

The Beginnings of the "Persian Dancer"

Armen Ohanian in Iran (1906-1910)

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Armen Ohanian (Sofya Pirbudaghian, Shamakha, 1887-Mexico, 1976), dancer, actress, writer, and political activist, led an adventurous life from the Caucasus to Mexico and bore witness to many events of the twentieth century, from the anti-Armenian pogroms of Baku in 1905 to the Iranian Revolution and from the last throes of the belle époque in Europe to the first decade of the Soviet experiment and life after revolution in Mexico. She was the author and translator of scores of books in French and Spanish, but above all, she was the "dancer of Shamakha" (*danseuse de Shamakha*) or "the Persian dancer" (*la danseuse persane*) who created a unique style that made her quite well-known in the 1910s and 1920s in Europe and the United States. This paper will focus on her life and work in Iran, where she sojourned twice, in 1905-1906 and 1910. Her stays were crucial to both her personal life and her artistic beginnings and, like her life, have been the object of very little academic scrutiny.¹

After the devastating earthquake of Shamakha in 1902, Sofya Pirbudaghian's family moved to Baku, where she continued her studies in a Russian school. Her family seems to have enjoyed a good economic position. She was eighteen when

the Armeno-Tatar turmoil started in 1905. The Russian administration did not intervene decisively to rein in the events, and the initial pogroms of 1905 would devolve into an openly armed conflict throughout the South Caucasus from 1906-1907.

Sofya's father, Emmanuel Pirbudaghian (1846-1905), a Lutheran educator and author, reportedly died following the October 1905 pogroms instigated by the Black Hundreds, an extreme right-wing monarchist group. His death and the destruction of the family seemingly opened a new path on his daughter's journey. Her memoir *La danseuse de Shamakha* (1918) portrayed her as a young and innocent girl married by necessity to an unknown husband from a faraway place: "After all these disasters, it was necessary to decide about everyone's fate without losing time. That's why, a few days later, one night I found myself in a church illuminated by a few candles. In the presence of my elder sister and two people from Persia whom I was seeing for the first time, I married a handsome man with a dark forehead like alabaster."²

The English version of the memoir, *The Dancer of Shamakha*, published in 1922, contains many revamped sections that make it look like a new book. The translator, the noted American journalist Rose Wilder Lane, seems to have revised

² Armen Ohanian, *La danseuse de Shamakha*, Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1918, p. 81.

and rewritten history, with or without Ohanian's cooperation, who appears in this version as subject to a matchmaker and is said to have learned about her marriage one day after the burial of her father: "This information surprised me very much. But as I learned that, even in the wreckage of our fortune, a respected maker of marriages had found for me a husband in a young Persian, handsome, rich, and of good family, I could not help being pleased."³

The matchmaking and marriage looks like a literary *topos*. The groom was neither an unknown husband from a faraway place nor was he a "young Persian." The marriage may have even happened before her father's death. The French painter Émile Bernard (1868-1941), who had an affair with Armen Ohanian from 1913-1915, wrote a roman-à-clef, *La danseuse persane* (The Persian Dancer, 1928), in which he put another version of the story in Ohanian's mouth, barely disguised as "Mademoiselle Armide":

As Christians, we have often suffered from Muslim persecution and many of us have been massacred. My father died in this way after marrying me to an Armenian named Keligian. My husband was young and handsome and we had loved each other since childhood; he belonged to one of the noblest families of our race.⁴

The groom was actually the bride's longtime acquaintance. Haïk Ter Ohanian, born in Resht (Iran) in 1883, had

graduated from a Russian gymnasium in Baku. By 1902 he was a member of a student council sponsored by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. After enrolling in the University of Zurich to study philosophy, he dropped out on June 17, 1905,⁵ likely to pursue a medical career in Germany. This roughly coincides with Mademoiselle Armide's statement that "[her husband] studied to be a physician, but had not yet graduated when he married [her]. . ."⁶

His father, Astvatzatur Ter H. Ter Hovhanyants (simplified to *Astvatzatur Ter Ohanian* in 1891), was also a native of Resht. He was a comptroller of the Board of Trustees of St. Mesrop Armenian Church, built in 1872-1879, consecrated in 1888 and destroyed in 1920 by a fire. He had loaned 2,898.45 riyals for the building--almost ten percent of the total amount raised--of which he donated 1,380 riyals in 1891.⁷

Armen Ohanian's last French memoir, *Les rires d'une charmeuse de serpents*, shows Resht as the theater of the marriage and subsequent events.⁸ However, only in Baku any member of her grieving family would have attended the wedding. Her mother was in the customary forty-day mourning period and the bride was accompanied by her oldest married sister "across the square and into the church."⁹ Two of the four Armenian churches in Baku were located in the area of the citadel and the Armenian cemetery; the third

³ Armen Ohanian, *The Dancer of Shamakha*, translated by Rose Wilder Lane, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1923, p. 95. It was previously published by Jonathan Cape, in London, in 1922.

⁴ Emile Bernard, *L'esclave nue, suivi de La danseuse persane*, Brussels: Club International du Livre, 1961, p. 182. Perhaps Bernard borrowed the name from Dikran Khan Kelekian (1868-1951), an internationally-known antiquarian and philanthropist who lived between Paris and New York after 1900.

⁵ "Matrikelektion der Universität Zürich, 1833-1924" (www.matrikel.uzh.ch/pages/753.htm).

⁶ Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 182.

⁷ A. Maksapetian, "Hayere Gilani mej yev Rashti hayots yekeghetsin" (Armenians in Gilan and the Armenian Church of Rasht), *Hairenik Amsagir*, February 1940, p. 116-120.

⁸ Armen Ohanian, *Les rires d'une charmeuse de serpents*, Paris: Les Revues, 1931, p. 29.

⁹ Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 98.

¹ For a biography of the dancer, see Artsvi Bakhchinyan and Vartan Matiossian, *Shamakhetsi paruhin. Armen Ohaniani kyanke yev gortze* (The Dancer of Shamakha: Armen Ohanian's Life and Work), Yerevan: Press of the Museum of Literature and Art, 2007.

and newest one was in the Armenian quarter.¹⁰ The indication of a square points to St. Gregory the Illuminator Cathedral, built in 1863, which had a prominent position on Parapet Square, in the White Town. The church was severely damaged by a fire a few years after the pogrom that practically ended with the Armenian population of Baku (1990) and converted into a book warehouse.

