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EPISODES FROM THE CULTURAL ACTIVITIES OF THE IRAQI-ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN THE 20th CENTURY: THEATER AND MUSIC*

Key words: Iraq, Nahr Omar, Baghdad, Basra, Levon Shaghoian, Armenian Culture, Armenian Prelacy.

Introduction

It is now a confirmed fact that Armenians have been living in Mesopotamia – modern Iraq – since time immemorial and were a very vibrant community. However, due to certain socio-economic circumstances, they almost disappeared from the scene of this centuries-old history of the country.

It is to be noted that the activities of the communities formed in foreign countries were not limited only to the preservation and development of their lives, but through interrelations and direct contacts with the peoples of different host countries, they tried their utmost to acquaint them with the centuries-old past of our people, the achievements of the present in the cultural and scientific fields, and to mutually get acquainted with the cultural traditions of the people of the given country, as well as with historical national figures, fateful events and their influence on

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the way of life of our people in the given country. Therefore, the Armenian cultural manifestations in the host countries, such as dance troupe, choir, theater troupe, literature correspond to the local possibilities and the demographic picture of the Armenian people.

The present article briefly touches upon the cultural activity of the Iraqi Armenian community's theatrical as well as musical creation and its development, especially after the emigration of the Western Armenians to Iraq.

Theater

Cultural activities in the modern Iraqi community began under British auspices in the Nahar Omar refugee camp, where they had been displaced after being forcibly driven out of their homeland for thousands of years. However, when the British mandate authorities stopped taking care of the refugees, the head of the Armenian Refugee Committee, Levon Shaghoian, took over the responsibility of his people's wellbeing in all aspects of cultural and social life¹. He led the people in the best way, took care of the cleanliness and safety of their new "residence", appointing workers and supervisors from the people themselves to carry out these tasks. He ordered the building of spiritual and cultural centers, such as a church and a school, as well as theater stage and a brick amphitheater for the audience, an all-purpose open-air building with stairs².

It is to be emphasized that the emigrant Armenian, still burdened by the terrible memories of the recent past, literally in need of daily bread (especially after the removal of the

¹ **Օհանեան.** 2016, 4:

² **Օհանեան.** 2016, 4:

protection of the British authorities) and with an uncertain but bright vision of the future, would try to keep alive the traditional national morals and image, well aware that the national culture, with all its branches, is a means of self-defense in a foreign environment, and is one of the important factors of national preservation. Both music and theater have been the most important factors in preserving the mother tongue with all its provincial dialects, national customs and especially the staging of characters embodying the national liberation struggle³.

The first theater performance in Baghdad was staged in 1921 by the Caucasian actor Barsegh Abovian in the Holy Trinity church yard. Then, in 1924, a group of young people took the initiative to form the *Taderasiratz* – Theatre Lovers Union was formed, which was supported and encouraged by the Armenian intellectuals of Baghdad⁴.

Besides giving stage performances, the *Taderasiratz* organized literary-artistic evenings and matinees, which would take place inside the perimeter of the church and the school. Later, the library of the Askanazian Society⁵ was placed at the disposal of the Theatrical Union⁶. It is noteworthy that Askanazian Society was established in Baghdad in 1878 by the distinguished teacher Mihran Svajian with the aim of keeping the national spirit alive in the youth. The Society later formed a social club and a library which contained hundreds of priceless works. Unfortunately, during the First World War, for security

³Յուշամատենան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 10:

⁴ Յարութիւնեան Բ. 2008, 6:

⁵ Մելքոնեան Վ. 1955, 183:

⁶ Մելքոնեան Վ. 1955, 183:

reasons, the library was closed, and the books were transferred to private houses, where they met an inglorious end⁷.

Taderasiratz became the core of the Union of Armenian Youth in Baghdad, founded in 1926, whose activities began on the very first day of its formation. The first performance of an operetta took place on the 20th of March 1927 at the Royal Theater in Baghdad, directed by **Ohan Tsaturian**. This performance was very well received and crowned with success. Gradually the Union gathered new artists around itself and began to stage new performances one after the other⁸.

