

Hakob Karapents (1925–1994): A Biographical Sketch

Hakob Karapents (né Hakob Karapetian) was born on August 9, 1925, in Tabriz, the “cultural citadel” of the Iranian-Armenian community. The eldest son of Simeon Karapetian, young Hakob grew up in the most populated Armenian community in northern Iran at the time. His father was, according to those who had met and known him, a kind individual endowed with innate artistic talents and skills. Karapents had two younger brothers and one sister. Life was harsh and ruthless to young Hakob, separating him from his mother. He grew up under the motherly care of his paternal aunt, Mrs. Astghik Karapetian-Beglarian, a dedicated and beloved teacher of many years. “His childhood was not rosy. His soul strived for distant, new bright worlds. . . .” Outside the immediate circle of his family many others left their mark on the “tabula rasa” of young Hakob during his adolescent years. He was fortunate to live in Tabriz where the Armenian life was being revived under the roof of its many cultural institutions: its parochial schools Tamarian, Haykazian, Aramian, Kendronakan Erkrordakan (Central Secondary) schools, its churches, libraries, cultural, athletic, scouting and youth organizations. Karapents, along with his cohorts, grew up in the adopted homeland of the “giants” personifying everything Armenian and Armenian culture. There was a legion of intellectuals under the leadership of the devoted and unique prelate Arch. Nerses Melik Tangian. Figures such as Karapet Pionian, Gaspar Hakobian, Hakovb Ter Hakovbian, (H. Irazek), Andre Ter-Ohanian (Amurian,) Aleksan Hovhannisian, Mikayel Stepanian, Levon Grigorian, Mushegh Hovhannisian, Tachat Poghosian, Anushavan Grigorian, Armenak Aftandilian, Ashot Muradkhanian, and many, many others under whose purely idealistic influence the young Hakob’s life was shaped in such a rich cultural atmosphere.

Karapents’ education was mixed. According to him: “kindergarten, Russian; elementary, French and Armenian, Saint Vincent de Paul; then Armenian, Haykazian-Tamarian; high school, Persian and French; higher education, American.” Karapents grew and flourished. His literary skills took shape and were formed with the passing of the decades and grew into the huge present day poplar of the Diaspora-Armenian literature. He started to write, in his own words, “poetry, scenarios for plays, and novels,” from his early years. He began his literary exercises from his adolescent years. “Imbued with the national and ideological spirit of his birthplace, he wrote patriotic poems, which appeared in the pages of *Alik’ daily*.” From the fresh early years of life, unique lines began to be seen in the character of Karapents. “Among his friends, with his mild behavior, his skills and talents inclined towards art and literature, he undertook special responsibilities and played roles, which naturally, with an inner drive, made him play leadership roles among his cohorts.”

The eruption of the Second World War also shook Tabriz. “He moved to Tehran. . . . It is not what he had dreamt of. . . . Moved to Europe and later to the land of Columbus.” Like many Armenian families, the Karapetians also took the road leading to the capital Tehran. Karapents received his secondary education in the French Saint Louis College of Tehran, while absorbing the cultural and social life taking shape in Tehran. In 1939, three years after the critical period for Iranian-Armenians, he

welcomed suggestions of a group of his friends to create a cultural society, and “the heartbeats of a newly formed society called Luys u Mitk’ (Light and Mind) began to be heard. . . becoming the first youth cultural society in Tehran.” Later, when he was barely twenty years old, together with a group of his ideologically like-minded friends, he collaborated with other youth societies such as Arshaluys (Dawn), Raffi, Shant’ (Thunder), and Kayts (Spark). On July 4, 1944 he participated in the establishment of Hay Patanekan Mshakut’ayin Miut’iwn (Armenian Adolescent Cultural Society). In 1946 said Society was renamed Hay Eritasardakan Mshakut’ayin Miut’iwn (Armenian Youth Cultural Society), and in the fall of 1950 its name was changed to Hay Mshakut’ayin Ararat Miut’iwn (Ararat Armenian Cultural Society), which later grew, and expanding its operations, deservedly was renamed one last time Hay Mshakut’ayin Ararat Kazmakerput’iwn (Armenian Ararat Cultural Organization). Today, sixty-seven years after those “historic” days, the Ararat Organization remains the backbone of the Iranian-Armenian community’s cultural, athletic, and social life, through whose gates tens of thousands of children, adolescents, and youths, thanks to the vision and dedication of Karapents and his “comrades,” have passed, armed and endowed with national consciousness and identity. In this undertaking, “he was everywhere, with everyone. He was a coordinator and, due to his sincere and selfless dedication, he enjoyed the love and respect of all.” He wrote the lyrics of the organization’s march which “lit the hearts and souls” of generations. The young Karapents chaired the organization’s Executive Committee from its establishment until mid-1945.

