

THE ARMENIAN QUESTION IN AVETIK ISAHAKYAN'S WORLDVIEW

Avik Isahakyan

Doctor of Sciences (Philology)

*O, the Armenian people!
You, the warrior, baptized in the noble blood
of centuries-old struggle for freedom!
Restrain not your unquenchable wrath
Raging in your tormented soul!
Avetik Isahakyan*



Avetik Isahakyan (1875-1957) first wrote about the Armenian Question under the influence of the massacres of the peaceful Armenian population in Sasun and Zeitun in 1894, in a record made on November 5, 1894 in the book "Hishatakaran" ("The Diaries", a kind of a confessional book where are collected the poet's diaries from 1891 to 1956 - his thoughts and reflections). And if before these bloody events the main motives in the poet's work were those of love, juvenile dreams, maternal love, beauty of his native land, now under the depressive influence of the tragedy his own people had been suffering, the themes of patriotism and the national liberation struggle resounded with full force in Isahakyan's poetry. And when in Western Armenia, in response to the terror by the Turkish authorities, the resistance movement started to gain strength and there appeared the first *hayduk* formations under the leadership of Aghbyur Serob, Arabo, Gevorg Chaush, Metsn Chello, Sargis Kukunyan, Andranik, Murad Sebastatsi. Isahakyan was the first to introduce the image of *fidayi*¹ into Armenian poetry, he became the first singer-herald to glorify the *fidayi* movement. Since 1898 - the year of the creation of the patriotic cycle "Hayduk's Songs", the topic of the Armenian liberation movement penetrated into the classic poetry, particularly Isahakyan's patriotic verse, occupying there its deserved place.

*Die once, than thousand times,
Be either free, strong, independent,
Or fall with dignity under the debris
Of the autocracy smashed up by Your hand ...*

¹ *Fidayin* - here: a single Armenian fighter or an Armenian group of fighters - usually from the districts of Western Armenia, confronting the Turkish governmental troop. They operated at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. In their nature and goals they were similar to the *hayduk* struggle of the Balkan nations. During the Artsakh Liberation war of 1991-1994 the participants of Armenian detachments were also called *fidayin*.

Isahakyan signed the cycle of poems, “Hayduk’s songs”, with the pen name *Armenian gusan*² («Հայ-գուսան»). Since 1898 the poems from this cycle were as a rule published in the official print organ of the Dashnaktsutyun party³, in the magazine “Droshak” (“Banner”)⁴. The most famous poems of this cycle are: “In Unforgettable Commemoration of Avetik Maloyan”, “In Commemoration of Serob”, “Make Way Sipan mountains”, “In the Valley, in the Valley of Fighting Salno...”, “Oh, My Dear Motherland, How Splendid You Are...”, “Arise People”, “Grey, Windswept Peaks...”, “To Arax”.

At the end of the 19th century, in the spirit of the awakening liberation movement Isahakyan created his new poem, “Masis’s Child”, which was like a peculiar echo of the Armenian folk epic, “David of Sasun”. On the whole preserving the spirit and genre features of the national epic Isahakyan filled it with modern content, pondering over the events of his time.

However, during the poet’s lifetime the poem was not published because of censorial bans. Only a fragment from the opening part of the poem “Goghtan lyre ...” was published in the magazine “Droshak” (1901, issue 1) with an epigraph characteristic to Isahakyan’s image:

*The saz⁵ does not allow me to become a warrior,
The sword does not allow me to become a gusan...*

However, Isahakyan could match both of these hypostases. In the first half of the 1890s the newly organized Alexandropol Committee (“Քար”-“The Stone”) of ARF reached such a level of organizational activities in Alexandropol that it started its activities in three directions: getting arms, formation of military squads and means of communication with people⁶. In 1895 after returning from Leipzig Isahakyan with his comrades-in-arms participated in the activities of ARF: formation of volunteer militia squads and obtaining money and weapons for sending to Ergir⁷ - Western Armenia. In May, 1896 the poet, as a participant of the national liberation movement was arrested by order of the district gendarmerie and imprisoned in the Erevan provincial fortress-prison, and after a year he was exiled to Odessa.

