"ZARTONK" (AWAKENING)

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Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, 2 April 2015

"Zartonk" (Awakening) remains a memorable novel for many of my generation born and raised in the Middle Eastern Armenian Diaspora. It is not uncommon to hear people claim to have read the novel more than once during their pre-teen years. I was no exception. By the time I stepped into my teens, I had read all the volumes of the novel at least once and parts of it many times more.

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The Sose' and Allen's Legacy Foundation is named after Sose' Thomasian and Allen Yekikian. Like the idealist characters in the novel, the young couple had settled in Armenia to contribute to its development. They were married on August 11, 2012 at Kecharis Monastery in Tsaghkadzor, Armenia. Their lives were cut short in a fatal car accident en route to Tiblisi on May 10, 2013. The mission of the foundation is the realisation of the young couple's aspiration to contribute to the development of Armenia "by establishing programs and supporting existing programs aimed at bridging the gap between Armenia and its Diaspora, through an emphasis on education, repatriation, and volunteerism within the homeland."

A group with impressive credentials has teamed to bring to fruition the publication of *Zartonk* in English as *Awakening* in three volumes. The team consists of Dr. Talar Chahinian (editorial director), Simon Beugekian (translator), Sako Shahinian (creative director), Dr. Carole Viers-Andronico (editor), Varouj Ourfalian (publisher an behalf Sardarabed Bookstore) and Vaché Thomassian (project Coordinator on behalf of Sose' and Allen's Legacy Foundation.

Awakening "tells the story of young Armenians who come of age during a period in Armenian history known as 'zartonk.' 'Zartonk' refers to the rise of collective consciousness among Armenians living across three empires: Russian, Ottoman, and Persian. Through the entangled lives of its characters, 'Awakening' recounts stories of activism and heroism, love and camaraderie that emerge during years of servitude, oppression, and ignorance. The story develops over a fifteen-year period (1903-1918) and offers glimpses into the Armenian revolutionary movement, the 1915 Genocide, and the establishment of the first independent Armenia".
Since reading the novel as a pre-teen, the characters of *Zartonk* have remained etched in my memory as vividly as they appeared on the pages of the novel I kept under my pillow to read while lying on my bed. The book is superbly narrated. It may be more captivating to school-age children than to adults.

Thankfully, the translator is adept and experienced at the art of translation. *Zartonk* is translator Simon Beugekian's second translation. The first was Karnig Panian's memoir *Goodbye, Antoura*.

Malkhas' life appears to have been no less colorful than that of his characters. Malkhas (baptismal name Ardashes Hovsepian) was born in Trapizond in 1877. After a short stay in the United States with his brother, he returned home in 1900 and immersed himself in the national liberation struggle assuming different responsibilities. He remained in the first republic of Armenia until the 1921 February 13 uprising lead by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. The anti-Bolshevik rebellion was suppressed on April 2, 1921. The Armenian leaders, including Malkhas, escaped to Persia to avoid arrest and possible execution. Malkhas eventually settled in the United States where he continued to participate in communal life. Along with 'Zartonk' he wrote *Abroumner* (Reflections). Unlike *Zartonk*, the latter was a collection of his memoirs.

After reading Zartonk, I read *Abroumner*. Like many readers, I too was consumed to find out the persons behind the characters of *Zartonk*. It was rumored that Malkhas would reveal the characters' identity in *Abroumer*. It proved not to be the case and it made for dull reading compared to *Zartonk*. The characters of *Zartonk* may be fictional, but they continue to impress the reader as very real. That may well be the very reason *Zartonk* became popular among the young. It is way too real to be a fictional story with fictional characters. The story morphed persons, fictional or real, into the unforgettable Vartan, Levon, Sonia, Yevgine, Topal Sadana and Aruydz Kevo.

I had the privilege of meeting Malkhas when he was invited to Lebanon in 1962. He stayed at Hotel

Lux, the hotel my father ran. I was in my teens and my Zartonk reading days were in the past. New heroes in the persons of Elvis Presley, Ricky Nelson, Fabian and other American singers and actors had crept into my life and taken over my teenage imagination.

Fortunately, meeting the author who had fired my imagination a few years earlier, proved not to be a disappointment. His goatee, spectacles, general demeanor, lively character fit the image of the person who could have authored the novel. It would take me many years to find out that the lively, engaged and impressionable person I had met was eighty-five years old and had passed away that same year. He had given the attached picture to my parents. Few years ago I donated the picture to Project Save in Watertown, MA.

Readers who wish to contribute to the publication fund should click the link **Zartonk**. *Awakening* may very well fire the imagination of the new generation of American-born Armenian youngsters.