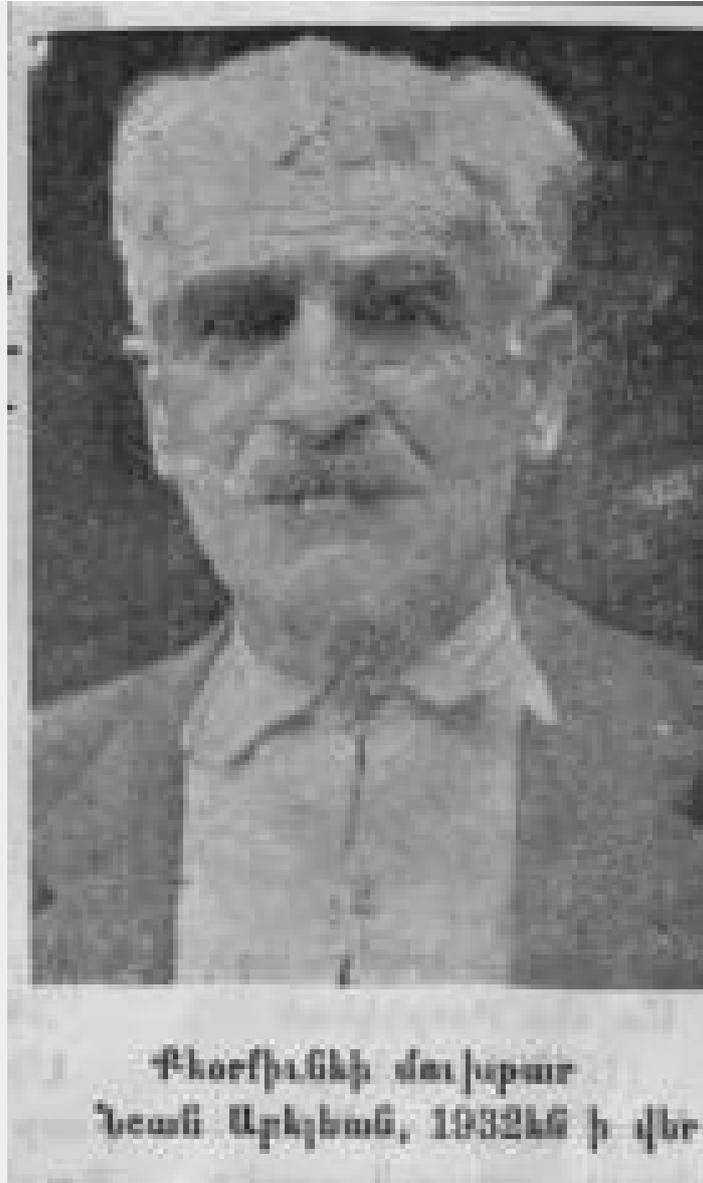


UNFORGETTABLE MUKHTAR NSHAN

Posted on December 11, 2011 by Keghart



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In memory of Khatcheg and Garo Apelian

Vahe H. Apelian, 10 December 2011

 Long before Dr. Kourken Bedirian achieved international acclaim as animal physiologist pioneering in transcontinental cow embryo transfer, he lived and was schooled in his native village Keurkune. In one of his comments to one of my articles, he wrote - "What a superb way of describing Keurkune's long gone [olive oil](#) industry and thus preserving it in our archives". Readers may have noted that I have penned several English articles in Keghart.com about Kessab and Kessabtsis. Indeed, the very reason that has motivated me to do so is to preserve a bit of the life I knew spending my summers up to my late teens in that exclusively Armenian enclave then.

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Kessab was literally a world onto its own. Its umbilical chord to the world beyond was the one thoroughfare that the French, the once colonial power over Syria, had laid down sometime in 1920s or '30s. The thoroughfare snaked its way from Lattakia and passed through its north-easternmost point of Kessab onto Turkey. The Kessabtsis referred to it as the "Zifton jampa", which means the asphalt road. Cars veering their way from that artery to the dirt roads of the villages were a rarity then. Living in Kessab in those years and its subsequent evolution into the present bustling summer resort, may very well be indicative of the way life would have been and evolved on that Mediterranean coastal prime real estate we left behind. We call it *Kilikia* – Կիլիկիա - the Armenian Cilicia, whose

longing in earnest constitutes the central theme of the Catholicosate of Cilicia's anthem.

Through the passing years in and out of Keurkune I came to know or know of four mukhtars of the village. All of them hailed from the Apelian family. However, Mukhtar Nshan, known to us then as Mukhtar Baboug, was the gentle giant for us youngsters. He will always remain etched in my memory. The three subsequent mukhtars of the village are related to him in one way or another. Baboug and Naner are affectionate Kessabtsi terms for grandpa and grandma.

