



The Seh-lerai Language

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THE SEH-LERAI LANGUAGE.

By James R. Russell,
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Day after day,
Alone on a hill,
The man with the foolish grin is keeping perfectly still
But nobody wants to know him,
They can see that he's just a fool,
And he never gives an answer,

But the fool on the hill,
Sees the sun going down,
And the eyes in his head,
See the world spinning 'round.

Well on the way,
Head in a cloud,
The man of a thousand voices talking perfectly loud
But nobody ever hears him,
or the sound he appears to make,
and he never seems to notice...

— John Lennon and Paul McCartney, 1967.

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1. A MYSTERIOUS LANGUAGE AND ITS MAKER.

We scholars of Armenian studies have tended to focus generally inward— researching the history, culture, and language and literature of the nation itself— rather than outward, considering the participation of Armenians in the wider culture of the world outside their (our) own ethnic sphere. This is reasonable, particularly as the 19th and 20th centuries were the period when the serious groundwork of the discipline had to be done. But now, in the early years of the 21st century, most of the Classical texts essential to historiography and many literary texts of diverse periods have been edited to a high scholarly standard and translated satisfactorily into the accessible languages of international learning. The ancient, medieval, and modern forms of the language, including its dialects, have received their fair share of attention from Indo-Europeanists. The record of the Genocide of 1915 in the heartland and the Ottoman periphery is firmly established, wanting only proper international and judicial recognition. And the chronicle of Soviet rule in the northeastern surviving sliver of the country has by now been meticulously declassified and documented. So the demons and secrets of modern trauma are now exposed, as it were, to the sun.

The field occupies a small niche, but a secure and respectable one. Now we can allow ourselves, perhaps, to widen the horizon. For Armenians have also been, and are, participants in *world* civilization, particularly in the intermediary zone between Europe and Asia, the bridge between West and East. Interacting with different cultures and living in other countries, writing in foreign languages and thinking about wider and other ideas than those of parochial concern, naturally contributing their particular experiences and points of view to what we might call nowadays the global conversation: this is as much a part of Armenian experience, particularly in the modern era, as is the indigenous culture. The study of “cosmopolitan Armenia” is not yet central to the field, but it is rich and can potentially contribute new insights as it develops. This study falls into that relatively new genre. It considers the life and times, and the work, of an eccentric Armenian savant of 19th-century Smyrna who invented what he hoped

would become a universal, international language. Though his project was in the end doomed to obscurity, it is of value to the study, for instance, of how progressive thought— of which internationalism is an essential part— developed in the Near East. Karl Marx in 1888 wrote of a (Western) Armenian translation due to be published at Constantinople of his *Communist Manifesto*— though suppressed by a printer wary of police persecution, it would have been the first in the Near East, in an indigenous language of the region.¹ (There were to be many other translations, mainly into the Eastern literary mode.) Here is another example, then, of Armenian cosmopolitanism.²

I studied recently an invented *a priori* language and cipher in an Armenian manuscript of the late 18th century that is housed in the collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg (MS A 29). It would appear from such features as the frequency of sounds such as *ō* and *f* that the author, a man of eclectic interests living most likely in Georgia, invented his fanciful language, which he named *Ř(u)štuni* (after the ancient Armenian district on the southern shore of lake Van and its legendary argot), in such a way as to make it sound as exotically un-Armenian as possible. Despite his intentions, its morphology and even features of its lexicon such as the similarity of words for heaven and earth (Arm. *erkin(k')*, *erkir*) betray its birth in an Armenophone mind. Though the language has some philosophical and theological vocabulary, its maker evidently created *Ř(u)štuni* for his own amusement, rather than out of some noble impulse to bring the races of man back together with a single speech, and thereby to begin to repair the damage done by the fall of the tower of Babel. His cipher uses older Armenian cryptograms, such as one used so widely by guilds that I have called it a “hetaerogram”, that is, the vehicle of an alphabetic subculture, and combines these with elegantly calligraphic forms based upon the late-Classical *nusxuri* script of Georgian. It was meant for the invented language (so he writes) but is actually employed in the manuscript mainly to enshroud sinister or salacious magical formulae in Armenian, including one spell for zombification and another employing the wild rue, a plant important in ancient and modern Iranian religion.³ My research led me to examine other invented tongues, including international, universal languages and their creators, and to return to a brief, intriguing reference in an article some decades old to one of the latter— one invented, with a strange script to go with it, by an Armenian.

The old article, then: in 1984 Vahé Oshagan, a writer, editor, and literary scholar, son of the famous writer, literary scholar, and educator Hagop Oshagan (Yakob Ošakan), published in a volume of the *Review of National Literatures* dedicated to Armenia an essay on cosmopolitanism among Western Armenian intellectuals of the late 18th-early 20th centuries. He noted that a millennium of experience as international travelers— and of life as a people in diaspora as well as in the historical homeland— had conditioned Armenians to multi-lingual agility, familiarity with diversity in culture, and the ability to cope with crises of divided loyalty. In the 19th century much of Armenian literature remained decidedly parochial in scope and consciousness, preoccupied with schemes of national liberation and communal politics. But the upper classes of Armenian society, particularly in Constantinople and Smyrna— the great western coastal cities of the Ottoman Empire— looked outward as well. They hailed very often from families who had converted from Armenian Orthodoxy to Catholicism, were fluent in French and Italian, and were well-versed in modern European literature. As examples of men who pursued cosmopolitan careers he cites several examples, including Murad Tosunian, who under the grand adopted name Ignace Mouradja d’Ohseen served as Swedish consul at Constantinople in 1795 and authored a history of the Ottoman Empire; and Goghmas Keumurjian (restyled Cosmas de Carboghnano), interpreter to the Spanish consulate and translator into Italian of a history of Constantinople in 1798. These elite Armenians resided mainly in the heavily European district of Pera (Beğöğlü, now Beyoğlü) of the capital. Ottoman Turkey’s great Aegean port in ancient Ionia also contributed to this burgeoning cosmopolitan culture among Armenians: the press of the Dedeyan Brothers at Smyrna brought out Armenian translations of Dumas, Chateaubriand, Swift, Samuel Johnson, Jules Verne, Sir Walter Scott, etc. The Smyrna intellectual Matt’eos Mamurian, who had translated Voltaire into Armenian, criticized contemporary Armenian society and morals in his satirical *Angliakan namakani* (“English Letters”). We will have much more to say about this extraordinary man presently.

Oshagan also sketches brief portraits of two intellectual eccentrics. Charles Akdjalian founded in 1867 the French-language journal *Politique Morale, revue de poesie, de santé et de morale*, which went out of print after only a year by reason of its editor’s insanity. “Then there is the strange case,” Oshagan continues, “of the lonely, misogynous and vegetarian eccentric Bedros Tingir,⁴ who had taught himself nine languages (Armenian, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Italian, English, French, and Sanskrit), who lived secluded in a hilltop castle near Smyrna

¹ Marx 1968, p. 5.

² For an example of the early modern Armenian contribution to global commerce— the network of traders and travelers from New Julfa— and its effect on the development of Armenian society and letters, see Aslanian 2011.

³ See Russell 2014.

⁴ The name will be found in various forms, with or without the Armenian family suffix *-ean(c')*; the pronunciation would be Təngər, in modern Turkish orthography Tingir, with the stress on the final syllable.

and who had devised, around 1865, a new alphabet and an international language which he called ‘Sahlera’. The purpose of this enormous effort was to ‘promote peace and love among the nations’. He had also prepared a special text-book for the teaching of his universal language, a grammar, and a dictionary which he gave to rare visitors and correspondents to enable them to communicate with him. He had also devised a new system of musical notation based on his alphabet.⁵ I wanted to learn more about Sahlera; but all I could find was a biographical sketch on its creator, Bedros Tingir, in a brief historical monograph by Fr. Ep’rem Pōlosean (Boghosian) of the Catholic Mekhitarist order at Vienna of the wealthy, influential Tingirian clan of Constantinople to which he belonged.

The family seems to have originated in central Anatolia— in the region called in ancient times Galatia, near Angora (modern Ankara). The first notable figure of the clan, Grigor *Hoca*⁶ T’nkreanc’, born in 1701, served as interpreter to the French consulate at the Ottoman capital, and in 1768 and after was honored with the titles Chevalier de Guignard and Comte de St. Priest. He married a woman named Hrip’simē (we do not hear all that much about the women of this clan history) and fathered several sons who worked in the prestigious and privileged profession of the mint and banking (Ar.-in-Tk. *sarraf*). Grigor died 13 August 1781, and was buried at Pera. Karapet, Grigor *Hoca*’s middle son, fathered three boys, Petros (in Western Armenian, Bedros), Anton, and Astuacatur (Astvadzadur), and a daughter whose name has not reached us. Bedros (let’s call him that: that was the name he heard) was born at Constantinople on 3 September 1799. On either 21 October 1811 or 8 July 1814 (accounts differ), Fr. Andrēas Šiwk’iwrean (Shükürían) took Bedros and a number of other boys to Vienna to begin study for the priesthood at the Mekhitarist (Armenian Catholic) seminary. Bedros was given the religious name Karapet on 7 September 1813, entered the order on 15 April 1816, and was ordained a priest on 1 November 1818— at the age of nineteen. Now Fr. Karapet, he returned to Constantinople but was sent away from the city during a notorious persecution of Armenian Catholics instigated by the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate of the capital in 1827-1830.⁷ He went first to Bucharest, but on 8 January 1828 returned to his monastery in Vienna, leaving both the Mekhitarists and the name received at ordination on 11 May— for we next encounter him with his old, secular name, Petros T’(ə)nkər (Tk. Tingir). He then traveled to Rome, seems not to have found peace there, and went on to Pesaro, a town on the Adriatic coast of Italy south of Ravenna. We do not know what made him abandon holy orders, nor is it clear what inner demon pursued him, though presently some suppositions of researchers will be advanced.