His insatiable thirst for education drove him to the United States. Disregarding massive financial difficulties, Karapents, shortly after his arrival to the United States (1947), succeeded in entering the University of Kansas in the State of Missouri. After completion of his studies there, he continued his graduate work at New York’s renowned Columbia University. He majored in journalism with a minor in psychology. In November 1949 he married the daughter of an Armenian family from Sepastia, Alice Minassian. They were blessed with two children, daughter Christine, and son Steven. Now the head of a household he juggled numerous jobs with his studies in order to support his family. Two years after residing in El Centro, California, Karapents moved to New York State. For a short period he taught at Cornell University’s Department of Linguistics. Among his many jobs, he was a “bank teller, driver, professor, dishwasher, reporter, doorman, editor, airline employee, teacher, mechanic’s assistant, radio broadcaster, Encyclopedia Britannica salesman, columnist, government employee, and a candidate for a whole host of other important and unimportant jobs.” From 1954 to 1979 he headed the Armenian Section of “Voice of America.”

From the late 1940s till the last days of his life Karapents contributed to many American-Armenian and Diasporan papers, among them: *Hairenik’ Amsagir* [Hayrenik Monthly], *Bagin* [Altar], *Alik’* [Wave], *Asbarez* [Arena] *Horizoni Grakan Haueluats* [Horizon Literary Supplement], 80-akan (80s), and many others. He contributed articles and reports to *Hairenik’ Orat’ert’* [Hairenik Daily]. The works of Karapents have been reprinted in the pages of Armenian Diaspora papers from Boston to Istanbul, and from Cairo to Tehran. Albeit belatedly, they began to appear recently in the pages of the papers in his beloved Armenia.

The first literary attempts of Karapents were poems, short articles and journalistic reports, which appeared in the pages of *Aruseak*, *Loys* [Light], *Eros* periodicals, and later in *Alik* daily. The decades of the 1950 and 1960s were especially fruitful. The first volume of the writer's short stories, titled *Antsanot' hoginer* [Strange Souls], was released in 1970 when he was already a well-known writer. This work was followed by his second in 1972, a novel titled *Kart'ageni dustre* [The Daughter of Carthage], which received the Haykashen Uzunian award (Beirut, 1972). In 1975, with Suren Gracian, Karapents participated and edited the Armenian portion of the text titled *Khosakts'akan arewelahayeren* [Spoken East Armenian] in the bilingual (Armenian-English) textbook with the same title, under the auspices and published by the American Council for Learned Societies. Karapents' third volume, *Nor ashkharhi hin sermnats'annere* [The Old Sowers of the New World], was published in 1975. This and the above-mentioned two volumes were published in 1995 in Armenia in the first volume of a two-volume set of the works of Karapents.

The following six years were even more productive. The fourth volume of the works of Karapents, *Mijnarar* [Interlude], was published in New York in 1981. This work too was the recipient of the above-mentioned Haykashen-Uzunian literary award. The writer's fifth volume, *Adami girk'e* [Adam's Book], was a contemporary novel published in 1983 in New York. This work won two awards simultaneously: The Armenian General Benevolent Union's Alex Manoogian Literary Award and the Eliz Kavookjian-Ayvazian Award given by the French-Armenian Writers Society. Two more volumes by Karapents, *Amerikian Shurjpar* [American Rondo] and *Ankatar* [Incomplete], were published in 1986 and 1987, respectively, bringing the number of his volumes to seven.

