



## FROM THE LETTERS OF SIRAN SEZA

*Siran Seza, "Letters", Volume I, compiled and annotated by Kevork Yazedjian and published by Hayastan Press (Yerevan, 2023). 720 pages.*

The first volume of Siran Seza's "Letters" has been brought to light. Seza stands out as a luminary among women writers in the Western Armenian and diaspora culture, and it is with the diligent efforts of Kevork Yazedjian (PhD in History) that

this remarkable work has come to fruition. Having perused the book, I can safely call it the publication of the year.

Siran Seza hails from the prominent Zarifian family of Constantinople, known for its influential figures, including her prematurely deceased brother, Vahagn – the dedicated political operative – the prematurely deceased Matteos Zarifian – poet – Lucy Zarifian-Tosbat – director and publisher of the Armenian daily "Ayk" in Beirut from 1953 to 1975 – and Siran Zarifian-Kupelian – writer, publicist, journalist and advocate for Armenian women's rights. Siran, better known by her pen name Seza, crafted from the initial letters of her first and maiden names (Se + Za = Seza), stands out as one of the most brilliant and intellectual women in the Middle East. Her profound national contributions are exemplified through her groundbreaking periodical, "Yeridasart Hayouhi" («Երիտասարդ հայուհի», "Young Armenian Women", 1932–1934, 1947–1968), the first women's publication in the Lebanon and among the earliest in the entire Arab world. Additionally, Seza holds the distinction of being the Lebanon's pioneer female professional journalist.

It is noteworthy that Seza's sole son, Vahagn Kupelian, along with his wife, artist-sculptor Ani, meticulously preserved Seza's extensive archive for decades, arranging and caring for it initially in the Lebanon before relocating it to Los Angeles. Upon reaching Los Angeles, philologists Mr. and Mrs. Minas and Nazelie Kojayan undertook the stewardship of the entire archive spanning the years 2021–2022. Subsequently, the archive found its home at the Yeghishe Charents

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Museum of Literature and Art in Yerevan (ԳԱԹ). The museum's directors, Karo Vardanian, followed by Vahagn Sargsian, played instrumental roles in facilitating the processing and organization of the materials. In the introduction to the "Letters" Vahagn and Ani Kupelian, expressing their filial duty, write: "We have fulfilled our responsibility by entrusting our mother's unique works to the Museum and subsequently presenting her complete works for publication".

Siran Zarifian firmly believed in her mission within Armenian communities, leading her to return to the Middle East after completing her studies in literature and journalism at renowned Columbia University in New York, forsaking her bright American dream. Settling in the Lebanon, where her parents and three sisters resided with their families, the young Seza, a publicist, dedicated herself to the intellectual empowerment of women in general, with a specific focus on advancing the role of Armenian women in public life. In this regard, she rightfully earned her place alongside the luminaries Srpui Dussap, Zabel Assadour, Arshaguhi Teotig, Zabel Yessayan, Haiganoush Mark and Arpi Missakian, becoming the seventh star in this constellation. Seza was particularly renowned for her fighting spirit, inspiring heart and courage among new generations of women. I still vividly remember from the days of my youth when high school and university students eagerly exchanged copies of "Yeridasart Hayouhi". Seza's editorials, together with those of others who advocated for women's rights, sparked lively discussions. Siran's mantra concerning women and Armenian society was "We want to serve." Can one even conceive of demanding... to serve the society? Seza exceptionally defied convention.

Undoubtedly, Seza played a pivotal role in educating a generation of Armenian women whose calling extended beyond traditional roles of raising children, serving husbands, and managing household affairs. Her domain of service transcended the confines of the household, and entailed active participation in national-social affairs, fostering self-development, and promoting psychological liberation.

I must emphasize that when Seza had to discontinue "Yeridasart Hayouhi" due to health and other reasons, she remained steadfast in her principles by transferring the publishing rights to Hovsep Melkonian, the founder of the weekly "Yeridasart Hye." Alongside Father Antranik Granian, Jirayr Tanielian, Bedros Terzian, Loutfi Tabakian and others, they continued publishing the periodical until the eve of the Lebanese Civil War in January 1975. The role of the "Yeridasart

Hye" was profound in the history of Armenian journalism, serving as an independent, non-partisan, investigative journalism periodical (the 'Hye' component of the name being a portmanteau of 'Hayouhi').