² Gusan – a folk poet, narrator, author, singer, instrumentalist, mime and actor, all in one person.

³ Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) “Dashnaktsutyun” – the Armenian political party, founded in Tiflis, in 1890.

⁴ Ավիկ Իսահակյան, Ավետիք Իսահակյանի բանաստեղծությունը, – Պատմա-բանասիրական հանդես, № 3, 2003, էջ 49:

⁵ A traditional folk musical (string) instrument.

⁶ Խուդինյան Գ.Ս., Հ Յ Դաշնակցության քննական պատմություն (ակունքներից մինչև 1895 թվականի վերջ), Երևան, 2006, էջ 269:

⁷ Literally – country, the country of forefathers; in this meaning Armenians call Western Armenia Էրզիր (*Ergir*).

In the face of Isahakyan the Armenian liberation movement acquired not only a talented singer-herald of the national idea, but also a political figure utterly devoted to his Mother-land who joined his destiny with the Armenian Question.

In Eastern Armenia and the Caucasus Avetik Isahakyan was involved in patriotic activities in opposition to the Tsarist autocracy's policy against Armenians. And when by the Tsar's decree the Armenian schools were closed⁸, the property of the Armenian church was confiscated, a number of Armenian-language print organs were banned and the activity of educational centers was suspended, Isahakyan, as a leader of the national liberation movement, became involved in the propaganda activities directed at uplifting the spirit of his compatriots.

The poet frequently visited the Armenian communities of Russia and countries of Western Europe. As a prominent ideological figure he became the delegate of the Third and Fourth Congresses of ARF Dashnaktsutyun. Since the time of his first imprisonment the Tiflis provincial gendarmerie was very well aware of Isahakyan's political activity and they literally followed on Isahakyan's heels watching every move of the poet.

At the end of 1908 in Tiflis, in a general accusation by the so-called "Case of Dashnaktsutyun" Isahakyan was arrested and imprisoned in the Metekhi prison together with 160 representatives of the Armenian intelligentsia. After six months he was released on bail, but Isahakyan's case was not closed upon completion of the legal process and there was a real threat of exile to Siberia for at least ten years. In this situation at the end of June 1911 Isahakyan had to leave the boundaries of the Russian Empire.

The poet spent the first year of his exile in Constantinople, where for the first time his poem, "Abu LalaMahari", was published. In conditions of the anti-Armenian actions of the Young Turks, Isahakyan left Constantinople in 1912.

Isahakyan, together with several associates from the Armenian and German intelligentsia, people who deeply knew Armenian history and culture, organized an "Armenian-German Association"⁹ in Berlin in 1914. But with the outbreak of World War I and ratification of the Ottoman-German Alliance all the plans and hopes about the Armenian-German cooperation were turned upside down¹⁰. For Western Armenia World War I had catastrophic consequences.

⁸ The Armenian schools were closed three times, in 1885, 1897 and 1903 (Կիրակոսյան Գ. Լ., Արևելյան Հայաստանի դպրոցների և աշակերտների թվաքանակը XIX դ. 80-90-ական թթ. – "Լրաբեր" հաս. գիտ. 2008, N 2, էջ 39):

⁹ In June 1914 the first conference of the association was held in Berlin, during which the chairman Johannes Lepsius, its deputies Paul Rohrbach and James Greenfield and secretaries E. Shtir and Avetik Isahakyan discussed the goals of the German-Armenian association.

¹⁰ Germany, considering Armenians as Russia's natural allies, encouraged the plans of the Ottoman Empire on the deportation and annihilation of the indigenous Armenian population. (see: Юрий Барсегов, Державы причастные к геноциду армян, должны искупить свою вину) <http://armenianhouse.org/barsegov/articles-ru/guilt.html>

During this historical period the main topic of Isahakyan's creative work became the tragic fate of Armenians and their heroic struggle for survival in their native land. The poet intended to create his "White book", a kind of a new "Book of Lamentations"¹¹ - a document condemning the Armenian Genocide, a chronicle of the tragic events of Armenian history. According to the poet's conception, based on the factual material, as well as narrations and evidences of witnesses, the book was to reflect the main stages of the struggle of the Armenian *hayduks*, testimonies about the deeds and heroic spirit of the defenders of the Motherland. A part of this intention found its reflection in "The Diaries".

