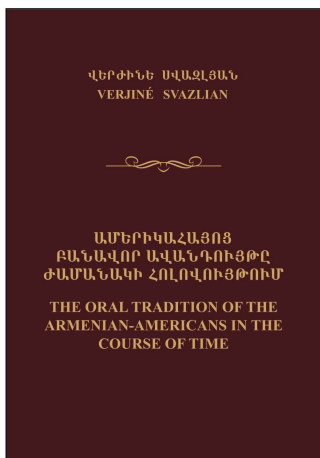


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BOOK REVIEWS



VERJINE SVAZLIAN

THE ORAL TRADITION OF THE ARMENIAN-AMERICANS IN THE COURSE OF TIME

(Yerevan: “Gitoutyoun” Publishing House, 2021, 904 p.)

Doctor of Philological Sciences, Leading Researcher of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA, Verjiné Svazlian, has published a new, voluminous book of great scientific merit. In all

probability, providence has prepared her from her childhood to deposit for mankind the national misfortunes as well as the national achievements and the precious reminiscences preserved in the memories of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and their descendants.

V. Svazlian entered the folklore scene with the book elucidating Sargis Haykouni’s life and work (1973) and today she owns an impressive library created by her own laboriousness. We are indebted to her for having on our desks the popular Armenian tales of Artsakh-Outik (1973), as well as the tales of other provinces of Greater Hayk, Taron-Tourouberan (1984) and Van-Vaspourakan (1998). Those were followed by the publication of the folklore creations of Musa Dag (1984), Cilicia (1994), the Armenians of Constantinople (2000) and Russia (2020).

From a historical value viewpoint, exclusive are the efforts, the scholar has exerted in recording the testimonies of the survivors of the Genocide, living in various countries of the world and presenting them not only to us, the Armenians, but to the whole world. The books containing the testimonies of the survivors of

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the Genocide have been published in the English, French, Russian, German and Turkish languages.

The greater part of her books has been published by the "Gitoutyoun" Publishing House of NAS RA. The article "Armenia" in the encyclopedia representing the world folklore, published in the USA in 2006, has also been authored by Verjiné Svazlian, (See: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folklife. Vol. 2. pp. 357–372).

To this rich self-created library, the folklorist has added a new publication entitled "The Oral Tradition of the Armenian-Americans in the Course of Time" (904 pages). When you open the book the map "The Distribution of the Armenians in the United States", compiled by Hamlet Sargsyan, grabs the reader's attention. At the end of the book an audio-tape ("Performances of the Popular Songs Widespread among the Armenian-Americans") can be found.

The volume is bilingual, Armenian and English (translator: Tigran Tsulikian). Besides the indexes, diverse and compulsory for scholarly literature, it also includes the photographs of the narrators (pp. 836–580) which are marked both in Armenian and English, notifying of the narrator's name and surname, date of birth and place of residence.

The book was edited by the Associate Member of NAS RA, folklorist Sargis Haroutyunyan of blessed memory, whose observations and remarks were summed up in the editor's remarks opening the book: "The present scientific work is the first to date in the history of Armenian folklore dedicated to the comprehensive study of the oral tradition of one of the largest communities of the Diaspora, that of the Armenian-Americans. The historical-cognitive value of this work is paramount. In fact, it is exclusive as it presents the history of the contemporary culture of the Armenian nation" (p. 145).

The Introduction, following the editor's word expounds the author's scholarly approaches to the presentation of the materials in the volume.

The first section of the book entitled "Historical-Folklore Studies" covers four subsections.

The second section is composed of primary sources, testimonies of the eyewitness survivors of the Genocide and their descendants, as well as various specimens of folklore genres: tales, fables, animal tales, moral-edifying tales, historical tales, domestic tales, the Armenians in their cradle, Armenians in the Diaspora, Armenians in America, repatriates, ludicrous tales, the new-comers in

the Soviet homeland, the Armenians from Armenia in America, historical songs of the Armenian-Americans, which depict the Armenian Genocide (1915–1923). In addition, songs of the orphans and of orphanages, of homeland-deprivation, expatriation and repatriation, of childhood, love and family, domestic life and revelry, of nation-gathering and patriotic songs.

