

Shirvanzade's Evil Spirit By Eddie Arnavoudian

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By Eddie Arnavoudian

1.

'The Evil Spirit'

A novel of backward prejudice by Shirvanzade

Alexander Shirvanzade (1858-1935) is generally regarded as one of the great exponents of the Armenian realist novel. The merit accorded to his work is however undeserved and much of his legacy is unreadable. But he was sometimes a shrewd social observer with a facility for story telling. So amid his voluminous works there are a few worthy of note. 'The Evil Spirit' is one. A short novel about 'Sweet Sonia', a young epileptic, it evokes with some emotional intensity the plight of community life, particularly for women, in a society tainted by ignorant and irrational prejudice.

After experiencing her first epileptic fit at the tender age of seven Sonia is locked away in her wretchedly impoverished home. With unfortunate victims of epilepsy treated as if afflicted by evil spirits, public knowledge of Sonia's condition would scupper the family's chances of marrying her off. As it is, Sonia would have been locked away at the age of 9 so as to prepare her for the traditional arranged marriage. Her condition only determines that her perpetual enslavement will begin earlier. Trapped at home Sonia yearns for her friends whom she hears shouting, laughing and crying as they scour the ruins of the village only recently hit by an earthquake. But slowly she is moulded to subservience, she adapts and adjusts to her new destiny, at least outwardly. Indeed was this not the purpose of incarcerating marriageable girls? To break their individual will, destroy their independent spirit and prepare them for their submissive role as breeding stock and workhorse in 'holy family' life? Initially with some remembrance of her freedom days Sonia makes dolls, naming them after her erstwhile playmates. But later in transition to wifely

servitude she begins to knit and darn socks - which her wastrel father will sell for drink. A total parasite, he treats his wife Shoushan and his daughter accordingly thus aggravating their anguish and their pain.

Sonia's mother sighs a sigh of relief believing that the `evil sprit' has been vanquished by prayer and by trust in god. She is eventually married off. But for Sonia marriage is but a new stage of her road to Calvary. From the outset the petty and narrow hatreds of her in-laws make a hell of her life. And when she suffers the first fit of married life her nightmare existence and the threat of tragedy become almost palpable.

The novel is not without its faults. Too many speedy transitions leave us blind to the full nuance of Sonia's development and `adjustment' to her imprisoned life. Additionally as Leo has noted, by conflating her in-laws' general hostility with that inspired by Sonia's particular condition, the full viciousness and irrationality of the prejudice against epileptics becomes less telling. Nevertheless most of the characters, especially Sonia, her mother and Mad-Daniel, the local village idiot who against the ugly social grain displays profound human compassion for Sonia are striking human types. Their relationships, together with those of the minor characters, convey well the drama of people whose lives are trapped in the web of medieval prejudices and poverty.

2.

`The Story of a Life' - a fictional memoir

Stephan Zorian's early novels and short stories, drawn as they are from life in Armenia itself, reflect national traditions and practices more authentically than the works of writers such as Shirvanzade who focused substantially on the life of Diaspora communities. `The Story of a Life', a fictional account of childhood and youth in north-eastern Armenia at the turn of the 20th century is a case in point. With its well constructed characters - the protagonist Souren, Eve, Ashod, Sampson, Setrak, the book is more than an engrossing account of life amid poverty, foreign oppression and backward social customs. In

reconstructing the story of Souren's early life Zorian also illuminates aspects of the story of life itself.

The first sixty pages make thrilling reading with its charming recreation of the fantasy of childhood blending its mix of chaotic emotions, confusions, strivings and appetites, innocent ambitions, pleasures and pains. On virtually every page we encounter the magic and the tragic of early life. Souren survives a hostile family split, suffers the marriage to another of his first childhood love, endures the blow of his brother's death and explodes with indignation at the intended betrothal of best friend Setrag's sister to some hateful old man. Yet no misfortune dampens his ardour. With incredible imagination

and daring he and his friends resort to some amazing ploys to foil their numerous tormentors.

Armenian resistance to foreign occupation is a central part of Souren's formative experience. At the time all Armenian schools were closed by the Tsarist authorities as part of their strategy to undermine the emerging Armenian national movement. At the age of 7 or

8 we therefore see Souren preparing to enter the local legal Russian school. Before, he had attended illegal, underground Armenian classes run by teacher Zakar. Assembling in a derelict basement, the permanent leaks, the damp and the wet force both pupils and teachers to take classes in the open fields. They are discovered. The school is closed. Zakar is arrested and exiled. But the resistance continues, in numerous ways.

Early adventures give way to the woes and the burdens of mature life which however brings with it a broader promise and potential. From Russian school Souren moves to his first job as a transcriber of letters in the local railway station. He has his first bitter encounter with human deceit and treachery, experiences his first imprisonment and undergoes a process of politicisation. Souren's gradual transition to adulthood is captured movingly in the accounts of his unrequited love for Anahid.