It is noteworthy that the years 1926-1933 are considered as the first period of the theater life of the Union, during which the following plays were performed – “**For the Flag**” – Droshagi Hamar, “**Black Soil**” – Sev Hogher, “**The Magnis**” - Magnete, “**Leylee Mejnun**”, “**Terdat**”, “**Dayee Karabed**” and so on. Most of the plays staged during this period were directed by Avedis Hovhannesian, who was one of the founders of the Armenian Youth Union of Baghdad. It was at this time that the Theater Committee and the board of the Union decided to organize the performances with the still existing Union of Theater Lovers (*Taderasiratz*). They started working together and gradually Taderasiratz was dissolved into the Armenian Youth Union of Baghdad⁹.

The year 1933 was a turning point for *Taderasiratz*, when the famous actor Manuel Marutian visited Baghdad and directed the

⁷ Յուշամատենան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 19:

⁸ **Օհանեան**. 2016, 186-187:

⁹ Յուշամատենան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 51:

plays of the Theater Lovers and staged a series of plays, such as *Corrado*, *Otello*, *Sherlock Holmes*, etc. Before this period, in the years 1929-1930, a new group of self-taught but talented actors and actresses appeared. Among these actresses, Nevard Ketenjian was an outstanding figure, who left her mark on other female compatriots. Furthermore, Ketenjian left an indelible mark on the minds of the Baghdad public in general until the end of the last century, thanks to her exceptional acting and organizational skills. In those days, and for obvious reasons, when it was very hard to bring the female gender on stage, Ketenjian not only went on stage, but also managed to gather around her a group of talented young women, who gave a great boost to sports, theater and social life of the Armenian Youth Union of Baghdad, which by now had enough women working in the theater and in other social fields¹⁰.

Among all the Iraqi Armenian communities, one of the impetuses for revitalizing the theater life in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul and Kirkuk and other smaller settlements were especially the satirical, comic performances, which had the purpose of temporarily distracting the immigrants, deprived of their homeland, from their worries and separating them from reality. Some of those plays were "*Charshel Artin Agha*", "*The Apostates*", "*The Pumpkin Merchant*", "*Baghdasar Aghbar*" and so on¹¹.

Gradually, the works of classical European authors began to appear on the repertoire of the amateur Armenian actors and

¹⁰ Յուշամատենան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 19:

¹¹ Յուշամատենան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 19:

actresses¹². The years 1933-1947 are considered the most productive period for the Armenian Youth Theatrical Union; in addition to the three visits of the famous actor and director Manuel Marutian to Baghdad, Khachik Araratian visited Baghdad in 1934, when he presented “*Baghdasar Aghbar*”, the actor Kocharian presented “*Ashkharhi Datastane*” (*Judgement of the World*) in 1934-1935. At that time, Manuel Marutian staged “*Trilby*”, “*Khachagoghi Hishadagarane*” by the great novelist **Raffi** on the occasion of the writer’s 100th birthday. This was followed by Shakespeare's **Otello**, **Marsilio's Porter**, **17 years old**, **Ericka**, etc.

Thus, encouraged by the guest actors, the local amateur performers also showed brilliant activity. They presented a number of plays: “*The Poet*”, “*Victime of Love*”, “*Sos and Varditer*” and others. All of these performances were staged under the direction of Avedis Hovhannesian.

In 1957, Baghdad's Armenian community was thrilled when the famous **Gaspar Ipekian** Theater Troupe of the Hamazgayin Educational and Cultural Society of Beirut, under the direction of George Sargisian, was invited by the Board of the Armenian Youth Union to perform a series of plays such as “*Golden Rooster*”, “*Usurers of Glory*”, and “*The Groom of the House*”, which brought unprecedented satisfaction to the Armenian community of Baghdad.

After that, the theater life continued with great vigor. The theater group, which by now, had approximately 70 male and female members, had its own special meeting days and a series of lectures, which led to the self-development of the actors and

¹² Յուշամատենան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 19:

increased the quality of the stage art.

The AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) had its own theater group under the name “Abovian” as early as 1939. However, the theater activity gained a lot of momentum when it was reorganized in 1989 under the leadership of the architect Hambardzum Aghbasian and renamed “*Hakop Baronian* theater group”. The latter was also responsible for the staging of the performances. This group was very active and staged the following plays: “*Baghdasar Aghbar*” by Hakop Baronian, “*The Pumpkin Merchant*” by Z. Arshakian, “*Jubilee*” by H. Torosian, “*Father and Son*” by H. Aghbasian¹³.