The first volume of Seza's "Letters" stands as an invaluable resource for students, historians, and literary scholars who are interested in the life of the 1930s-1960s. In this volume, one finds Seza's correspondences with prominent figures of that era – poet, translator, editor, and dedicated educationalist Vahe-Vahian (Sarkis Abdalian of the "Ani" magazine in Beirut) and Antranig Dzarugian (of the "Nayiri" magazine in Aleppo and the eponymous weekly newspaper in Beirut). These letters vividly capture the sentiments of these youthful souls as they navigate themes of humanity, love, and literature.

A letter as a literary medium affords the writer a certain freedom to be sincere, often uninhibited, and to emote. The letters of the three aforementioned correspondents are also distinguished by their literary merits and their use of lyricism. The inclusion of lyrical digressions, confessions, and descriptions of inner tumult transforms the "Letters" into a unique novel or romance, with the primary characters being Vahe-Vahian, Antranig Dzarugian, and Seza herself.

Sarkis Abdalian writes from Jerusalem on August 11, 1933: "Dear Siran, Jerusalem... Capital of saints, fortified city, adorned with domes. A forest of towers. Cradle and grave for the sons of men, but above all, a garden of intoxication and a house of revelry... I stroll through the streets, yet without the fragrance of my Sulamith... Again and again my thoughts, my prodigal, criminal thoughts, pursue her. I behold her in her sublime whimsy..." (p. 171).

At the outset of the next letter, we read: "Siran, I have been writing to you for one week, yet the wine of your words has not yet reached me. I await your letter" (p. 172).

As the reader observes, these personal and intimate letters adorn themselves in a literary-artistic attire, with evocative expressions such as 'the wine of your words...' and other metaphors and figures of speech enriching the narrative.

Siran engages Dzarugian with even more intimate expressions: "Dear Antranig", "My precious boy", "Darling," and so forth.

The correspondents, all in their early 20s or 30s, embody a unique perspective. Siran was mature beyond her years, having received her education at the renowned Robert College in Istanbul. At the same time, individuals like Sarkis Abdalian and Antranig Dzarugian, from the "childless" generation, and having

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been deprived of the pleasures of childhood, converged on the Phoenician shores of the Mediterranean to meet the young graduate of Columbia University, liberal-minded and free of inferiorities.

In the 1930s, Siran found herself facing a challenging decision: to whom shall she grant the preference of her heart? The calm, romantic, dreamy poet Sarkis, or the fiery, macho, direct and no-nonsense Antranig? As is often the case in such affairs, a third contender emerged victorious – Dr. Nerses Kupelian, who was and will continue to be Seza's right arm in the “Yeridasart Hayouhi”. Sadly, trials befell the other two, to the extent that Dzarugian, who was expelled from Hamazkayin Armenian School in Beirut in his final year and having been rejected by Seza, turned to suicide. Fortunately, his attempt was unsuccessful...

Readers are left to evaluate these young souls for themselves, without prejudice and the imposition of lofty moral principles, for we are dealing at last with individuals who had a certain fervor for life and love.

Kevork Yazedjian's dedication in compiling the “Letters,” with his philological research and meticulous annotations, is truly immense. We stand as a witness to his robust professional approach, observing how he diligently recorded each apparently obscure detail. The outcome: Volume I, comprising 444 pages of the biographies of the three correspondents and their letters, is augmented with 1,550 annotations, and lists of personal and place names, culminating in a comprehensive 718 pages of text. Seza's remaining letters, involving around 60 correspondents, are anticipated to be released later this year in three additional volumes, meticulously composed by Yazedjian and supported by the patronage of the Kupelian couple.

We note that we have taken the liberty to present this publication for consideration by the Literature Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, in the earnest hope that Mr. Yazedjian may receive well-deserved special recognition.

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