After their wedding, the newlywed couple took the regular boat service of twelve hours to Enzeli (Anzali), the main Iranian port on the Caspian Sea, and continued to their nearby destination. Resht (Rasht), 324 kilometers north of Tehran, was an important center of silk trade with a population of 15,000 to 20,000: "As for the town itself, the tiled houses in the streets, and the lanes, lined with hedge and cottage, in the environs, impart a cheerfulness to the locality little in unison with the sickly and fever-stricken faced and forms of the inhabitants."¹¹

The small Muslim town had a tiny Christian enclave (there were 458 Armenians in 1905)¹² and many customs were part of the common landscape. Iranian customs prescribed that, after joining her husband's household, the new bride did not return to her parents' house for forty days in order to get used to her new life.¹³ In fact, a new Armenian bride in rural areas not only covered her nose and mouth with a white cloth, but was not allowed to speak in the presence of

her husband's family. According to this extended custom, called *munj-pahel* ("to keep silence"), the bride could only speak through messengers, younger boys and girls who would convey messages. If they were unavailable, then she had to speak through gestures or talk facing a wall.¹⁴ This pattern of avoidance was not confined to Iran, but was widespread in Western Armenia, under Turkish domination.¹⁵ Sociologist Yervant Frangian recorded that harem life still pervaded Armenian society in the areas of Isfahan and Gilan and women were mostly secluded at home, with cloth over their nose and mouth, a custom that had already disappeared in Iranian Azerbaijan, where he worked as a teacher.¹⁶ Of course, harem life just meant clear-cut separation of men and women in the house.

Sofya Ter-Ohanian had spent her formative years in Baku, much closer to a European city than a backwater town in northern Iran. There is no dearth of details about her state of submission to the groom's family. She was in mourning for the father's death; thus, only after that "[she] would be brought for the first time into the presence of the young Persian who was now [her] master." Meanwhile, she was taught the duties of a young wife: not to talk or look at her husband or any other member of the household, and

14 Levon G. Minasian, *Patmutiun Peria gavari (1606-1956)* (History of the Province of Peria 1606-1956), Antelias: Kevork Melidinetzi Literary Prize, 1971, p. 384. See Houri Berberian, "Armenian Women in Turn-of-the-Century Iran: Education and Activism," in Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (eds.), *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, Costa Mesa (Ca.): Mazda Publishers, 2003, p. 75.

15 Florence Mazian, "The Patriarchal Armenian Family System: 1914," *Armenian Review*, Winter 1983, p. 22.

16 Yervant Frangian, *Atrpatakan* (Iranian Azerbaijan), Tiflis: Hermes Printshop, 1905, p. 105.

10 S. M. Tzotsikian, *Ararat-Kovkas* (Ararat-Caucasus), vol. 2, Paris: Imprimerie Polyglotte, 1922, p. 292.

11 "Rasht," *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ninth edition, vol. XXIV, Chicago: R. S. Peale, 1891, p. 286.

12 Maksapetian, "Hayere Gilani mej," p. 111.

13 Guity Nashat, "Marriage in the Qajar Period," in Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (ed.), *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, Champaign (Il.): University of Illinois, 2004, p. 48.

a string of penances, such as fasting for fourteen days.¹⁷

The stress created by her personal loss and the forced separation from her family, the prospect of married life and an unknown milieu with rigid customs alien to her free spirit were bound to trigger a nervous crisis. In Bernard's novel, she reportedly said that her husband "left for Germany to finish his studies." "I stayed in Persia," she added, "in my father-in-law's house. He was very wealthy and had beautiful gardens where my poetic instincts were awakened. However, I could not endure the extended absence of my husband, and I suffered from melancholy surrounded by these marvelous gardens."¹⁸ She started to suffer nightmares and the *hakims* (doctors) concluded that "fears had made the soul of [her] brain fly away from [her], and they counselled that [she] should at once be taken to see spectacles which would divert [her]."¹⁹

One evening they took her to the bazaar. As a British traveler wrote years later, "the Bazaar was like all others in Persia, full of people who, to our eyes, appeared to be doing nothing in an extremely busy manner; groups of idlers, doubtless fulfilling their daily duties of barter and sale, but who seemed to be only smoking or drinking tea."²⁰ The performance of a public dancer was far from reassuring:

We came to a platform where two musicians accompanied the movements of a little dancer who crouched before them. Her hair was dishevelled, her small face seemed aged in its youth, and while she

17 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 105-110.

18 Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 182.

19 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 111.

20 Dorothy de Warzée (Baroness d'Hermalle), *Peeps into Persia*, London: Hurst and Blackett, 1913, p. 12.

sang a plaintive air her body moved with the rhythm of the melody, like the contortions of a wounded serpent. There was so much suffering, so much revolt in her gestures, now frantic and angry, now weary and heartsick. Without saying a word she expressed all her experience of the villainies, the ingratitude, the cruelty of humanity toward one who has no longer anything to give.

She finished her dance and held out her tambourine to the crowd, with a gesture asking only a few pennies. The bystanders, laughing, rewarded her with handfuls of refuse. A rotten egg smashed in the tambourine, to the joy of the crowd, a few pebbles followed, and many insults. She shrugged her shoulders and, if she had heard nothing, coldly looked at the throng. Her eyes met mine, and in that instant I saw all the misery in which she lived, disdained by those to whom yesterday she was throwing her youth with open hands. She turned away, covered her face with her hair, and rested a moment before beginning another dance.

I tugged at my uncle's sleeve, begging him take me away.

"Yes, let us go," he said. "You are right. Why should we look at this lost girl? There is nothing in the world more impious than a dancer [*courtesan-danseuse* in the French original]."²¹

Although popular in Iran from pre-Islamic times, public dance had been regarded with deep contempt at least since the advent of Islam. Writing in the seventeenth century, French traveler Jean Chardin remarked that dancing was "more dishonorable and more contrary to religion than singing and playing instruments," and that public women and prostitutes were its only practitioners (although men also engaged in it).²²

21 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 113-114.

22 Rudi Matthee, "Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls: Women Entertainers in Safavid

Dancers were also singled out as prostitutes in Turkey and Iran, where dance had been periodically banned, as well as in other Near Eastern countries.²³

An old woman famed as a magician was summoned. She concluded that evil spirits had possessed the young bride. After adorning her with various talismans, she was ordered to take her dancing to the tombs of the saints to cleanse herself. "The spirits, made wretched by my rapid movements and the sharp sounds of the cymbals, would leave me, and when they sought to return, the talismans would prevent them," she wrote. "But the evil spirit did not leave me. I returned to the house trembling with exhaustion, and fell into a stupor during which I moaned without ceasing."²⁴

Relying on Ohanian's story, New Age writer Detraci Regula has noted the cleansing qualities of ancient dances and sounds. However, she mistakenly ascribes the nightmares and the failure of the ritual dance to the bride's rejection of an arranged marriage,²⁵ since Sofya believed that after the forty days period ended "[she] should never be allowed to speak freely to him, who alone of all the household was young enough to understand [her], and [she] despaired at ever knowing the joys of love described by the poets."²⁶

She claimed to have suffered a final breakdown on the fortieth day, when she was waiting to meet her husband. The

whole narration may be just a fictional twist in the plot. The story depicted in *Les rires d'une charmeuse de serpents* under the guise of journal entries mentions the wedding night on October 29 (scarcely a week after the death of the bride's father) and the groom's family search for proof of her virginity. In Armenian rural areas, this consisted of displaying bloody sheets from the wedding bed. Ohanian labeled this practice as "despicable" and "indecent," a possible pretext for premature tension. In fact, on November 5 she wrote that "impudent customs trigger in me a fierce aversion towards marriage. This aversion becomes physical. My rejected husband does not understand anything. [. . .] [T]he older family members are outraged. I no longer speak to them. I will never forgive them for that display of the nuptial sheets." The rejection becomes mutual; five days later, she added that "something is not working in this long-wished union. He has a dismissing attitude towards me. I am showing indifference."²⁷ There is neither mention of the *munj-pahel* custom, nor of forty-day mourning.

