TWO ARMENIAN MASTERS OF ART

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Category: Opinions

By Khatchatur I. Pilikian, London UK, January 2011

PART ONE

The 'Golden Palm' for best short film in last year's Cannes Festival 2010, was awarded to ***CHIENNE D'HISTOIRE***, a film by **Serge Avedikian.**

Thankfully, I have received from Serge Avedikian the DVD and press kit for his brilliant short film. This 15 minutes long animated film has both French and English subtitles. I have suggested the film for the 2011-2012 LSFC (London Socialist Film Co-Op) programme. Our selection committee now lists it there pending final decision

CHIENNE D'HISTROIRE is Serge Avedikian's third animated film. An actor, director and producer, he has many documentaries, short and medium length films as well as film poems to his credit. Serge Avedikian is now engaged preparing his first feature film.

The background of the tale of ***Chienne d' Histoire***, or ***Barking Island*** (in Turkish ***hayırsızada***), iswell recorded more than half a century ago by the distinguished writer and journalist Aram Andonian, himself a survivor of the Genocide of the Armenians in 1915, perpetrated by the Young Turk *Ittihadist* government. Rendered into English, this is what Andonian wrote:

It should not be forgotten, of course, that the Ittihadists first tested their massive exile plan on the dogs of Constantinople - and I am alluding to the four-legged creatures. They killed the defiant and biting ones on the spot and banishing the remaining ones to one of the Princes Islands, where most of them perished of hunger or tore each other to pieces. Their screeches reached Constantinople when the wind blew in the city's direction. (*Exile Trauma and Death*. by Aram Andonian, Translated & Edited by Rita Soulahian Kuyumjian. Published by Gomidas Institute, UK. Page 6)

The director's note sheds a little more light on that ghastly event of 1910 in Constantinople. Avedikian says:

This historical fact is deeply misunderstood in Turkey. The successive authorities did all they could to erase it from popular memory, along with the entire history of the late Ottoman Empire. But, I was struck by the perverse nature of the relationship between the Europeans and the Turks at that time. One hundred years later, I wanted to illustrate the state of mind this episode reveals through the power of a film. *(Chienne d'Histoire*press kit*)*

On January 27, this year, HMD event highlighted **UNTOLD STORIES** as the national theme for 2011. The projection of Avedikian's short animation film does, I humbly think, add another untold story and a dimension to man's inhumanity not only to man but also to the animal species and to the natural environment. If the meaning of the word what Raphael Lemkin coined GENOCIDE is taken literally to mean what it says -- the Killing of the Genos=species or race, then what happened in Constantinople in 1910 is exactly that, in this case: 'Killing the Species' of canines.

More relevantly, even today such inhumanity is still rampant against various animal species, as it was shown to the British public by the recent programme on C 4, titled SHARK BAIT, where non other than noted *chef* Gordon Ramsey demonstrated how the shark species are on the brink of extinction

merely because of the obscene market value of shark fins. Many hundreds of pounds are paid just for a bowl soup of shark fins. Thousands of sharks are totally dismembered of their fins and thrown back as carcasses into the ocean, while their fins fetch many millions on the elite restaurant tables in Taiwan -- just to mention one of the main centres of shark fin consumption in the Far East.

The profit-at-any-cost motto was exactly what the official representative of the Pasteur Institute, headed by Dr Remlinger, advised the *Ittihadist* hierarchy, back in 1910. Early that year, as reported by the journal *Sabah=Morning*, there were ***"more than 60,000 dogs in the streets of Istanbul. The authorities call for tenders to eliminate dogs".*** Hence, the Pasteur Institute was one of the tenders presented. The famous Institute highlighted various stages such as: slaughter homes outside the city; airtight rooms; cutting up rooms, thus preparing selective manufacturing compartments for skin, fat, bones, and what not, all to be extracted from canine carcasses. Moreover, as philanthropy was (and still is) a legal and subtle practice of tax evasion, the earnings of the enterprise was advised to be assigned to the charity works of the city. Having concluded that '*decanisation*', or dog cleansing, can be accomplished in two months time, the market value was estimated to be 300,000 francs for 80,000 dogs.