The section of popular sagacity of the Armenian-Americans is most remarkable. It includes proverbs and sayings, wise thoughts, riddles and much more. The book also covers a section representing the holidays of the Armenian-Americans, as well as the music notes of the songs.

The section “Historical-Folklore Studies” opens with the brief appraisal of Mrs. Svazlian’s scientific activities, by Academician Edward Jrbashian: “Verjiné Svazlian’s long-standing folklore-collecting and elaborations in the field of folklore studies, her new methodological approaches and the value of her impressive results cannot be overestimated in the new research field of Armenian folklore. The rich and multigenre materials recorded by her and the textual accuracy of the memories, narrated by the eyewitness survivors of the Armenian Genocide, as well as her detailed and scrupulous discussions, characterize Svazlian as an unprecedented researcher of the current century, in the history of collecting and studying the Western-Armenian oral tradition” (p. 149).

Before we embark on the discussion of the separate sections of this important book, we consider it important to mention that Svazlian’s volume puts forth the sacred precept that “an Armenian is an Armenian on his/her Motherland”, and this is done with reference to reliable facts. This idea reminds the reader of Stepanos Nazariants’ words: “The Armenian in foreign lands is like a drop of water in the sea” as well as Shahan Shahnour’s “Regression without a song” which warns against the assimilation of the Armenians in foreign countries.

“The Armenians in the United States of America” section is compiled according to the testimonies of the Armenian-Americans, which is also created on a factual-documentary basis and, in its own way, is an encyclopedia of valuable information. It is in this section that we are informed of John Martin – an Armenian, who was the first to step on the present US soil in 1618. Somewhat later, in 1653, two Armenian masters were invited to America by the leader of Virginia colony to develop silkworm-breeding and silk-spinning.

In the 30-ies of the XIX century, the Armenians from Cilicia and Western Armenia moved to America as a consequence of the activity of protestant

missionaries. Subsequently, the Armenian element increased in numbers following the Hamidian massacres and, particularly, the Armenian Genocide. Those Armenians were educated in the United States and became renowned figures. One of them was the “chemist-inventor” Christopher Ter-Seropian, whose invention of the composition of green and black dyes has made the counterfeit of the American dollar impossible up to the present day (p. 13).

V. Svazlian provides the concise history of the establishment of the first Armenian churches and schools. Along with those events, the formation of the Armenian Unions in that country is also presented. Of particular importance are the autobiographical narratives of the singer Barbara Chookasezian and of Harout Sassounian. The singer Barbara Chookasezian (b. 1946, San Francisco), giving freedom to the thoughts that tormented her, made confessions in 2008, at her residence in Fresno, which shed light on the life of the Armenian-Americans (pp. 40–42). Barbara’s grandfather had migrated to America during the Hamidian massacres in 1896. Barbara’s parents were born in the USA. Because of the absence of Armenian schools they had to attend English schools, while the spoken language at their home was Armenian. Barbara explains how two circumstances hindered the Armenians in America to keep going as Armenians. First, the Liturgy at the Armenian Church, which is in “Grabar” (Old Armenian), hence – incomprehensible, the second is the Holy Scripture, which should be sermonized not in Old Armenian, but in the contemporary Armenian language (p. 41). Her parents had given the following precept to their children: “You are Armenian, you should do your best, you are Armenian, you should be the best, you are Armenian, you have to do your utmost in order to hold the Armenian’s honor high, you are Armenian, you have to win” (p. 41). Barbara compares the old emigrants with the Armenians emigrated from Armenia during the past years and sees a great difference...

Harout Sassounian’s (b. 1950, Aleppo, lives now in Los Angeles) interview depicts his pro-Armenian, patriotic activities. He graduated from two higher educational institutions in the USA. He lived four years in Geneva and did a significant work in the sacred mission of the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide. He even managed to gain the international attention to the fact of the Sumgayit massacres. There is an interesting fact in the interview. At the Department of Human Rights of the UN in Geneva, H. Sassounian made a speech condemning the Armenian massacres in Sumgayit. “On the following day, when

the speeches started, it was my turn. I began to denounce the events in Sumgayit. There happened something of exceptional importance; the whole delegation of the Soviet Union stood up and left the UN premises," concludes Sassounian (p. 417).

