

Roupen Sevag - 1885-1915

Illuminated Legacy in the Holy See of Etchmiadzin

By Ruth Bedevian

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The telegram read:

25 August 1915 - 8:25 AM Chankir, Istanbul - Pankalty Nalpant Street
To: Mrs. Chilingirian
'I WENT WITH VAROUJAN TO AYASH. SEND ME YOUR LETTERS THERE. ROUPEN.'

Two hours after the telegram was dispatched, Turkish soldiers removed Roupen Sevag and Daniel Varoujian and three others from the train near the village of Tuneh. They tied their victims to a tree and brutally butchered them according to a documented eyewitness account. During the 100 years since this heinous crime, Roupen Sevag has been mourned - as have all the victims who perished in the first genocide of the 20th century perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire. He was one of the youngest[1] intellectuals of the more than 250 that were marked for arrest and death on April 24, 1915 at the onset of the deportations and ultimate ethnic cleansing of Armenians from their ancestral land. Today he is abundantly memorialized in the Holy See of Etchmiadzin by the generosity of his brother's son, Hovhannes Chilingirian, age 93, who lives in France.

During my most recent trip to Armenia, I was privileged to visit the Roupen Sevag Museum which was officially opened as recently as April 11, 2013. I was guided by Lusineh Baraghamian who does the English tours. Christina Minosyan guides

Russian-speaking visitors. The Director of the museum, David Saribekyan kindly introduced himself and offered any assistance I might need. I felt their passion and pride with which they do their work.

Lusineh explained to me. 'With the blessings of HH Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians, the former dining area for the clergy and seminarians was converted into a gallery. This building, known as Ghazarapat[2], has served the Holy See since 1740.'

The museum is divided into two halls. The first hall displays an impressive personal collection of nearly 200 paintings that Chilingirian amassed during his lifetime, including three Aivazovsky oils, the largest of which is entitled 'Crimean War 1855' and lures the visitor's eye from the far end of the hall. Several works by two students of Aivazovsky - Vartan Makokian (1869-1937) and Arsene Chabanian (1864-1949) are also on display. We browsed through a varied selection of art. One touched me, most especially, of a woman standing with flowers in one hand and the other resting upon the tombstone above a grave. The inscription on the tombstone read, 'Im Mayrigis (My Mother) 1915. The second hall contains the personal belongings of Sevag that have been salvaged and preserved in the family, including personal correspondence, photographs and Sevag's own artwork and sketches. I yearned to read the handwritten letters that Roupen wrote to his wife, Yanni. Lusineh told me that husband and wife communicated in French and the letters were quite romantic.

Born Chilingirian in the outskirts of Istanbul in Silivri, Turkey in 1885, Roupen took the pen name Sevag (since he possessed black eyes - "sev" being the Armenian word for black). He received his elementary

education locally, and then graduated from the prestigious Berberian School in Istanbul before pursuing higher education in Switzerland where he met and married his German wife, Yanni Apel. Upon graduation from the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Lausanne (1911), Roupen remained in Lausanne and practiced medicine until 1914 when the couple with their children, Levon and Shamiram, made Istanbul their home - a fateful decision. (Lusineh informed me that Shamiram lives in Nice, France and has reached 100 years of age!)

Roupen was gifted with artistic talent and a penchant for poetry; thus writing came to him as an avocation. He also dabbled with sketching and an oil seascape adorns a wall with two charcoal sketches flanking it, one of Beethoven and the other of Victor Hugo. Admiring both the musician and the writer he rendered good likenesses. Literary critics rank Sevag among the patriotic and humanist poets and believe had he been given longer life that he would have made even richer contributions to Armenian literature and might have created a new genre as his writing did not truly belong to any one literary school. His poetry is a view into Western Armenian literature and expresses its essence. As early as 1908 he was contributing regularly to popular Armenian periodicals of the times. He was well respected and his abhorrence toward injustice and appeal to world harmony resonated with his readers. In 1910 his first book was published, entitled, *Garmir Kirk* (The Red Book), stirred by the carnage that took place in Adana in 1909 when the Young Turks government massacred 30,000 Armenians.

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It is a book of poems, but reflects his mourning for his people, but also his growing activism. A copy is on display along with other samples of his work. He depicted the life and struggle of workers, expressing faith in the victory over their toil in such works as 'Red Banner,' 'This Knife,' and 'The Porter.' He also wrote a series of short stories Pages Taken From a Doctor's Diary (1913-14).

The Ruben Sevag Museum is a gem among the museums of Armenia and is unique in that it is the first one

devoted to a Western Armenian writer. Not only did I feel the spirit of young Roupen Sevag, but also the devotion of an uncle's love for his nephew. Hovhannes Chilingirian has made a magnanimous gift to the Armenian people of his dearly beloved possessions and has wisely placed them into the protective hands of the Holy See. Indeed, a legacy has been illuminated.

End notes:

(1) Younger than Sevag was poet Armen Dorian (pseudonym of Hrachia Surenian) who was 23 when he was arrested and killed in 1915.

(2) The name comes from its builder, Catholicos Ghazar Jakhetsi (1737-1751). 'Ghazarapat' means 'walled [built] by Ghazar.'

Much appreciation to Dr. Vartan Matioossian, historian, translator and editor, for his counsel and review.



Ruben Sevag Museum, View from entrance:
First Gallery - At far end is large Aivazovsky seascape



Im Mayrs 1915
(My mother 1915)



Rouben and Yanni



Sketches and oil paintings
by Rouben Sevag