The theater enthusiasts of the Armenian Youth Union of Basra, immediately after its establishment in 1932, performed a series of plays “*Oosh lini noosh lini*” which were performed on the very modest stage of the Armenian Primary School, setting aside all the income to the development of the newly established Armenian school. Then the performances followed one another, and new talents were discovered both in stage directing and in new actors of both sexes¹⁴.

The Basra Youth Union had a very extensive activity. Various works of Armenian and foreign authors were staged, such as “*Patvee Hamar*” – (For Honour), “*Voski Hekyat*” – (The Golden Tale), “*Shoghoqorte*” – The Coaxer, “*Abisoghom Agha*” and so on. And from the works of European classical authors “*Otello*”, “*Hamlet*”, “*Corrado*” and so on. Well-known Armenian theater personalities, such as Manuel

¹³ H. Aghbashian was a long-time member of AGBU board and the responsible member of its Cultural Committee. He lives now in USA.

¹⁴ Յուշամատենի Պատրիկ Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց միության 60-ամեակի առթիւ. 1992, 7:

Marutian, Berj Tompulian, George Kocharian and others, with the help of local actors, repeatedly enthused the theater lovers of Basra community¹⁵. **Herand Markarian**, a prominent playwright, actor, director, poet and scientist, was born in Basra, Iraq, in 1938. He is one of the most prominent intellectuals among today's Diaspora Armenians¹⁶. Dr. Markarian is the founder of the Hamazkayin Armenian Educational and Cultural Society, New Jersey Chapter¹⁷.

In contrast to the growing theater activity in the Armenian centers, very few of the members of the community participated in the local Arab theater performances, as the Armenians who sought refuge in this hospitable country conducted very cautious and inclusive theatrical and other cultural activities, and were far from coming into direct contact with local actors¹⁸. However, the actress Azaduhi Samuel Lachinian, the first female student of the Academy of Fine Arts, was one of the exceptions. Azaduhi's accent and voice were indistinguishable from those of an Arab actress. Her stage career began in 1954, and by 1968 she had appeared in more than 30 theater and film productions in a variety of roles. In an interview in 2002, journalist Ban Abdul Latiff expressed the following about Azadouhi... *“After almost 50 years of continuous performance on the Iraqi theater and motion pictures, she proved to be a talented actress who would never lose her glamour”*. She received many awards and

¹⁵ Յուշամատեն Պատրալի Հայ երկսեռ Երիտասարդաց միության 60-ամեակի առթիւ. 1992, 7:

¹⁶ **Բախչինեան**. 2021, 619:

¹⁷ Հրանտ Մարգարյան, Hamazkayin-usa.org/New-Jersey.

¹⁸ Abdul Latiff B., 12/01/2002, Baghdad.

certificates of appreciation¹⁹. Azadouhi Lachinian passed away in Armenia on 24th February 2023.

The communities of Mosul and Kerkuk also had an active theatrical life presenting national patriotic plays, that inspired hope and faith in the community members who were present in the hall. In 1931, a theater troupe, an orchestra and a sports group were organized in Mosul, which gradually was developed and became the object of state attention.

In 1936, on the initiative of the “*Hai Nvagasirats*” (Armenian music-lovers) group, which existed in Mosul, with the cooperation of the patriotic craftsmen of the community, and with the generous donation of the devoted national figures, the stage of the Armenian National School was built, where the students of the school and the theater fans of the community staged various national patriotic performances²⁰.

Music

Music in all its ramifications, spiritual, national-popular and patriotic, is one of the essential levers, especially for the Armenians settled outside their homeland. Recalling the ethnographic patriotic songs and traditional dances handed down from generation to generation in their native country was one of the means of national preservation. Regarding the Iraqi Armenians, this was born and embodied after the arrival of the emigrants, who brought with them the unique songs and dances of the Western Armenians, manifesting the national traditions through the songs, and with all the care and zeal to preserve the

¹⁹ Abdul Latiff B., 12/01/2002, Baghdad.

²⁰ Ասթաթեան. 1975, 44-45:

national identity and pass them on to the next generation. After each musical performance, the patriotic listeners and eager people left the hall even more inspired and with the vision of returning to their homeland strengthened in their souls.