H. Sassounian has been the assistant director of "The Lincy Foundation," established by Kirk Kirkorian and allocated huge sums of money to Armenia and Artsakh. Learning about the grave financial situation of the Armenian schools in Lebanon, he has sent an assistance of 4,5 million dollars to 28 Armenian schools there (p. 418).

Exemplary is the behavior of the couple Jack and Eva Medsorian toward Armenia, which they have visited quite frequently. In May 2012, the president of Armenia Serge Sargsian decorated Jack Medsorian with the "Movses Khorenatsi" medal for services rendered to the Motherland. Eva Medsorian, who still has an exquisite voice and sings, relates about her childhood memories in Boston, where Soviet Armenia had its honorable place. "After the war, - continues Eva Medsorian, - I was just 14 years old. I started to sing Armenian songs on stages. I had a beautiful voice, and they loved me. We used to organize Armenian concerts like, for instance, the concerts dedicated to the celebration of the Sovietization of Armenia on November 29 every year. The local Armenians used to gather in a large hall, and we had nice Armenian evenings. We had also a dance group" (p. 393).

Numerous are V. Svazlian's recorded testimonies of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and the interviews with individuals, who then had preserved their Armenian identity.

On these grave days for our Motherland, after the loss of Shoushi and Hadrout, we hear that the Turkish "Gray wolves" militaries, who had committed violences, were reported in Shoushi. In V. Svazlian's book, there is the tale "The origin of the Turks: 'The Gray wolves'". It is said there that the Turks were of Mongolic origin and come from some parts of China. One day these nomads saw a gray wolf, and they followed it on horseback. The gray wolf came to Armenia, and they followed it to Armenia. They saw that Armenia was a beautiful country and decided to remain there. Later on, they made the "Gray wolf" their symbol. The Turks started to oppress the Armenians, they imposed heavy taxes on them, they killed, set their houses to fire. Subsequently, they started to kidnap Christian boys up to 10 years old, they circumcised and Islamized them, they changed their language and turned them into Janissaries. The Turks forbade the Armenians to

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speak Armenian and even cut the tongues of those speaking their mother tongue. Faithful to the cruel and violent traditions of their ancestors, they have established a reactionary youth organization entitled "The Gray Wolves" in Turkey nowadays (p. 439).

Certain folklore plots are, apparently, wandering in the Armenian environment. As for example, "The King and the Pauper," which, as a fairy-tale, is present in the stories recorded in various states. The pauper can tell such a lie that the king is compelled to fill the pauper's bag with gold (p. 446).

In the section of historical tales, there are interesting narratives about Khrimian Hayrik, General Andranik, Soghomon Tehlirian, William Saroyan, Nicol Aghbalian, Garegin Nzhdeh. Catholicos Vazgen I, Monte Melkonian and other celebrated Armenians.

Khrimian Hayrik is likened to Ghevond Yerets, who participated in the heroic battle of Avarayr, to Nerses the Great, to Nerses the Graceful. Khrimian Hayrik with his work "Grandfather and Grandson" is heralding the Armenians the precept of remaining attached to the native land, cultivating the soil and acting with beneficence. The Armenian Hayrik (Father) not only remained on his height, but he preferred the native thorn to the foreigner's rose (p. 470).

In the tale relating about General Andranik it is said: "Concerning the Turks, my father said that our great General Andranik was always an opponent of the Turks and used to say to the Dashnaks: 'You reconciled with the Turks, but I myself cannot do it until my death. A day will come, when those revolutionaries (i.e. the Young Turks) will become beasts like Sultan Hamid and will exterminate you all'" (p. 471).

In the tale representing Soghomon Tehlirian it is narrated that Soghomon did not kill Talaat alone, he also killed an Armenian called Haroutyoun Mkrtchian, who, through the Chief Police officer Petri, had handed Talaat the black list of 250 Armenian intellectuals in Constantinople, and only 10 of those survived (p. 472).

