

ZABEL YESSAYAN



The
GARDENS
— of —
SILIH DAR

A MEMOIR

TRANSLATED BY
JENNIFER MANOUKIAN

EDITED BY JOY RENJILIAN-BURGY & JUDITH SARYAN

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of
Silihdar*

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AIWA PRESS

Armenian International Women's Association
Boston, Massachusetts

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Photo Insert: 1935 Title Page, Map of Constantinople, Family Tree, after page 76.

The Armenian International Women's Association publishes a series of English-language translations of works by Armenian women writers. The main focus is on the pioneering female authors who published their works in either Western or Eastern Armenian. This rich and diverse body of literature is relevant not only to present-day Armenians, but also to all those interested in multifaceted issues regarding ethnic identity, social justice, cultural values, and the evolving roles of women in society.

TITLES IN THIS SERIES

Shushan Avagian, *I Want to Live: Poems of Shushanik Kurghinian*.
Bilingual edition (2005)

Diana Der-Hovanessian, *The Other Voice: Armenian Women's Poetry
Through the Ages* (2005)

Zabel Yessayan, *The Gardens of Silihdar* (2014)

Zabel Yessayan, *My Soul in Exile and Other Writings* (2014)

Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan

In the creative outburst that marked the Armenian renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women played an active role. The victory of the vernacular Western Armenian language in the struggle over classical texts resulted in the rapid growth of schools, periodicals, publishing houses, and social organizations of many kinds. Among the many facets of this renaissance was an emphasis on educating women and advancing their position in society. Educated women began writing and editing articles and books, entering teaching as a profession, and establishing humanitarian organizations.

It was during this vibrant period of Armenian culture that the writer and activist Zabel Yessayan established a reputation as a prominent Armenian intellectual. Her turbulent life, reflected in her writing, followed the vicissitudes of the Western Armenians of the period. Born Zabel Hovhannessian in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1878, Yessayan graduated from the Armenian Holy Cross secondary school, where she had excelled in her studies, especially literature. Her first works were published in 1895, the same year that she left for Paris and enrolled in the Sorbonne, thus becoming one of the first Ottoman women to study abroad.

In Paris she married the painter Dikran Yessayan, with whom she had two children, Sophie and Hrant. Her first novel, *The Waiting Room*, published in 1903, takes place in Paris and explores themes that were to become central to her work—exile and alienation.

Returning to Constantinople in 1902, she began writing articles

about contemporary issues; these appeared in various Armenian and French publications. In 1909 she was appointed to a delegation sent to Adana to provide aid to orphans and assess conditions in the aftermath of the bloody massacres of the Armenians that had taken place a few months earlier. Her classic account of this experience, published as *In the Ruins*, is widely regarded as one of her best works.

The only woman on the “black list” of the Armenian intellectuals to be arrested on the night of April 24, 1915, Yessayan was able to elude the police, and after spending several months in hiding managed to escape to Bulgaria. There she found only temporary refuge and was forced to flee again when Bulgaria entered the war as an ally of Ottoman Turkey. The following years found her busy at work in the Caucasus, writing and publishing interviews with survivors of the Armenian Genocide and also organizing the care and relocation of refugees and orphans. By 1922 she returned to Paris and resumed her writing, publishing the psychological novels *My Soul in Exile* in that year, followed by *Hours of Agony* and *The Last Cup*.

In the 1920s Yessayan visited Soviet Armenia, and in 1933 accepted an invitation to move there and teach literature at Yerevan State University. At the same time she continued her writing with the novel *Shirt of Fire* (1934) and *The Gardens of Silihdar* (1935). After years of wandering, it seemed that she had found a permanent, safe home. But this stable life was not to last. In the face of increasing criticism of creative artists by Communist government officials, Yessayan staunchly defended the works of such talented writers as Aksel Bakunts and Yeghishe Charents. Becoming along with them a victim of Stalin’s purges of Armenian intellectuals, she was arrested in 1937, imprisoned and tortured in exile in Baku, and died under unknown circumstances, probably in 1943. Left unwritten were several plays and projects, including a biographical novel based on the life of the poet Bedros Turian, the second and third volumes of her memoir *The Gardens of Silihdar*, and a major novel titled “The Dream of Shahabed.”

