

Kohar Tölölyan, a Biography

Kohar Chobanian was born in 1912 in Bardizag, a small town inhabited by Armenians. Her family was one of artisans and small businessmen. Her father was a successful specialist in making high riding boots for prosperous people and cavalry officers, and her mother's family was in the business of making and selling charcoal on a regional scale. The family had homes in Bardizag and V'langa, a largely Greek district of Istanbul. The genocide killed all of her mother's family and most of her father's; he died of beatings and disease in prison in 1918. Kohar briefly spent time in an orphanage in Athens, but was found and reclaimed by her mother Haiganush who, with her two younger daughters, Siran and Victoria, moved in with her widowed mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Kohar grew up in a household of three widows and three orphaned girls. Her mother worked as a housekeeper for the German legate in charge of naval matters in Istanbul. Her grandmother had concealed a small amount of capital before the genocide, in Istanbul, and she made a meager living as a local moneylender.

Kohar excelled in school and, as she was always proud to say, began to work even as she attended the Essayan high school for women. She tutored the children of the German consulate employees in Istanbul in the Turkish language even as she received a fine education in classical and modern Armenian, Turkish, and French at Essayan. She revered most of her teachers, who managed to nurture the cultural memory of their students with accounts of the pre-genocide Armenian culture of Constantinople; she recalled with a smile that she had only one teacher who was not very good at teaching – the well-known writer Sybille – but she was the easiest grader.

Upon graduation, Kohar began teaching at Essayan and at a French sisters' school, and became active in the cultural life of Istanbul Armenians. In later years, she often recalled her attendance at many literary and cultural events and in the households of prominent figures in the community, including Haiganush Mark, the first prominent Armenian feminist of the post-genocide period. Always interested in education, for years she attended free lectures at Istanbul's major Turkish university. Decades later, when she saw in her son's school texts a book titled Mimesis by a Princeton professor, she said "Funny, I knew a German professor at Istanbul with that same name." Without knowing of his fame, she had attended the lectures of the great German-Jewish scholar Erich Auerbach, who fled the Nazis first to Istanbul and then to the US. Her belief in education was passionate and life-long.

Kohar Chobanian met Minas Tölölyan in 1933, when she was twenty-one and had moved to Arnaut Köy. Their stormy, long romance – complicated by Minas' prolonged time in the Army and in Bulgaria and Romania – endured until 1943, when they married. They moved to Aleppo in 1944, since her husband could not find employment in teaching or journalism because of Turkish bureaucratic persecution. Another motive for their departure was that they both despised the Varlik Vergisi, the special tax levies designed to destroy the businesses of non-Turkish minorities. Though she left Istanbul, Kohar spoke with longing of this great city on the Bosphorus all her long life.

In Aleppo/Haleb, Kohar gave birth to her son Khachig and went back to work as soon as she could, teaching in the Haigazian elementary school as well as at a school run by French nuns, sisters, where many students were Armenian. At Haigazian, she and her husband were part of a remarkable phalanx of educators at the kindergarten and elementary school levels who fostered an unmatched atmosphere of Armenian care and culture: Arkanush Meliksetian, Alice Dasnabedian, Ovsannah Missirlian were close and valued friends. After 1948, when Bishop Zareh Payaslian (later Catholicos), Hrach Papazian and others founded the Karen Jeppe Jemaran, her husband became the first principal of this high school and Kohar began to teach there. Her daughter Sosy was born in 1950, but the energetic and disciplined Kohar would not dream of staying home. She found ways to continue to teach, and she also translated three novels from French to Armenian, so that they could be serialized in Arevelk. The years she spent at the Jemaran were the high point of her life as a teacher – decades later, she remained connected by mail and visits to many of her students, who reciprocated her care and affection. She left teaching for a year when she moved to Egypt, but returned to it when the family moved to Beirut, where she taught at the Surp Nshan school from 1957 to 1960.

After the Tölölyans moved to the US in 1960, Kohar served as the Executive Secretary of the Armenian Relief Society. When she retired, she went to work as an assistant to the cataloguer of Armenian books at Harvard's Widener library for many years. For much of that time, she devoted many hours to St. Stephen's Elementary School in Watertown, MA. The Armenian language, the literature and culture created in that language, and the transmission of that culture to new generations were central to her life. In her nineties, she continued to read for hours a day, with a magnifying glass. Before she died, she instructed that any donations made to her memory go to the Esayan School, or to the Jemaran, or to St. Stephen's. Her commitment to Armenian educational institutions and the

culture they transmitted to new generations was central to her life. She and her husband both taught their children that love –whether for the family or the Armenian nation -- demanded work and that work for the nation was a form of love. A love of literature was an intrinsic part of their commitment to the Armenian nation.