THE DREAMER

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Levon Sharoyan
Translated and edited by Vahe H. Apelian, 4 February 2014

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After attending the local school, he was sent in 1896, the year of the Hamidian Massacres, to Istanbul where his father lived. In Istanbul he attended the Mekhitarian School. He continued his education at Mourad-Rafaelian School of Venice, and in 1906 entered the Ghent University in Belgium where he studied literature and economics.

His first book of poetry appeared in the Keghouni (Գեղունի) periodical that was published in San Lazzaro (Ս. Ղազարի) Island, Venice. It was titled Shivers (Սարսուռներ). The Hamidian Massacres and the imprisonment of his father had left profound impression on the young man he would articulate in the book. He was 21-years-old. Of course his early poems lacked the artistic mastery of his later literary works.

The Teacher

In 1909, right after the declaration of the Ottoman Constitution, he returned home. He started teaching at the Aramian School of Sepastia (Սեբաստիոյ Ազգ. Արամեան վարժարան).

Some of his students later wrote about him in their memoirs. One of them was Arakel Badreg who reminisced that one year, just before their summer break, they went to Prknig to visit Varoujan in his paternal house. On their way they passed through the same road and along the same stream that Varoujan alluded to in his autobiography in Teotig's Yearbook (Թէոդիկի Տարեցոյց). In it Varoujan had written, "That's where I spent my childhood, under the melancholic shade of the pomegranate trees, or along the stream, mischievously throwing pebbles to the ducks".

As the boys passed by the same stream, they turned to one of their classmates and said, "Dikran, you better throw pebbles at the ducks too, perhaps you may become another Varoujan one day".

Varoujan and his parents welcomed them to their home with jubilation. It was a two-storey building, simply furnished. A vegetable garden surrounded the house. The library of the poet was rich with books. Varoujan read a poem by Dante and then asked them "Did you pay attention to the language's silvery sounding beauty? The Italian is a song, it is a song……."

He taught there for three years. After his marriage to Araxie in 1912, he became the principal of St. Gregory the Illuminator School in Istanbul.

The Poet

Not long after his return from Europe (1909) he published his second literary work, a book of poetry titled The Heart of the Race (Զեղին Սիրտը). It is there that Varoujan revealed the eminent poet he was. His writing had reached an unsurpassed mastery of language and of depth and form. He was only 25-years-old when he published the literary masterpiece.

A great deal has been written about his poetry. Our greatest literary critic, Hagop Oshagan, after reading The Heart of the Race declared that Varoujan is our greatest poet.

Varoujan had a special approach to writing. Events from his life inspired him. He would stir his imagination and dreams and turn personal occurrences into an all-Armenian longing and at times into an all-humanity yearning.

Once Father Ghevont Alishan (Հ. Ղեւոնդ Ալիշան) sent one of his books to Catholicos Mgrdich Khrimian inscribing in it "To the Nation's Father" (Հայոց Հայրիկին); The catholicos, in turn, sent him

a boxful of soil from Armenia addressed to "The Patriarch of the Nation" (Հայոց Նահապետին). Inspired by the exchanges, Varoujan wrote one of his most memorable poems--"The Red Soil" (Կարմիր հողը)--in The Heart of the Race collection of poetry.

In 1912 he published Pagan Songs (Հեթանոս երգեր), his third book of poetry.

His last book, The Song of Bread (Հացին Երգը), was published posthumously in 1921. The poems celebrate the toiling Armenian peasantry. He describes the peasant standing tall and imposing in the fields he cultivates. The eloquence of his writing remains unmatched.

The Poet's Marriage

To supplement his teacher's meager salary at the Aramian School, Varoujan gave private lessons to a young girl named Araxie, the daughter of a wealthy family. As was the local customs at the time, Araxie had been promised in betrothal to the son of a wealthy family when still in her crib. That's why Araxie's mother always chaperoned her daughter and attended her classes. Yet, the improbable happened. The teacher and the student fell madly in love with each other.

Rumors started flying in greater Sepastia. The classes ended abruptly and Araxie's parents and the prospective in-laws began hasty plans for an earlier-than-planned wedding, but Araxie remained adamant refusing to comply with her parent's wishes. Instead of a wealthy husband she preferred the country teacher of meager means.

The event became the talk of the town among the Armenians. Many regarded the incident scandalous. Some supported Varoujan and wanted the lovers to marry. Others blamed Varoujan for having seduced his young student. The animosity toward Varoujan became so great that he began to carry a stick to defend himself should he be attacked.

