

Minas Tölölyan, a Biography

Minas Tololyan was born in Bardizag, a largely Armenian-inhabited small town of 5,000 people located 50 miles southeast of Istanbul, on 24 November 1913. He died in Watertown, Mass, on 11 April 1997, at the age of 83.5 years.

When the Armenians of Bardizag were deported to Konya, in Anatolia, on the first leg of the death-marches to the Syrian desert, the two-year old Minas was claimed by his 15-year old aunt Azniv as her child, and in turn, Azniv was claimed as his indispensable housekeeper by her oldest brother Mgrdich, who was a physician in an Ottoman army hospital in Smyrna/Izmir, where they lived out the years of genocide and World War I. Minas Tololyan did not see or recognize the surviving members of his family until 1919.

The reunited members of the family settled in Bolis/Istanbul. After attending the *Srpots Tarkmanchats* [Holy Translators] elementary school, he entered the Vienna Mkhitarists' Lycée, a fine secondary school. At age 13, he published his first poem in a newspaper. He liked to say in later years that he was bad at almost every topic, including math, science, and even history, and would not have graduated had it not been for the fact that he excelled at Classical Armenian and all the other languages the Mkhitarists also taught: modern Armenian, Turkish, French, and German. At age 15, he was selected to be a member of a youthful delegation of students from Istanbul sent to Ankara, where he "met" Mustapha Kemal Atatürk. In 1933, he graduated from the lycée having written a long honors essay on the poetry of Vahan Tekeyan. This so impressed the great poet that he wrote Minas a letter and a correspondence began between them. The few letters he was able to hang on to in his subsequent wonderings were eventually published in Professor Avedis Sanjian's authoritative edition of Tekeyan's correspondence. This high school honor's thesis was published as a booklet, *Vahan Tekeyan*.

The years 1933-1944 were unstable and very difficult for Minas Tololyan. He had begun to work as an editor in 1931-2, when he and Mgrdich Hajian co-edited a short-lived new literary periodical, *Artsan* [Statue], which closed after only a couple of issues. In 1933-4, he taught at the school from which he graduated. By 1935, however, his articles were being published regularly in the Armenian language press of Istanbul. He made a living teaching Armenian language and literature on a part-time basis at a variety of Armenian high schools in Istanbul, and by contributing articles, almost always with pseudonyms, to the press (*Nor Luys*; *Jamanag*; *Aztarar*, and *Haratch* of Paris); he used such noms de plume as Tatul, Nojiadz Dghan and Armen Amadian. He was continually

harassed by the Turkish police for having suspect nationalist tendencies, because of the tenor of his articles and because he maintained a correspondence with Shavarsh Missakian, the founding editor of *Haratch* in Paris and a leading figure in the ARF, and with Rouben Darbinian, then the editor of the Armenian language *Hairenik* literary and cultural periodical in Boston, also funded by the ARF. The Turkish police sporadically opened the mail many Armenians received from abroad.

Drafted, he served in the Turkish Army and there witnessed the abuse of Armenian recruits. Oddly, he was largely exempt, he told his son Khachig, because the Turkish captain of the unit favored him and made him a company clerk. This was due to his ability to write not only Modern Turkish well but also to read and write in Ottoman Turkish, which he learned from his uncle Hagop, an accountant, even though Ataturk had forbidden instruction in that language in schools. The Captain told Minas he missed Ottoman Turkish and was impressed by his mastery of the cursive. In all three alphabets that he wrote, Minas Tololyan had beautiful and unmistakable handwriting.

After being released from his first service in the Army, starting in late 1935, Minas Tololyan experienced so much police harassment that he could not reliably find work at Armenian schools, whose principals were intimidated by the “visits” of the Turkish police. He left for Bulgaria, where he lived for almost two years in Sofia; he taught at the Kevork Mesrob school and wrote for the local Armenian weeklies, and there published his first collection of poems, *Nakherkank* (Beginning song, 1937). However, he aroused the anger of dissident members of the ARF who had left the party; they denounced him falsely to the Bulgarian police. He was jailed and released quickly. While his mother came from Istanbul to see him, they attempted to assassinate him – they missed, but the shot wounded his mother. (In his seventies, the surviving assassin-to-be wrote Minas a letter of apology for the false accusation!). Minas then left for Romania, where he taught at the Azkayin varzharan of Constanza and remained until late 1938, before returning to Turkey, when war threatened Europe. He also briefly visited Belgrade in Yugoslavia, and Greece. Between 1938 and 1943 he was recalled to active duty in the Turkish army twice, and again witnessed the abuse and death of many non-Turkish draftees. In 1943, he married, Kohar Chobanian, a graduate of the Yessayan school and a teacher of Armenian.

In 1943, the Turkish government launched the Varlik Vergisi, a special tax assessment system. It was supposed to tax the assets of major businessmen to collect an extra tax that would sustain the Turkish army, which was neutral during World War II but incurred large expenses while on a war footing. However, the Turkish government’s other aim was to destroy the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian businessmen who were so

influential, and to open the way for a seizure of their assets and for less successful Turkish businessmen to acquire them. This they did by a simple device. They assessed non-Turkish businesses at fantastically inflated values; when the businessmen could not pay the taxes, they were jailed, their businesses seized, and usually resold for a pittance to Turkish businessmen and officials. This bankrupted many, including the Armenian businessman for whom Minas was working as a book-keeper, having been forbidden to teach. While receiving support from his family and making a pittance for writing articles under a pseudonym, he and Kohar decided they could no longer live in Turkey. But Europe was in the grip of the Nazis and Stalin, Iran was occupied by Allied forces, and only Syria was available as an option for emigration. On 1 August 1944, Minas and Kohar left Turkey, his passport stamped as an undesirable who could never return. They arrived in Haleb or Aleppo, Syria. Their son, Khachig, was born there in 1944 and their daughter Sosy in 1950.

