



## **ANTOINE SEVRUGUIN'S (1851--1933) BIOGRAPHY: SOME CLARIFYING FACTS AND DETAILS**

YVETTE TAJARIAN  
yvettetaj@yahoo.com

### **INTRODUCTION**

This short paper elucidates certain facts concerning some aspects of the life and work of the famous Iranian-Armenian photographer Antoine Sevruguin, including his origin, birth and death dates, studies, and photographic career. The study is based on several

interviews conducted by the author with the photographer's descendants, as well as evidence found through field work and research in the archives of the family Sevruguin.

### **A SHORT OVERVIEW OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN IRAN IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES**

Between 1785 and 1925, a policy for the unification of Iran was undertaken by the ruling Qajar dynasty. Alongside unifying the country, all kings of the Qajar dynasty aspired to bringing the country out of its isolation by improving its economic and cultural relations with the west.

One of the tools for communicating with the west, promoting Iranian culture, and attracting western travelers and researchers was photography, which was much appreciated and popular in Iran during the reign of Naser ed-Din Shah (1848-96). One hundred seventy-seven years have passed since the first daguerreotype was taken in Iran in mid-December 1842. Indeed, a veritable passion for photography gripped the Qajar palace and thereafter spread throughout the Persian country. Soon photography was popularized in Iran thanks to its long-established tradition of visual culture.

We can categorize Iran's photographers of 1842-1925 into three main groups: a) a group of photographers whose duty was investigating, promoting and marketing the various cultural and ecological diversities of the country. These mostly came from different nations of Europe and were assigned the task by European geographic and scientific institutions, b) local photographers who took up new technical discoveries just for fun, and were dedicated to the art of photography as a hobby, c) professionals who had made photography their

career.<sup>1</sup> Some of these photographers were independent, like Joseph Papazian,<sup>2</sup> who started his photographic studio in Tehran around 1875.



Mirza Melkom Khan and his family, Tehran, 1860s

Armenian woman, glass plate negative, Myron Bement Smith collection (FSA A.4  
2.12.GN.46.15

According to the Iranian historian Yahya Zoka, the photographer who initiated photography in Iran was Jules Richard (1816-1891), a Frenchman who, according to his diaries, arrived in Tehran in 1844. Richard was appointed as a language instructor at the newly founded Polytechnic College, the Dar ol-Fonun<sup>3</sup> in 1851. He knew the daguerreotype technique, the first commercially successful photographic process in the history of photography (in the 1830s). Named after the inventor, the French Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, each daguerreotype is a unique image on a silvered copper plate. It was Richard who carried out the process and introduced it to Iranian photographers. Richard was the first foreign photographer who served at the Persian Palace. During the period of the Qajar dynasty, the number of foreigners increased in Iran. Of these some were invited by the shah while others came as diplomats.

Richard was followed by a number of photographers, who, a decade later, became active in Tehran and introduced new techniques in photography. In the 1850s, August Krziz (1814-1886), an Austrian military officer who used to teach at the Dar ol-Fonun, experimented with calotypes.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the Italian Focchetti taught at the Dar ol-Fonun. He initiated the collodion process in Iran.<sup>5</sup> In the 1860s, two Italian photographers, Luigi Montabone (died 1877)

and Luigi Pesce (1818–1891) arrived in Iran. The latter was the first who took photos of a number of ancient monuments and ruins, like Persepolis and Taq-e Bostan. The most prolific among these early European photographers was Ernst Hoeltzer (1835–1911), a German engineer who was tasked by the British in Isfahan to run the telegraph center in the city.<sup>6</sup>

Naser ed-Din Shah assigned Agha Reza Eghbal ol-Saltane, one of his favorite palace attendants, to study the techniques of photography. Soon the art was institutionalized, and in the 1860s an official position was created for a palace photographer. Eventually, a darkroom and a photographic studio in the Golestan Palace were in full function. Soon, the Dar ol-Fonun established its own photographic studio too.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of photography on painting during this period should not be underestimated. Photography gave a realistic dimensional quality to painting. Many photos served as models or prototypes for paintings. Portraitists, especially, produced several paintings 'copied' from photos after making certain changes.<sup>8</sup>