Mukhtar is an Arabic word and it means chosen. However, it seems the name has acquired official status during the Ottoman Empire as the representative of the village and the host to the visiting dignitaries. Its very name indicates that the mukhtars are elected to their office. However for all I know, the mukhtars of Keurkune have not been elected by balloting but by a participatory consensus. Rev. Garabed Tilkian in his book titled *Kessab from 1846 to 1945* indicates that Nshan Apelian had been the Mukhtar of Keurkune since 1932. That makes the Apelians carrying the mantle of the post in the village for at least during the past 80 years.

We, the youngsters, spending our carefree summers in Keurkune, were the heralds of the generation known in the West as baby boomers born on and onward 1946. By the time we started being aware and know those around us, we had already learned that Mukhtar Baboug and his wife Anna Naner had lost their only child during the Genocide. After their return, Mukhtar Baboug had embarked on search trips tracking back their caravan route into the interior of Syria. George Apelian narrates Mukhtar Nshan's poignant search for his lost son Khatcheg in his "Martyrdom for Life" Armenian book.



Keurkune - Kessab

Few steps separated Mukhtar Nshan's house from my maternal grandmother's house, in that cluster of Apelian households in the village up the hill. My maternal grandmother, Karoun Chelebian, was also born into Apelian family and had moved into her parental vacant house after her marriage to Khatcher in 1918 on their return from their 1915 ordeal. My mother has told me that for years, while she was growing up, during the Christmas and Easter celebrations, Anna Naner would tidy their house, make up the bed for his lost son and assume and radiate an air of self-deceptive optimism that her son's coming home is imminent. However, by the time I got to know them, both Mukhtar Nshan and his wife Anna seemed to have long given up on the hope of ever seeing their only child again and lived quietly. We would always find them together. In their old age they always did things together with a slow motion that inevitably comes with advancing age.

Mukhtar Baboug and Anna Naner lived out of their land. During the summer, they would leave their house in Keurkune and move to the village below, *Douzaghadj*, where they would put a hut. Intertwined Kessab native *hikma* evergreen bush stalks, tree branches and leaves tightly covered the hut. In the hut they had their bedding, cushions and few utensils where they cooked their meals over fire made from dry woods fetched from nearby. I had been in that hut with my uncle Joseph. My grandfather's land was on the other side of the brook that halved *Douzaghadj*. Coziness and warmth emanated in that bare hut that filled the air. Since then I also have had occasions of staying in lush hotel rooms and sat in well-furnished living or guest rooms. However, I cannot say that their hut was any less comfortable but definitely remains the more memorable. Mukhtar Nshan's nephew Hrant, wife Sarah, their son Garbis and their four daughters lived also in *Douzaghadj* during the summer. The family tended their apple orchard that was adjacent to Mukhtar Baboug's land and kept a caring watch over the aging couple.

Mukhtar Nshan and his wife Anna may have had good reasons to be hopeful and optimistic in their old age. They had made a pact with Nshan's nephew and his wife. Should they ever have another son and named him after their lost son, they would pass on their land holdings on to him. Indeed Hrant and Sarah became blessed with another son whom they named Khatcheg.

Mukhtar Baboug passed away not long after. In time Khatcheg grew up into a fine and handsome young man and got married. In the later part of December 1988, Khatcheg, an expectant father for his first child, a daughter to be Tamar, took leave of his pregnant wife in her first trimester of pregnancy and joined a hunting party from the village for a very early dawn to dusk boar hunting excursion. During the hunt, in the twilight of the early morning, he was fatally shot. The news of this tragic accident arrived to the village along with the news of my brother's untimely death in America having succumbed to his illness. It is customary to this day whenever a member of that age-old village passes away, wherever that may be, the bells of the church toll to break the news. This time around it was Steve, my paternal cousin, who rang the church's bell and broke the news of the untimely deaths of these two young men in the prime of their lives. They were friends.

I have not visited the much changed village for decades. However, I know that one day when I do and head to the church, I will face the renovated facade of the church in memory of Khatcheg Apelian. He is buried in Keurkune's ancient cemetery where Mukhtar Nshan and his wife Anna are also buried. His tombstone reads the following:

**Աստ Հանգչի Խաչիկ Աբելեան
Ծն. Քեորքունա. 1958-1988**

**Կեանքս էր բուրոմնալի
Վար յոյսերով հիանալի
Անգութ արկածն բեկանեց
Գարուն կեանքս խաբանեց
Բարեկամներ,
Գիտցէք արժէքը կեանքին
Ապրեցէք յոյսով, սիրով լի**