Preface

One evening more than two and a half years ago, after watching the documentary, *Finding Zabel Yesayan*, a small group of women from the Armenian International Women's Association decided that we had to introduce Yessayan's works to a wider audience of readers.

When we began our project to translate Zabel Yessayan into English, we had little idea where our journey would take us. We spent months researching Yessayan's life and literary contributions. Among her many works, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, a memoir, and *My Soul in Exile*, a psychological novel, stood out as exemplary representatives of her fiction and nonfiction. Thus, we decided to publish these two works that were very different, both in style and form.

Literary critics consider *My Soul in Exile* (published in a separate volume) one of Yessayan's great psychological novels. It is the first major fictional work that she wrote after the Armenian Genocide, and it takes place in Constantinople (Istanbul) during the period following the 1909 Adana massacres and preceding the outbreak of World War I.

This volume, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, is a literary memoir of Yessayan as a young Armenian girl growing up in Constantinople. She wrote the book after she settled in Soviet Armenia in the early 1930's. She intended it to be the first in a series of autobiographical works but her arrest by the Stalinist forces cut short her plans.

Among many issues that confronted us, a persistent question remained: what is the book's literary form? In a letter to her daughter, Yessayan describes the upcoming publication of *The Gardens of Silihdar* as "romantic memories." The Soviet Armenian

Encyclopedia calls the work an autobiographic novel. The French translation of *The Gardens of Silihdar*, published in 1994, calls it simply a novel. After much discussion, we decided to describe the work as a memoir. Another point of discussion was what to call the city of Yessayan's birth and childhood. Was it Constantinople or Istanbul? Yessayan refers to the city repeatedly as Bolis, which is the Armenian and Greek word for Constantinople, and literally means "The City." The name Istanbul was used by the Turks during the nineteenth century and became the official name of the city after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. In this instance, we chose the name that the author used.

The Gardens of Silihdar evokes a time when Constantinople was a multi-cultural city with three major religions: Moslem, Christian and Jewish. Yessayan was born into a world of uneasy coexistence among these different groups. The book reflects the negative racial, ethnic and religious attitudes of the times.

The unresolved political and social issues of the declining Ottoman Empire manifested in *The Gardens of Silihdar* were among the powerful forces which shaped Yessayan's life and her artistic vision.

As editors, we could not have completed this publication without the assistance and advice of many people who have supported us along the way. We would like to congratulate Talin Suciyan, a journalist and PhD candidate, and Lara Aharonian, founder of the Women's Resource Center in Yerevan, Armenia, as co-creators of the inspiring documentary on Yessayan. In addition we appreciate Lara Aharonian's help in securing relevant photographs and documents. We would also like to acknowledge the Museum of Literature and Art (Yerevan) for providing critical images and documents as well as Artsvi Bakhchinyan for coordinating our interactions with the museum. We appreciate Shushan Teager's linguistic and literary insights as well as the contributions of Houry Youssoufian, Marc

Mamigonian, Ara Ghazarians, Susan Pattie, Meg Pier, and many others who have encouraged us throughout this project. We are grateful for their wise counsel.

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Fund for their generous financial support towards the publication of the books by Zabel Yessayan.

—*Judith A. Saryan and Joy Renjilian-Burgy*

I was born in 1878 in the early morning hours of February fifth (Greek calendar)¹ in the Scutari district² of Constantinople.³ My neighborhood was called the Gardens of Silihdar.⁴

During the night, the Russian army had reached San Stefano.⁵ My mother used to say that she was in labor when she heard the town criers pass through our neighborhood, shouting:

—You'll hear cannon fire. Don't be alarmed!

The authorities had undoubtedly thought that the Russians were planning to bombard the capital.

My mother said that a heavy snowstorm had begun that day and continued through the night. It was almost impossible to leave the house, but if people did manage to step out into the street, trudging through the snow would have certainly drained them of all of their energy. My mother's Greek midwife lived in Kadikugh,⁶ but no driver was willing to hitch his horses to a wagon to make the trip in that kind of weather. My aunt Yeranig liked to add that, on top of everything, my father was not home and my uncle Dikran, who had just returned home, was staggering through the house, drunk. It took a half-hour to get him to understand that he needed to find a way to bring the midwife from Kadikugh.

Uncle Dikran, braving the snowstorm, passed through the Haydar Pasha Cemetery and, after losing his way a few times, finally arrived in Kadikugh where he pulled the Greek midwife from her bed and brought her to Scutari.