Naser ed-Din Shah himself became an enthusiastic photographer and in the mid-1860s began to take photos.<sup>9</sup> His eldest son, Mass'oud Mirza Zell al-Sultan (1848–1917), a powerful prince of the Qajar dynasty and the ruler of Isfahan, followed his father's keen interest in photography and employed photographers in his palace.<sup>10</sup>



Persepolis (Iran), Shiraz, 1890s, glass plate negative, Myron Bement Smith collection

#### ANTOINE SVRUGUIN

Antoine Sevruguin belongs to the generation of those rare and distinct photographers who introduced artistic photography to the palace of Naser ed-Din in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

In appreciation of his dedication to photography, and contribution to Iran's national heritage, Naser ed-Din Shah awarded Antoine Sevruguin the title of "Khan" and decorated him with the order of the Lion and Sun "Shir o

Khorshid", (1848-96).<sup>12</sup> He was highly respected and honored in the palace, while on the streets of Tehran he was called Antoine Khan. Not least, his recognition went far beyond the palace and the streets of Tehran and the country. Antoine Sevruguin's artistic devotion was honored with medals and awards in international photo exhibitions in Brussels in 1897 and in Paris in 1900. Notwithstanding his fame, several details of Antoine's life have been ambiguous. Even his dates of birth and death were uncertain.

In 1996, when I first started research on the Sevruguin family, I was surprised by the abundance of contradictory details in his biography. Information about his dates of birth and death was different in various sources, and there was little concurrence, which made it more difficult to find the truth. Even Antoine's grandson, Emmanuel, did not have a clear idea about these dates.<sup>13</sup> One source mentioned that Antoine was buried in the Russian Cemetery in Tehran. After extensive research I was able to discover the Sevruguin family grave. The tombstone included Antoine's name. It was inscribed that Antoine Sevruguin was born in 1851 and died in 1933.

There are some contradictions regarding his origin, too. Indeed, due to his name, which is often misspelled, this Armenian photographer is considered to be of Russian origin.

The research conducted by this author revealed several details of his life. The Sevrugian family had a place in the Persian-Armenian upper class and was also a part of the Persian aristocratic elite.<sup>14</sup> The family was diligent about the upbringing of their children and took measures to make sure that the offspring received a comprehensive education and learned several languages. Vasily Sevruguin, Antoine's father, was an educated intellectual who graduated from the Faculty of Oriental Languages of the Lazarev School in Moscow.

After graduation Vasily held a civil service position at the Russian Embassy in Tehran.<sup>15</sup> Like many Russian-Armenian state officials and politicians, Vasily also changed his Armenian surname to Sevruguin.<sup>16</sup> This change of name to Sevruguin explains the uncertainty in sources concerning the origins of Antoine. Later, André, Antoine's son, Armenianized the family name Sevruguin adding the suffix "ian,"<sup>17</sup> which is typical for Armenian family names and identifies the bearer as of Armenian origin.

Emmanuel Sevrugian, Antoine's grandson, is convinced that his ancestors had an Armenian family name. His extended research of the family's original name, however, did not produce any clarifications.

One may assume that probably the name Sevruguin has a geographic connotation. Vasily had studied in Russia, which is a country north of Iran. In Russian north is referred to as "Sever (север)," and Sevruguin meant the man

from the north, from Russia, or an area which is north of Iran.

Vasily's sudden and unexpected death shocked the family, which had to adapt to the tragic new conditions it faced.<sup>18</sup> His widow, Achon, who was the only caretaker of the family, left Tehran and returned to her birthplace, Tbilisi, and later moved to Agulis, Nakhichevan region.

Antoine, on the contrary, opted for a career as an artist and went to Tbilisi, where he studied painting. Soon he discovered the miracles of photography, which had recently been introduced to the country, and learned the art of photography under the famous Russian photographer Dmitri Ivanovich Yermakov (1845-1916), who lived in Tbilisi.<sup>19</sup> The wrong assumption that the Sevruguins were Georgians or originated from Georgia may be related to Antoine's connection with Tbilisi.



The Antoine Sevruguin Family, 1900s.

