation over 110 years ago, the sanctuary has also served as classroom, or as classrooms for the youngsters born to parents who survived genocide and were taught at the same time in different corners of the sanctuary. It was also used as a town hall where the villagers congregated to resolve issues pertaining the village, such as allocating the water from the village's only spring to the different families for irrigation. The sanctuary has also acted as a social hall where plays were staged on the podium of the church. October is the Armenian cultural month.

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In 1846 the Armenian Evangelical Community was established in Istanbul. The new faith found a foothold in Kessab and soon a school was inaugurated in 1853. The Armenian Evangelical School of Kessab still continues to operate and may be the oldest functioning school in the Diaspora outside Turkey. However, the original church – The Armenian Evangelical Holy Trinity Church - was destroyed during the 1909 pogroms of kessab. The community resumed constructing a much bigger church made of fine off white stones quarried locally. The construction of the church was halted due to the 1915 genocidal deportation and remained unfinished until 1960s.

Along with Holy Trinity Armenian Evangelical Church in Kessab, the center village, there are three additional Evangelical Churches in greater Kessab. The church of Ekiz Olouk, named after the village, was established in 1882, whereas the one in Kaladouran in 1855 and of Keurkune' in 1898. Arguably, the latter is the only one in greater Kessab where services are still held in the same sanctuary since its founding. Keurkune' is the ancestral village mostly of Apelian, Bedirian, Chelebian, Kakoussian, Kerbabian and Khederian families.

Thus by all accounts the Armenian Evangelical Church of Keurkune'' can be considered an Armenian cultural and historical landmark. On the upper portion of the front wall, the following is inscribed in

Armenian alphabet reading Turkish – "My house shall be called a house of prayer" Math: 21:13; Keurkune''; Armenian Evangelical Church; January 8.98 foundation; July 21.99 completion. Missak Agha Apelian is claimed to have laid down the cornerstone.

Yervant Kassouny, the former editor of the Armenian Evangelical Monthly Chanasser, edited Dr. Albert Apelian's study of Kessab into a well documented book. Albert was a 20 years old student of Aintab College when he wrote his study as a requirement for his graduation. Dr. Albert Apelian is Dr. Soghomon Apelian's son who is the first Armenian to graduate as a Medical Doctor from the American University of Beirut.

In his study Albert Apelian notes that the construction of the church of Keurkune' commenced without securing a permit. When the authorities planned to halt the construction, the villagers participated and completed the covering of the roof almost overnight and thus secured the viability of the sanctuary. Ottoman regulations forbade the destruction of an erected building with a roof on it. Subsequently, the Sultan's High Porte issued the permit for the church. This important historical document, however, has been lost.

The logs that covered the roof of the church were made of trees from Furnlagh, a forest some 8 miles from Keurkune''. To this day it is renowned for its tall and erect pine trees. Soghomon Kerbabian, the late Rev. Ardashes Kerbabian's father, accompanied the cavalcade and played the flute all the way to inspire the able bodied young men and distract them from their heavy loads as they carried the logs on their shoulders. The long trimmed logs extended across the two opposing walls of the church. On these logs wood was fastened and on which the villagers spread bluish ground stones, called Keuruk, which they would have quarried from a nearby vein giving the church roof top the same bluish color that colored the roof tops of all the houses in the village. Keuruk is a bluish colored, light weight, easily crushable stone ideal to cover the roof tops. Each roof top had a stone roller that was used to pack the keuruk, which was replenished frequently. Such were the efforts put to erect the only house of worship Keurkune'' has ever had.

The Armenian Evangelical Church of Keurkune'' is situated on an elevation at the southeastern corner of the village. An arched entrance leads to the courtyard. The sanctuary is right across the arched entrance. The pastoral dwelling, uninhabitable now, is situated on the right hand side. The bell tower is positioned at the back right hand side corner of the church. The sanctuary was built by master mason Hovsep Terterian, from the neighboring village of Chakaljuk. He was the grandfather of Archbishop Ardavast Terterian who, next to the Catholicos Aram I, is the highest ranking bishop of the Catholicosate of Cilicia.

The construction is typical of the era. It consists of two layered walls erected by depositing carved stones resulting in thick walls and in deep windows. The pastoral complex was built in 1903 during Rev. Kevork Kassarjian's tenure. The sanctuary has two entrances. Up to the time I attended the church, the men used the door on the left-hand side, and the women used the door on the right-

hand side, irrespective of their marital status. There are three olive trees in the church courtyard. They seem to have always been there and are regarded as part and parcel of the church. On one of these trees a resonating piece of a metal was hung which was rung to alert Sunday school services.

Many pastors have served the Armenian Evangelical Church of Keurkune' and some were ordained in the church. Keurkune', nor Ekiz Olouk, its neighboring village and the birthplace of the pastor emeritus Rev. Dr. Vahan Tootikian, the eminent author of some 20 books, could support a full time pastor on their own. Therefore the same pastor always served the churches in these two neighboring villages by alternating the Sunday services, holding the early Sunday service in one church and reversing the order the next Sunday. The practice continues to this day.

Rev. Hovhannes Iskijian, whose late grandson found the Iskijian Museum in Ararat Home in California, was the first pastor to be ordained in Keurkune'' and Ekiz Olouk. His ordination became an issue of contention between villagers. They could not agree whether his ordination would take place at the church In Keurkune'' or at the church in Ekiz Olouk. They came to a workable compromise and agreed to have the pastor's ordination done in open air, mid way between the two villages, under a tree, which came to be known as Badveli's (the pastor's) tree. The tree was still erect when I spent my summers there in my youth.

Reverends Mardiros Marganian, Hanna Sarmazian, Hagop Sarkissian were also ordained in Keurkune'. Rev. Ardashes Kerbabian is the only native son of Keurkune' to serve as a pastor of the church. Rev. Hanna (Hovhannes) Sarmazian, a Kessabtsi, is the church's longest serving pastor. He served the church from 1959 to 1981. His son renovated the pulpit of the church in his memory. The present pastor, Rev. Simon Neshan DerSahagian, is also a Kessabtsi.

The sanctuary, as noted, has also been used as a classroom, town hall and as a cultural hall where plays were staged on the church podium in the halcyon days of the village. In mid 1950s, a play was staged under the direction of Rev. Ardashes Kerbabian to raise money to purchase a bell for the church. The bell was cast in Beit El Shehab in Lebanon and stayed locked in a basement for over two years due to some bureaucratic hurdles. As an impressionable child, I still remember the vivid discussion among the villagers to sort through these bureaucratic hurdles to bring the bell and install it in the tower. Those whom the bell beckoned for service still remember its deep tenor ring that resonated deep into the soul. The bell is still in use.

The church has undergone major renovations. The first major renovation took place in mid 1960s. The seed money for this renovation was raised through the collective efforts of a group of young adults, among them Ashod Apelian, George (Kevork) Apelian and the late dynamic Yeghia Mouradian. The logs that covered the ceiling of the church have now long gone into oblivion and a cement ceiling covers the roof. The old pews have been replaced with newer ones. The front wall is now covered with yellow stone bearing the following inscription "Renovated in memory of Khatchig Apelian", who was tragically killed during boar hunting in December 1988. Stepan Apelian lately had

the bell tower renovated as the church continues to be tended.

The church is the spiritual center of the village and plays a vital role in the lives of the inhabitants of the village and safeguards the kinship among its one time inhabitants and their descendants spread across the globe