Fr. Pōlosean’s narrative continues: “It would appear that somewhat later Petros T’ngərean returned to secular life, moved to Izmir [the author uses the Turkish form of the city’s name interchangeably with Gk. Smyrna and Arm. Zmiwīnía], and took up residence in Buca,⁸ where also he died. (Abraham Y.) Ayzavean in his *Series* (*Šar hay kensagrut’eanc’* [“Series of Armenian Biographies”], II, Constantinople, 1893, pp. 91-93; cf. also *Arewelk’* 1899, no. 3946) writes on all this in detail under the entry ‘Petros-T’nkər’, which we here abbreviate: ‘Petros-T’nkər, who was once a clergyman of the Vienna Mekhitarist order, was a scion of one of the most notable and honored Armenian Catholic families of the capital, the T’nkəreans. He began his schooling at Constantinople and completed his education at the Vienna Mekhitarist seminary and another school of higher learning. Petros-T’nkər was deeply learned in various branches of knowledge, and one might also say he was a considerable linguist; for in addition to a good knowledge of Armenian, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Italian, English, and French, he was familiar with Sanskrit... Petros-T’nkər lived nearly forty years in the village of Buca, at Smyrna. With financial help from his family he purchased, a few years before his death, a lovely hill in the locale near Buca called [Gk.] *Aspra Khōmata*, that is, White Lands, on the summit of which he caused to be erected a square stone house, which might more suitably be called a small castle... It was in that house where, secluded from humankind... Petros-T’nkər pondered the betterment of humanity anew [the contrastive irony seems intentional in the style of the Armenian text— JRR] and labored every day... For his newly-invented speech [*noragiwt barbařoyñ*] he constructed an alphabet primer [*aybbenaran*], a grammar, and a pocket [*arjėrn*] dictionary, which he caused to be printed, and which he presented as gifts to visitors to his home. He named the language [*lezu*] Sahleray, which means worldwide language [*hamašxarhayin lezu*]. In this language he wrote poems and composed verses that his visitors [*yačaxordnerə*] read in French translation... but nobody except their author could read, grasp, and understand their original text. Again, in the special letters of his language Petros-T’nkər placed a plaque over the door to his house, upon which he caused to be engraved the word *Ayzeratand* [probably intended to be pronounced *Ayzeradant* in

⁵ See Oshagan 1984.

⁶ The Turkish honorific, from Persian *xwāja*.

⁷ The English traveler William John Hamilton, in a narrative of 1842, states, “it is impossible to feel respect for men who had recourse to the vilest intrigues, in order to procure the banishment of their Catholic countrymen from Constantinople in 1829 and 1830” (Ghazarian 1997, p. 320). Perhaps the trauma of this event of internecine viciousness contributed to T’nkər’s dislike in later life of sectarianism and nationalism.

⁸ Thus the modern Turkish spelling; in the Ottoman period it was rendered into European tongues as Boudja or the like.

accordance with the orthography of Western Armenian— JRR], which meant Temple of Wisdom [*tačar imastut'ean*]. Inside the Ayzeratand was a library which was greatly adorned by books on linguistics... Petros-T'nkər never ate any food such as meat, fish, or the like... although he held these strange convictions, Petros-T'nkər won the affections of all his acquaintances by reason of his modest and noble demeanor and entrancing conversation [*iwr pargešt ew azniw varmunk'ovn ew hrapurič' xōsac'ut'eamb*]. For Petros-T'nkər was endowed with the ability to speak fluently all the languages he knew. By the final days of his life, that is to say, after having lived his life, one evening Petros-T'nkər, who had become weakened to an extreme degree, went to a grave he had long ago dug and made ready in the middle of his temple, there to go to repose in a conscious death [*gītakic' mahuamb gnac' hangč'elu*]. The following day when his customary visitors arrived they discovered him dead in that grave.” He died in 1881.⁹

Petros' brother Astuacatur (or Asatur, for short) studied at the Mekhitarist academy in Trieste; his brother Anton, a pillar of the Armenian Catholic community, in 1831 read out the *ferman*, or imperial decree, to the assembled *amiras* (Armenian aristocrats) and lay community concerning the construction of the Church of the Holy Savior (*Surb P'rkic'*). Anton had two children, who in turn reared children of their own— one, Karapet, was a writer who took the *nom de plume* Tigran *Erkat'* [“Tigran the (man of) Iron”]. Scores of other sons and daughters of this famed *amira* clan are recorded through the 19th century and into the 20th: Dr. Raffi Tingir, a graduate of Robert College (now Boğazıcı), Istanbul, is a prominent physician on Long Island, New York, with a daughter studying in college here in Boston as I write. The American-Armenian writer William Saroyan was a friend of the Tingirs, and appended to this study is a group portrait of the great master and the family in their Istanbul home, half a century ago.

And what of the ellipses in Fr. Pōlosean's citation of Ayvazean's book? Heeding the stern Victorian admonition to verify one's references, I sought and found a photocopy of the rare volume in the Widener stacks. Opening it to the chapter quoted, I now restore the portions omitted in the Vienna book. We find there a fuller, more interesting, and perhaps more troubling narrative in which delicate subjects are alluded to and a richer emotional portrait of the brilliant and eccentric linguist is attempted. I translate Ayvazean's biographical entry now in full. I have not altered its style.

“In 1881 the Smyrna newspaper *Aršaloyis* [“The Dawn”]¹⁰ reported the grievous tidings of the decease of a philosopher of all our nation; then the local national papers echoed the same sad news. I had already in my ‘Letter’ to the people in the *Utegrut'iwnk'* [“Itineraries”] of 1878 offered a little taste, a brief notice; but the life and the circumstances of the passing of the deceased— which a friend from Smyrna had relayed to me— provoke such interest that I consider it indispensable today to expand upon his ideas and the manner of his life, so that it may be possible for readers to make their own judgments about what manner of eccentric exceptions human life encompasses.

“Petros-T'nkər, who was once a member of the Vienna Mekhitarist clergy, was a scion of one of the most notable and honored Armenian Catholic families of the capital— the T'nkərean clan.

“He began his schooling in Constantinople and then completed his education at the Vienna Mekhitarist seminary and at another school of higher learning.

“Petros-T'nkər was deeply learned in various branches of knowledge, and one might also say he was a considerable linguist; for in addition to a good knowledge of Armenian, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Italian, English, and French, he was familiar with the Sanskrit language, which according to the new scientific dogma is singled out as the root of languages.

“Petros-T'nkər, by reason of some unfortunate circumstances at the time of his adolescence, shunned human society. With unshakable conviction he was ever unable to believe that the calling of being a member of the human race could ever forgive him for diverging from the path of benevolence and turning to evil.

“These noble sentiments became so elementary to his heart that he shunned all manner of evil. The hatred of evil things guided him to misanthropy, and it is just because of this that civil life became unbearable to him.

⁹ Pōlosean 1951, pp. 36-38.

¹⁰ That is, *Aršaloyis Araratean*, “The Ararat Dawn”, founded 1840. *Arewelian Mamul*, “The Eastern Press”, was the other major Armenian newspaper of the city. There were numerous Smyrniote Armenian other periodicals.

“Belonging to a wealthy clan facilitated his disposition to lead a solitary life; and his bachelorhood further strengthened that inclination in him.

“For over forty years Petros-T‘nkər resided in the village of Buca near Smyrna. Thanks to financial assistance sent by his family he purchased, a few years before his death, a beautiful hill in the place near Buca called [in Greek] *Aspra Khōmata*, that is ‘White Lands’, on whose summit he caused to be built a square stone house, that one might more appropriately call a small castle.

“This building was so firm and solid that even the most ferocious brigands despaired of (pillaging) it.

“It was in this house that Petros-T‘nkər, the recluse from the human race and hater of human society, pondered the betterment of humanity and worked from dawn to dusk.

“He supposed thus: the diversity of religions and languages subjected mankind, which is of a single origin [*hamaseř*], to division. And he believed that together with a composite [*miajoyl*] religion a universal single language [*tiezerakan miōrinak lezu*] would integrate the nations with each other and would even put a stop to all individual strife, all fighting and disputation. And thereby general peace and concord would follow.

“For a long time he worked at contriving this sort of worldwide [*hamāšxarhayin*] language. He imagined that this language would be accepted with love and without resistance by all nations.

“The language’s structure being of no lesser interest, our abovementioned friend, who had the honor to meet the deceased, related to us that this newly-invented tongue, being comprised of the various sounds of several languages but especially of Sanskrit, had letters that were an amalgam shaped of the parts of various characters. Since it was not yet accepted and used by any nation it could not yet, generally speaking, be termed a language.

“He named the language Sahleray, which means ‘worldwide language’. In this language he wrote poems and composed verses that his visitors read in French translation and found sufficiently interesting. For his newly invented speech he constructed an alphabet primer, a grammar, and a pocket [*arjeřn*, “handy”] dictionary, which he caused to be printed, and which he presented as gifts to visitors to his home.

“But nobody except their author could read, grasp, and understand their original text.

“Again, in the special letters of his language Petros-T‘nkər placed a plaque over the door to his house, upon which he caused to be engraved the word *Ayzeratand*, which meant Temple of Wisdom. Inside the Ayzeratand was a library that was greatly adorned by books on linguistics. And on the tables one found to one side sponges, mineral samples, and various other objects, all covered in dust.

“The haphazard state of these objects made it plain to the visitor that the Ayzeratand had never benefited from the care of a woman.

