

## ՀՈՒՅԼՅԱՆՆԵՐ JUBILEE

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### **VERZHINE SVAZLYAN: THE TIRELESS ETHNOGRAPHER AND FOLKLORIST (on Her 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary)**

Leading researcher of the Folklore Studies' Department of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, famous ethnographer and folklorist, Doctor of Philology, Professor Verzhine Garnik Svazlyan celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on March 1, 2024. V. Svazlyan is the author of more than 500 academic and public papers, as well as over 30 books, published in different languages in Armenia and abroad. In 2016, V. Svazlyan was awarded the honorary title of the Honored Scientist of the Republic of Armenia for her constant dedication to science and tireless work. The meritorious academician has received more than three dozen native, diaspora and foreign awards, including the President's First Prize of the Republic of Armenia and "Golden Memorial Medal" (2006), "Moses Khorenatsi" Medal (2013) for making a significant contribution to the study of the Armenian Genocide.

In the Homeland and in the Diaspora V. Svazlyan is especially known for her tireless activity of recording and publishing the oral testimonies of the eyewitnesses who survived the Armenian Genocide. Her works on the Armenian Genocide have been translated and published not only in Armenia, but also abroad in English, German, French, Russian, Turkish, Spanish, Hindi, Czech and other languages. As a folklorist, she has raised the academic study of the memoir

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stories' genre to a new level of research, becoming a high-ranking specialist who has thoroughly investigated the given type of folklore.

Verzhine Svazlyan was born on March 1, in 1934 in Alexandria, Egypt. Her father, writer and public figure Garnik Svazlyan, greatly contributed to the formation of his daughter's psycho-cognitive world. In 1947 V. Svazlyan was 13 years old when her family repatriated to Armenia.

Since her early school years, V. Svazlyan's goal was to fulfill the behest of her honorable father. "...Be a credit to your parents, your nation and Motherland."

In 1952 she was admitted to the Armenian State Pedagogical Institute named after Kh. Abovyan in Yerevan, studying at the Historico-Linguistic Department, graduating it with Excellence. For two years she has taught the Armenian language and literature to senior pupils at № 52 secondary school in Yerevan. Along with the pedagogical activities, she has described the daily life of the repatriates in the Homeland, their work, educational and professional success in the pages of the "Soviet Armenia" magazine and other periodicals, later also covering these topics on the radio and television.

Nevertheless, newly graduated Verzhine was interested in carrying out research. In 1958 she started working at the Armenian Popular Folklore Department of Manuk Abeghyan Institute of Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR as a Laboratory assistant. At the same time, in 1958–1961 she started her postgraduate studies at the Academy of Sciences, majoring in "Armenian Folklore." During her postgraduate studies, V. Svazlyan earned a scholarship named after M. Abeghyan.

Eminent academician orientalist-folklorist Karapet Melik-Ohanjanyan, after getting acquainted with the newly discovered folklore materials inscribed by the young folklorist in the difficult dialect of Moussa-Ler and transcribed with dialectological accuracy, highly appreciated the quick and conscientious work of the novice researcher. K. Melik-Ohanjanyan, taking over as V. Svazlyan scientific supervisor, proposed to study the *"Life and work of Sargis Haykuni,"* a grateful collector and ethnographer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. V. Svazlyan studied Haykuni's uninvestigated archival materials with love and in 1965 successfully defended the PhD thesis. The given scientific work was published in the 4<sup>th</sup> volume of the series "Armenian Ethnography and Folklore" published by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (1973).

In 1959 the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography was established at the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. And in 1960 the Department of Armenian Popular Folklore was moved there, ceasing to be part of the Institute of Literature at the National Academy of Sciences. In this department, V. Svazlyan worked as a Junior Researcher, and since 1972 as a Senior Researcher in the newly created Department of Documentation of Folklore Sources (Head: S.B. Harutyunyan), and from 1995 to the present day as a Leading Researcher in the Department of Theory and History of Folklore (since 2024: Department of Folklore Studies). From 1996 to 2004, after the establishment of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute she started working there as well, becoming member of the Scientific Council of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute.

In 1965 V. Svazlyan defended PhD (Candidate) thesis and in 1995 Doctor of Habilitation thesis. In 1996–2018 was a member of the Scientific Councils of the Institutes of Archaeology and Ethnography, as well as of the M. Abeghyan Institute of Literature at the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia. She has participated in a number of national and international conferences, making presentations in various Armenian Diaspora organizations (in Russia, Greece, France, Austria, Germany, USA, Canada, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Turkey), where she has explored topics related to folklore, ethnography, genocide studies and the Armenian historical memory.

Starting from 1955, over the course of more than 65 years, Verzhine Svazlyan, on her own initiative, with selfless dedication, walking from village to village has written down (also tape-recorded and video-recorded), studied and published the oral culture (i.e., legends, folk songs and other popular relics) inherent to Armenians of Western Armenia, Cilicia and Asia Minor. V. Svazlyan's narrators were the survivors of the Armenian Genocide who were forcibly displaced from more than 150 locations of the native cradle, then settled in Armenia and the Diaspora. V. Svazlyan also studied memoir-testimonies, narrative-testimonies and song-testimonies of the Armenian Genocide survivors and their descendants that are of great factual-documentary value. During that work V. Svazlyan has not overlooked the oral culture of Turkish-speaking Armenians either.