My mother also used to say that during her labor my father and the Greek midwife were seated around the fire embroiled in a heated debate until well after midnight. The midwife insisted that a Rus-

sian occupation of the capital would mean freedom for Christians, while my father said he did not expect anything good to come from a Russian victory.

I was small and frail when I was born. Seeing me for the first time, Uncle Dikran exclaimed:

—You call this a baby! She looks like a little bubble. And to think I'd gone to so much trouble...

Uncle Dikran continued to call me Bubble until I was eight or nine years old.

Until then, I was very weak, subject to all kinds of childhood illnesses and constantly teetering between life and death.

Our Home

Our large family was made up of people from a variety of different towns and villages who all lived under the same roof. This was a common arrangement in Constantinople at the time.

My maternal grandmother was from a well-established family from Balat.⁷ Her father was a civil servant, but he was not very good at his job. At home, everyone—friends and relatives—called my grandmother Doudou.⁸ She was a sad, proud woman who did not know how to read or write, but spoke Armenian impeccably and Turkish with a carefully selected vocabulary. Tall and self-assured, she was strikingly beautiful as a young girl, though I only knew her as a widow dressed entirely in black. Her sad, dark eyes flickered with the intelligence of a remarkably wise woman; her face was white and wrinkled like a relic. My grandmother seemed to harbor unyielding contempt for everything and everyone, even for her own children. It was a kind of contempt that made her perpetually dour and taciturn. Although she usually forced herself to maintain this façade, my grandma made an exception for my father—a man for whom she had only love and respect. She also loved her children, especially the boys, but it was a painful, tortured kind of love that did not allow her to forgive easily.

During her unhappy life, my grandmother never lowered her expectations. She kept habits and traditions and an inflexible pride that did not correspond with her children's ways of life or with her own means. This conflict became a constant source of misery for her.

At fourteen, she was hastily married to Shirine oghlou Hagop,⁹ a handsome young wagon driver from Scutari who had been chosen for her by a matchmaker.

This is how it happened:

At that time, the janissaries¹⁰ kept the capital—especially the Greek neighborhoods of Stamboul¹¹ and the Golden Horn¹²—in a constant state of fear and dread. My grandmother's family, having already lost their influence as well as their faith in the government's ability to protect them, had kept their daughter Loucig at home until the age of fourteen. They feared that if she left the house, she would draw the attention of a janissary. But, according to custom, once a girl reached puberty, she was expected to leave the house for the first time to receive communion. My grandmother used to say that, at the time, when men left for work each morning, they would stop at their doorsteps, make the sign of the cross and say *helallamish*,¹³ bidding a final farewell to their families, because they never knew if they would be returning home that night. Janissaries would often test the sharpness of their swords by decapitating Christians in the street. To show their deference, Greek and Armenian men used to shave their mustaches, pull their fezzes down over their ears and timidly walk through the streets to avoid catching the eye of a janissary. Holding your head high and looking directly at others was considered disrespectful and could incite the wild rage of a janissary. My grandmother remembered wealthy families who had sunk into poverty after their husbands and fathers had disappeared without a trace. Even sultans and government officials trembled at the sight of the janissaries, whose power stretched from their own homes, into their neighborhoods and across the entire capital.

Every time my grandmother recalled the harsh days of her childhood, Aunt Yeranig used to interrupt, saying:

—Oh, Doudou. Didn't your mother and father have any sense? How could they have sent you to church during such cruel times?

My grandmother explained that at that time the Patriarchate was powerful and its influence was far-reaching. The Patriarch had a good relationship with the head of the janissaries. Not only did he watch closely to make sure his flock performed their religious duties, but he also severely punished those who neglected them.

—You really couldn't win either way, Aunt Yeranig would say to Doudou.

My grandmother paid no attention to my aunt's pointed comments and continued to explain how the Patriarchate exerted its authority.