“It is a point worthy of attention that when we say woman here we understand not only a spouse— for Petros-T‘nkər, aside from never marrying, so detested the fairer sex that he never suffered a member of it to cross the threshold of the Ayzeratand.¹¹ And if without his knowledge a matron or maiden slipped in by stealth, he would instantly show them the door, no matter who the lady in question might be.

“Petros-T‘nkər never ate any food such as meat, fish, or the like, but sustained himself solely on vegetables, milk, and eggs. He considered carnivorousness the province of beasts, and consequently considered men who ate meat little better than scavenging animals.

¹¹ Ayvazean inserts here the following footnote (p. 95 n. 1): “It is said that Petros-T‘nkər had a powerful reason for that hatred of his. That feeling can perhaps be considered pardonable for him when one considers that others in the same circumstance have even resorted to suicide, as a young Armenian of genius did in early 1881 at Yeni-Kapu.” This seems to be most likely a delicate reference— astonishing still for its candor, given the time and place— to the forbidden topic of homosexuality. But gay people often have women friends; so it is just as likely that Bedros was a person of no realized predilection at all, a recluse with a horror of the flesh, somewhat like the visionary American writer of fantastic and horror fiction H.P. Lovecraft (d. 1937), also a lover of arcane scripts and tongues, who detested bodily contact and animal food in equal measure.

“In this respect his opinions were very like those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with the difference that Petros-T‘nkār put the latter’s thoughts into practice upon himself. But the remarkable thing is that Petros-T‘nkār carried his hatred of meat to fanatical extremes— he never wore leather shoes, only elastic rubber ones. For he maintained that wearing footwear of leather comes in the wake of the murder of animals and is therefore contrary to natural law [*bnakan ḡrinac*].

“He saw to his own work, cleaning, and shopping, and felt no need of a staff of servants.

“Although he held these strange convictions, Petros-T‘nkār won the affections of all his acquaintances by reason of his modest and noble demeanor and entrancing conversation. For Petros-T‘nkār was endowed with the ability to speak fluently all the languages he knew. By the final days of his life, that is to say, after having lived his life, one evening Petros-T‘nkār, who had become weakened to an extreme degree, went to a grave he had long ago dug and made ready in the middle of his temple and lay down to rest in conscious death after enjoying over sixty winters, much as once St. John the Evangelist went to his rest in a grave he himself had made.

“On the following day, when his customary visitors arrived, they found him dead in that grave.

“So that is how Petros-T‘nkār met his end, he whose breadth of knowledge was comprehensive; his vision, broad; and whose life, albeit outside the normal round, can be an occasion for the pondering of contemplative souls...

“Go, then, o weary and desolate soul, who wast born of poesy, rocked by the lullaby of linguistics, who lived by philosophy and who died in spiritual converse [*hogexōsut‘eamb*].

“Go to that place where all is poetry, all is soul, where there is no Babel of the tongue, where there is no international frontier, where there is no issue of the pulpit, where there is no political party, where there is no Hereafter and no Here...

“There the issue of language has been resolved, and the inhabitants are of the same speech...

“There, there is no party, no faction, there is a single flock and but one shepherd...”¹²

And with that prolix, elegiac evocation of a Heaven in which the Greek, Armenian, and Turk speak the same language, the Christian, Jew, and Muslim worship at the same altar, and social democrats and revolutionaries are in accord, the window onto the past (and into the Otherworld) closes. There, there, there... The repetition of that word in the elegy reminded me of the lament over the death of a friend penned by another Bedros, a poet and contemporary from Constantinople who died at the tender age of twenty, ten years before the recluse of Smyrna lay down to his eternal rest in the Temple of Wisdom. This is Bedros Tourian (Petros Durean), the creator of the modern Western Armenian poetic language. In the final stanzas of “Laments” (*Hececmonk*‘, 1871), addressed to a dead classmate, Tourian wonders:¹³

Are you happy there or sad?
Send me tidings on an angel’s wing.
Ah! This world is ever weary...
This world is a mother of great pain.

O, if the shade of a tree there
May be found, and a rill besides,
If imperishable love is there,
If there are freedoms there, free airs...

O, I toss in the filthy raiment
Of my soul, my whole life until today:
I clothe myself in earth, the mourning soil...

¹² Ayvazean 1893, II, pp. 91-97.

¹³ See Russell 2005, p. 294 (Armenian text, p. 292). The poet’s work was very widely known; and in the same year, 1893, that Ayvazean published his three volumes of biographical sketches, Barset E. Ēk‘sērčean (Parsegh Ekserjjan) published at Constantinople the volume Petros Durean, *Talk‘ ew t‘atregut‘iwnk*‘ [“Poems and plays”], with both the poem (pp. 44-46) and the graveside eulogy (*dambanakan*) to the poet’s friend, Vardan Lut‘fean (pp. 254-256).

Ah, Vartan, are the things we longed for there?...

The poet's work was very widely known: the despairing, brilliant, lyrical boy cut down by consumption in his twentieth year became an instant Romantic hero. And in the same year, 1893, that Ayvazean published his three volumes of biographical sketches, including that of Petros T'nkər, Barset E. Ēk'sērčean (Parsegh Ekserjian) published at Constantinople the volume Petros Durean, *Taḥ' ew t'atregut'iwnk'* ["Poems and plays"], with both the memorial poem quoted (pp. 44-46) and the graveside eulogy (*dambanakan*) to the poet's friend, Vardan Lut'fean (pp. 254-256). So one thinks it very likely that the words of the young Armenian poet, whose friend predeceased him by but a few months, echo in Ayvazean's closing lines.

But the lyrical author of the necrology of the Smyrnaic linguist (and poet, too, though the verses have not come down to us) Bedros still divulges only one word of Sahleray. And we do not even know yet how the name was to be pronounced, for Oshagan evidently believed its final -y to be silent, as in the modern pronunciation of all Armenian polysyllabic words, since he transliterates it as Sahlera, but the name, as we shall see, was to be pronounced Sehlerai. Only one word is breathed out loud: *Ayzeratand*. Temple of Wisdom, But what associations the name of the house of the man standing alone on the hill summons to mind!

2. THE TEMPLE OF WISDOM AND THE FREEMASONS.

Ayzeratand, "Temple of Wisdom". Although many erudite men at one time or another might in an excess of self-esteem give their homes some such grand name, the best-known edifice with the title, *Weisheitstempel* in German, belongs to a famous work of fiction. That is, to a literary invention in music. That is, to an opera— to the very greatest opera, the very last work, the most luminous and mysterious, of the greatest composer who ever lived in all history: *Die Zauberflöte*, "The Magic Flute", which Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart completed shortly before his death in 1791. The delightful libretto is the work of a fellow Freemason named Johann Emanuel Schikaneder. Mozart himself belonged to the Masonic lodge *Zur gekrönten Hoffnung*, "Crowned Hope";¹⁴ and the opera, an allegorical attack in the spirit of the Enlightenment on oppression by tyranny and on the obscurantism of dogmatic religion, is steeped in Masonic allegory and symbolism. The opera and its Temple of Wisdom are so proudly Masonic that the inevitable conspiracy theorists have suggested, wrongly, that the composer betrayed secrets and hastened his own death thereby. Echoes, perhaps, of the later Morgan Affair in the young American republic...

Mozart's lodge met at Vienna, where the very young Petros T'nkər was to come as an acolyte a scant two decades later— and, as we have seen, to return as a harassed and disillusioned adult, abandoning the established Church and dedicating himself to a private vision of service to humanity involving a utopian, cosmopolitan linguistic (and musical!) project and the erection of an edifice of learning with a tomb at its center. Petros T'nkər's biographer suggests this remarkable eccentric was driven by a particular predilection too dreadful overtly to name; but he chose to deal with his inner demon, to turn it to a good purpose, in a manner strikingly consonant with the arts, philosophy, and imagination of the city of Mozart, the city of his youth, the Vienna that was still a crown of hope for the brotherhood of man, the city whose orchestral music and opera were attuned to the divine harmonies of the *Erklärung*, the Enlightenment.

Freemasonry is an international fraternity (it does not, indeed, admit the fairer sex, and in this regard the Ayzeratand followed suit) dedicated to the spiritual rebirth, transformation, and growth of the individual human being. This process of personal alchemy begins with a series of dramatic initiatory rites in Lodge combining vivid experiences enacted through a drama with the intensive and complex study of an all-embracing cosmological, moral, and mythopoetic system. The latter is expressed in the symbols of the craft of the builder and geometer, and in a passion play based upon the story, dimensions, and features of the Temple at Jerusalem ordained by the archetypal sage, King Solomon and built by his Phoenician architect, the widow's son Hiram Abiff of Tyre. Masonry is inherently cosmopolitan, secular, and democratic (if not feminist) in its world outlook (and thereby sympathetic to the concept and ideal of a universal language)— for it recognizes within its temples no distinction of religion, nationality, or social class. Brethren (as the members of the Craft are known) meet, work, and part on the level of equality, and strive to develop their moral character through fraternal effort and charity. The leveler of men is death: the symbolism of the tomb and of the initiate's *conscious death* is figuratively and literally at the center of every Masonic temple— much as was the grave of Petros T'nkər in the stone Ayzeratand on its hill outside Smyrna. Through the 18th and 19th centuries Masons such as George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette, Simon Bolivar, Jose Rizal, and many others played leading roles in the revolutions in America, France, and other countries. Freemasonry was often regarded by the old order and the Catholic Church in particular as a threat and was obliged to operate in

¹⁴ See Landon 1982, where a painting of Mozart in his mother Lodge at work is reproduced, and a recently discovered list of its Brethren is provided.

conditions of secrecy. In order to protect the Craft from its enemies and to preserve its mysteries pristine, Masons still employ coded language and written ciphers.