In a rather superficial reading of *The Dancer of Shamakha*, Suzanne Rodriguez claimed that "her widowed mother, stripped of money and possessions, soon gave the girl in marriage to a brutal man."²⁸ Diana Souhami's rewrote this statement as "her mother forced her into a brutal marriage."²⁹ Nothing in the memoir warrants such a conclusion. The only support for any claim of domestic violence

27 Ohanian, *Les rires*, p. 29-30.

28 Suzanne Rodriguez, *Wild Heart. A Life: Natalie Clifford Barney's Journey from Victorian America to Belle Epoque Paris*, New York: Ecco, 2002, p. 228.

29 Diana Souhami, *Wild Girls. Paris, Sappho, and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005, p. 67.

may come from the narration of Mademoiselle Armide, the pseudo-fictional heroine of *La danseuse persane*. It looks grounded in facts; the text mentions Haik Ter Ohanian's actual first name and age:

During his time away he had learned brutal manners; he often treated me as his slave. I was violently hurt to see he liked to humiliate me in my most beautiful feminine movements and I cried when I was alone. Moreover, his German education made him see love as indecent and tenderness as a childlike act unworthy of a man. At just twenty-three, he pretended to be my educator and shape me after the Europeans.³⁰

Ohanian claimed to have been in a sort of coma for two months. The English translation includes three pages missing from the French original where she speaks with romantic self-effacement about her unabashed love for her husband and their mutual attachment after she woke up from her state: "Beside me was my young husband, grave, serene, handsome as a hero of the poems that had taught me to dream of love. . . I loved him. I adored him. My soul became a limpid stream at his feet. When I touched his cheek timidly with my hand he trembled, and I knew the rapture of a surrender so complete that it is conquest."³¹

The idyll did not last. According to *La danseuse de Shamakha*, six weeks after she regained consciousness, "one unfortunate morning [her] master woke up and declared that, despite his love for [her], he had a sacred duty to perform." He explained to her that "the world was flooded with crimes and injustices, that it was time to recreate the world, that justice would come very soon," and gave her the terrible news that "by leaving [her]

free, [she] will go to save the souls of the wretched and wake their fair wrath!"³² However, some flourishes added in *The Dancer of Shamakha* can hardly be figments of the translator's imagination. Her husband "had left his parent's home by the door of marriage so he might be free to begin his pilgrimage for the salvation of the world," because "he was only nineteen years old, and since unmarried sons of whatever age are always considered part of their father's household and subservient to the wishes of their elders, he had been unable to start on his holy mission, of which Asatour-Khan would not hear anything about."³³ As stated before, Haik Ter-Ohanian had married at twenty-two, not nineteen. Between the lines, however, she admitted he was approximately four years older, as they actually were.

Mademoiselle Armide narrated a different follow-up in *La danseuse persane*: "I suffered quite a lot during the two years he stayed close to me; however, I loved him and I could not resign myself to see him abandon me as he intended. 'If you abandon me again,' I told him, 'there will be events that will force you to come back'."³⁴

A reviewer of *La danseuse de Shamakha*, reading between lines, presciently asked: "Was he a militant patriot, yearning to deliver his fellow citizens from an abhorred yoke that needed the Great War out of which we have just emerged to be destroyed?"³⁵ Ohanian's words reflected the fact that her husband had gone back into the ranks of the Ar-

32 Ohanian, *La danseuse*, p. 111.

33 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 125. *Asatour* is the shortened form of *Astvatatur*.

34 Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 182-183.

35 Cl. Huart, "Mlle. Armène Ohanian. La danseuse de Shamakha," *Journal asiatique*, January-March 1921, p. 155.

30 Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 182.

31 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 124.

Iran," in Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (eds.), *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, Costa Mesa (Ca.): Mazda Publishers, 2000, p. 139.

23 Donnalee Dox, "Dancing Around Orientalism," *The Drama Review*, Winter 2006, p. 56.

24 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 115.

25 Detraci Regula, *The Mysteries of Isis: Her Worship and Magick*, St. Paul: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2002, p. 174.

26 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 106.

menian revolutionary movement. The Armeno-Tatar tension became an open confrontation in the summer of 1906. Well-organized Armenian self-defense units were able to contain and overcome widespread Tatar attacks. During the interethnic war, which lasted until early 1907 and overlapped with the revolutionary movement that swept across Russia and the Caucasus, Haik Ter-Ohanian was an operative in the clandestine transport of weapons through the Russian border organized by the A.R.F.³⁶

She would not only be a separated woman, carrying her husband's last name, but a single mother. Towards the end of the relationship, she was said to have told Bernard that "Haick — this was the first name of my husband — finally returned to me and I had a daughter."³⁷ As she wrote twenty-five years later, "Echmiadzin is our Vatican and refuses to grant divorce to Orthodox people. I was therefore condemned either to celibacy or to adultery; I chose celibacy."³⁸

The social stigma carried by a single mother was surely one of the reasons that made Ohanian omit, almost completely, the existence of a daughter in her writings. She gave the example of the austere morality in Zergueran: the villagers had isolated a widow who had conceived a child, perhaps with a traveler, like she had been a leper. She also mentioned the infamous case of a young Armenian woman whose husband had entrusted her decades earlier to his elder brother. She had become pregnant and gave birth to a child that had been taken away from her. Worse, the elder's council

had sentenced her to be buried alive.³⁹ The dancer stated that her own mother "knew nothing of my life, and thought that he whose name I bore was waiting for me in Turkey."⁴⁰ It is likely, besides, that the newborn child would become a barrier to her professional ambition.

In August 1906, Sofya Ter-Ohanian gave birth to her daughter Nora in Kislovodsk (northern Caucasus).⁴¹ While we do not know the details of her private life during the next three years, her public persona started to show as an aspiring actress playing secondary roles in Armenian theater groups from 1906-1908 in Baku and other cities in the Caucasus. However, in mid-1908 she felt the urge for professional advancement and abandoned the Caucasus for Moscow to study in Konstantin Stanislavski's celebrated Art Theater. She also studied dance with a famed former dancer and teacher, Lydia Nelidova-Lupandina (1863-1929). The tension between theater and dance was soon resolved: she became a dancer at the Art Theater. However, she rejected an offer to become a soloist at the Moscow Opera Theater; instead, around October 1909 she went back to the Caucasus and entered the Royal Opera Theater of Tiflis, where she performed for a few months as a soloist. However, at the end of the year, her career seems to have been at a standstill. The lukewarm reception given to her performances may have prompted her to rethink her options.