Under the impression of the tragic events Avetik Isahakyan's poetic lyre lapsed into silence for several years and during this period he expressed his pain and protest in his letters, articles and diaries. As Isahakyan's manuscripts testify, he was among those Armenian intellectuals who demanded to put the Turks in the pillory for their crimes against humanity. At the same time, after the Armenian genocide of 1915 the poet experienced great disappointment with the policy of the European countries in regard to the Armenian Question. On the other hand, Isahakyan always cherished hopes concerning the future of his people in alliance with Russia. However, the policy of the Russian Empire in the years of World War I deprived to some extent Isahakyan of those hopes too.

For the poet the Armenian Question never lost its urgency, it became the main topic of Isahakyan's numerous essays and philosophical reflections. In his Genevan "Diary" of 1916-1917 (entitled "The Armenian Question"), when still continued in Western Armenia the genocide of the native Armenian population, we can find a profound analysis of Armenian history and reflection on the future of the Armenian Question. The crime of the genocide has never become a closed page of history - it remains a reality.

The Western Armenian population was forced out of their native land, across paths of death to the desert Deirez-Zor. The Armenian diaspora was not yet formed, in Eastern Armenia military operations continued, Karin-Erzurum, Kars, Gyumri, Igdir, Van, etc. were in the ring of fire. The poet wrote about the tragedy, about the war in his native land:

*...The perished hayduk dreams
The freedom of his native land...*

<http://www.genocide.ru/lib/barseghov/responsibility/v2-1/0627-0647.htm#634>

¹¹ "The Book of Lamentations" by Grigor Narekatsi (sc. 951-1003) is one of the pearls of the Armenian medieval poetic, philosophical and theological mind.

The key idea in the Genevan “Diary” is that all the great European countries betrayed Armenians, leaving to the mercy of fate the oldest Christian nation. During the most difficult period of their history Armenians were left one-on-one with the Ottoman Empire and its janissaries. When a whole nation was massacred in front of your eyes as the result of the first genocide in modern history, could the great patriot be silent and not hold up to shame civilized Europe and all the countries that did not support Armenia? Both from the point of view of the Armenian nation and from the point of view of the historical situation he was absolutely right. It means that there is no point in relying upon the mighty of this world. When everything collapses and perishes (and first of all the Russian Empire perished because of internal political shocks) it is necessary to rely solely on yourself. So protect your home yourself at the cost of your own life.

The records in the poet’s “Diary” are dated as of 1916-1917, but it seems that in his “Diary” Isahakyan expressed the Armenian nation’s feelings of several centuries. Penetrating deeper into the records, into the specifics of the historical moment of 1915-1920 it becomes evident how right Isahakyan was. Isahakyan definitely realized that by committing the Armenian Genocide the Turks never wavered for a second, never repented, never doubted their crime; moreover, they criminally and intentionally continued the genocide of the Armenian population through 1918-1923. And no country stopped Turks, none protected the Armenian nation. And the atrocities committed by Turks went unpunished. Moreover, for the committed crimes they even received in 1921 as a “gift” from Bolshevik leaders some eastern Armenian districts which were deprived of their indigenous Armenian population also as a result of the genocide and deportation. Naturally, such a policy aroused the poet’s anger. Thus, there was one only way out - to unite as a single fist, to fight to the death, to struggle and protect themselves realizing the need for Holy Vengeance, i.e. to solve the Armenian Question with arms, through a holy war.

Isahakyan’s records concerning the Armenian Question, as well as numerous aphorisms of the poet convincingly prove that Isahakyan was a genius of prevision. Let’s remember at least his words expressed at the dawn of the revolutionary movement in Russia stating that socialism would bring Russia even more trouble than Tsarism. Or his prophesy that neither Europe nor America would stand up for the Armenian Question, on the contrary they would become Turkey’s allies, that the latter would never repent of the crime committed and would not admit its guilt, etc. Isahakyan’s “Diary” on the Armenian Question from the moment of its creation and during the following 100 years lost not a bit of its relevance, moreover, in its philosophical generalization it can be called a book of the future, which gives us a glimpse into the future.