In 1989, after establishing residence in Watertown, a suburb of Boston, Karapents, along with his literary works, brought his participation to the cultural life of the local community. During the last five years of his life, Karapents published two more volumes in Armenian: *Erku ashkharh—grakan pordzagrutiwinner* [Two Worlds: Literary Essays], Boston, 1992, and *Mi mard u mi erkir ew ayl patmuatsk'ner* [A Man and A Country and Other Stories] in 1994. During the last two years of his life, 1992–1994, Karapents regularly contributed to the Armenian press, *Hayrenik' shabat'at'ert'* [Hairenik Weekly] and *Nor Keank'* [New Life] in particular. His weekly columns, covering a vast span of topics and issues (cultural, national, political, social, and artistic), appeared under the subheadings "Lusants'k'i vray" [On the Margin] and "Getap'in" [By the River].

With the exception of a few poems, short stories, and numerous articles which were published in the *Armenian Review* quarterly in the 1950s and *Litchfield County Times* daily during the 1980s, Karapents avoided writing in English. "It seems to me that I could have done the same work in American literature, and I actually had started to prepare myself and move in that direction in the last years by contributing to American dailies and periodicals. However, one bright day, I came to the conclusion that American literature does not need me at all, and neither do I need it. . . . I will remain an Armenian writer, loyal to my language, its elements, and the national complexes." However, it was not fair for the English-speaking public, in general, and

linguistically assimilated American-Armenian generations, in particular, to remain deprived of Karapents' literary wealth and rich legacy. Perhaps realizing the significance of this issue, and to introduce his work to American readers, Karapents planned his first English volume titled *Return & Tiger and Other Short Stories* which he closely supervised, like all his other previous volumes, in all details. Unfortunately, however, he did not live to see his tenth volume. It was released one month after his death in November 1994.

It was Karapents' dream to see his works published in his beloved Armenia. This was also not to be. During his last visit to Armenia in 1989, Karapents had brought this issue up with his colleagues there and was extremely encouraged by the results. In 1994, for the first time ever, Karapents' *American Rondo* was released in Armenia, in the form of a small pamphlet. This was followed in 1995 by a two-set volume of Karapents' major works.

It has been five years since the passing of Karapents, and yet it is still difficult to get used to his absence. With his death, a deep gash was opened in the Diaspora-Armenian cultural and spiritual life, a wound which still remains unhealed. He still had a lot to give, to enrich our lives and souls with ideas, in this materialistic, automated, often insane world. We are only left to console ourselves with his rich literary legacy. 1994 will always be remembered in the literary history of the Armenian Diaspora with bitterness. Despite his physical agility and toned body, after only four months of struggle, Karapents succumbed to pancreatic cancer on October 20, 1994. He closed his eyes eternally, surrounded by his wife, Alice, and children Christine and Steven. The national funeral of the writer took place on October 25, 1994 at St. Stephen's Armenian Church in Watertown, headed by Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian, with the assistance of pastors from both the Cilician and Etchmiadzin Sees, and attended by a capacity crowd. Karapents' body was interred at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, where the remains of other prominent Armenian figures, such as General Dro and Rouben Gregorian, Minas Tololyan and others are buried.

Posthumously, in accordance with the wishes of Karapents, his personal library was moved to the Armenian Cultural Foundation's library, in Arlington, Massachusetts a place which he loved and often visited with guests and friends. The dedication of the Hakob Karapents Room at the Armenian Cultural Foundation took place on October 19, 1996 in the presence of his family members, friends, and guests. In addition to his books and periodicals, the Karapents collection at the Foundations includes his loyal servants of decades, his Armenian typewriter, desk, and memorabilia, which he had left untouched since the summer of 1994.

In addition to his library, the Karapents archives have also been preserved, consisting essentially of correspondence, photographs, manuscripts, newspaper clippings, and personal documents. These valuable resources, at present, are in the process of being cataloged and hopefully will be available in the near future to those interested in delving into the rich literary legacy of Karapents, the man, and the writer.

Ara Ghazarian