The hero of *The Magic Flute* is a brave youth, Tamino, who through various ordeals must win his beloved soul-mate, Pamina: their names are fanciful variants of the Persian Tahmina, known from epic literature; and the libretto, itself a pastiche of previous orientalizing operas, reminds one strongly of the Hellenistic romances set in the East, some of which allegorize the rites of the mystery religions. One of these is Mithraism, with its roots in Armenia, from which elements of Freemasonry probably descend.¹⁵ *Die Zauberflöte* combines Egyptian motifs with Persian ones, since both those ancient civilizations were believed to have contributed the universal *prisca theologia* that Pythagoras and Plato propounded to the world, fusing the wisdom of the East with the philosophy of the West. The priest of the *Weisheitstempel*, Sarastro, is the Iranian Zarathustra; but in an aria he invokes the Egyptian divine pair, Isis and Osiris. The *Weisheitstempel* in the original stage set for the opera at Vienna was flanked by pyramids;¹⁶ and the Masonic symbol of the pyramid surmounted by the all-seeing eye of God on the great seal of the United States is obviously at once a Pythagorean tetractys, an Egyptian edifice, and an archetypally ancient Temple of Wisdom. Egypt and its strange written characters, which were regarded as a primordial philosophical language, had been a source of fascination since the Renaissance and the somewhat fanciful writings of Athanasius Kircher; and the new discoveries of Egyptian antiquities in the Napoleonic era provoked a kind of aegyptomania in European and American art and fashion. So it is not surprising that when the New York Mason Robert Folger, born 1803, set out to invent a ritual cipher in 1826— a few months after his raising in the Third Degree as a Master Mason and just a year before Jean-François Champollion published his sensational decipherment of the ancient Egyptian script— it was made to resemble Egyptian. The Folger Manuscript abounds in symbols; and at the center of page 21 stands the *Weisheitstempel*, the stone Pyramid (Plates 1-3).¹⁷ Many secret societies sprang up in imitation or emulation of the Masons, and they, too, created codes to protect their teachings and their members from eavesdroppers and persecutors: the mid-18th-century German fraternity of Oculists, for instance, were a guild of ophthalmologists who framed their esoteric teachings in the symbolic system of their own craft— instead of swords, cataract needles; and instead of heraldic lions, cats (who see well in the dark). Their code, in the Copiale manuscript, was deciphered in 2011 by a team using new computer techniques.¹⁸

Freemasonry has existed in Smyrna since the 18th century, and endures in modern Izmir. It is not known whether Petros T'ngor was a Mason, whether Mozart's opera inspired him at Vienna or in a Lodge, or whether he simply came up with the Ayzeratand, its odd restrictions, its cabinet of natural curiosities, and its central tomb, all on his own. But the most prominent Armenian intellectuals of Constantinople and Smyrna in his day were Masons; and Armenians had been pioneers in the spread of Freemasonry to the East. The first Grand Lodge of England sealed its charter in 1717; yet already by 1762, we find an Armenian named Dr. Manass appointed one of four Masters of Lodges in the Near East, Aleppo, and Persia by the Grand Lodge at London. Armenians saw the power and influence of colonial Britain as a kind of protection, and this attracted many at first to join Lodges under London's jurisdiction. But in the 19th century Armenians in the Ottoman Empire with revolutionary, liberationist sentiments tended to prefer affiliation with the rival Masonic authority, the Grand Orient of France, both because of its more overt association with liberal and radical ideas and individuals, and in view of Britain's increasingly troublesome reputation of siding with Turkish Muslims against Levantine Christians. Some seemed to maintain affiliations with both jurisdictions, however. At Smyrna in the 1860's, the prominent writer and public figure Matt'eos Mamurian, mentioned above, belonged to the Anglo-Armenian Tigran lodge, which had also Greeks, Turks, and Jews among its Brethren. (One recalls here the tantalizing name Petros T'nkər took for himself in Sehlerai, *Tg(h)ransar*, though it supposedly has nothing to do with Tigran, the Armenian king. But more on that anon.)

On 7 May 1866 the first Lodge working exclusively in Armenian was inaugurated at 21 Yazıcı street, Kule Kapu district, Constantinople: *Sēr* ("Love") was chartered by the Grand Orient of France, and Mamurian became one of its most active members. The Lodge met at seven PM on the first and third Sunday of each month at its *tačar* (i.e., temple!). Work opened with a hymn heavily flavored by the *grabar* (Classical Armenian) forms generally encountered in the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church: *I mēj mt'ut'ean darer xarxap'ac./ Aysōr zart'ec'ank' ew zloyš gtank'./ Erkiwlacut'eamb Ōt'eakə mtac./ Zīrar p'ntrēc'ink', zīrar mek' gtank'./ Zays šēm'ə koxac— t'ōt'ōč' ok' mezmē/ Berē kanxakal mtk'er u xohēr:/ Hamerašxut'ean t'ōt'zšunč' c'anē.../ Azat hogu tēr, zloyšə p'ntrē./ Zi mek' Tīezerk'i bari etbark' emk' "Having groped for centuries in darkness./ Today we awoke and found the light./ Entering the Lodge in awe/ We sought and found each other./ Crossing this threshold let no one of us/ Bring*

¹⁵ See Russell 1989 and 1995.

¹⁶ See Nettl 1957, pp. 89-91.

¹⁷ See Morris 1992; on aegyptomania, Erwin 1980; on Champollion, Robinson 2012. On the use of cryptograms in Armenia, including a "hetaerogram" used by large sodalities within Armenian society, see Russell 2010.

¹⁸ See Schachtman 2012.

thoughts and opinions previously held./ Let him sow spirit of concord.../ Master of a free spirit, seek the light,/ For we are the good brothers of the Universe.”

Following the Ritual governed by the *gerapatiw varpet* (Worshipful Master), the Brethren of *Sēr* Lodge repaired to a standard *hamkeroyt* (Collation, the meal after the meeting, or Communication), with toasts and convivial fellowship. The printed notice of a Communication of Mar. 1867, which included the conferring of the *A astičan* (1st Degree), has at its head the letters *I.P.M.Č.T.*, which I recognized with pleasure as the abbreviation of a formula I could reconstruct in *grabar* containing some familiar terms: *I p’arš meci čartarapeti tiezerac* “To the glory of the Great Architect of the Universe”. Brethren were entertained at a meeting of the Lodge in February 1867 with a performance of songs by none other than *elbayr Mozart*, “Bro. Mozart” (who, of course, had written specifically Masonic music as well as “profane” music imbued with the Masonic spirit). Most of the Brethren were intellectuals who came from well-to-do families, so the meeting often featured a learned lecture: in June 1866 Bro. Mamurian gave an impassioned oration on the life and recent death in Siberian exile of the Eastern Armenian revolutionary activist Mik’ayēl Nalbandian (1829-1866), declaiming the latter’s famous poem *Erg azatut’ean*, “Song of Freedom”.¹⁹ The young poet Bedros Tourian also wrote of Nalbandian’s martyrdom in distant Russia; and freedom, *azatut’iwn*, was a watchword and slogan of Ottoman Armenian Masonry. (Bro. Garibaldi and the Carbonari were front-page news in those years; and one recalls that the Armenian national anthem, *Mer Hayrenik* [“Our Fatherland”], was originally a poem about the Italian liberation struggle against Austrian and Papal tyranny.) We have seen that Petros T’nkār did a lot of traveling; and this seems to have been typical of members of *Sēr* Lodge, some of whom lived for most of the year at Paris, Rome, Manchester, London, and Smyrna— all places where Western Armenians studied or did business. The Lodge must have been, even with its work in Armenian, a gathering place of impressive polyglots, even if T’nkār, with his Sanskrit, would have stood out among them.

In his illuminating series of articles on *Sēr* Lodge published in 1937 Rūbēn Berbērean seeks to place the growth of Freemasonry among Armenians in the political context of the time. By the mid-1860s, he argues, the hopes for reform and national liberation excited by the Constitution (*Sahmanadrut’iwn*) had been dashed. The community was rent by fractious and corrupt behavior: “In the ’60s there were in Armenian life not only purely Armenian national ideological currents, but also moral and philosophical ones embracing all humanity [*hamamardkayin*]. The age is typified by the attempt by the Turkish Armenian intellectual strata, for a brief time, to found and strengthen the structure of ‘the benefit of the nation’ and ‘national unity’ by fusing it with sentiments of ‘universal brotherhood’ and ‘the harmony of mankind.’”²⁰ Though in his booklet describing Sehlerai, Petros T’nkār uses Armenian script constantly to explain the phonology of his language, the manual itself is in French and its precursor was in Greek: we do not know what view he took of Armenian communal and national activism. And although Masonry is tailor-made for a man of T’nkār’s humanist and universalist convictions, it is somewhat difficult to imagine the ascetic denizen of the Ayzeratand as a gregarious Lodge Brother firing glasses of strong drink at Collation, though he did have constant friends— and even, perhaps, followers. However Masonry has always had room for eccentric thinkers whose life trajectory turns to late isolation; and Berbērean cites the example of a member of *Sēr* Lodge whose linguistic interests, even, are akin to those of T’nkār. Bro. Serovbē T’agworean (Takvorian) left Constantinople and settled in Paris, where, in Berbērean’s words, he “withdrew into his shell” (*k’ašuec’ ir pateanin mēj*). There, in 1881 (the year of T’nkār’s death), he published an *Essai d’un système de linguistique comprenant l’interprétation des racines par les lettres de l’alphabet, appliquée a la langue Arménienne*.