In the life of Iraqi-Armenian cultural history, the “*Komitas*” choir has justified its name and performed in a most dignified manner. During its 50-55 years of existence, this choir was the best organized choir representing the Armenian Youth Union. The community has never had an organized choir, neither in the past nor in the present, which made the Armenian society so enthusiastic when listening to the ARMENIAN SONG presented by this incomparable choir. This choir was also famous in non-Armenian circles. Obviously, this was the result of the dedication of the choir leader, as well as the love and sacrifice of each member. At first, Garabet Kishmishian didn’t have the goal of going deeper into music, but at Babken Papazian’s²¹ insistence and leadership, he founded the Armenian choir “Komitas”. According to a contemporary, “the Armenian community, the community of diplomats as well as the local Arab elite filled the hall of the Armenian Youth Club to listen to the “Komitas” choir, which was certainly the cultural event of the year and enriched the cultural life of the Armenian community in Iraq”²².

The choir began its rehearsals with a limited number of young men and women, and after nine months of hard work, in 1954, on the initiative of the Armenian Central Administration and under the auspices of the Iraqi Red Crescent, it presented its

²¹ Babken Papazian was one of the prominent leaders of the Iraqi Armenian community, an intellectual and a theater critic.

²² **Բախչինեան**. 2021, 614:

first concert in the “Faisal B” Hall. All the income from the concert was donated to the victims of the Tigris floods that year²³.

The choir and its director have been awarded many gold and silver medals by the Armenian Youth Union, especially the five founding members Sirvard Keshishian, Lyoni Nahapetian, Shake’ Kishmishian, Joseph Kishmishian and Misak Meymarian²⁴.

Founded in 1965, the **Sayat Nova** dance group works under the auspices of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. They performed several times in local cultural centers. In 1973 they participated in the Moscow Festival of Arts, and in 1992 the group took part in the most important festival in Babylon²⁵. In 1968 they gave successful performances in the National and El-Khuld Halls of Iraq, presenting Armenian folk²⁶ and local cultural dances and songs.

In addition to its intra-community activities, the community has made a significant contribution to the development of Iraqi music. At the end of the 1940s, Iraqi-Armenian musical life began to revive. Lecturers in the music department of the Academy of Arts, founded in 1940, were Armenians. The pianists S. Boghosian, M. Antonian, K. Gantarjian, N. Dadian and of course, the world famous Beatris Ohannesian. As for the violists, A. Babukhian, A. Tajirian, H. Balian, N. Bshdikian, cellist H. Guyumjian and others were well known for their

²³ Յուշամատեն Դադտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 80:

²⁴ Յուշամատեն Դադտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միության 50-ամեակի առթիւ. 1976, 78:

²⁵ **Օհանեան**. 2016, 197:

²⁶ **Օհանեան**. 2016, 197:

unconditional devotion to national music. Misak Zarbhanelian is one of the most prominent *oud* players in the Middle East and the author of the “*Oud Method*” manual²⁷.

Beatris Ohannesian has worked as a lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. Born in Baghdad in 1927, she was one of its most successful graduates. After receiving a state scholarship, she went to London where, after for four years of study, she graduated from the Royal Academy of Music and was awarded the Fredrick Westlake Memorial Award in 1948. She then went to the USA – New York – to further her studies. She performed at the famous Carnegie Hall at her graduation. She toured Middle Eastern countries, Europe and America. Her art was highly appreciated by the music critics. She emigrated to the USA, Minnesota, where she worked as a lecturer. She passed away in 2008.

Soon after the emigration, various literary and artistic evenings were organized in all Armenian-populated cities and villages of Iraq. All national holidays were and still are duly commemorated.

Conclusion

The cultural life of the Iraqi-Armenian community was founded by thousands of Western Armenians and Cilicians, who survived the Armenian Genocide, bringing with them the traditions of the homeland and various branches of our centuries-old culture, especially theater and music, through which the community leaders worked to keep the national spirit alive and transmit it to the younger generation.

After the Armenian Genocide, the Armenians who took

²⁷ Հայ Սփյուռք հանրագիտարան. 2003, 273:

refuge in Iraq, having acquired all the skills of the local language and having recovered and strengthened physically, became participants in all Armenian and local cultural, educational, sports and other fields.

