

MIKOYAN HAS COME TO YEREVAN

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✘ Antranig Dzarougian, translated by Vahe H. Apelian

A segment from Antranig Dzarougian's "Old Dreams, New Routes" (Հին Երազներ և նոր Ճամբարներ) (1958). Translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian.--Editor.

When Mikoyan comes to Armenia, the waters of the Zankou River do not stop flowing but the whole **✘** country waits breathlessly. He comes for a few days, delivers an election speech, and returns to Moscow. It's a country where people have no choice but have the right to cast their votes to the only candidate on the ballot. The whole thing looks like a comedy of sorts, the comic stage of an unimaginative play. But when one experiences the solemnity of the people, their enthusiasm and their religious-like devotion to the process, a person has no choice but become serious and make an effort to understand the meaning of all that is happening around him.

Mikoyan comes to Yerevan once every four years, delivers a speech, gets elected and returns to Moscow. For an already predetermined election Mikoyan can present his candidacy from anywhere in the vast expanse of Russia. That would not make his star any less shiny among the bright stars of Kremlin. But the reality is that he has come to Armenia because he represents the people of Armenia in the Supreme Soviet whose parallel can be an amalgam of Babylon with its assortment of peoples and races; and the Roman legions with their fanatic obedience to law and order.

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We are invited with the Catholicos to be present to Mikoyan's welcoming ceremony in the Opera House. It is not a small lucky turn of events for me. In fact, it's an exceptional privilege. Half-a-million people will follow the ceremony clustered outside in front of large screens. We, on the other hand, will be seated comfortably in the hall where only the princes and the princelings will be allowed.

A crowd in countless thousands, constituting a sea of people, has surrounded the Opera House extending to the streets further away. When our car stops at the main gate, instinctively I sense that I am witnessing an important and a memorable happening. Rows of policemen have lined up in formal attire; they represent not only Soviet Armenia but also the Soviet Union. How would they receive the Catholicos of All Armenians? I wonder. The *Vehapar* appears to be noticeably moved as well and immersed in his thoughts, which might not be far from mine.

Tens of thousands have their eyes focused on the unfolding scene. It is not hard to fathom that they are impatiently following the rare event. The event is a testing moment. Publically and officially the Armenian Church and the Armenian State will face each other in a symbolic welcome. We start off. Right away a goliath of a man, a giant in formal police attire and the head of the Yerevan police force meets us. He greets the *Vehapar* cordially. He bows his head slightly and with his right arm gestures us towards the main gate. The arm, more than pointing to a direction, appears to us as a bridge over which we will walk and enter. We walk. He walks with us. The rows of the policemen on the two sides do not extend official salute. A communist never salutes a clergyman. But they straighten themselves, stand still and bow their heads. I take note. It continues this way from the entry hall to the entrance of the main hall. The head of the police greets us again, bows and returns.

Inside, an unmistakably moving surprise awaits us. The hall is full to capacity. The state, party and intellectual elite and anyone who is somebody in Armenia is present. They are ministers, generals, academicians, scientists, writers, professors, astrophysicists, and specialists: all of them are there and have occupied their seats. There is nothing out of the ordinary in that. But the extraordinary and the miraculous happens just at the very moment when the Catholicos occupies his place. The central seating for the dignitary has been reserved for the Catholicos of All the Armenians.

The scene explains itself. There is no need to elaborate further. But I need to sort out my train of thought that crowds my mind. I write this book for me. It's up to readers to interpret what I write. Consequently, I need to write what I felt and what I thought when I witnessed the scene. Oh, man where are you? Oh, you Armenian man, where are you? I keep asking myself. Are you in the fifth century Vagharshabad or in the tenth century Ani or in the hall of an opera house in a modern city? These very same people who have gathered here have reserved the central seating to the Catholicos of All Armenians when they deny the existence of God and do not believe in religion but they are Armenians. They are Marxists. They are Armenians. They are communists. They are Armenians. They are advocates of the brotherhood of men. They are Armenians. They do not believe in God. They are Armenians. That is why, even though they do not enter a church, they uphold the spiritual leader more than their leaders. In the Catholicos they see their past and its glory.

The man who came to the podium accompanied by thundering applause and who cracked a few witty jokes in Armenian is also Armenian. Now he continues to read in Russian an important speech that seems to be endless. I understand nothing from what he says, but I know that the political leaders in the capital cities of the world are attentively following every word he says. By dawn next day his speech will appear in the countless papers of the Soviet Union and will be published in million copies from Moscow to Peking and will be available to a billion people. His speech is in Russian but the speaker is an Armenian and the Yerevan Opera's stage has become a focal point tonight.