3. MERCURIANS.

In his controversial recent monograph on modern Jewish history, the Slavicist Prof. Yuri Slezkine proposes a division of human societies into types he calls Apollonians and Mercurians, after telling characteristics of the ancient gods: the Apollonians are rooted in land, hierarchy, honor, and military service; while Mercurians live by traveling, trading, and exchanging information. Jews, some Armenians, Overseas Chinese, some Roma, and other like cosmopolitan groups comprise the latter, global fraternity; while the traditional, landed aristocracies of Germany, England, Russia, etc. exemplify the former. It is as much in the interests of Mercurians— who are in many ways trans-national, and represent the common human denominator in the most positive sense— to knit the world together with one language, legal system, and currency as it is vital to the status of Apollonians— whose essence is parochial and reactionary— for these things to be divided among nation-states. The T’nkārean clan and the other families of the Armenian *amira*-nobility of the Ottoman Empire were Mercurians *par excellence*: they dominated finance but were barred from the military, they slipped effortlessly from one language into another, and they traveled ceaselessly. In Smyrna, one might add to the Mercurian roster the “Levantines”, those huge, wealthy

¹⁹ See text in Simonean 1965, p. 61.

²⁰ Berbērean 1937, part 1, pp. 74-75.

trader-clans of mixed Western European and Eastern Mediterranean Christian lineage who resided in garden-wreathed palaces in Smyrnaic suburbs like Bournabat, T'nkər's Buca, and even a district called Paradise.

Idealistic visionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries created hundreds of invented languages,²¹ but only two have survived, and Jews made both. The first, perhaps more a resurrection than a creation *ex nihilo*, is Modern Hebrew. Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1858-1922), who grew up in the Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire, read in Russian translation George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda*, in which a young English aristocrat discovers he is a Jew, but instead of burying his shameful secret comes out of the closet, as it were, and determines to revive Hebrew and live in the Land of Israel. Following the pogroms of 1881, the year of T'nkər's death, Ben Yehuda followed the example of his fictional hero and emigrated from Russia to Jerusalem, seeking to erase his Mercurian status by reclaiming his ancestral homeland. (Mercurian Armenians felt the similar pull of *Yergirə*, "The Land", though many, like Bedros Tourian, imagined its fallen glories but never pulled up stakes and went.) The second made-up tongue is Esperanto, meaning literally "one who hopes". Its inventor, Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917), a Jewish oculist from Bialystok, witnessed the same anti-Semitism as his contemporary Ben Yehuda. Though sympathetic to Zionism, he elected to remain in Europe, hoping with his *internacia lingvo* to promote world peace through mutual understanding. In 1887 he published at Warsaw in Russian his booklet outlining the rules and lexicon of his new language. Although Esperanto was the creation of Jews, it was Armenians who propagated it in the Caucasus: In Tiflis, Hayk Artem'evich Astvatsatriants (Astuacatreanc') from 15 March 1910 published and edited the journal *Kaŭkaza Esperantisto* ("The Caucasian Esperantist"), which featured articles in Esperanto, Russian, Armenian, and Georgian on art and music, *belles lettres*, and the theater, and provided also lessons in Esperanto and a review of the press. At Baku from 1911, Abel Ivanovich Ter-Bagdasarian (Tēr-Bağdasarean) published, and Yakov Kalustovich Khodzhamir (Xořamir) edited, the commercial and humor paper *Nerkarar* (Arm., "The House Painter") in Esperanto, Russian, and Armenian. And at Constantinople, as we shall see presently, Greeks were at the forefront of the Esperanto movement.²²

These trends in cosmopolitan, global thinking reached the Islamic world mainly through Mercurian, Christian communities and individuals. It is true that in the 16th century a hypothetical faith or abstract religious philosophy called *Dīn-e Elāhī*— "Divine Religion" in Persian— was created by intellectuals of the different religions that flourished at the cosmopolitan court of the Mughal emperor Akbar. It united the teachings of these diverse confessions— Hindu, Muslim, Zoroastrian. And the Parsi Zoroastrian author of the *Desātīr* ("Instructions"), a mystical treatise in the spirit of the *Dīn-e Elāhī*, composed his work in a hybrid language. There is another, likewise Persian-based invented language employed to convey Sufi mysteries to initiates, Balaibalan.²³ And in the early decades of the 20th century the leader of the Baha'i faith championed the study and use of Esperanto in Iran. However it would seem that Sehlerai is the only invented language intended specifically for all nations and faiths that was invented in the Near East by a native of a Near Eastern nation, a Mercurian, an Armenian, Petros T'nkər.

4. AN INTERNET DETECTIVE STORY.

Unsatisfied by one word of the invented language, I pursued my search for Sehlerai and turned to an Italian dictionary of imaginary languages, and found a brief reference. Albani and Buonarroti 1994, p. 371 s.v. *Sehlerai*, report that the inventor of Seh-lerai published at Smyrna in 1864 under the pseudonym Tghransar a description of his language. They provide a sample sentence with translation: *Rum shai yran bes lerai vom, shaiz il le sam lerai iun sim, mim serai vam shaiz il le som* "Nel mondo sarà preferita una lingua scientifica unica a numerose lingue con una scienza unica" (or, in the Esperanto translation of Stamatiadis, *En la mondo estas prefere por la scienco unu sola lingvo/ Ol multinombraj lingvoj kaj plej malgranda scienco.*) A history of international languages in Esperanto offers a brief notice: *La libro de Tghransar portis la nomon "Alphabetarion Ansailanzar Sahlerai" kaj estis eldonita en Smyrna. La eldonjaro de la libro ne estas konata, sed lau la havataj informoj ĝi estis publikigita en ĉiu okazo ne pli malfrue ol ĉe la fino de la XVIII jarcento.* ("Tghransar's book bore the name *Alphabetarion Ansailanzar Sahlerai* and was published at Smyrna. The date of publication of the book is not known, but according to the information we possess it was published at any event no later than the end of the 18th century." [Tr. by JRR])²⁴ But that would place the invention of the language at or before the date of Bedros' birth; and this erroneous statement seems to be the source of a still more inaccurate assertion by the linguist Mario Pei— that Sehlerai (as he calls it) was invented around 1800 but published in 1921.²⁵ For the latter date is erroneous as well. 1921 is the date of an abridged translation of T'nkər's work into Esperanto, with facing text in Greek, published in two consecutive issues of the

²¹ Okrent 2010 provides a list of some five hundred, though Sehlerai is not among them.

²² See Vlasov 2011, pp. 57-58 and 58 n. 1.

²³ See Bausani 1954.

²⁴ Drezen 1967, p. 61.

²⁵ Pei 1968, p. 147.

journal *Bizantio* at Constantinople by its editor, the Greek physician and author of the standard Greek-Esperanto dictionary, Anakreōn Stamatiadēs (Stamatiadis in general transliteration).²⁶ I did not understand that Stamatiadis was a person: my reference suggested this was the title of a journal.

I wrote to the E-mail address of Dr. Arika Okrent, a professional linguist and author of a very entertaining book on invented languages already noted here, hoping she might have a lead. She promptly replied, apparently much amused and approving of my pleasantly lunatic quest. She had not heard of Sehlerai, but suggested I contact her learned friend Ms. Olga Kerziouk, Esperanto librarian of the British Library, to whom I wrote at once. Ms. Kerziouk answered straightaway, explaining that Stamatiadis was a person. And she located his journal, *Bizantio*, at a British Esperanto library. But my E-mail to its curator somewhere in the English countryside languished without response for some time. Olga, anxious that my work not be delayed in the interim, kindly located another set of *Bizantio* in the Planned Languages (this is another designation of “invented” languages) collection of the Austrian National Library at Vienna; and Dr. Bernhard Tuidar and the rest of their helpful staff immediately sent me scans of both articles. They are reproduced here, with my translation of Dr. Stamatiadis’ introductory essay. They allude to a publication by T’nkər in Greek, which has not survived. In the meantime, Prof. Johann Strauss, a historian of Ottoman Turkey at the University of Strasbourg, was intrigued by the question and sent me a reference to a biographical note on T’nkər and to a documentary history of the Ottoman Armenians of the 19th century by the contemporary Istanbul Armenian savant Pars Tuğlacı. Both are cited in this study.²⁷ At my request, my colleague Prof. Taner Akçam of Tufts University, the eminent historian of the Armenian Genocide, took time from preparing for yet another lecture tour and contacted his old friend Osman Köker, founder and editor in chief of *Birzamanlar Yayıncılık* (“Once Upon A Time Publishers”) at Istanbul, who instantly sent me the photograph reproduced here of the place where Petros T’nkər had lived. Both these men have, at enormous personal cost, including prison and torture, dedicated their lives to studying the record of Armenian life and death in Ottoman Turkey. My peregrinations on the Internet have involved quiet heroes of collegiality and scholarship, and real life, flesh and blood heroes of politics too. The speed of their collegial aid vied with the lightning rapidity of electronic communication.

But the book by T’nkər himself, printed at Smyrna in 1864,²⁸ still eluded me. Neither the British Library nor the Library of Congress nor the Bibliothèque Nationale de France possessed a copy; and it proved well-nigh impossible to contact the libraries of the two Mekhitarist monasteries at Venice and Vienna, both of which, numerous correspondents warned me, and often with a hint of bitterness, rarely respond in a timely manner, if at all, to requests for research material. (Perhaps T’nkər’s papers are hiding in the Mechitharistengasse or on the isle of St. Lazzaro.) But my colleague and friend Prof. Valentina Calzolari of the University of Geneva recommended I ask Dr. Raymond Kévorkian, director of the AGBU Nubarian Library at Paris and an eminent Armenian historian, whether that collection might have the volume. And indeed, a copy of Tgransar’s manual, perhaps the only one in existence, had been given in 1928 by an Armenian from Istanbul to Aram Andonian, the library’s first director and author of *Mec oçirə* [“The Great Crime”], one of the first histories of the Armenian Genocide. To my delight and astonishment, Dr. Kévorkian instantly provided a miraculous scan of the precious little book by E-mail; and you now hold it in your hands. The booklet deals with the writing system of Sehlerai and contains mainly the names of letters, diacritical marks, and numbers, with the single sentence quoted by the Italian authors of the encyclopedia noted above; the grammar and dictionary T’nkər compiled have not yet come to light. But that is a lot better than nothing. And if one seeks the holy grail of the inventors of planned languages— the state of human fraternity and mutual assistance across religious confessions and national frontiers— one place it is surely to be found is on the electronic strands of the worldwide web, where collegial scholars, quiet heroes of the mind, weave the magical brocade of learning. And one can travel there, unlike the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, without leaving one’s front door.