At that time, churches did not have copper bells. At dawn, the sexton would hit a stick against a piece of wood, while the beadle would pass through the neighborhood and call the faithful to church for Morning Prayer. The men had to go to church to pray, while the women prayed at home. During Lent, the *yasakhdjis*¹⁴ from the Patriarchate, drawn to scents like dogs, would wander through the neighborhoods. If the smell of meat rose from a house, they would arrest, and occasionally beat, the head of the household, subject him to *bastinado*, seize the meat and fine him. They might also bring him to the church jail where he would be beaten and imprisoned. If he resisted or tried to resist, they would bring him to the Patriarchate's underground prison where they would keep him until he repented. Sometimes, treating him as if he were mentally deranged, they would send him to an insane asylum, and he would never be heard from again.

At that time, the basement of Sourp Hovhannes Church¹⁵ in Narlé Kapou¹⁶ served as the insane asylum. Inside, the men were chained and shackled by their wrists and feet and forced to sit in their own filth. To silence those who dared curse the holy rituals and sacraments of the Church, the wardens would sometimes ruthlessly beat them to the brink of death. My grandmother used to add that they would curse even louder during those beatings.

One time, my grandmother told us about the events surrounding Kazaz Artine amira's¹⁷ decision to finance the construction of the Sourp Pergitch Armenian Hospital¹⁸ in Yedi Koulé.¹⁹

For one of the major church holidays, the Patriarch performed a solemn mass at Sourp Hovhannes Church in Narlé Kapou. The mass was attended by various archbishops and by some of the most gifted choirboys of the time, each one handpicked by his parish for

his glorious voice. My grandmother remembered the names of those remarkable choirboys as well as the name of their choirmaster, who she said was unlike anyone else in the world. The mass was also attended by prominent *amiras*²⁰ and their respective entourages, which were composed of local notables and some of the wealthiest merchants of the day.

At the beginning of the mass, the men imprisoned in the basement of the church began to curse so loudly and with such force that their cries reached the Patriarch and disrupted the fervor of the faithful. Following a signal from the furious Patriarch, the burly guards (who, as my grandmother would say, had mustaches so long and thick that you could hang someone from them) went down to the basement and ordered the wardens to kill the prisoners like the dogs they were.

Despite the merciless beatings, the prisoners, swept up in a powerful, agonizing rage, continued to curse loudly.

Finally, that day, an artisan from Samatya,²¹ deeply affected by the plight of those men, started screaming from the church gallery, cursing both the mass and the Patriarch. In a sign of protest, this woman—whom they called Indecent Baydzar and whom they would later say was possessed during the incident—began throwing pew cushions on the faithful below.

When the Patriarch, archbishop, amiras and their loyal entourages gathered in a big reception hall after the mass to solemnly review the day's events, someone approached Kazaz amira and called his attention to the impropriety of keeping the mentally insane in the Church of the Patriarchate.

—Times are bad, my lord. With all due respect, I must tell you that the number of insane and immoral people is rising each day, and our prison is becoming too small to hold them all. Only you can find a way to solve this problem, he said.

—Oh, Holy Savior, called the clergymen and the faithful in unison. Times are bad. Save us from these leprous lambs.

With this situation in mind, Kazaz amira decided to finance the construction of an insane asylum and chapel in the name of the Holy Savior²² in Yedi Koulé, an uninhabited area outside the city walls.

These stories disturbed Aunt Yeranig. Trying to relate to the people's concerns, she said angrily:

—What misguided people, Doudou! Those prisoners should have gone to the government for help, converted to Islam or at least tried to do something to save themselves.

My grandmother shook her head indignantly and responded to my aunt's impious thoughts by making the sign of the cross and saying:

—Wherever they turned, there was no deliverance.

Occasionally, with bribes or through other means, a prisoner could find a Muslim protector, who would render the Patriarchate powerless in punishing him. According to my grandmother, the Patriarchate would sometimes impose the harshest punishment of all: expulsion from the community. From the pulpits of all the local churches, preachers would denounce the man who had been expelled, and he and his entire family would become lepers in the community. After a few months of deriving smug satisfaction from his expulsion, the man—unable to endure the consequences any longer—would fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. He would place all of his belongings at the Patriarch's feet and plead for his expulsion to be reversed so that he could reenter the community. My grandmother also said that some of these men would sometimes reject their faith and convert to Islam.

It was during this period that fourteen-year-old Doudou left the house for the first time to go to church with some elderly relatives. At the time, Christian women in Constantinople did not yet wear European clothing; they dressed like Turkish women in a *feradjé*²³ or an *entari*²⁴ and, depending on their class, were veiled in either a *yashmak*²⁵ or a simple scarf.