From left to right, sitting: Antoine, second daughter Olga II, wife Louise, daughter Marie. Standing: son André, son Sasha, brother Emmanuel,

Antoine, a nostalgic individual, encouraged by his teacher Yermakov, eventually decided to return to his birthplace, Persia, where he had left the unfinished tale of his childhood dreams, and where he was to create a series of photographs devoted to Persian culture.<sup>20</sup> In the 1870s, Antoine and his brothers decided to devote themselves to photography and founded a family business in Iran. In 1883, Antoine managed to found his own studio in the city of Tabriz, which brought him great popularity in a short time, also ensuring his access to the Palace.<sup>21</sup> Later on he relocated to Tehran to launch a photo studio on the second floor of a house in Ala ed-Dowla Street (later renamed Ferdowsi Avenue).<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to his exceptional skills, soon Antoine became such a well-known photographer in Tehran that members of the upper class visited his studio to have their photos taken. In no time his reputation made him the official palace photographer of Naser ed-Din Shah.

Antoine had a charismatic personality. He had a large circle of friends and associated himself with members of the royal palace, tribal chieftains, intellectuals, diplomats and Sufis. He traveled a great deal with his camera, took photos and created thousands of printed photos.<sup>23</sup> These photos are

mainly dedicated to archeological and historical sites, beautiful and mysterious oriental episodes, wandering dervishes, Sufis and a whole range of characters carrying the burden of the world on their shoulders. As an Armenian and a member of the intellectual elite, he combined both cultural and social identities.

Antoine's studio was a significant meeting place for European travelers, artists, and archeologists who were interested in his photos and wanted to buy them. They often bought whole albums from him.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Antoine's albums with pictures of life in Persia were sold as souvenirs to European travelers.

Antoine developed his photographic talent in four categories or genres: a) He was a great portraitist. Most of his portrait photos were created in the studio or in nature. b) He dedicated a part of his photographic talent to taking photos of everyday life and work. These are works created mainly in nature or simply on the streets. c) The third group of photos are multi-figure, multi-dimensional compositions created in the studio, and sometimes in the yards of houses. d) The fourth group of his photos is completely different. These are pictures of historical monuments and places of interest in Persia in which the very rarely observed human figures look like part of nature.<sup>25</sup>

Comparing Antoine Khan Sevruguin's photographs to the works of other prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century photographers of Iran,<sup>26</sup> one may observe that the majority of his pictures have both documentary as well as artistic value. These photos reflect his individual style, although the artist often also worked experimentally. He was a master of the technical possibilities of his time, which he applied repeatedly as would a painter. Probably his early education of painting enabled him to develop a flexible mind, which triggered his experimentation in photography.

Antoine has his place in the history of world photography, due to the fact that his photographs, though taken in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century still look contemporary and actual. Indeed, interest in his photographic art has not declined, but has increased.

Antoine was seen as an Iranian-Armenian and an "Oriental" photographer, yet equally he was regarded as a "European" photographer, especially when his professional endeavors with the latest developments of photographic technology were taken into consideration.

This Armenian photographer's life and activities are an inseparable part of the history and culture of Persia and add to the contribution of Armenians to Iranian culture. Antoine Sevruguin not only became famous as a photographer of the everyday life of Iran and its society, but his art also had an important impact on the academic world, as stated by the Orientalist, archaeologist and art historian Professor Friedrich Sarre, an author of the book *Iranische Felsrelief*,<sup>27</sup> in which Antoine's photographs are printed.

## POST SCRIPTUM

For years, I have been trying to convince Emmanuel to transfer his father's and grandfather's heritage to the Republic of Armenia. It seemed, however, he



Armenian women, National Museum of Ethnology,  
Leiden, the Netherlands

would prefer to preserve the heritage in Germany, where he had been living for years. In 2002, while working in the Golestan Palace-Museum of Tehran, I organized an exhibition of the paintings of André, Emmanuel's father.<sup>28</sup> The exhibition attracted a lot of interest due to the fact that André's previous solo exhibition had taken place in the 1960s and had

become popular then, too. The director of the Golestan Palace-Museum suggested organizing the displacement of Emmanuel's collection to the palace-museum. However, in 2014 Emmanuel preferred to donate more than a hundred valuable works of the two artists to the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran), considering that his heritage should be resettled and preserved in the homeland.<sup>29</sup>