In Aleppo, Minas officially joined the Dashnaksutyun with which he had been secretly affiliated since 1935 in Bulgaria. Both he and his wife found employment in the Armenian school system of Aleppo, and he continued to write. In 1945, he published a second book of poems, *Mtnolord* [Atmosphere]. While he taught, he also co-edited the ARF's newspaper *Arevelk* with Onnig Meliksetian and edited the *Arevelk Darekirk* of 1948. While teaching at the Haigazian school (1945-1947), he became a member of the committee headed by Archbishop Zareh (later Zareh Catholicos of Antilias) and by Hrach Papazian, who founded the Karen Jeppe Jemaran of Aleppo, the junior sister school of the Nshan Palanjian Jemaran of Beirut. He served as its first principal from 1948 until 1956.

It is impossible to summarize the extraordinary burst of writing activity that Minas Tololyan exhibited after 1945. He published a column or an editorial, daily; literary articles, weekly. He was the acting secretary of every meeting he attended, because of his unmatched ability to take full notes and formulate minutes and agendas, always on the run. He spoke at meetings, without notes, as needed, whether for ten minutes or forty five. He was known as a phenomenon who in the confined quarters of *Arevelk* could write an editorial while several people argued, stop, make an astute comment on the ongoing debate, and continue to write cogently. He worked from six AM to midnight, seven days a week. With his friend Antranig Dzarugian he organized the important gathering of diaspora Armenian writers in Zahleh/Shtora, Lebanon, in 1948, and between 1950 and 1954, while a full-time principal and a full-time editor and secretary of the Central Committee of the ARF, he prepared *Tar me kraganutyun* [A century of literature, 1850-1950]. This two-volume work was designed, written and edited by him around the same time that, unbeknownst to him, in the US the first

college-level Norton's anthologies of literature were being designed and edited by committees of many professors. Like them, but working single-handedly, he selected representative samples of the work of all important Armenian authors in the Ottoman Turkish and Russian Empires and in the post-Genocide diaspora as well as Soviet Armenia, and he commented extensively on them, finding photographs, writing biographies, and extended analyses of each historical period and esthetic movement. Published in Cairo, Egypt, by the Houssaper press, the first edition of 1500 sold out, an unheard of event for a serious book in Armenian. The book was used as a textbook and reference book for decades; a second edition, published in two volumes in 1977 and 1982, with the financial support of the Alec Manoogian Fund, in 1200 copies, was almost entirely sold out as well. It was read in Soviet Armenia in smuggled versions until the 1980s.

The Tololyans lived in Aleppo until 1956. From 1952 on, Minas developed *Tseghin Park'e*, a text compiled from the work of many Armenian writers, with choral and solo parts that were recited at graduation ceremonies – he wrote the transitional passages himself in a variety of poetic styles; he was known for meeting a challenge by producing on the spot Armenian quatrains with perfect rhyme on any proposed topic. He also wrote textbooks for teaching modern Armenian grammar to all grades of elementary and junior high schools. Simultaneously, from 1953-1956, Minas was involved on a daily basis in the struggles over the Antilias Catholicosate, writing and lecturing not only about the ARF's point of view but also on the *Sahmanatrutyun* or Constitution of the Armenian Church, formulated in the Ottoman Empire in 1863. His energy became legendary, so much so that an Armenian cartoonist published an image of him running, a briefcase in one hand and a rocket under his feet.

From 1956 to 1957 the Tololyans lived in Cairo, where Minas edited *Houssaper*, the official organ of the ARF. From 1957 to 1960, the family lived in Beirut, where Minas contributed a great deal to *Aztag*, an ARF-affiliated daily, and served as the principal of the *Surp Nshan* school.

Immigrating to the US in 1960, the Tololyans settled in Watertown, Mass. From 1960-5 Minas was the executive secretary of the ARF for the eastern US (while his wife Kohar was the executive secretary of the ARS, in the office next door). In 1962, he published a short book, *Baikar'e hay heghapokhagan tashnagtsutyun tem* [The struggle against the ARF]. After 1965, he became editor of *Hairenik*. In 1968, he published in Beirut a short book, *Hayasdanyayts Yegeghetsin yev Hay Yegeghetsaganutyun Gochmn'e* [The Armenian church and the vocation of the Armenian clergy], in which he argued the historical and contemporary case for the predominant role of the Armenian laity in parish and

national councils, and discussed the relation between the local and the global in Armenian diasporic life long before that topic was fashionable. He retired in 1977, but for the next twenty years contributed a daily column to the *Hairenik*, also contributing articles to ARF publications elsewhere and to *Nor Gyank*, a publication in Los Angeles.

Though he was a well-liked and successful teacher and speaker, Minas Tololyan considered himself primarily a writer, a man who lived to think and thought to write. He published a few pages each week starting in 1935; after 1945, until his death, he published 6-8 pages in Armenian newspapers and periodicals each and every week. He wrote seven days (and nights) each week. And of course he wrote his books. In his lifetime, he published some 23,000 pages in Armenian, the equivalent of over seventy volumes, each of 300 pages. This prodigious output included political polemic, social and cultural commentary, as well as poetry and criticism.

When Minas Tololyan died, Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian said in his eulogy: "A great oak has fallen." His former student and assistant editor, Armen Baghdoyan, drank a simple toast to him: "*Barab gyank chabretsav* – he did not live an empty life." Hratch Tchilingirian, currently based in London, wrote to his son Khachig after reading a long obituary: "Your father's life was comforting for me: he went where he was needed and he believed in what he did. Long before globalization, he was an Armenian sans frontières."