5. ANS HAİLĀNZAR.

²⁶ See Tg(h)ransar 1921, reproduced at the end of this study. According to Vikipedio, Stamatiadis was born at Florence in 1868 at Florence and died in 1964. He worked as a physician on Samos, was exiled in 1913, and settled in Athens. He published *Bizantio* from July 1921 to July 1924, and was active in Greek Esperanto associations and publications. His first book of many on Esperanto, *Hē diethnes boēthetikē glōssa* (Greek, “The international auxiliary language”) was published at Samos in 1912.

²⁷ Seropyan 1999, vol. 2, p. 624; and Tuğlacı 2004.

²⁸ For the year 1864 there is but this mention of the T’nkorean clan recorded by Tuğlacı 2004, Vol. 2, p. 227: *8 Eylül 1864: Tıngırzade Ohannes Efendi’nin Der saadet Maliye Nezareti muavinliğine atanmasına irade buyuruldu* “8 September 1864: Mr. Yovhannēs T’nkər at Constantinople was appointed to the post of assistant at the Ministry of Finance.” Though the declaration is less than earthshattering, it illustrates well the special privilege of *sarrağ* enjoyed by the Armenian *amiras*.

So here, finally, is the Book, *Ans Hailanzar ou Alpha-Gnomonic de Seh-lerai: ouvrage*, by Tghransar, Petros T'nkār. Its probably lost Greek precursor lay before Dr. Stamatiadis, who published in *Bizantio* on 30 Sept. 1921 these reflections on it, which I translate from the Esperanto:

“For a long time people have not ceased to invent artificial languages as international ones. For this purpose they have from time to time proposed various projects, which belong to three different systems.

“According to the first, the inventor proposed languages *a priori*, made without reference to languages already existent, such as those of Descartes (1629), Leibniz (1716), the Solresol of Sudre (1817), the Spokil of Dr. Nicholas (1900), etc.

“According to the second type, they took into consideration the already existing languages, and, principally, the European ones: of this kind were those of Faiguet (1765), Schipfer (1839), Zamenhof (Esperanto, published in the year 1887), and others. Finally, according to the third system, the projects are based upon both principles of the abovementioned schemes: of this kind were the languages of Von Grimm (1860), the Volapük of Pastor Schleyer (1880), the *langue bleue* of Bollach (1899), etc.

“A project appeared again in the Near East, in olden time, of an artificial language to be employed as an international one. This one was named Sehlerai (Σεχληροάη) and was published in the Greek language— at least the old undated booklet which we have before our eyes and introduce. It was published once, under the pseudonym Τγρρανσάρ (Tgransar), which means, according to the language, ‘intellectual movement’.

“What distinguishes this old artificial language is that it can be written in three different ways: from above to below, from left to right, and from right to left. Before becoming acquainted with its strange alphabet, we consider it good to present the literal translation from Greek of the preface by the inventor. It will be evident therefrom, that ‘There is nothing new under the sun,’ and that the same principles that inspired our Master of blessed memory [i.e., Ludwik Zamenhof, who died four years earlier, in 1917] to invent Esperanto likewise impelled Tgransar to create Sehlerai. [Tgransar’s preface from *Ans Hailanzar* follows, in Esperanto and Greek.]”

The second and final installment of Stamatiadis’ contribution in the next issue of *Bizantio*, 31 Oct. 1921, presents in Esperanto and Greek the consonants, vowels, diacritics (all named, which is not done in the French booklet of 1864), the reading lesson (all of one sentence, the ditty cited above), and the numbers, in Esperanto and Greek. Here is an annotated translation of Tghransar’s booklet, his ABC or *Ans hailanzar*, from the French. I have not put in the various invented characters, for which the reader is referred to the appended facsimile of the text. Where they are supposed to appear, I signify the space with hooked quotation marks, thus: < >.

“Tghransar, *Ans Hailanzar*, or, an explanation of the rules of the alphabet of Seh-lerai. A work. Smyrna, 1864.

“Preface. It is a most natural tendency the world over to observe objects of curiosity and in particular to satisfy the sense of sight. That is taken for granted.

“I now place before the eyes of the public a new object for observation, the product of a fantasy that is not fantasized— that is, the lovely form and basic model, the means of pronouncing the words of a new language called thus: Seh-lerai, that is, a Universal Language, composed and enriched not as other languages are, by some taking from others, but original, entirely pure, from a single unsullied idea, or, to put it better, without imitation but invented through the faculties of the spirit and the imagination in direct relationship with the Natural Law, put in order in this language. For it would be absurd and unseemly to make a universal project such as this compatible with a particular, non-universal language.

“It is already known that the most detestable calamity has sundered human hearts to espouse diverse preferences. There are nationalities in the world, and, by consequence, their languages and dialects. These are: the Chinese language and its relatives; the Chaldaean, and its; the Egyptian, and its; the Teutonic, and its; and finally, the Illyrian, and its.²⁹ Of all these remarkably original tongues, the Chinese is the most lively in sound; the Chaldaean, crude; the Egyptian, majestic; the Teutonic, elegant; and the Illyrian, energetic. It follows that there are many languages, with their innumerable dialects, of which French has a charming and very touching quality, while English tickles, and is in our day the most profitable. This being the case, perhaps only an imbecile would venture upon the error of such a new linguistic form: in effect one might say, What purpose is served by such superfluous

²⁹ By Chaldaean the author means “Semitic”; by Teutonic, “Germanic”; and by Illyrian, “Slavic”.

rubbish? Bah! It would have to end there, were it my purpose to add a new nation to the existing ones; and a new language, to the other tongues. Heaven forbid! To undertake any project, however excellent, that is detrimental to reason, is but a perversion of the same. Indeed, it would be the work of a hare-brained individual, for a good project is one that is forever and is advantageous.

“Whatever the case may be, if it seems to those attached to our real world, a world that is morally topsy-turvy, that the creation of a universal language is bizarre, unnecessary, and, on the whole, a lot of garbage, I would recommend it to the various quotidian observers of such theatrical spectacles that likewise find an obstacle to acceptance of this offering of my modest invention that I present, most humbly, to the learned public, not as an exacerbation— a new national and linguistic divide— but to the contrary, as a possibly complete harmonization and means of connection.

“At the outset I would wish to offer to public knowledge this *Anshailanzar (Alpha-Gnomonomic)*, or Alphabet, of the language in question, in order to make study as easy as possible for the elementary students of SEHLERAI, who will be obliged always and in every way to remember with acknowledgment and gratitude, not me but the wisdom of the ineffable and supreme Providence.

“Borrowed characters suitable for the pronunciation of the words of Seh-lerai: h, in Latin, Italian, and French, for <>. Y: Armenian for <>. Z, z: Armenian for <>. J: French for <>. Ga: Latin, Italian, and French for <>. B: for <>. G: Latin and Italian for <>. C: for <>. D: for <>. U: French for <>. Armenian *shva* and French short e for <>. The rest are as in French.

“Instruction in the *Alpha-Gnomonomic* of the Universal Language. The basic characters of Sehlerai. Sehlerai (the Universal Language) is composed of nineteen syllabiforms. These characters are called syllabiforms because they are in effect syllables by reason of the value of their assumed vowel a, which can be deleted by means of a perpendicular stroke, thus <>, called *šerkendill*. This makes them equivalent to the letters of already known languages.³⁰

“In order to ensure from the start the most exact possible pronunciation of these forms, one lists them individually, with the pronunciation of each in French and Armenian, noting to either side the characters of the two ancient languages Hebrew and Arabo-Persian, as follows:³¹

- No. 1. Handizer, Heb. *h*, <>, Ar. *ḥ*, *Hantizēr*.
- No. 2. Iandizer, Heb. *y*, <>, Ar. *y*, *Eantizēr*.
- No. 3. Landizer, Heb. *l*, <>, Ar. *l*, *Lantizēr*.
- No. 4. Mandizer, Heb. *m*, <>, Ar. *m*, *Mantizēr*.
- No. 5. Sandizer, Heb. *ś*, <>, Ar. *s*, *Santizēr*.
- No. 6. [No Fr.], Heb. *z*, <>, Ar. *z*, *Zantizēr*.
- No. 7. Dzandizer, [no Heb.], <>, [no Ar.], *Cantizēr*.
- No. 8. Jandizer, [no Heb.], <>, [no Ar.],³² *Žantizēr*.
- No. 9. Chandizer, Heb. *š*, <>, Ar. *š*, *Šantizēr*.
- No. 10. Gandizer, Heb. *q*, <>, Ar. *q*, *Kantizēr*.
- No. 11. Fandizer, Heb. *f*, <>, Ar. *f*, *Fantizēr*.
- No. 12. Vandizer, Heb. *w*, <>, Ar. *w*, *Vantizēr*.
- No. 13. Bandizer, Heb. *b*, <>, Ar. *b*, *Pantizēr*.
- No. 14. Nandizer, Heb. *n*, <>, Ar. *n*, *Nantizēr*.
- No. 15. Gandizer, [no Heb.], <>, Ar. *j*, *Čantizēr*.
- No. 16. Ciandizer, [no Heb.], <>, [no Ar.], *Č'iantizēr*.
- No. 17. Dandizer, Heb. *d*, <>, Ar. *d*, *Tantizēr*.
- No. 18. [No Fr.], Heb. *r*, <>, Ar. *r*, [no Arm.].
- No. 19. Ghandizer, [no Heb.], <>, Ar. *gh*, *Łantizēr*.