In the meantime, Iran was going through a crucial moment in its modern

history. The Iranian Constitutional Revolution was burgeoning in the second half of 1906, fueled by the political need for a change encouraged by the middle class and the intelligentsia, and the ongoing race between Russia and Great Britain for the control of oil. Mozaffer ad-Din Shah (1896-1907), in one of the last acts of his life, signed the Constitution on December 31, 1906. The turmoil continued and the country was divided into Russian (northern) and British (southern) zones of influence a year later. Muzaffer-ad-Din's son and successor, Mohammed Ali (January 1907-July 1909), initially faced competition from his brother Salar-ad-Dowleh. In June 1908 the new shah engineered a coup d'état with the help of Russian troops and dissolved the first *majlis* to restore absolutism. However, the resistance of the constitutionalist forces bore its fruits. They were able to recapture Tehran with British backing in July 1909. The shah was deposed and replaced by his twelve-year-old son Ahmad Shah (1909-1925), the last king of the Qajar dynasty.

In either 1908 or 1909, Haik Ter-Ohanian returned to Iran as a correspondent for the moderate-liberal daily *Russkoye Slovo* of St. Petersburg to cover the activities of Yeprem Khan Davidian (1868-1912), an A.R.F. member and one of the military leaders of the constitutional movement.⁴² He was later a representative of two other newspapers: the left-liberal *Rech* and the progressive *Utro Rossii*.⁴³ Perhaps he had a hand in get-

ting his wife an invitation to be involved in the foundation of a European-style theater. The fact that she gathered a group of Iranian journalists, Parliament members, and young educated merchants in a foundational meeting seems to indicate that such an invitation was behind her trip. Probably on the basis of the dancer's information, French musicologist Louis Laloy stated in 1912: "But the Near East was dear to her dream and in 1910 she gladly accepted to go to Tehran and give to the reborn Persia several examples of a regular theater that would replace its old mysteries."⁴⁴

In January 1910, M. Krinsky, correspondent for *Teatr i isskustvo*, a St. Petersburg-based arts magazine, published an article titled "The Foundation of National Theater in Persia." He wrote that locals did not have any knowledge of European theater and that Ohanian, who had Russian theatrical education and whose picture illustrated the article, was working to fill the vacuum. There were plans to stage Schiller's *The Robbers*.⁴⁵

Ohanian enjoyed the sponsorship of government circles, especially the chairman of the Parliament, Mirza Sadeq Khan Mostashar-od-Dowleh, and an educated member of the clergy, Ziya-Eddin. As she wrote years later, "the chairman of the Majlis, together with some 20 noblemen, including one sayyid to placate the clerics, put everything at my disposal." Her right hand was a young politician educated in Russia, Egtdar-sultan.⁴⁶ It must have been a rather unusual picture: a Western-leaning, Christian wom-

36 "Hoghvrtik" (Obituaries), in Garo Kevorkian, *Amenun taregirke* (Everyone's Yearbook), Beirut: Atlas, 1959, p. 590.

37 Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 183.

38 Ohanian, *Les rires*, p. 94.

39 Ohanian, *Armenia feliz*, p. 48.

40 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 218.

41 Arrival form F-14, Archivo General de la Nación de México (AGN), Registro Nacional de Extranjeros (RNE), Rubro "Persia," Caja 1. Thank you to Dr. Carlos Antaramian in Mexico, who provided the information from this document, namely, the arrival form of Nora Ter Ohanian to Mexico in 1935.

42 A. Gulxhandanian, "Bakvi dere mer azatagrakan sharzhman mej" (The Role of Baku in Our Liberation Movement), *Hairenik Amsagir*, June 1924, p. 117.

43 Andre Amurian (ed.), *H. H. Dashnaksutiun - Yeprem - Parsakan Sahmanadrutiun* (A. R. Federation - Yeprem - Persian Constitution), vol. 1, Teheran: Alik Press, 1976, p. 269.

44 Louis Laloy, "Danses d'Asie," *Revue Musicale S.I.M.*, February 15, 1912, p. 39-40.

45 M. Krinsky, "Sozdanie natsionalnogo teatra v Persii" (The Foundation of National Theater in Persia), *Teatr i iskusstvo*, 5, 1910, p. 104.

46 Armen Ohanian, "Dimastverner" (Profiles), *Arzagang Parizi*, 17-20, 1917, p. 17.

an addressing a gathering of more or less progressive Muslim men. Krinsky gave a suggestive depiction of one of the meetings: "All speakers are men. Against this backdrop of Oriental faces, clothes, and environment, there is a sort of strange lack of harmony in the presence of a European woman who in fact listens to the speeches and makes short, nervous exclamations right from her place."⁴⁷

The Persian Theatrical Society was finally created in March 1910. She commissioned the translation of three plays: Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Avetis Aharonian's *The Valley of Tears*, and Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* (from the Armenian). Molière was not unknown in Farsi; both his plays and plays inspired by them had been performed in Iran and elsewhere. Perhaps because of this reason, and since Aharonian's play belonged to an Armenian author (actually imprisoned by the Czarist government at the time), the organizing committee selected Gogol's play. It was an attractive and risky choice; this comedy of errors, written in 1836 and "doubtless the greatest play in the Russian language," was "intended as a moral satire against bad officials, not a social satire against the system of corruption and irresponsible despotism," but "quite apart from the author's intention, it was received as a social satire."⁴⁸ It was translated into Farsi by Prince Nadir-Mirza, official translator of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As was customary with French plays, the text was "Iranized": "church" was turned into *mejid* and "ruble" into *toman* to give more local color.

47 M. Krinsky, "Tegeran (ot nashego korrespondenta)" (Tehran: From Our Correspondent), *Teatr i iskusstvo*, 13, 1910, p. 278.

48 D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature From Its Beginnings to 1900*, Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press, 1999, p. 160-161.

Ohanian worked feverishly during several weeks with amateur actors to produce Gogol's play according to the guidelines of the Moscow Art Theatre. She was a fast learner and in two months learned enough Farsi to memorize the role of Maria Antonovna, the main female character. An Armenian woman well-versed in Farsi played the mayor's wife along with some other twenty actors. She presented *The Government Inspector* at Atabek Park on May 21, with 450 spectators, including Iranian princes, almost all the cabinet ministers, the president of the Parliament and many representatives, as well as Armenian and European families living in Tehran. However, only a few laymen attended from the sizable Russian community, while officials were conspicuously absent, perhaps because of the nature of the play. During the intermissions, three orchestras performed for a delighted audience.⁴⁹

This first European play in Iran was widely covered by the press in the Caucasus and St. Petersburg. The news was also reported in Paris. "The actors had studied their roles very well. The best was the mayor. . . . As a completely fresh work, the performance was not exempt of inaccuracies. Osip's very long moustaches fell to the floor at the very beginning and triggered endless laughs among the pub-

49 M. Krinsky, "Revizor' na persidskom yazyke" ("The Government Inspector" in Persian), *Teatr i iskusstvo*, 23, 1910, p. 461; Kastor i Polluks, "Revizor' na persidskom yazyke" ("The Government Inspector" in Persian), *Baku*, May 27, 1910, p. 3. See also "G-zha Armen Ter-Oganyan - osnovopolozhintsa pervogo natsionalnogo persiskogo teatra" (Mrs. Armen Ter-Ohanian -- Founder of the First National Persian Theater), *Baku*, June 6, 1910; M. Krinsky, "Revizor' na persidskom yazyke" ("The Government Inspector" in Persian Language), *Teatr i iskusstvo*, 23, 1910, p. 460-461; "Revizor' v Tegerane" ("The Government Inspector" in Teheran), *Kavkaz*, August 31, 1910.