The *Ittahadist* ruling triad was overwhelmed -- their animation silhouettes remind us of Enver, Talaat and Jemal in real life history of the Young Turk government. Confused, the triad lost the united front to tackle the French tender and its cost -- as the gestures of the triad is made obvious in the film. It is estimated that at least 30,000 dogs were suddenly and brutally collected from all over the city, often pulling them, especially the puppies, away from the clutches of their human caretakers, killing the latter when not compliant to the order. The animals, all crammed and bundled in cages, were thrown on the deserted island called ***Oxia****=viper*, in Turkish, s***ivriada*** = ***sharp-pointed island.***

The film ends with the deported dogs screeching and tearing each apart on the island, while some desperately throwing themselves in the sea hoping for rescue that never was there to be, albeit their exasperate gesture acted as tourist attraction for nonchalant sea farers. It was left to mother nature to get rid of the massive carcass refuse. And the vultures obliged with overwhelming enthusiasm, plunging as hordes on ***sivriada***. Hence the film's and the deserted island's new name, in Turkish, ***hayırsızada*** = ***ill-omened island***.

PART TWO

IN MEMORIAM -- the Palestinian born Maestro Ohan Durian. I am happy to remember that back in 1968, Maestro Durian invited me to sing the tenor solo for the first complete performance of Verdi's *Requiem Mass* in Yerevan, at the Philharmonia Grand Hall on December 21, with the Armenian State Radio--TV Symphony Orchestra & Chorus under Durian's exuberant direction. The Maestro had the whole musical score memorised, hence conducted without having the score in front of him on the podium. That was his usual performing practice. Among the audience was His Holiness, the magnificent Catholicos of all the Armenians, the late Vazken the First. Alas, I don't have a video recording of that unique Verdi Requiem performance. But I have instead Aslanian's film of 2008, titled **With Love, Ohan Durian**, which includes among others, various musical excerpts conducted by the Maestro.

Ohan Durian was born in Jerusalem, on September 9, 1922. After his musical studies at the local conservatory (1939-1945) Durian completed his musical education in Europe. Among his distinguished tutors were H. Sherchen, G. Martinon and R. Desormiere. Having established himself as a noted maestro, it was then that he decided to change his original name of Hovhanness Khachadurian by choosing abbreviations; hence he became known as Ohan Durian. Durian preferred to be a first, and second to none, not even to the world famous composer Aram Khatchaturian -- so we are told by the noted Diaspora Armenian writer Antranig Zaroukan.

In 1959, Catholicos Vazken the First invited Durian to Soviet Armenia, helping the talented maestro to settle and become an Armenian citizen. Ohan Durian soon became the artistic director and principal conductor of the Armenian State Philharmonic Orchestra. His extraordinary musical prowess paved the way for him to be the Music Director of the Leipzig Opera from 1963 to 1968, while he was serving also as Permanent Guest Conductor of the noted Gewandhaus Orchestra. The press did not hesitate comparing Ohan Durian with the giants of the art of conducting of the past and of the present such as Nikisch, Toscanini, Karaian, Stokovsky and Bernstein.

In late 60's, after performing his role as the Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the Armenian State Radio-TV Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, Ohan Durian left Soviet Armenia, surprising all his admirers. Two decades later, with his wife, the soprano Alice Chamirian, he eventually returned, now as a French citizen, to Armenia, when Armenia declared independence. In 2000 Ohan and Alice Durian were granted special status for ten years residency of the Third Armenian Republic. But as before, local political intrigues and manoeuvres soon took its toll and Maestro Durian, yet again, protested, this time against the new state authorities, by returning all the government honours he had received from them. By then, in 2010, he had already performed with 110 orchestras all over the world -- an odyssey of a talented Maestro. Indeed.

I sketched Durian's portrait in late 1969, when he visited my studio in Beirut, Lebanon. He signed at the bottom left corner of the sketch with musical symbols--as did sometimes the world's Armenian composer Aram Khatchaturian. What a moving tale we are told by his wife, Alice, that the world's Armenian conductor Ohan Durian was listening to Mozart's music while breathing his last on the morning of the Armenian Christmas Day, January 6, 2011, just over 88 years of age...