THE CLEVER ARCHITECT OF ADDIS ABABA

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Garbis Korajian, Vancouver BC, 21 February 2016

Minas Bet Afrashu (1887-1969)

Among the many celebrated and colorful Armenians who helped establish the Armenian community in Ethiopia was Minas Kherbekian (1887-1969). Kherbekian was a tall and heavy-set man who was, for many years, Addis Ababa's chief architect. He also had the aura of an aristocrat. He socialized with the elite and enjoyed life to the fullest. He was also known to admire beautiful women and fine Ethiopian cuisine. The Armenian immigrant helped pioneer the modernization of Addis Ababa, the mountainous capital of Ethiopia.

The Empress Taitu, wife of Emperor Menelik II, who was away on a military campaign, founded Addis Ababa in 1886 along with settlers who had come from different parts of the country. The city is at the site of hot springs. The imperial palace, aristocratic mansions, and military encampments formed the center of the early city. The settlers built their homes in free and clear land holdings without official planning or zoning. At the time, other than a few trails for people and domestic animals, there were no roads worthy of mention.

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During his tenure as the chief architect, Minas was known as *Muse* Minas, synonymous with "*monsieur*", an honorific bestowed upon foreigners. He was also known as Mehandis Minas ('Architect Minas') but the majority of the city's residents knew him as Minas *Bet Afrashu* ('Minas the House Demolisher' in Amharic). Apparently, while he surveyed the streets of Addis with his crew, residents were scared, assuming Minas would demolish their homes. During the modernization campaign, Minas did indeed order the demolition of huts and ramshackle homes to build many of the new

roads in place today. He showed no mercy in his modernization mission.

The following story about one of Minas' adventures was told to me by Shumeye Aba Mirgu, some 35 years ago in Vancouver, Canada.

During his home demolishing expeditions, Minas was known to make exceptions if the house belonged to a dignitary. The huge house belonging to an aristocrat near the French Embassy, for example, was spared. Luckily, the large size of the compound allowed for a sharp curve around the house in the construction of a new road. For any onlooker, it was obvious that the road had taken an intentional turn with the purpose of sparing the house.

After many instances when people lost their homes as a result of Minas' orders, citizens made a formal complaint to the emperor. Minas was accused of accepting bribes from aristocrats to spare their houses from demolition, while the houses of the poor were never spared. The emperor listened to the complaints and assigned an adviser to investigate the accusations and report to him. The adviser was *Afenigus* Ketaw. The *Afenigus* wasted no time and began his investigations by confronting Minas at the city hall. He asked Minas to provide an explanation for the coincidental curvature of the road. Minas was taken by surprise.

This was the first time his decision was being questioned, let alone investigated. After thinking for a few moments, Minas replied, "The reason the road was curved is because the world turns around its axis." Although he was intelligent and wise, *Afenigus* Ketaw was not well versed in astronomical theories and, as a result, found Minas' explanation unacceptable and cynical. As the story goes, after much discussion and disagreements, Minas came up with a brilliant idea to resolve the argument. He suggested that they sit face to face with a bottle of ouzo each and race to see who finished his bottle first. He who finished first would win the argument. *Afenigus*, a man of smaller in stature, was at a disadvantage since Minas was a big man.

After a while the alcohol began to take its toll on the two, particularly *Afenigus* Ketaw who eventually slipped from his chair. Lying on his back on the floor, he looked at Minas and loudly said, "Minas, Minas, you are indeed right. The whole world is turning around!" Minas, the gentleman he was, lifted *Afenigus* Ketaw from the floor. He then told the emperor's adviser that he should have believed him in the first place because, as he could see, the world continuously turns around. *Afenigus* Ketaw accepted Minas' explanation, admitted defeat, and dropped the corruption charges. While the liquid debate was going on a crowd had gathered to witness the event in amusement.

When the emperor heard the story, he laughed for a long time, something he rarely did in public. Thereafter, neither the emperor nor *Afenigus* Ketaw spoke about the investigation, and Minas was cleared of charges. The *Afenigus* Ketaw and Minas became good friends and remained so for the rest of their lives.

A musician at the Azmari Bets bar wrote a song about Minas and performed it using the kerar (six-

string lyre) and masinko(single-string violin). Here are the lyrics in Amharic:
“Talian meta hede temelese
Ingerlis meta hede temelese
Minas becha kere bet eyaferese.”

(“The Italians came and left, the British also came and left, only Minas stayed demolishing homes.”)

Minas had a son named Yervant who was married to Seta Karaseferian. They had three children, Philip, Elize, and Haig. For a while the Minas compound was converted to a hotel (Shewa Hotel). When the Dergue came to power, Shewa Hotel was nationalized by the Mengestu regime.

Photo borrowed from www.aboutaddisababa.wordpress.com

After the nationalization and continuous harassment of the Minas family by the Kebele administration, the Kherbekian family emigrated to France. The only remaining memory of Muse Minas in Adis Ababa is the rapidly deteriorating residence, which is designated as heritage site by the ministry of culture. Apparently, inside the building there is a sealed room that serves as storage for the belongings of the family. Before the city grants a permit to developers to build high-rises on the site, the heritage status of Minas' house should be mandated to remain as it stands. Much like the ‘Arthur Rimbaud’ house in Harar that was renovated and turned into a heritage site, the same can be done to the house of Minas. The property should become a museum which would add beauty to the capital of Ethiopia, and be known as "The House of Minas Bet Afrashu."

The five-story building is the residence of Muse Minas Kherbekian. It is believed to be the first “skyscraper” prior to the Italian Occupation (1936).

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Afenigus is an official title which means the mouth of the king. It is also a way of respecting the person according to Ethiopian culture.

M. Kherbekian's photo is taken from Ethio-Armenian site posted by H. Ghazarossian