lic. . . . The mayor blessed her daughter's wedding in the Muslim fashion, covering her face with the hat. . . . The kisses were given in the Muslim way, kissing the hands and not the lips. . . . The big crowd in the theater applauded enthusiastically the organizers and the performers." Ohanian, almost buried beneath piles of flowers, received a diamond pin and an honorarium of 300 rubles. The theater group rented a place for the next performances, *Nadir Shah*, about the life of the famous eighteenth-century shah of Iran, and Schiller's *The Robbers*.⁵⁰ *The Government Inspector* was repeated at the royal court, with the attendance of the shah, his ministers and his entourage, and she was decorated with the "Elmiei" order together with a beautifully-scripted *ferman* (imperial decree).⁵¹ This second performance was in September, "on the birthday of the young shah," reported the French press, although Ahmad Shah was actually born in January 1898. The same report described her achievement in glowing terms:

Persia owes to a Russian artist, Mrs. Armène Ter-Ohanian, who was very acclaimed in Moscow and in Tiflis and whose talent is praised, the existence of a theater and actors. Mrs. Armène Ter-Ohanian traveled to Tehran a year ago, learned the Persian language, founded a theatrical society, organized a troupe, shaped actors, directed the rehearsals and the *mise-en-scène*, and was able to offer hugely successful performances with *savoir-faire* and energy.

Mrs. Ter-Ohanian not only formed her actors, but also her repertoire, which is com-

50 A.N., "Veraknniche` Tehranum parskeren ner-kayatsvatz" ("The Government Inspector" Performed in Farsi in Teheran), *Mshak*, June 16, 1910.

51 "Tikin Armen Ohanian" (Madam Armen Ohanian), *Taraz*, 10, 1910, p. 101.

posed of old Persian pieces and Russian and French plays.⁵²

She was simultaneously involved with progressive women engaged in revolutionary change. In April 1910, the Social-Democratic newspaper *Iran Naw* reported about a big event, a play for women organized by the *anjuman* (council) of Ladies of the Homeland at Atabek Park.⁵³ However, according to the files of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the gathering was sponsored by a charitable organization called Persian Women's Benevolent Society, initiated by female party members "despite lack of encouragement and sometimes outright hostility by certain conservative segments of society." Both the Council and the Society had been founded in the first months of 1910; the paucity of information even leaves room to think that both were one and the same.⁵⁴ A bridging point in this assumption may be the fact that Anahit Davitian, Yeprem Khan's wife, was member of the *anjuman* of Ladies of the Homeland, while his party was behind the organization of the Benevolent Society.⁵⁵

Davitian was acquainted with Haik Ter-Ohanian, who probably engaged in revolutionary activities under his cover as a journalist. On January 30, 1910, Yeprem Khan, who was campaigning in Iranian Azerbaijan, wrote to her: "I will soon go to Tabriz and there I will decide

52 "Théâtre persan," *Le monde artiste*, March 11, 1911, p. 158.

53 Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 196.

54 Berberian, *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, p. 141. The documentation did not contain any mention of Ohanian (Hourri Berberian, personal communication).

55 Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911*, p. 186.

where we will live. . . Where is Haik? He seems to be gone."⁵⁶ Since she knew Ter-Ohanian, this might point to a connection with Armen Ohanian, who, according to *Mshak*, had organized the event at Atabek Park on behalf of the Persian Women's Benevolent Society.⁵⁷ The information about this event is contradictory. While Berberian says that the audience included Iranians, Muslims, Jews, Chaldeans, and Armenians, as well as Europeans, Afary just mentions the presence of Iranians and several Europeans. Men's access was logically forbidden.⁵⁸

According to the report in *Mshak*, which counted 500 Iranian women in attendance (the number was similar in the other sources), the event was a cultural gathering with a little of everything, from speeches to a movie. The first part featured two speakers: Ohanian talked about "Theater and Its Moral Significance" and a young Iranian woman spoke about "The Persian Woman in the Past, Present, and Future," protesting against the use of the veil, imposed four centuries earlier. The second part consisted of readings of literary excerpts in historical costumes with choral and solo chants with Oriental music, and excerpts of Alexander Yuzhin's *Treason*, a play that dealt with Christian-Moslem struggle during the sixteenth-century Persian occupation of Georgia. The third part had been originally planned to be a one-act comedy, but this did not materialize, since even the most liberal-minded women did not dare go on stage. Instead, the organizers

showed a movie: "This kind of presentation was so important for those unfortunate Persian women that they remained at the hall for a long time after the end of the event to share their impressions."⁵⁹ Movie theaters had existed in 1905 and 1907-1909, but had been closed or destroyed amid religious protests and, indeed, were banned to women. Artashir Khan Batmangarian would become in 1912 the pioneer of movie theaters as organized business.⁶⁰

The four hundred tomans collected at Atabek Park were allocated to a school for orphaned girls, adult classes and the opening of a women's clinic.⁶¹ Ohanian wrote:

Persia has full right to call that a historical day, as it became famous both for a female performance and for being the first appearance on stage of a Persian woman, who until then wandered in the bondage of the harem. This was the first time that the Muslim woman left aside all obstacles and dangers, and not only showed herself in the theater hall, but also *on stage*. Three months of hard work, multiple annoyances, meetings in the harems, and lots of discretion to prevent the whole event from being ruined by the condemnation of a cruel mullah. Today, Persian women dare to let the world know about their triumph. It was worth it to see the endless line of carriages rushing towards the luxurious Atabek Park. The atabek had graciously allowed the use of his park and palace for the event. Everything had been done to eliminate any trace or sign of a male. When the Persian women felt safe, they threw away the sheets and the fishnet veils they wore. Only then was it possible to distinguish young from old, beautiful from ugly, prin-

56 Amurian, *H. H. Dashnaksutiun*, p. 67 (the date is January 17 according to the old, Julian calendar).

57 See A.N., "Parskuhineri arajin nerkayatsume Tehranum" (The First Presentation of Persian Women in Tehran), *Mshak*, June 2, 1910.

58 Berberian, *Armenians and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, p. 141; Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, p. 196.