³⁰ T'nkər here borrows the scheme of Devanagari for Sanskrit, in which each letter is pronounced with a short *a* following unless a short diagonal stroke, the *virāma*, is written at the lower right-hand corner of the character.

³¹ The list of letters commences on page 10 of the text, with the character in the center, the Hebrew equivalent to the left and the Arabic to the right, with the name of the letter in French above and Armenian below. I transcribe the Armenian in accordance with the Hübschmann-Meillet system; so the reader should keep in mind that in T'nkər's Western Armenian the voiced stops are unvoiced and vice-versa, the diphthong *ea* is pronounced /ya/, etc.

³² There is of course the Persian and Ottoman Turkish *ž*: the Arabic *r* with three dots above it; it is noted and printed in the discussion of syllabiform no. 8, so its absence seems to be one of a number of errors for which one can but commiserate with the harried typesetter!

“Chapter One. Function of syllabiforms.

No. 1. Handizer (syllable of *h[a]*), the first consonant, with its assumed vowel *a*, has three sounds: 1. In its own basic form, simply formed, it is equivalent to the character *h* in Latin, Italian, etc. 2. When it has a point on top of its upper hook it takes the value of Hebrew *h*, Arabic *kh*, Greek *χ*, and Armenian *x*. 3. When it has a circle in the same position it renders an *égne* [perhaps a misprint for *égre*, “chiming”?] sound, or one like the breath of birds or their likes, which one can note and produce with the characters of other known languages.

No. 2. Iandizer (syllable of *ia*). This has a single pronunciation, identical to Hebrew *y*, Arabic *y*, and Armenian *e* [i.e., *ye*, with on-glide].

No. 3. Landizer (syllable of *la*). It takes the place of the three following sounds: In its simple, basic form it is equivalent to Latin, French, and Italian *l*, Hebrew *l*, Arabic *l*, and Armenian *l*. When it is marked with an accent like a circumflex, thus < >, or sometimes by two points, thus < >, at the ends of words, this signifies gemination, or at the end a doubling vibration of the same character, performed by touching the tongue to the palate and sliding it at once, as in English.

No. 4. Mandizer (syllable of *ma*). The shape of one sound only, equivalent to the *m* of French, Italian, etc., Arabic *m*, and Armenian *m*.

No. 5. Sandizer (syllable of *sa*), the basic radical of five sounds: 1. Written simply, it is equivalent to the *s* of Latin, French, etc., Arabic *s*, and Armenian *s*. [2.] Marked by a sinuous line like the Greek perispomene at the middle and bottom, thus < >, it becomes equivalent to Greek *θ* and French *th*. 3. Surmounted by a semicircle thus < >, it produces the sound of French *z*, or the radical *s raddonei* (?) in a Sehlerai word. 4. Surmounted by a hook touched by a point at the right edge, thus < >, it is pronounced like French or Italian *xa* and Greek *ξα*, while if deprived by a *šerkendill* of its *a*-vowel, thus < >, it becomes equivalent to Greek *ξ* and French *x*. 5. When it is surmounted by the miniature syllabiform < > of no. 9, thus < >, it is pronounced like Russian *ш*, Italian *scia*, and Armenian *əšć'ia*.

No. 6. Zandizer (syllable of *za*), written as a simple radical. But written with a point below, thus < >, it has the value of Armenian *c* [in the Hübschmann-Meillet system: in W. Arm., *dz*], and does not differ from the following base syllable

No. 7. Dzandizer (syllable of *dza*). Finally, touched by another point below, thus < >, it renders the stronger sound of *tša*: Hebrew *ts* or Armenian *j* [Hübschmann-Meillet; in W. Arm., *ts*].

No. 8. Jandizer (syllable of *ja*). The pronunciation of this form is identical to French *j*, Armenian *ž*, and Persian *ž*.

No. 9. Chandizer (syllable of *cha*). This has only one sound, of the same pronunciation as Arabic *š* and Armenian *š*.

No. 10. Gandizer (syllable of *ga*). In simple form as a radical it is pronounced like *ga*, or Arabic *q*, or Persian *g*. If there is a point touching the top, thus < >, it becomes the equivalent of French and Italian *k*, Arabic *k*, and Armenian *k'*.

No. 11. Fandizer (syllable of *fa*). This form has only one sound, equivalent to French *f*, Arabic *f*, and Armenian *f*.

No. 12. Vandizer (syllable of *va*). This form has only one sound, and is pronounced like French and Italian *v*, Hebrew *w*, Arabic *w*, and Armenian *v*.

No. 13. Bandizer (syllable of *ba*), a form with two sounds. The basic one, without a point, is equivalent to French *b*, Arabic *b*, and Armenian *p* [pron. *b* in W. Arm.]. The other, touched by a point on the right edge and above its circular figure, thus < >, or else to the left side, thus < >, is equivalent in value to French *p*, Persian *p*, and Armenian *b* [pron. *p* in W. Arm.].

No. 14. Nandizer (syllable of *na*): the form has only one sound, equivalent to French *n*, Arabic *n*, and Armenian *n*.

No. 15. Giandizer (syllable of *gia*): the form has only one sound, equivalent to Latin and Italian *g*, Arabic *j*, and Armenian *č* [pron. *j* in W. Arm.]; French *g* has a corresponding character.

No. 16. Ciandizer (syllable of *cia*). The form has only one sound, corresponding to Latin and Italian *c*, Persian *č*, and Armenian *č* [pron. *č* in W. Arm.]; French *c* has a corresponding character.

No. 17. Dandizer (syllable of *da*), the base form, with four sounds: 1. Written simply, it is equivalent to French and Italian *d*. 2. Pointed in the middle above, thus < >, it has the sound of French and Italian *t*, Arabic *t*, and Armenian *t'*. 3. Surmounted by a semicircle, thus < >, it becomes equivalent to Greek *δ* [i.e., Modern Gk. *dh*]. 4. Finally, < > surmounted by the same semicircle renders the sound of Greek *θ* and French *th*. But one must take care not to confuse the form with the perispomene of no. 5, < >, with this character of the same value, keeping in mind that the latter, always in the middle, interiorly, has an entirely particular function characteristic of abstract nouns in Sehlerai.

No. 18. Randizer (syllable of *ra*) is a base form with two sounds. Written simply it is equivalent to French and Italian *r*, Arabic *r*, Hebrew *r*, and Armenian *r*. Reinforced by a point, thus < >, it renders the sound of Greek ‘*ρ*’ or Armenian *ṛ* [i.e., a trilled *r*], almost equivalent to the value of French, Latin, and Italian *hr*.

(No.) 19. Ghandizer (syllable of *gha*), a base form with two sounds. Written simply, it is of the same pronunciation understood by French *gh*, Greek *γ*, Arabic *gh*, or Armenian *ḡ* [pron. *gh*]; and being marked thus, by a point [not shown], it produces a guttural sound cruder and more forceful than either Arabic *gh* or Armenian *ḡ*, while < > pointed by no. 10 introduces a more mitigated sound, between a strong [Arm.] *x* and the natural [Ar.] *kh* and [Arm.] *x*, equivalent to the *χ* of Greek. And that suffices for the entire function of the consonants of the universal language.

“Second chapter. Vocalization, or the movement of the syllabiforms in Sehlerai. The first grade of pupils studying and memorizing the forms and function of the 19 syllabiforms of Sehlerai, following their precise image and punctual delineation, are to progress directly to the study of their vowels, this being absolutely necessary in order to execute the act of reading.

“Now, the vowels in question most current for the pronunciation of the words of this universal language are 12 in number, beginning with < >. An *a* is assumed for every syllabiform, as I have already mentioned earlier; and when it is marked within with the figure of a Greek or Latin comma, thus < >, it renders the sound of Hebrew ‘*ayin*’ and Arabic ‘*ayn*’, while the rest is as follows [the Latin transcription is followed by the Arm., which I italicize]:

No. 2. < > e *ē*

No. 3. < > i *i*

No. 4. < > o *ō*

No. 5. < > eu *ēo*

No. 6. < > short e *ē*

No. 7. < > ou *u*

No. 8. < > u *iww*

No. 9. < > iou *iō*

No. 10. < > iu *iww* [Arm. *iw* represents the diphthong *yu*]

No. 11. < > ieou *iēu*

No. 12. < > ieu *iēiw*

“Note: It is evident and perfectly clear to grammarians that the five vowels a, e, i, o, and u are simple ones, the rest being compounds, or diphthongs. The two last and most complicated are < >, iéou, < > iéou— *iēou*, *iēōiw*— whose use in Sehlerai is most rare and perhaps serves when necessary to pronounce certain Chinese words and the like.

“Now, those beginning the study of Sehlerai, after having strictly imprinted upon their imagination the preceding consonantal forms, as well as their vowels delineated above, must now apply themselves to combining them together and making syllables of them, carefully following the combinations below:

< > he *hē*

< > hi *hi*

< > ho *hō*

< > héu *hēō*

< > he *hē*

< > hou *hu*

< > hu *hiw*

< > hiou *hiu*

< > hiu *hiiw*

< > hieou *hiēu*

< > hieu *hiēiw*

“Then one must practice sufficiently before syllabifying, with each separate consonant with its vowels on the same model, which is done by changing only the successive consonants: that is, in the place of *ha*, one puts an *ia*, then *la*, and so forth— which I think it superfluous to repeat here to my ingenious pupil. Still, if he wishes to practice only with the formal representation of their aspects, and one by one, he can see them in my Prototype paradigm in Greek, where all 19 consonants are arranged and set in motion, explicitly.³³

³³ This would clearly be the earlier pamphlet to which Stamatidis had access. The table would have resembled somewhat the scheme of Ethiopic, in which each consonant is altered in shape slightly by the vowel added to it.