The photographs of Antoine Khan Sevruguin and the paintings of his son, André (Darvish) Sevrugian, were exhibited in a solemn exhibition in 2015 at the Matenadaran. In his welcoming words, the late Director of Matenadaran, Hrachya Tamrazian, reflected on the work of André Sevrugian and stated, "We're talking about the millennial contacts of Armenian and Persian arts, which reach to the mythological substrata and have the same genealogical roots. These interactions are also noticeable in the Middle Ages, especially in miniature painting. One can see them in André Sevrugian's paintings, where mythological-epic substrata are in endless movement." Tamrazian referred to Antoine Khan Sevruguin's works as of "high art .... on the border of art and reality, they perpetuate the instants of existence, which are a vital condensation of the moment and image."

The fact that most of the works of father and son are devoted to the Armenian nation is an undeniable proof that the Sevruguins have Armenian origin.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Iraj Afshar, *A Treasury of Early Iranian Photographs, Together with a Concise Account of How Photography Was First Introduced in Iran*, Tehran, published by Nashr-e Farhang-e Iran, 1992.
- <sup>2</sup> Papazian's birth and death dates are unknown. For further information on him, see Yvette Tajarian, *History of Photography, Course of Lectures*, Yerevan, YSU press, 2019, p. 64, and the Nelson collection of Qajar Photographs (Thenelsoncollection.co.uk).
- <sup>3</sup> In 1851, the Dar ol-Fonun, a university based on the European model, was inaugurated in Tehran.
- <sup>4</sup> Calotype process, an early negative-positive photographic process, patented by William Henry Talbot in 1841.
- <sup>5</sup> Wet-collodion process, also called collodion process, an early photographic technique, was invented by the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer in 1851.
- <sup>6</sup> In 1870 Hoeltzer married Maryam Hagh-nazar (1850–October 12, 1920), an Iranian-Armenian woman from Tehran.
- <sup>7</sup> Bahman Jalāli, Mohammad 'Ali Meshkāt ol-Molk, and Rezā Tahāmi, *Visible Treasure. A Collection of Photographs from Album Khaneh, Golestan Palace Museum*, Tehran: Daftar-e Pazhuhashhā-ye Farhangi, 1998.
- <sup>8</sup> The famous French artist Edgar Degas (1834-1917), for instance, always painted indoors, preferring to work in his studio, from memory, photographs, or live models. In the late 1880s, Degas also developed a passion for photography. Later, other artists, depicting dancers and nudes, were used for reference in some of Degas's drawings and photos.
- <sup>9</sup> Mohammad Reza Tahmasbpour, *Nāser-Od-Din, The Photographer King*, Tehran, Nashr-e Tārikh-e, 2001.
- <sup>10</sup> Jennifer Scarce, *Isfahan in Camera. 19th Century Persia through the Photographs of Ernst Hoeltzer*, London, Art and Archaeology Research Papers, 1976.
- <sup>11</sup> Barjasteh van Waalwijk van Doorn, L. A. Ferydoun, and Gillian M. Vogelsgang-Eastwood (eds.), "Sevruguin's Iran," *Late Nineteenth Century Photographs of Iran from the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, the Netherlands*, Tehran, Zaman and Rotterdam, Barjasteh van Waalwijk van Doorn, 1999.
- <sup>12</sup> *Sevruguin And The Persian Images, Photographs of Iran, 1870-1930*, Smithsonian Institution, 1999.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Emanuel Sevrugian conducted by the author on several days and months during 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Emanuel Sevrugian conducted by the author on several days and months of 2011.
- <sup>15</sup> Ивет Таджарян, Емануэль Севрюган, "Творчество Антуан-Хана Севрюгина" (Yvette Tajarian, "Emanuel Sevrugian, Works of Antoine khan Sevruguin," *ANIV*, 2013:6(45).
- <sup>16</sup> Yvette Tajarian, *Armenian-Iranian Photographer Antoine Sevruguin's Art*, Ph.D. thesis, Yerevan, 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> Yvette Tajarian, *Andre Sevrugian (1894-1996)*, Yerevan, Matenadaran, 2015.