In the tale about the English-writing Armenian writer William Saroyan, important facts about the world-renowned writer are reported. Saroyan was awarded the "Oscar" prize for the screenplay written on the basis of his book "The Human Comedy" (in 1942). There is also a mention of Saroyan's well-known self-appraisal: "Although I write in English, and I am an American by birth, I consider myself an Armenian writer. The language I write is English, the

environment is American, but the spirit, which induces me to write is Armenian. Therefore, I am an Armenian writer..." (p. 473).

In the tale dedicated to Garegin Nzhdeh, there is a mention about his last wish to see Mount Ararat with his own eyes before being exiled to Siberia, (p. 474).

There are also a number of ludicrous short stories in the book. One of them is called "George Washington and the Armenian Boys". In 1776, during the struggle incited for the independence of America, two Armenian youths, frozen up at their military sentry post tell one another: "Brother Sargis, we were fools to leave our beautiful Harpoot and to come here in order to freeze to death". At that moment, the commander of the armed forces of the American colonies rebelling against England, George Washington, who was taking his usual rounds on horseback, heard their talk and said: "Boys, are you also Armenians?" (p. 508).

There are also a great number of amusing tales containing the comparative characteristic peculiarities of Jews, Frenchmen, Russians and particularly Armenians. One of them is "The Jews and the Armenians" and runs as follows. In hell, they dip the Jews and the Armenians in a cauldron full of boiling water. The Jews free themselves by climbing up on the shoulder of another compatriot, whereas, when an Armenian tries to come out of the cauldron, another Armenian pulls him down from the feet, so that they boil together (p. 515).

There are humorous stories connected with Stalin, Churchill, Khrushchev and John Kennedy. In a raillery criticizing Khrushchev, we read: "A man went to the Kremlin and started to shout: 'Khrushchev is an idiot, Khrushchev is an ass'. They send him to prison for 2 years for speaking against Khrushchev and ten years for revealing a state secret" (p. 519).

There are funny tales connected with Clinton, Yeltsin, Levon Ter-Petrossian, Ben Laden, George Bush Sr., George Bush Jr., Erdogan and Obama.

Along with folklore ditties and lullabies, there are simple, sincere songs about nation-gathering and nostalgia:

"Whoever renounces his nation,
May he lose his both eyes,
Let him beg from door to door,
Like a perfect pauper.
We are Vardan's sons by nature,
There aren't strangers among us,

By assisting our Motherland,
We are comforted day by day" (p. 589).

The section of proverbs and sayings is plentiful and contains timeless sagacious ideas based upon age-long experience. For instance: "Fight with one lion and not with a thousand mice" (p. 594), "You better eat the stale bread of your home, rather than the barbecue of a foreigner" (p. 598), "The Jew uses his brains, the Armenian uses his hands" (p. 600), "He who expects good will from a Turk, will find misfortune from God" (p. 601), "A pessimist will soon be disappointed, an optimist will look for a way out" (p. 602), "The pleasure of giving is greater than that of receiving" (p. 602), etc. Numerous are also the moralizing admonitions: "Behind every successful man there is always a clever woman and behind every unsuccessful man there is always another woman" (p. 604), "Be scared of one, who does not fear God" (p. 606); "Do not be afraid of a job, let the job be afraid of you" (p. 607); "You are Armenian, you will win!" (p. 607); "If you have Armenian blood in you, you have to struggle " (p. 607); "If you lose your language, you will lose your nation" (p. 608); "Respect your parents and love them" (p. 610); "Man will go, his work will remain" (p. 611); "Do not do evil in order not to find evil" (p. 612); "Do not stoop too much, otherwise you will be straddled" (p. 613); "A nation's force is not in its quantity, but in its quality" (p. 615); "A nation's mirror is its history" (p. 615); "Everybody's fate is in his hand" (p. 615); "Cursed be the one, who renounces his nation" (p. 617); "A tree is strong by its root, an Armenian – by his nation" (p. 620); etc.

Verjiné Svazlian's book "The Oral Tradition of the Armenian-Americans in the Course of Time" has a profound instructive sense. It has been developed and created by virtue of her 40 years' productive work, when the author visited the United States of America in 1979, 1990, 2001, 2004, 2008, has been in various cities, has met Armenians of various professions and age and has collected the oral creative materials of the Armenian-Americans in fragments making them a common property and bequeathing them to the future generations.

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