Finally, the prominent Armenian freedom-fighter, Sepastatsi Mourad, who, as his name indicates was from Sepastia, intervened on behalf of Varoujan. Mourad's stature was such that his intervention quelled all gossip and put an end to what was deemed scandalous. Three children were born from their union: Veronic (Վերոնիք); Haig (Հայկ); and Armen (Արմէն).

The Poet's Demise

In April 1915 Varoujan, along with many other Armenian notables, was apprehended in Istanbul. Their arrest would be the prelude of what would be the greatest catastrophe that has befallen on the Armenian nation, the Genocide. He was subjected to torture and died a slow and painful death in August of that year, near a Turkish village called Changher (Չանղըր). He was 31-years-old.

Varoujan's father was killed in Sepastia. The fate of his mother and two brothers is not known. Only his brother, Vahan, survived. For many years he worked in a printing shop in Paris.

His widow, Araxie, remarried and emigrated to the United States. Their son, Haig, settled in Fresno, California where he worked for a local newspaper. He passed away in 2002. His second son, Armen,

settled in Hawaii with his family. He passed away there. Veronic worked in New York city public libraries. She would always attend the April 24 commemorations and reflect upon her talented father.

Nothing is known about the great Armenian poet's grandchildren.

The Poet Remembered

In 1958 the Armenian students in Belgium secured the permission of the Ghent University to have a bilingual plaque commemorating Taniel Varourjan placed in the university library hall.

The unveiling of the memorial plaque took place on February 9, 1958. The poet's widow, Mrs. Araxie Varoujan-Apigian attended the unveiling.

A representative from ministry of culture, the president of the university, Luc-André Marcel (who had translated Varoujan's work into French); Frédéric Feydit, the eminent Armenian linguist; writer Garo Poladian, and Edouard Emirzian (the latter on behalf of the Armenian students) took part in the ceremony and spoke about the poet. A former classmate and academician Pierre Maes delivered a most poignant personal testimony about the slain poet. He said Taniel Varoujan had mastered the French language--not long after his enrollment--to deliver a lecture at the history department about Armenians and Armenian culture. Varoujan would read to him, the academician said, the poems Varoujan had written in Armenian, leaving him mesmerized by the eloquence of their sound and delivery, although he did not understand Armenian.

Varoujan's appeal as a prominent poet continues to reverberate to this day.

Below is Tatul Sonentz-Papazian's translation of Taniel Varoujan's Antastan poem.

> *Արեւելեան կողմն աշխարհի (At the Eastern part of the earth)*
> *Խաղաղութի՛ւն թող ըլլայ... (Let there be peace…)*
> *Ո՛չ արիւններ, քրտինք հոսին (Let sweat, not blood, flow)*
> *Լայն երակին մէջ ակօսին. (In the broad vein of the furrow,)*
> *Ու երբ հնչէ կոչնակն ամէն գիւղակի՛ (And at the toll of each hamlet's bell)*
> *Օրհներգութի՛ւն թող ըլլայ (Let there rise hymns of exaltation.)*
>
> *Արեւմտեան կողմն աշխարհի (At the Western part of the earth)*
> *Բերրիութի՛ւն թող ըլլայ... (Let there be fecundity …)*
> *Ամէն աստղէ ցող կայլակի, (Let each star sparkle with dew,)*
> *Ու ամէն հասկ ցուլէ ոսկի. (And each husk be cast in gold,)*
> *Եւ ոչխարներն երբ սարին վրայ արածին՛ (And as the sheep graze on the hills)*
> *Ծիլ ու ծաղիկ թող ըլլայ (Let bud and blossom bloom.)*
>
> *Հիւսիսային կողն աշխարհի (At the Northern part of the earth)*

> *Առատութի՛ւն թող ըլլայ… (Let there be abundance …)*
> *Ոսկի ծովուն մէջ ցորեանին (In the golden sea of the wheat field)*
> *Յաւէտ լողայ թող գերանդին. (Let the scythe swim incessantly)*
> *Ու լայն ամբարն աղուններուն երբ բացուի՛ (And as gates of granaries open wide)*
> *Բերկրութիւն թող ըլլայ (Jubilation let there be.)*
>
> *Հարաւային կողմն աշխարհի (At the Southern part of the earth)*
> *Պըտղաբերում թող ըլլայ… (Let all things bear fruit…)*
> *Ծաղկի՛ մեղրը փեթակներուն, (Let the honey thrive in the beehive)*
> *Յորդի գինին բաժակներուն. (And may the wine run over the cups)*
> *Ու երբ թխեն հարսերը հացը բարի՛ (And when brides bake the blessed bread)*
> *Սիրերգութի՛ւն թող ըլլայ (Let the sound of song rise and spread.)*