- 
- <sup>18</sup> *Sevrugian Bilder Des Orients In Fotografie Und Malerei 1880-1980, Zurrezeption des Fotografischen Werks von Antoine-khan Sevruguin*, Museum of World Cultures, Frankfort on the Main, Frankfurt, Societäts-Verlag, 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> Tajarian, *Antoine Sevruguin (1851-1933)*.
- <sup>20</sup> *Sevrugian Bilder*.
- <sup>21</sup> Smithsonian Institution.
- <sup>22</sup> Donna Stein, "Three Photographic Traditions in 19th Century Iran," *Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture*, edited by Oleg Grabar, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1989.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Kolia Jagharbegan on Antoine's Ancestors, conducted by the author in, Iran-Tehran, in December 1998.
- <sup>24</sup> Zokā Yahyā, and Hasan Semsār, *History of Photography and Pioneer Photographers in Iran*, Tehran, Elmi va Farhangī, 1997.
- <sup>25</sup> Tajarian, "Armenian-Iranian Photographer Antoine Sevruguin's Art."
- <sup>26</sup> The best-known photographer of the era was Abdullah Qajar (1849-1908).
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Emmanuel Sevrugian.
- <sup>28</sup> Yvette Tajarian, "Exhibition of Original Art of Derwish," Tehran, *Alīk*, February 5, 2002.
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.magaghat.am/archives/31348> .

---

ՄԻ ՇԱՐՔ ԼՈՒՍԱՐԱՆՈՂ ՓԱՍՏԵՐ ԱՆԹՈՒԱՆ ՍԵՒՐՈՒԿԻՆԻ (1851–1933)  
ԿԵՆՍԱԳՈՐԾՈՒՆԵՐՈՒԹԻՒՆԻՑ  
(Ամփոփում)

ԻՆԷՐ ԹԱՋԱՐԵԱՆ  
yvettetaj@yahoo.com

Սերուկեանների ընտանիքը պատկանում էր թեիրանահայ բարձր դասին՝ մաս կազմելով նաեւ պարսկական ազնուական վերնախնամի: Անթուան Սերուկինը ծնունդ է 1851ին, Թեիրանում: Նա պատկանում է այն եզակի լուսանկարիչների շարքին, ովքեր ԺԹ. դարի երկրորդ կեսին Իրանի տիրակալ Նասեր էդ-Դին շահի (1848-1896) պալատ ներմուծեցին գեղարուեստական լուսանկարչությունը: Յետագայում Իրանին մատուցած ծառայությունների համար Սերուկինը շահի կողմից արժանացաւ «Խան» տիտղոսի եւ պարգեւատրուեց «Շիր օ խուրշիդ» (առիւծի եւ արեւի) ադամանդակոտ շքանշանով:

Անթուան Սերուկինին թիւրիմացաբար համարել են ոռւս, վրացի, պարսիկ կամ ֆրանսիացի: Մեր ուսումնասիրությունների, լուսանկարչի թոռան՝ Էմանուէլ Սերուկեանի, հետ հարցազրոյցների եւ այլ անհատական զրոյցների շնորհիւ սոյն յօդուածում բերում են յստակ ապացոյցներ Անթուան Սերուկինի հայկական ծագման առնչութեամբ, ճշտում այլ սխալներ եւս:

Յետագայում Անթուանի որդին՝ Անտրէն, «եան» մասնիկի օգնութեամբ հայկականացրեց Սերուկին ազգանունը: Անուանի արուեստագէտ լուսանկարչի հայ լինելն անվիճելի փաստ է արդէն, եւ պատահական չէ որ նրա ժառանգութեան զգալի մասը 2014ին Էմանուէլ Սերուկեանի կողմից նուիրաբերուեց Երեւանի Մեսրոպ Մաշտոցի անուան Մատենադարանին:

Անթուան Սերուկինի արուեստի շուրջ հետաքրքրողները ոչ միայն չի մարում, այլեւ աւելի ու աւելի է նորանում: Հայ լուսանկարչի կեանքն ու գործունէութիւնը Իրանի պատմութեան ու մշակոյթի անքակտելի մասն են կազմում, ինչը վկայութիւնն է այն կարեւոր դերի, որ խաղացել են հայերը Իրանում: