

REMEMBERING SIMON SIMONIAN

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Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, 11 June 2014

Simon Simonian was one of the towering intellects and literary figures of the Armenian Diaspora's post-Genocide century. He was an educator, publisher, editor, author, and an activist.



This year marks the 100th anniversary of his birth. Simonian was born on March 24, 1914 in Aintab. His Sassoun-born father's name was Ove' (ՕՎԷ). His mother's name was Menoush (ՄԵՆՈՒՇ). She hailed from Aintab. Sassoun was once an exclusively Armenian-inhabited highland while Aintab (now Gaziantep) had a large Armenian population. Simonian was their eldest child.

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In 1921, having survived the Genocide, the family had found refuge in Aleppo. The future writer-publisher received his elementary education in that city in northern Syria. Subsequently, he attended (1930-1935) the newly-established seminary of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon becoming one of its first students.

After graduating from the seminary he returned to Aleppo where he taught at the Gulbenkian and Haigazian Schools until 1946. During the war years he established the "Sevan" Printing Press with a group of like-minded Armenian teachers.

At the invitation of Catholicos Karekin I Hovsepian (1946) he moved to Lebanon where he taught at the catholicosate's seminary until 1955 and became the institute's scholar in residence. He also established a close personal and professional relationship with the catholicos. His scholarly contributions during those years and later are far too numerous to list.

In 1954 he visited Armenia as a member of the delegation representing the Catholicosate of Cilicia at the funeral of Catholicos Kevork VI Tcheorekdjian. At the time a visit to the Soviet republic was considered an extraordinary event. That visit became a life altering experience for him. The following year he resigned from his positions at the catholicosate but continued teaching, part-time, for many years at the Armenian General Benevolent Union Hovagimian-Manougian Secondary School for Boys and at the Tarouhie Hagopian Secondary School for Girls.



**(L-R) Sirkedjian (Cairo), Nshan Khoshafian, Simon Simonian
Garos Parseghian, William Saroyan and Hovig Simonian**

In 1955 he reestablished "Sevan" so as to have his own voice heard. Three years later he launched the "Spurk" literary magazine, which along with Antranig Dzarougian's "Nayiri" became prominent literary magazines and platforms for many authors and budding writers.

Along with his teaching and scholarly research Simonian wrote Armenian history, geography and language textbooks for different grades. They were reprinted several times and became standard textbooks at Armenian schools across the Diaspora.

Simonian authored the following novels and collection of short stories: «Կը ԽՆՊՐՈՒԼԻ ԽԱՃԱԾԵԼԵԼ» (Obstruction Requested, 1965), «ԽԱՄՔԱՅԵՍ ԱՍԼԱՆԻ ԱՂՉԻԿԸ» (Commander Aslan's Daughter, 1967), «ԼԵՂՆԱԿԱՆԵՐՈՒ ՎԵՐՉԱԼՈՅՍԸ» (The Sunset of the Mountaineers, 1968), «ՍԻՓԱՆԱՅ ՔԱՉԵՐ», (The Daredevils of Sipan, 1967-1970), «ԼԵՂ ԵՒ ՃԱԿԱՏԱԳԻՐ» (Mountain and Fate, 1972), «ԱՆԺԱՄԱՆՊՐՈՍ» (UntimelyMan) (1978, 1998);

Simonian was not hamstrung by Armenian political partisanship. He possessed a too large personality and a streak of Sassountsi "free spirit" to be confined by partisanship. His concern for all things Armenian resonated across the Diaspora political spectrum and he became a much-loved personality. I recall with fond memories the overwhelming popular reception he received in the social hall of New Jersey's St. Vartanants Cathedral when he and his wife toured the United States in the early '80s.

After reading his books it becomes apparent that his father's lineage from the Armenian highland of Sassoun shaped his literary imagination and his perception of what an Armenian is or ought to be. Many of the stories of his books depict the once-proud mountaineers of Sassoun as heroes. Driven from their mighty highlands, the generous spirit of these proud mountaineers would find outlets as bakers in the bakeries they ran in Aleppo, setting up an authentic and unsurpassed tradition that continues to this day.

Simonian had a commanding presence even though he was not tall. Anyone who has had the opportunity to have called him couldn't forget his deep baritone that came over the wires with his customary greeting "Ողջոյն" (*voghjuyn*). The closest word for it in English is 'salute' but surely his *voghjuyn* embodied more than a mere salutation.

Several times I had the pleasure of calling him at his office. When I recall those moments I realize that he must have assumed that his world was inhabited only by Armenians and hence "voghjuyn", rather than the universal "hello". The latter makes deference to the caller's native language and offers the courtesy of the doubt that the caller may not be an Armenian. But it was always Ողջոյն (*voghjuyn*) for Simonian.

Simonian was married to Aleppo-born Mary Ajemian. Much like his heroes, she also hailed from a Sassountsi family. She was the sister of Kevork Ajemian, a well-known bilingual (Armenian and English) journalist and novelist. The Simonians had four sons (Hovig, Vartan, Daron and Sassoun) and a daughter Maral.



(L-R) Nshan Khoshafian, Yervant Kassouni, Aghasi Havhannisian (Iran)

Simon Simonian, Levon Vartan, Smpad Panossian & Yervant Barsoumian

Simonian died on March 24, 1986. Armen Tarian's eulogy in "Zartonk" daily (March 29, 1986) borrowed Simonian's greeting and wrote: "*Voghjuyn* Simon. Sevan Press was his Sevan Lake. Not only the lake, but simply its name would transform him". (Ողջոյն Սիմոն: Տպարան «Սեւան»ը իր Սեւանայ Լիճն էր, ոչ միայն անոր մթնոլորտը, այլ անոր անունն անգամ կը հոգեփոխէր զինք)։

Sevan Press published more than 500 titles, in addition to Simonian's books and textbooks, and the weekly, monthly, yearly periodicals. Sevan Press and its owner-publisher became landmark institutions for several decades in the Diaspora. Dignitaries visiting Lebanon made a point of meeting him. Unfortunately, almost ten years before his death, his much-beloved printing house became another casualty of the Lebanese Civil War and ceased being the outlet for his prodigious literary output. Simonian's literary legacy remains an enduring part of the post-Genocide Western Armenian literature.

