THE LEGEND OF SHAKÉ

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Vahe H. Apelian, 29 May 2011

I had seen copies of the black and white pencil drawing of Shaké with a rifle on her shoulder and a child in her lap looking down a precipice in the mountains of Sassoun, before seeing it again in Hmayag Aramiants hymnal, about which I recently wrote an article. I had always assumed that she is a mythical figure much like David of Sassoun. However, I recently found out that is not the case. She was flesh and blood and her story was depicted in May 29, 2011 issue of Nor Gyank written by Rosa Pashinian who is a candidate for doctoral degree in history in Armenia.

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Here is an abridged summary of the article she wrote.
On July 15, 1894, in the house of Krikor (Krko) Mosseyan, the chieftain of Sheneg, the princes of Sassoun gathered to discuss how to defend themselves against the expected onslaught. Women were also present at the gathering. Notable among them was Shaké Mosseyan, the wife of Krko's elder brother. She was noted for her bravery and for her outspokenness.

Hampartsoum Boyajian, a former medical student in Constantinople, who was better known by his nom-de-guerre Murat, addressed them saying that the enemy forces have encircled Sassoun and war is inevitable. He exhorted them to fight to their last drop of blood to defend their mountains and the sanctity of their households.

The authorities were not only demanding that Sassountsis pay 175 thousand silver gurush to cover their alleged taxes over the past seven years, but were also demanding that the 67 notables of Dalvoreg of Sassoun and the clergy present themselves in Moush to show their obedience. Furthermore all those in Sassoun from elsewhere were ordered to present themselves to the authorities. The aim of the Ottoman High Porte was to decapitate Sassoun of its leadership and subsequently subjugate, if not massacre the people. The enemy forces were assembled in Moush. Kurdish and Turkish irregulars had also joined. The combined forces far outnumbered the people of Sassoun.

On July 28, 1894 the Shenegtsis engaged fighting the Kurds and the regular forces. The Sassountsis from Semal joined force and succeeded in pushing back the onslaught. The women of Sassoun, led by Shaké Mosseyan, helped the fighters by providing food and distributing ammunition. The fighting

continued until August 23. The enemy supplemented the fight with fresh forces, while the Sassountsi fighters, running out of ammunition and food, retreated. At one point Krko Mosseyan and his men left the defense of the mountain to the women of Sassoun and ventured out to secure food and ammunition.

The enemy continued its onslaught and demanded that the women surrender. Realizing that they cannot anymore defend themselves, Shaké, carrying her six-month old child, retreated to the edge of a precipice and told the women that it is either surrender to the enemy or die. She then hurled herself with her child into the abyss.

The bravery of the women of Sassoun was sung in a popular nationalistic song that has survived to this day. Songs were dedicated to Murat. Dr. Antranig Chalabian picked Murat as one of the seven great Armenian freedom fighters in his book titled "Revolutionary Figures". Murat was referred to as Metz Murat, the Great Murat to distinguish him from the other legendary freedom fighter Sebastatsi Murat, i.e. Murat of Sebastia.

A legend about the feat of Shaké was also born. The legend must have been so poignant at one time that an unknown artist depicted her in a pencilled picture of a woman at the edge of a precipice with a rifle hanging on her shoulder and her child in her lap. Copies of the drawing survived to this day. Hmayag Aramiants dedicated the hymnal he published in Constantinople in 1911 in her memory and included a copy of the drawing in his dedication - (see attached).

Over time, however, the legend of Shaké gradually receded into oblivion.

After the fall of Sassoun, the surviving Sassountsis were driven from their mountains into the flatlands of Syria where they made their mark. To eke out a living, the once fiercely independent Armenian mountaineers became famous for their bakeries in Aleppo, as the late Simon Simonian, himself of Sassountsi descent, described in his writings. A new legend of sorts was thus born and seems to continue to this day as attested by the popularity of a bakery named after Sassoun - Sassoun Bakery - in greater Los Angeles.