

SHAHNOOR: DOOMSTER OF WESTERN ARMENIANS

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Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, 3 August 2014

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The book is hailed as an epic and as such is much cited even today. At the dawn of the centennial of the Genocide it is considered more prophetic than ever. The alarm the book sounded eighty-four years ago is now considered fait accompli by some: the Western Armenian culture is in a precipitous and perilous decline.

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In his famous book Shahnoor wrote: *"We are retreating, parent, child, uncle and groom; customs, understanding, morals and love are retreating. The language is retreating; the language is retreating; the language is retreating. We all are retreating with work and deed, willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly; mea culpa to Mount Ararad..... The children, who could have grown up as future generations and would have come after us, are the last ransoms. Because those who will come will be strangers in work and in deed, willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly; mea culpa to Mount Ararad....."*

The novel is about the lot of Bedros, an Armenian boy who, having survived the Genocide, has found refuge in Paris, Gallicized his name to Pierre and is working as an apprentice at a photographer's studio. Pierre is also sexually involved with the owner of the studio, a voluptuous woman who goes by the name Mme. (Mrs.) Jeanne, although she is single. The descriptions of his sexual exploits were



and may still be regarded daring by the standards of Armenian literature. It may also be the only modern Western Armenian novel to have been considered for censorship.


Pierre socializes with a group of expatriate Armenians who muse about the fate of their people as they become more and more assimilated and get less involved in the Armenian community. The intertwined and convoluted life of Pierre is what has made the book an Armenian masterpiece.

Shahnoor was born in 1903. His baptismal name was Shahnoor Kerestejian. After receiving his elementary education at the neighborhood school, he graduated from the famed Berberian School in 1921.

He was mostly self-educated. His maternal uncle, Teotig, who was celebrated for his yearly almanac, is claimed to have influenced the budding writer and poet. Almost right after graduation Shahnoor began to dabble in literature by posting translations in Armenian newspapers.

By 1923 it had become evident that the pan-nationalist movement would propel Mustafa Kemal, the future Ataturk, to the helm of the emerging Republic of Turkey and continue the persecution of minorities. Shahnoor left for Paris that year joining the exodus of other Western Armenian writers. To earn a living he worked at a photographer's studio but continued to write.

In 1929 he published "Retreat Without Song or the Illustrated History of the Armenians" (Նահապետը Առանց Երգի, կամ Պատկերազարդ Պատմութիւնը Հայոց). The book had been launched in installments in "Haratch" (Յարաչ), the leading Armenian newspaper in Paris.

Since its publication Shahnoor's masterpiece has been much referenced and its author frequently quoted. However, Shahnoor's gloomy prophecy wasn't necessarily embraced by all his contemporary writers. The book was published at a time when Armenian writers had brought new luster to post-Genocide Western Armenian literature. 

"Haratch" ("forward" in Armenian), was founded in 1925 by famed editor Shavarsh Missakian. The newspaper soon became known for attracting high-profile Armenian literary figures. His daughter Arpik took over the paper after his death in 1957. The paper folded in 2009 because of dwindling readership.

Poor in health, Shahnoor published his next novel in 1937. His malady, thought to have been osteoporosis, progressed rapidly causing him great pain. By 1939 he had lost his house and had become homeless. He was finally confined to a sanitarium.

After recovering some of his health, Shahnoor began writing in French under the pen name Armen Lubin. "From then on he was acclaimed highly as a French writer and poet and received several literary awards," says Wikipedia. He was distraught by what he considered a lack of support--if not

outright neglect--of Armenian writers. However, Shahnoor did not break his links with his roots and culture. He wrote several more books in Armenian. He died in 1974. Last year Armenia commemorated the centennial of his birthday.

While there is renewed interest in "Retreat Without Song" novel, the book has never faded from the Armenian literary radar. The Western Armenian language is indeed retreating. Recently UNESCO classified it among endangered languages.

Many factors are contributing to the demise of the language. The deadly political events in the Middle East during the past five decades and the social unrest in these restive host countries have seriously undermined the Armenian communities in Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Jerusalem, and now also in Syria and Iraq. These organized and entrenched communities had in their heyday vast educational and social networks, and were regarded (some still are) as the best guarantors of our millennia-old Western Armenian culture.

Renewed echoes of Shahnoor's predictions continue to be heard. Alluding to the younger generation born in the West, Rev. Hovhannes Sarmazian wrote recently: "Right in front of our very own eyes, with music and dance, we are losing them."

There can be no doubt that the Western Armenian language is endangered. A vivid example of the calamity is this article: to inform Armenians born or living in the West, who mostly do not read Armenian, it is written in English.

Whether Shahnoor and Rev. Sarmazian are prophetic in their lament for the inevitable loss of the culture and hence of the Armenian identity (because of the loss of our native language), will continue to be debated as succeeding generations measure events and developments with their own yardsticks.