Mikoyan's speech has no end in sight. It has been more than an hour since he started reading but the reams of paper in front of him have hardly reached halfway. Even though it is Mikoyan who is speaking, it's no small torture to stay put listening to something you do not understand. I see an exit that does not seem to be too noticeable. I go outside to smoke. I lose nothing. I will read his speech tomorrow in the paper.

I meet a well-known writer in the hallway.

"Did you get bored?"

"No, it's the repetition of things one understands that becomes boring. The things that you do not understand tire you. In this case it's not the fault of the deliverer or the listener," I said.

"It's a matter of getting used to it."

I know the intellectuals of Armenia. They tend to start and end their conversations with witty remarks.

"Listen, in my country if a candidate speaks this long, we do not vote him," I say.

"This one has his re-election guaranteed. That is why he cares less."

Truly you cannot outwit these folks. They have a way of outwitting you.

I go inside. The speech continues at times to long and thunderous applause. I have reoccupied my seat. Since I have nothing to listen to, I immerse in my thoughts. There is nothing sentimental in my thoughts as I attempt to rationalize. This man who is one of the very highest placed officials in the Soviet Union. What has he done for Armenia? I ponder.

At first glance the answer is nothing. But once you dwell further and after having been in contact with the people of Armenia, you realize that they, in their unmistakable instincts, see in Mikoyan a compatriot who cares for them but does not articulate, protects but does not show. If style is the essence in writing, so it is in politics. The man has remained center stage for three decades. Those higher up than him have fallen, the ones below him pay a hefty price, but the man carries on. Where can one find the secret of his political longevity if not in his style? He serves but does not demand. He accomplishes but does not shine. A man who is indispensable to his country but does not abuse

his position. He lives in with the upper strata but always shies away from the limelight. Truly without understanding the man, Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan in Moscow, it is not possible to understand this Armenian man, on the podium, the one-time student of the Kevorkian *Djemaran*, and the one-time volunteer and soldier under the command of General Antranig.

He has been in Armenia for the past two days, and tomorrow he will return to Moscow. Yesterday evening, two carloads, some forty people, arrived from Tiflis. They were not officials from the other republics. Nor were they representatives of the party. They were his onetime classmates from the Nersesian School: most of them ordinary citizens. He spent the whole evening with them feasting, dancing and singing. He was transferred to a different world.

The somber and wrinkled-faced person in official portraits is a highly social person. Should we ask ourselves 'what does he do for Armenia for the overwhelming votes he receives?' It would be difficult to answer. At the moment, other than the papers in his hand, nothing else is visible. Four years ago he gave a similar speech in Russian in the same hall. I was not present, so I cannot comment. It would not have mattered anyway as I do not understand Russian. It was during that speech, maybe at the beginning or at the end; or during his ideological discourse in Armenian that he has mentioned Yeghishe Charents.

The name and the literary works of Charents had remained under lock. Suddenly they burst free. Soon after the works of Charents were published in Armenia in two editions of 25,000 copies each. Springs and schools were named after the eminent author. The fact is that for 25 seasons Charents had remained buried. After Mikoyan's speech suddenly Charents blossomed. True that when Mikoyan comes to Armenia the waters do not remain still but suddenly long interred poets can resurrect.

Mikoyan has ended his speech and he starts conversing in Armenian. He is joyful, witty and robust as if he is not the person who delivered a two-hour speech. There is a break for 20 minutes after which the reception would follow with music and dance. Thousands of eyes now remain focused on the Catholicos, who is not unaware or indifferent of the attention, but he has nothing to say.

Two persons enter the box where the Catholicos is seated.

"*Vehapar*, Comrade Mikoyan would like to meet you. He would have come to escort you but the buffet is ready, so he asks you join him there."

A pillar of Kremlin would not want to appear escorting a clergyman. All those in the hall are members of the party, committed communists, but they are Armenians. Asking outright the Catholicos to come to him would not seat well with many. In a typical Mikoyan style the message is subtly delivered that he would have escorted the *Vehapar* but the buffet is ready for both of them to head there together.

It turns out that it is not the first time that Mikoyan has met the *Vehapar*. Seven years ago they have

met in Bucharest during a reception in honor of Mikoyan hosted by the Romanian government.

"I was surprised to see among the guest an Armenian priest," says Mikoyan. On the podium it seemed Mikoyan was struggling with his Armenian. In close circles his Armenian is flawless. He reminisces about his student days.

"That Armenian priest wanted to make a clergy out of me, the priest...". He seeks to remember the name and suddenly with air of triumph says, "Yes, Karekin *Vartabed*". He is happy he remembers the name fifty years later. He suddenly realizes the *Vartabed* was no other than the Catholicos of the Cilician See, Karekin I.

"The good man worked hard to make something out of me, but out came a good-for-nothing".

"Mister Mikoyan, I wish all those good-for-nothings would have been much like you," remarks the Catholicos.