Isahakyan’s chronicle of the bloody events, expanding day by day, gradually grew into a kind of a “White book”. During World War I and the post-war years the “White

book” found its continuation in the second version of the epic novel “Usta Karo” (“Master Karo”). The first version of the novel was completed in 1912, later he proceeded to the second version which was never completed. In this respect Isahakyan wrote: “The novel “Usta Karo” will be completed only when the Armenian Question is solved and on that day I will put the final full stop”.

After the end of World War II – total defeat of fascist Germany, as well as its ally Turkey, Isahakyan cherished the hope that the question of returning native Armenian lands could be solved positively. In the summer of 1945 he waited from day to day that the victorious Red Army would cross the Arax and liberate the territories seized from our nation and that justice would triumph. But it did not happen.

Turkey could again - for the umpteenth time - avoid just punishment keeping the lands of Western Armenia. But Isahakyan could not put up with such “reality”.

He considered the most important component of the Armenian Question the problem of Artsakh, and in 1948 the poet went to this steadfast and impregnable Armenian land not letting the lamp of the liberation movement extinguish. The poet had the same attitude towards Armenian Javakhk where he often went.

It should be mentioned that a considerable part of Isahakyan’s aphorisms are directly related to the Armenian Question. The poet expresses his thoughts and hopes on this topic in the form of aphorisms – a genre that was developed by Isahakyan more than by other Armenian writers. Many of Isahakyan’s aphorisms in a way became commandments for future generations.

The enormous life experience, the wisdom gained with years found their expression in the poet’s word. Isahakyan’s word was entirely aimed at revealing the logic of the development of Armenian history. The aphorisms on this topic reflect both Isahakyan’s political views, and his attitude towards the order established in the country. Reading his diaries, aphorisms and letters one understands what an abyss there was between the poet and the Soviet power. His writings would not pass through the powerful barrier of censorship - either as a literary work, or as publicist articles. Nothing would escape the “all- seeing” eye of the party censorship, that is why in the course of many years the poet “wrote a lot into the drawer”.

Since the early period of his creative activities Isahakyan kept the Armenian Question at the center of his attention. It runs like a red thread through his book “Hishatakaran”, through many pages of the “White book” (not yet published), the “Aphorisms” and letters. The solution of the Armenian Question has a most urgent, vital importance for the future of Armenia. Isahakyan’s reflections on the Armenian Question were written in the midst of the events of 1894-1924 and during long years in emigration, as well as during the last decade of the poet’s life and they have not lost a single bit of relevance even at present.

Isahakyan was sure that every idea, scheme and historical program enters life and becomes relevant only when being embodied in script and a book. The word, especially

the word of a genius poet is immortal. In Isahakyan's perception the Armenian Question was a conscious need for Holy Vengeance for the historical injustice that our nation experienced. It is a cry for vigilance and demand for reparation for our numerous misfortunes and loss of our historical land. Unlike other nations that experienced similar periods in their history, our sworn enemy is a quite unique "phenomenon". For example the Germans repented of the Holocaust they had committed against the Jews, apologized and stretched a helping hand to them. But the Turk! God forbid, if there is the slightest chance of repeating the crime committed, the Turk will go for a new genocide without hesitating. Isahakyan's idea is that we must deeply realize this and always have our sword ready, not sheathing it.

Isahakyan spent the autumn of his life in his Motherland surrounded with the love and respect of his native people. For the new generation, for the Armenian youth he was a living embodiment of enlightenment, truth, a fighter for the high spiritual ideals of patriotism. He never accepted the official stand of Soviet foreign policy on the Armenian Question, according to which it had long "exhausted itself" and should be considered "closed". Time showed that the great poet (he wrote "to live to see Ani", "to die not to see Sevan dried up") was absolutely right. And the proof of it is the declaration of independence of the Republic of Armenia and the Artsakh Republic crowned with the heroic victory of the Armenian nation in the Artsakh Liberation War.

***Translated from Armenian by
S. E. Chraghyan***