59 A.N., "Parskuhineri."

60 M. Ali Issari, *Cinema in Iran 1900-1979*, Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1989, p. 61.

61 Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, p. 196.

cess from maid. We have to remember, alas, that the Persian woman, while trying to Europeanize herself, is already ruining her free body with a corset.⁶²

Interestingly, eight years later the dancer would admonish Europeans about women rights: "I really do not understand the cause of the error, common among Europeans, of believing that the Asiatic woman is a slave. . . . As for the position of the Oriental woman before the law, one can only regret that that of the Occidental woman is so inferior. I advise feminists to borrow a few precepts of Mohammed concerning the rights of women. Protected by these precepts, the condition of the European woman, slave to her husband and to his laws, would be much improved."⁶³ She seemed not to be aware of feminist writer Bibi Khanum's essay *Vices of Men* (1894-1895), who lamented the seclusion of Iranian women at home and the poor treatment of women by men.⁶⁴ She had also forgotten about an outspoken advocate of women's rights and political participation, Taj-es-Saltaneh (1883-1936), the divorced daughter of king Naser-ad-Din, who criticized polygamy, veiling and female seclusion in her memoirs written in 1914.⁶⁵ "I was returning from a fête which the most celebrated of the courtesans of Iran, Tadj-es-Saltaneh, princess and poetess, had given for her friends," Ohanian recalled. "I thought of this courtesan daughter of a king, who preferred the intoxications of music and love to the boredom of a high place near

the throne. I admired the fierce pride with which she supported the name of a depraved woman, and I highly esteemed her will to live as she chose and not to exist [as] a slave to the will of others."⁶⁶

Ohanian organized the screening of a documentary film at the shah's harem. Some Armenians were said to have pointed out this fact to Muslims, since a man had handled the film projector. Women were in charge of the next projections, and poetess Melek-Tajj continued to supervise them after the dancer left Iran.⁶⁷ "Melek-Tajj" may have been Taj-es-Saltaneh herself, since both names mean "Queen of the Crown."

Ohanian ascribed the end of her theatrical venture and her departure from Iran to work hardships and the opposition of fellow Armenians,⁶⁸ who reportedly opposed and tried to have *The Government Inspector* banned on the grounds that Christian women performing before Muslims were dishonorable. According to her, she even received death threats, but the actual target was another Armenian woman, Araxi, a Russian teacher and correspondent for Caucasian newspapers, who performed the role of mother in the play and was killed afterwards.⁶⁹ However, Armenian women had been on the stage for a long time, since Aghavni Papazian had performed before a Christian audience in Tabriz (1879), followed by Christian actresses before a Muslim audience in the same city in 1888, and Mrs. Golofian and Mrs. Babian in Tehran in 1897.⁷⁰

62 Quoted by A.N., "Parskuhineri."

63 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 159.

64 Afsaneh Najmabadi, "A Different Voice: Taj-os-Saltaneh," in Afsaneh Najmabadi (ed.), *Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, Cambridge (Ma.): Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 20.

65 Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 68.

66 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 210-211.

67 Ohanian, *Les rires*, p. 85-93.

68 Ohanian, "Dimastverner," p. 18.

69 Ohanian, *Les rires*, p. 66-71.

70 Farrokh Gaffary, Arby Ovanessian, and Laleh Taghian, "Iran," in Don Rubin et al. (ed.), *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, vol. 3, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 199.

A report published in the wake of her departure disclosed that this attitude had led to a dramatic outcome: "To conclude, unfortunately we cannot avoid mentioning the damning attitude exhibited by the Armenians of Tehran. They put the art lover in such a situation that she made recourse to the revolver to end her precious life."⁷¹

These laconic words highlight the fact that the circumstances and the timing of her suicidal attempt were actually different from the narration of *La danseuse de Shamakha* and *Les rires d'une charmeuse des serpents*, which turned that attempt into the denouement of her husband's abandonment four years before. She claimed that desperation had first led her to drown herself in a pond. However, since "the djinns [spirits] live there and make the dead their mistresses,"⁷² she tried a more straightforward course of action instead and stole a revolver from the nearby house of an Armenian general to kill herself. In her last French memoir, she reshaped her account as part of her journal entries: "A week ago I went to throw myself into a pond where snakes abound. I fell back. I did not want to offer them my body of newly-wed. Afterwards, I found a revolver and I perforated my chest with a bullet, which did not kill me. It slide very close to my heart and crossed my lungs. I feel sick when I breathe."⁷³ She did not touch upon the details of her botched attempt in *Armenia feliz*, but added that it had been fed by the sentimental romanticism of her readings of Nikolai Karamzin's *Poor Liza* and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Werther*. Its only reminder, she

71 Frman, "Tikin Armen Ohanians," (Madam Armen Ohanians), *Horizon*, October 1, 1910.

72 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 131.

73 Ohanian, *Les rires*, p. 31.

added with sarcasm, was the left lung perforated by a revolver.⁷⁴ Her short memoir of 1916 made clear that her suicidal attempt was tied to 1910, although it did not delve into the circumstances: "A bullet would save me from my moral solitude. I was gravely wounded and I had recently been discharged from a hospital in Tehran." Then, she had met Yeprem Khan, who had returned from the battlefield and commented that the bullet had perforated her chest.⁷⁵

According to her *alter ego* Mademoiselle Armide, her husband, who had abandoned her after two years, returned after her suicide attempt, but left for good once she was out of peril.⁷⁶ About the whereabouts of Haik Ter-Ohanian we only know that he was also in Tehran by August 1910.⁷⁷

Ohanian's success prompted another group to launch a series of comedies with Iranian themes inspired in *The Government Inspector*. This second group, more firmly established, where men played roles reserved for women, was far more successful than hers, which disbanded after she left the country. The reason, she claimed, was that they had struck a chord among the audience by presenting truly popular subjects in everyday Iranian life.⁷⁸ Some of those actors founded Teatr e-Melli (National Theater) in 1911, followed by Komedi-e Iran, led by Said Ali Nasr, who presented works by European authors in Farsi. A few years later, an Iranian essayist remarked: "Whereas

74 Ohanian, *Armenia feliz*, p. 67.

75 Armen Ohanian, "Dimastverner (A)" (Profiles [I]), *Ardzagang Parizi*, November 25, 1916, p. 3.

76 Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 182-183.

77 Amurian, *H. H. Dashnaksutiun*, p. 316.

78 Ohanian, "Dimastverner," p. 18. However, it was reported in March 1911 that her group was going to Constantinople for performances ("Théâtre persane," p. 158).

the Persian Comedy fought for the promotion of modern theatre and pursued with consistency compositions and performances of new play, a certain number of Armenian actors and actresses, among them Hadjian and Mrs. Ohanian, who had contented until then with playing in their mother tongue, began to perform in Turkish and Persian too."⁷⁹ This seems to imply that Ohanian's group and Komedi-e Iran existed simultaneously; however, the latter has been variously dated in 1911-1912, 1915, or 1918.⁸⁰

Laloy observed, with regard to Ohanian's theatrical success, that "after an enthusiastic reception, she was led to prolong her sojourn. A princess of royal blood gave her hospitality; during many months, in the intimate shadow of the harem, and tenderly pampered by her secluded sisters, she studied the charming rhythms that the very artistic administration of the Olympia has allowed us to watch today."⁸¹ A Parisian journalist reported later that "she came here after stopping in Egypt and read us her correspondence with a friend, a princess secluded in a harem of Tehran."⁸² The cir-

79 Ali Nö-Rouze, "Lettres persanes: Les origines du théâtre moderne en Perse," *Mercure de France*, June 1, 1924, p. 528-531.

80 See Medjid Rezvani, *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran*, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1962, p. 137; "Masrah," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989, p. 763; Ehsan Yar-Shater, "Persia," in John Gassner and Edward Quinn (eds.), *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, Mineola (N.Y.): Dover Publications, 2002, p. 651.