The second part of 'The Story of a Life' is of inferior quality. Yet it is an interesting record of people and social-political life in Tbilisi, once, like Bolis, a prominent centre of the Armenian Diaspora and a base for the national revival. It is to Tbilisi that Souren comes to find work and complete his education and discover the world of books. Characters and places, social relations and political situations are brought to life conveying well the atmosphere of the town as a provincial imperial administrative centre.

It may be bold and debatable, but it is reasonable to assert that 'The Story of a Life' compares well with Charles Dickens' David Copperfield. Both convey with wit, humour the wonder, the adventure, the mystery and the magic of childhood. Both recover the frequently forgotten reality of a child's universe that is marked by broad, profound, enormously diverse emotional and intellectual experiences touched by an unfathomable innocence that makes childhood so enchanting.

3.

'Paramaz'- a biographical sketch of a Hnchak leader

Paramaz (1863-1915), one of the most outstanding members of the Armenian Hnchak Social Democratic Party, is not served well by this biographical sketch written by H. M. Boghosian. Stringing together disparate events in a rather inconsequential chronological structure, the booklet does however include material that stimulates thought on aspects of modern Armenian history. It is in addition of particular value for reprinting some of Paramaz's writings.

After the rapid disappearance of the inchoate and amorphous Armenakans

the Hnchak Party, founded in 1887, was the first truly modern Armenian political movement. During the course of its historical development it underwent a number of qualitative transformations. But two enduring features marked out its early period. The Hnchak Party, from its inception, called for the establishment an independent Armenia arguing the case for the separation of historic Armenia from the Ottoman Empire. Recognising the then multi-ethnic, multi-national composition of Armenia's historic territories it argued for a platform of

democratic and equal national rights as the foundation of an independent state. Whilst the Hnchak party on this basis succeeded in rapidly setting down deep and strong roots in the Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire, these were not in historical Armenia but outside, in Cilicia and elsewhere. The consequence for both the Armenian people and the Hnchaks were incalculable.

This was the context for Paramaz's political work as he criss-crossed the Ottoman Empire's Armenian communities, often disguised as teacher,

merchant or vagrant, speaking, educating and organising. Besides working in Cilicia, Van and other areas of historic Armenia, he was also in the Caucasus where he was prominent among those who worked to

promote harmony between different national groups. Arrested and tried in Van in 1898 a rousing speech from the dock summed up the essence of

his outlook:

`Because our demands cannot be satisfied within the Ottoman Empire, we revolutionaries, recognizing our fundamental human rights demand **THE SEPARATION OF THE POPULATION OF ARMENIA FROM THE OTTOMAN STATE**. We are not chauvinists - Our determination is that the Armenian, the Kurd, the Turk, the Arab, the Laz, the Cherkez - (who live in Armenia) be ruled by people they vote for and be governed by laws that they vote for. We demand Armenia with all the people living there!'

With ups and downs Paramaz continued working until 1914 when he was

again arrested falling victim to a major pre-meditated offensive against the Hnchaks by the Young Turks. The reason for this offensive was self-evident.

While political and military defeats along with internal fragmentation led the Hnchak Party to eventually abandon its revolutionary policies, it still retained a sharp evaluation of the political evolution of the

Ottoman Empire and its constituent national groups. It produced an accurate accounting of the essentially national-chauvinist and fascistic character of the Young Turks. Paramaz in particular noted their hostile and intolerant attitude to other national groups and condemned their drive to centralize state power seeing it as nothing less than the efforts of the new Turkish elite to defend what remained of the now much reduced colonial empire. Paramaz was with that wing of

the Hnchaks who anticipating the disaster of the genocide, opposed the ARF deal with the Young Turks, began cultivating the Turkish opposition and advocated the revival of Armenian armed self-defence and prepared to go underground again.

In the context of a crisis ridden Ottoman empire marked by rising Young Turk oppression, especially in historic Armenia, the prospect of a resurgent Armenian revolutionary movement was serious. The Young Turks feared that Hnchak movement could take the initiative from the ARF and present a real threat of resistance to their designs. So they moved into action. Paramaz and some two hundred organisers and leaders

were put behind bars and the Hnchak organisation was effectively broken. Paramaz was even charged with conspiracy to assassinate Talaat Pasha and other leading Young Turk members. With the Hnchak threat out of the way, the Young Turks anticipated little other opposition to their genocidal schemes. And when Paramaz and his twenty comrades were publicly executed in June 1915 in Istanbul the deportations in historic Armenia were already underway.

An interesting sidelight of this booklet is its information about Armenian villages and communities in north-Persia. At the time and perhaps even up to the 1930s the notion of a 'Persian Armenia' retained some reality. Areas nearby Lake Urfa (sometimes considered part of ancient pre-Christian Armenia) were still dotted with towns and villages populated by long-standing Armenian communities. Whilst never

an object for Armenian national demands, the Armenian revolutionary

movement used this area as a safe home base for manufacturing and smuggling guns and propaganda into Ottoman dominated Armenia.

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