From Svazlyan's historiographical records, Der-Zor Turkish-language songs are of an exceptional documentary value in the field of Genocide studies, which the author found with difficulty, wrote down, translated and analyzed in her study

**"The Genocide in the Memoirs and Turkish-Language Songs of the Western Armenians"** (1997, 1999, Armenian, Russian, English, and Turkish – in Istanbul, 2005). In addition, she published the monography **"The Armenian Genocide and the People's Historical Memory"** (in Armenian, Yerevan, 2003; in English, Yerevan, 2004, 2005; in French, German and Russian, Yerevan, 2005, in Turkish, Istanbul, 2005). V. Svazlyan also authored extensive papers dedicated to Armenia and Armenian folklore in a number of foreign encyclopedias.

Noteworthy are Verzhine Svazlyan's such volumes as **"Moussa Ler"** (Yerevan, 1984), **"Cilicia: The Oral Tradition of Western Armenians"** (Yerevan, 1994), **"The Great Genocide: Oral Evidences of the Western Armenians"** (Yerevan, 1995), **"The Oral Tradition of the Armenians of Constantinople"** (Yerevan, 2000), **"The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors"** (Yerevan, 2000, also the second expanded edition: Yerevan, 2011, Armenian and English; Istanbul, 2013, Turkish), **"The Heroic Battle of Moussa Dag: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors"** (Armenian, English, Yerevan, 2015), **"Relics of the Oral Tradition of the Armenians of Russia (Rostov-on-Don and Pyatigorsk)"**, Armenian, Russian, English, Yerevan, 2020), **"The Oral Tradition of Armenian-Americans in the Course of Time"** (Armenian, English, Yerevan, 2021). These volumes include people's historical testimonies, folklore, ethnographic materials and academic studies.

In regard to V. Svazlyan's work **"The Oral Tradition of the Armenians of Constantinople"** Dr. Anahid Donabedian, the Armenian Studies responsible at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) in Paris, has stated the following: "The author with Western Armenian roots has presented her work in Western Armenian and classical spelling for a special purpose, which is extremely important for Diaspora communities both as a textbook and as a reading material."<sup>1</sup> For this work V. Svazlyan has received a number of awards in the Diaspora<sup>2</sup>. For her work **"The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the**

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<sup>1</sup> Տոնապետյան Անահիտ, Վերժինե Սվազլեան. Պոլսահայոց բանահյուսությունը, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ «Գիտություն» հրատ. Երևան, 2000, 592 էջ, «Պատմաբանասիրական հանդես», Երևան, 2001 N 3 (158), էջ 290-291:

<sup>2</sup> Ararat International Academy of Sciences awarded her the title of *Professor* (2004). The Union of Constantinople Armenians in Montreal awarded her *Golden Medal*, the AGBU of Aleppo branch in Syria awarded her "Mesrop Mashtots Memorial Medal", while the Armenian Political Congress rewarded her "Nile Key Gold Memorial Medal" (2006).

**Eyewitness Survivors,**” as well as for other studies, V. Svazlyan has received numerous awards<sup>3</sup>.

Taking part in international conferences, V. Svazlyan also continued to write down the memoirs of the eyewitness survivors living abroad (Greece, Russia, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Holland, Canada, USA, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria-Deir Zor, Turkey), searching everywhere for eyewitnesses on the verge of disappearing, writing down and saving from oblivion the survivors’ testimonies and feelings along with their spiritual and cultural heritage.

V. Svazlyan has worked with folklorist Artashes Nazinyan on the academic multi-volume *“Armenian Folk Tales,”* which was firstly published under the chief editorship of Academician Hovsep Orbeli. Back then the multi-volume was already being published under the chief editorship of A. Nazinyan. A. Nazinyan and V. Svazlyan compiled **“Artsakh-Outik”** (vol. 6, Yerevan, 1973) volume. Then V. Svazlyan compiled the volumes of **“Taron-Tourouberan”** (vol. 12, Yerevan, 1984) and **“Van-Vaspourakan”** (vol. 15, Yerevan, 1998). The work included decoding and annotating archival manuscripts, compiling a dictionary of dialect words and name-lists, as well as writing academic prefaces.

In Armenia and abroad various reviews, studies and encyclopedic papers have been published about folklorist V. Svazlyan’s works. A film has also been made entitled **“The Creed of the Svazlyan Extended Family”** (Director: Laura Minassyan, 2009). The film is dedicated to the three consecutive generations of the Svazlyan extended family, their contribution to their Homeland and nation, through the centennial history fatal for the Armenian people.

Along with scientific works, V. Svazlyan has also stood out in the public arena. Since 1960, she has been involved in the activities of the Armenian Society of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (ASCS) as a referent, as a freelancer. In 1964–1991 V. Svazlyan cooperated with the Committee for Cultural Relations with Diaspora Armenians and was elected a member of the Pan-Armenian Women’s Council of Armenia and the Diaspora, and in 1987, the President of the Women’s Council of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the NAS of Armenia. Being born in a family of philanthropists, the

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<sup>3</sup> “Honor Certificate” of the Presidium of the National Academy of Sciences of RA (2000), *“Haykashen-Uzunean”* scientific-philological award by the Diaspora Tekeyan Cultural Association (2002), also “Fridtjof Nansen Memorial Medal” conferred by the International Committee “The Truths for Armenians” at Presidium of the National Academy of Sciences of RA, etc.

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repatriate scholar didn't neglect the needs of orphanages and nursing homes and especially the victims of the 1988 devastating earthquake, being treated at Yerevan hospitals. V. Svazlyan carried out her duties conscientiously and devotedly.

V. Svazlyan has always taken her vocation and selfless work with great responsibility and diligence, she has always shown great respect for her teachers, her peers and young colleagues. V. Svazlyan's hard work and aspiration are a vivid example for young researchers.

We warmly congratulate merited ethnographer and folklorist Verzhine Svazlyan on her 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary wishing her longevity and many new academic achievements.

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