81 Laloy, "Danses," p. 39-40.

82 Y., "Au jour le jour. Danseuse persane," *Journal des Débats*, February 14, 1914. Ohanian published two "Persian letters" in 1916 addressed to her "sister," the princess Karamat-el-Saltaneh, who may have been a pseudonym for her host (Armène Ohanian, "Deux lettres persanes et une conte," *La Revue*, June 1-15, 1916, p. 446-450). Bernard mentioned the name of the princess alternatively as "Daoulah Sultanieh" and "Salah el Daoulah" (Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 190).

cumstances under which the unnamed princess hosted her are unknown.

Clearly, the dancer did not miss the opportunity to study in depth and learn the secrets of her trade from the source. On the eve of her debut in Cairo, in the beginning of 1911, a press release claimed: "She also studied the modern dances of peoples with whom she had lived and from where she had originated, and she made an original and striking reproduction, for example, of characteristic dances of the Caucasus."⁸³ A news report would later add that she "gave several performances and at the same time studied harem dances."⁸⁴ Another writer stated in 1914 that "she had the possibility of entering all Persian strata, all dark corners of harem life, even the shah's harem, to investigate the way of life and customs of Persian people. Thanks to her acute senses and delicate artistic tastes, she was able to create an original work from Persian harem dances with all nuances of European art, which she successfully presents on the European stage."⁸⁵

La danseuse de Shamakha put aside the actual facts behind her Iranian sojourn in favor of a quasi-fictional account peppered with a few bits of real information. The narration starts with the account of an arranged and failed marriage, an attempted suicide and a recovery in "the only hospital in Tehran," whose

83 Museum of Literature and Art, Yerevan, David Davidian File, n. 55 (the clipping does not mention the name of the paper).

84 Sirogh, "Paruhi Armen Ohanian" (Dancer Armen Ohanian), *Mshak*, August 30, 1911. Ohanian presented a recital of Gypsy and Spanish-style dances, as well as Caucasian dances at the Iqbal Russian School in Teheran (Hrair-Reshtuni, "Tikin Armen Ohaniani khumbé" [The Group of Madam Armen Ohanian], *Azatamart*, June 19, 1910).

85 Yervand Minasian, "Tikin Armen Ohaniane Briukselum" (Madam Armen Ohanian in Brussels), *Horizon*, March 28, 1914.

name "was abhorred by the people, and with reason, since one received there very little encouragement to live."⁸⁶ Ohanian was reportedly rescued from the hospital by a princess connected to royalty. Instead of mentioning her Farsi name, as in other cases, she used *Reine des Couronnes* (in English, *Queen of the Crowns*), the translation of both Melek-Tajj and Tajjes-Saltaneh. Her new friend took the unfortunate bride under her protection and took her to the house of her mother, where she had lived since being abandoned by her husband. She was "celebrated for the great beauty which she was willingly destroying by the opium that made her forget her sorrows."⁸⁷ Bernard quoted a more or less similar story from Mademoiselle Armide that had the princess live in her own house, separated from her estranged husband.⁸⁸

The memoir's storyline purportedly altered and rearranged the facts of Ohanian's life from 1906-1910. Her two Iranian sojourns became one, with a few intermediate episodes of her time in the Caucasus added at the end of the story arc. The narration would have further value beyond the literary realm if it were proved that she was actually the princess' guest both in 1906 and 1910. Besides, we would need to find out why a Muslim princess would have been interested in a Christian woman in a hospital. None of these facts can be ascertained at this point, since it is unclear whether Ohanian's marriage drama happened entirely in Resht or had a sequel in Tehran.

The strong fictional element makes it very unreliable as a biographical source. Furthermore, several authors have complicated the issue through their

misreading. Thus, her account does not allow anyone to infer that she "became a courtesan for a while" after her separation or that she "later spent a happy year as consort to the 'Queen of Crowns,' a debauched Persian princess and drug addict," in whose company she "enjoyed smoking opium through a jeweled hookah while lounging about on Oriental carpets."⁸⁹ Ohanian, indeed a free spirit, does not shy away from controversial subjects in her writings. However, she made no mention of a time of debauchery, as the "courtesan" and "consort" qualifiers imply. There seems not to be an involvement in courtesanship or in a homoerotic relationship either.

Courtesans in the time of the Safavid dynasty (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries) and afterwards, especially in the upper circles, had a high profile and enjoyed a measure of respect. They had some education and knowledge of music. Far from being simple prostitutes, they were more akin to the *cortigiane oneste* ("honest courtesan") of Renaissance and early modern Europe.⁹⁰ Ohanian described one night when she watched from the skylight of her host's residence a performance by five *mutrubes* (courtesan-dancers), one of them Armenian, to the amusement of the princess' brothers. Typical in dance troupes, the older one, forty-years-old, was no longer a courtesan, but a leader to the others: "She was their mistress in the difficult art of the courtesans of Asia. From her they learned the science of pleasing the eye, of dancing, being open-hearted, reciting beautiful poems, scattering through their conversation jewels of proverbs, and how to flatter shy wooers, to be proud with bold men, to be grave in the

86 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 133.

87 Idem, p. 135-136.

88 Bernard, *L'esclave nue*, p. 183-188.

89 Rodriguez, *Wild Heart*, p. 228.

90 Matthee, "Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls," p. 140, 142-143.

evening and to blossom into flowers of love in the dawn."⁹¹

In such an exotic environment, Ohanian would be undoubtedly ready to experiment new sensations. "The queen and I reclined in our underground rooms, smoking a few pipes of opium. . . . And the sweet heavy scent of the opium filled me with an illimitable sorrow."⁹² While describing her halcyon days, she commented that the house was filled with "poor old men and women, relatives or strangers picked up by charity from the bazaars." The old women sometimes went for some distraction to the cool underground quarters where the princess and her Armenian friend lived, "and in the shade of our vaults, smoking the odorous kalian [Persian *ghalian* "hookah"], they would revive for us their picturesque pasts, sharing with us all the wisdom they had acquired in a long life."⁹³ Despite the prohibition of cultivation and consumption by Qajar dynasts in the eighteenth century and several laws issued since 1911, widespread use of opium in Iran, both in pills and inhalation, did not stop. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Anthony Neligan likened the habit of opium smoking in Iran to the consumption of tobacco in Europe, in the same way that a century before Guillaume-Antoine Olivier had asserted that the use of opium in that country was comparable to wine in southern Europe.⁹⁴ Of course, in the West opium smoking has a different meaning (including penalization) now than it did in the Orient a century ago.

91 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 183-184.

92 Idem, p. 191.

93 Idem, p. 160.

94 Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 207-221.