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«Հայ սփյուռք» հանրագիտարան, Երևան, Հայկ. հանրագիտարան. հրատ., 2003, 732 էջ:

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Յարութիւնեան Բ. 2008, Գաղթականութեան օրերէն, «Կանթեղ», պաշտօնաթերթ Իրաքի Հայոց Առաջնորդարանին, էջ 6-11:

Յուշամատեան Պաղտատի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց Միութեան 50-ամեակի առթիւ 1976, 240 էջ:

Յուշամատեան Պասրայի Հայ երկսեռ երիտասարդաց միութեան 60-ամեակի առթիւ 1992, Պասրա, 185 էջ:

Օհանեան Ս. 2016, Իրաքի Հայ համայնքը 20-րդ դարուն, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ պատմության ինստիտուտ, Երևան, 293 էջ:

Հրանտ Մարգարյան, Hamazkayin-usa.org/New-Jersey.

Abdul Latiff, Ban, *The Iraq Daily*, 12/1/2002.

**Սեդա Տ. Օհանեան, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ պատմության ինստիտուտ,
պ.գ.թ., Դրուագներ իրաքահայ համայնքի մշակութային
կեանքին 20-րդ դարուն (թատրոն եւ երաժշտութիւն)**

Ամփոփում

Հայեր բնակութիւն հաստատած են Միջագետքի (Իրաք) տարածքին հնագոյն ժամանակներէն եւ որոշ հանգամանքներու բերումով, երբեմն եղած են շատ կենսունակ եւ երբեմն ալ գրեթէ անհետացած են այս երկրի դարաւոր պատմութեան թատերաբեմէն: Միջագետքի մէջ հաստատուած հայ գաղթօճախի գործունէութիւնը դեռեւս վաղնջական ժամանակներէն սահմանափակուած չէր միայն իրենց ֆիզիքական գոյութիւնը պահելով, այլ զիրենք հիւրընկալող երկրի բնիկ ժողովուրդին հետ փոխարաբերութիւններու եւ անմիջական շփման միջոցաւ, ծանօթացնել զիրենք մեր ժողովուրդին բազմադարեայ անցեալին, ներկայի մշակութային եւ գիտական ոլորտներուն մէջ ձեռքբերումներուն եւ փոխադարձաբար՝ ծանօթանալ տուեալ երկրի ժողովուրդի մշակութային եւ պատմական դէմքերուն ու դէպքերուն եւ անոնց ազդեցութիւնը Միջագետքի մէջ հաստատուած հայ գաղթօճախի կենսակերպին վրայ:

Ներկայ յօդուածը հակիրճ կերպով կ'անդրադառնայ իրաքահայ համայնքի մշակութային գործունէութեան – թատերական, ինչպէս նաեւ երաժշտական – ստեղծման եւ զարգացման, յատկապէս գաղթականութեան Իրաք հանգրուանէլէն ետք:

Բանալի բաներ՝ Իրաք, Նահիր Օմար, Պաղտատ, Պաւրա, Լեւոն Շաղոյեան, Հայկական մշակոյթ, Հայոց Առաջնորդարան:

Седа Д. Оганян, *Институт истории НАН РА, к.и.н.*, Эпизоды из культурной деятельности армянской общины Ирака в XX в. (театр и музыка)

Резюме

Армяне поселились в Месопотамии (Ирак) с древнейших времен. В разные периоды истории, в силу различных обстоятельств, их присутствие то становилось ярко заметным, то почти исчезало с исторической сцены этой страны. Деятельность армянской колонии, образовавшейся в Месопотамии, с древних времен выходила за рамки простого поддержания своего физического существования; благодаря взаимодействию с коренными жителями принимающей страны они они обогащали свои знания о многовековом прошлом своего народа и знакомились с современными достижениями в культурной и научной сферах. В результате происходил взаимный обмен: армяне узнавали о выдающихся деятелях и ключевых событиях местной культуры, а влияние принимающей страны формировало образ жизни армянской общины.

В данной статье рассматривается культурная деятельность армянской общины Ирака, в частности, создание и развитие театрального и музыкального искусства армянской диаспоры Ирака.

Ключевые слова: Ирак, Нахр Омар, Багтат, Пасра, Левон Шагоян, Армянская культура, Армянская пресвитерия.