The harem or *andarūn*, meaning the women quarters in a well-to-do household (also called *haram* or *haram-sarā*), was an upper-class phenomenon, as well as a closed place. Isabella L. Bird, an English traveler and writer, visited Iran around 1889-1890 and wrote that "the *andarun* has its own court, no one is allowed to open a window looking upon it, it is as secluded as a convent. No man but the master of the house may enter, and when he retires thither no man may disturb him."⁹⁵ There were Armenian harems too, Ohanian claimed: "As etiquette required, I returned her calls from time to time, and visited a few other women of the exclusive Armenian harems."⁹⁶ For her, the temptation to which her Christian conscience had resisted was part of the charm of harem life. "The other half of that charm," she added, "was in the complete liberty with which we played behind these walls apparently so imprisoning."⁹⁷

Famous Armenian actor Vahram Papazian (1888-1968) maintained to have heard that "she had found great success in Persia and had conquered the unstable heart of a Persian prince with her charms of Oriental Terpsichore. Tired of his clumsiness, a year later she had taken her unappreciated charms to Europe, where many big shots of the financial world had been sucked and immobilized in her web."⁹⁸ The dancer wrote that she had rejected outright an offer of marriage by an Iranian prince because of religion.⁹⁹ However, neither Papazian's allegation nor

95 Mrs. Bishop [Isabella L. Bird], *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan*, New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons and John Murray, 1891, p. 209.

96 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 126-127.

97 Idem, p. 156.

98 Vahram Papazian, *Hetadartz hayatsk* (Retrospective Glance), vol. 1, Yerevan: Haypethrat, 1956, p. 179.

99 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 135-149.

Ohanian's story of Christian fidelity are backed by any available source.

The dancer claimed to have entertained the young shah, which also has various versions. While *La danseuse de Shamakha* stated that "Queen of Crowns" and the dancer had thought of "amusing him with *tamashas* (spectacles), of which we gave the first on the solemn occasion of his official accession to the throne,"¹⁰⁰ the English translation changed it to "amusing him with a little entertainment. . ." ¹⁰¹ Interestingly, the French original previously stated that, when she was there, Tehran had celebrated the *avènement au trône* ("accession") of the king,¹⁰² whereas the translation changed it to "coronation."¹⁰³ However, the dancer was either in Moscow or in Tiflis from Ahmad Shah's accession to Mohammed Ali's self-exile to Odessa (July-September 1909), and the coronation happened in July 1914.

She stated that, long before meeting him, she had been renamed *Vadjih-es-Saltaneh* --"respected (beautiful) lady recognized by the court"-- in order "to respect my childhood name through silence."¹⁰⁴ However, in 1911, when Ohanian was in London, it was reported that the shah had bestowed upon her the title of *Vadjeh-es-Sultan* ("The Beauty and the Nobility of Our Empire").¹⁰⁵ In 1925, "Armen Ohanian, *Vadjih-es Sultane*" dedicated a copy of *The Dancer of Shamakha*, today kept at the New York Public

Library; the press wrote that it meant "The Imperial Graceful."¹⁰⁶

Although chronologically implausible, the fictional cover might reflect some real facts. The young shah was said to have decorated Ohanian with a medal of high rank, "Shir and Khorshid," but the regent Naib-es-Saltaneh had died "the following day"¹⁰⁷ and nobody had agreed to sign the corresponding decree.¹⁰⁸ While she was actually decorated for her theatrical activities, it is true that Azad-el-Mulk, chief of the Qajar tribe and uncle of the king, was regent from July 1909 to his death in September 1910, around the time of her departure. The position remained vacant until 1911.¹⁰⁹

In any case, the decoration is said to have brought a scandal in and out the court, since such a prize to a woman, furthermore a Christian, defied all rules. On the other hand, there were stories that she had been indiscreetly seen by Muslim princes when dancing, and this constituted a fault in the eyes of Christians. There is also a passage in *The Dancer of Shamakha* about a Christian (perhaps Armenian) woman whom Ohanian took for an Iranian at the public bath in Tehran. The woman would have chided her for her misstep and she understood that it was time to leave the country. She had the purported aim of going to Jerusalem, "that is to say, after having a little sinned, to go to kiss the tomb of Christ and then to return to my country to die highly respected."¹¹⁰ The whole story seems to belong to literature. As one reviewer commented,

106 D. A. Dikijian, "Shamakhi paruhin" (The Dancer of Shamakha), *Hayastani Kochnak*, April 26, 1924, p. 529.

107 The original French says "two days later" (Ohanian, *La danseuse*, p. 254).

108 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 206.

109 Warzée, *Peeps into Persia*, p. 228.

110 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 207-213.

"we do not see at all the reasons that prompted Miss Ohanian to exchange such a sun for our mists. May I say that some novelistic and bookish artifices did not convince me enough?"¹¹¹

Another reviewer wrote that "it was apparently the pressure of her life-loving temperament, with its desire for beauty, new sights and new sensations, and its delight in the mystic, the 'irréel' (as she calls it) atmosphere that surrounds the dancer in the East, that made her set out her voyages, when forced to give up the easy life in Tehran."¹¹²

A few months later, her estranged husband accompanied Yeprem Khan's sick wife to be treated in Europe. In a letter from Resht, Haik Ter Ohanian informed the Armenian leader on February 6, 1911 that he was departing to Anzali with the patient after staying at "Asatur Khan's home," and thus "tomorrow we will cross the Rubicon,"¹¹³ i.e., they would leave Iran.

He helped her settle in Germany and returned to Iran. Months later he was among several Armenians from Russia arrested in Resht and Enzeli by order of the Russian consul, accused of being members of revolutionary parties.¹¹⁴ According to an undated circular of the A.R.F. Central Committee of Teheran,

"on September 2 they sent people from the Russian consulate after Haik Ter Ohanian and called him for the same case; when he showed up, they arrested him. The reason was his accurate information to the Russian newspaper. After they caught him, Yeprem sent a telegram to Tardov (contributor to a newspaper of the Russian capital arrived in here): 'Haik has been arrested for giving accurate news to the newspaper.' On the tenth of this month, Haik was set free; they tried to accuse him of being an A.R.F. member, but they failed."¹¹⁵

Sometime after his liberation, Ter-Ohanian left the country to avoid further persecution and returned to Germany to continue his medical studies. He wrote to Yeprem Khan an undated letter in the first months of 1912 from an undisclosed location that arrangements had been made to move his wife to another sanatorium. As a final note, he added that "my wife is coming in a month. She is finding success in Paris."¹¹⁶

After leaving Iran, Armen Ohanian toured Constantinople, Egypt, London, Dublin, and settled in Paris at the beginning of 1912. She would never go back to Iran, but her longing for that country would chase the self-titled "Persian dancer" for the rest of her life.

111 Frédéric Mallet, "La vie littéraire," *L'Afrique du Nord illustré*, March 1, 1919, p. 14.

112 A. G. H. Spiers, "Recent French Books," *The Bookman*, March-August 1920, p. 188.

113 Amurian, *H. H. Dashnaksutiun*, p. 479 (facsimile of the first page of the letter).

114 "Orvan lurer" (News of the Day), *Gochnag*, October 21, 1911, p. 1026.

115 Amurian, *H. H. Dashnaksutiun*, p. 117, who noted that the circular was issued in 1911.

116 Idem, p. 268-269 (facsimile of the first page of the letter).

100 Ohanian, *La danseuse*, p. 246.

101 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 204-205.

102 Ohanian, *La danseuse*, p. 247.

103 Ohanian, *The Dancer*, p. 204-205.

104 Ohanian, *La danseuse*, p. 125.

105 Pierre Ducré, "Notes et informations," *Le Monde artiste*, October 21, 1911, p. 670.