“Note: The vowels ought to be proportional to their syllabiforms as much as possible, so students at the outset are to arrange them between two evenly spaced lines, the adornment being thus lovelier. And this is a most necessary exercise, whereby you behold them at every instant, and at every point, to ravish them as bees do flowers, in order to produce the most exquisite sweetness of this universal language.

“Third chapter. The diacritic signs of Sehlerai.³⁴ The comma is an inverted triangle, thus <>; when pointed in this way <>, it marks the division of a phrase. The full stop to end a sentence is a round mark and appears thus, <>. Accent is a line inclined slightly to the right, thus <>, and must always be written under the syllable to be accented. The question mark is a perpendicular stroke capped above by a semicircle, thus <>, which is written at the end and sometimes under the *šerkendills* of words that bear the sense of a question.³⁵ The exclamation point is likewise a perpendicular stroke with a hook just to one side, thus <>, or sometimes inclined thus [not shown], when its hook is placed upon the accent of an interjection. Note: The doubling of syllabiforms (a variety of the Arabic *tašdīd*)³⁶ is done with two points separated by a *šerkendill*, and is called a *šefirkendill*, thus <>. Finally, to soften and assimilate two dissonant consonants found at the end of a word and the beginning of another, one uses the sign <>, called *firuriundill* (see the rest in the Grammar).³⁷

“Reading lesson. <>.

Accent.

hroum chaï iram, bes leraï
vom chàiz illè sam
leraï ioun sem mimseraï
vam chàiz illè som;

[in Armenian transliteration]
Hrum šay, eiran, pēs lēray vōm
šáyzil lē sam:
Lēráy eunsim, mimsēray vam
šáyzillē sōm.

Meaning.

One language on all the earth,
A plethora of sciences is worth more
Than various languages in great number
Which scarcely contain any knowledge.

“*Nota bene.* Seh-leraï may be written in three way: right to left, left to right, and in vertical columns like Chinese. Even the existential law itself is written together in all three fashions (see it in its place).³⁸

³⁴ The text from which Stamatiadis worked gives the Sehlerai names of the signs of punctuation, which he renders in Esperanto (and Greek): komo [comma], *raniedil*; punkto [period, full stop], *perindil*; malakuta akcento [*accent grave*], *prondil*; demanda punkto [question mark], *aiŝendil*; ekkria punkto [exclamation point], *fran-ŝafrandil*; signo pro la koincido de la radikaj elementoj [sign for the coming together of radicals, i.e., gemination], *ŝefirkendil*; signo por korekti la malbonsonecon [sign for the correction of cacophony], *feruriundil* (Tg(h)ransar 1921, part 2, p. 100). In the original Sehlerai each name would have ended with a double *l*; cf. the spelling of *šerkendill* in the 1864 text, above.

³⁵ Here T’nkər adopts the usage of Armenian, whose question mark is a diacritical sign placed above the stressed syllable of the questioning word in a phrase, rather than at the end of the sentence as in English.

³⁶ This is the common Arabic-in-Persian term that T’nkər would have known from either Persian or Ottoman Turkish, grammarians of Arabic themselves preferring to call the symbol *šedda*, literally “strengthening”, a sign of gemination.

³⁷ *Feruriundill* seems to follow the practice of consonantal *sandhi* in Sanskrit grammar and orthography. In the writing of the classical Indian language one does not separate words in writing a phrase, and an unvoiced stop at the end of one word is harmonized to a voiced stop at the beginning of the next, for instance, by being written as its voiced equivalent (*t* becomes *d*; *k* goes to *g*; *p* changes to *b*; etc.). Whaddaya mean? The same thing happens in actual English speech; but since we separate words in writing the phonetic process is not represented on the page, except when reproducing colloquial northeastern American (“What do you mean?”).

³⁸ This would presumably refer to some recapitulation of Rousseau’s *loi naturelle* in the credo of a universal religion intended to accompany Sehlerai, the international language.

“Fourth chapter. The numbers, or, characters for noting the numbers in Seh-lerai. Aside from its alphabetic characters, Seh-lerai is also the possessor of its own arithmetical signs to mark numbers, following the forms below:

- <> 1 aik *ayk'*
- <> 2 fir *fir*
- <> 3 chia *šia*
- <> 4 lun *lōn*
- <> 5 ghir *kir*
- <> 6 iks *ik's*
- <> 7 fiks *fik's*
- <> 8 chiks *šik's*
- <> 9 luks *liwk's*
- <> 10 jirai *žiray*
- <> 11 akmunjir *ak'miwnžir*
- <> 12 firmunjir *firmiwnžir*
- <> 13 chirmunjir *širmiwnžir*
- <> 14 leurmunjir *lēōimiōnžir*
- <> 15 ghirmunjir *kirmiwnžir*
- <> 16 iksmunjir *ik'smiwnžir*
- <> 17 fiksmunjir *fik'smiwnžir*
- <> 18 chiksmunjir *šik'smiwnžir*
- <> 19 luksmunjir *liwk'smiwnžir*
- <> 20 firaijir *firayžir*
- <> 21 akmunfijir *ak'miwnfižir*
- <> 30 chiraijir *širayžir*
- <> 31 akmunchijir *ak'miwnšēžir*
- <> 40 leuraijir *lēōrayžir*
- <> 41 akmulunjir *ak'miwillēōnžir*
- <> 50 ghirmanjir *kirmanžir*
- <> 60 iksanjir *ik'sanžir*
- <> 70 fiksanjir *fik'sanžir*
- <> 80 chiksanjir *šik'sanžir*
- <> 90 luksanjir *liwk'sanžir*
- <> 100 jaiera *žayēray*
- <> 1000 jerōm *žērōm*
- <> 10,000 jerai i jerom *žērayeižērōm*
- <> 1,000,000 jeromkom *žērōmk'ōm*
- <> 10,000,000 jeronikari jerom kom *žērōmk'arižērōmk'ōm*

“Note: These arithmetical characters, as one can see, are formed in an ordered system, of which the basis is a point, augmented successively. It is written from left to write and with a composite system. This is done intentionally to abbreviate the writing of the characters and to abridge them even when one is computing mentally. Still, if one wants to express them also according to the methods of arithmetic, it will go much better that way for beginning students. As to an alternative function for these characters, note well that the same numerical symbols up to seven render also the notes of the [musical] scale, when one writes them in their entirety at a slant and uses for the sharps the division of a *šerkendill*.

“And for the concise instruction in Seh-lerai, that suffices.

“The End.

“Advertisement. The studious pupil, after having studied assiduously my little course of primary instruction in Seh-lerai is then to have the grammar, after its dictionary, which are already complete and ready to be printed, at the service of the public, with sole thanks for the assistance of divine Providence.

“Table of Contents of this work, the *Alpha-gnomonic*:

Page 7. Preface.

9. Characters loaned for pronunciation, etc.

9. Instruction in the *Alpha-gnomonic*.

17. Ch. 1. The function of the syllabiforms.

- 21. Ch. 2. Movement of the syllabiforms.
- 25. Ch. 3. Signs of punctuation.
- 27. Reading lesson.
- 28. The numbers of Seh-lerai.
- 32. Advertisement.”

And that, to the best of my knowledge, is all that is known or can be known, on present evidence, about Seh-lerai, though I should be happy to be discover the lost Grammar and Dictionary. What can we extract from it? *Seh-lerai* means “universal language”; and from the rhymed reading passage it is plain *lerai* means “language”, with the base *ler-* and *-ai* most likely a suffix; cf. *žirai* “ten” alone but *žir-* “ten” in compounds. The name *Tghransar* means “moved by mind”; and the title *Ans hailanzar* means “Alpha-gnomonic”. The first syllabiforms are H, Y, and L; accounting for *hail-*, “ABC”; that leaves the suffixes *-sar* and *-zar* meaning, most likely, “mind” and “gnomic”; and *ay-zer-* “wisdom” (in *Ayzeratand*; *tand*—pronounced, of course, *dant*— then meaning “temple”, with the final *-t* perhaps the marker of an abstract noun and the root word then possibly inspired by Pers. *dān*, “container”, from which is Arm. *-aran?*) with the initial sibilant modified by verbal *sandhi*; and to this same root having to do with thought or order one might add *-zer*, probably “form”, with a different vowel gradation, in *X-anti-+zer*, “syllabiform of X”. (Could the ending *-ant(i)* be participial, and thus from Indo-European?) The base *tigr-* would then mean “move”; and *ans*, “law”. The *-en* and *-an(t)* would thus be nominal suffixes in compounds (in numbers, *-an-* means “times”). So we can analyze *šerkendill*, the *virāma* stroke that cuts away the *-a* following each syllabiform consonant, as *šerk-* “cut”, *-en* suffix, and *dill* “line”, following which we can derive the bases *ram-* “comma”, *peri-* “stop”, *pron-* “accent”, *aiš-* “question”, *fran-šafir-* “exclamation” with related *šefir-k-* “germination” (with the shared root *šafir-* meaning something like “intensify”), and *feriuri-* “harmony” (perhaps sharing a root with *fr-an?*). The bases *peri-* and *pron-* sound like they have Indo-European prepositions as their precursors. But when one deals with an avowedly *a priori* language, and one for which so little evidence exists besides, such impressions may be mere mirages. Returning to the reading sample in verse, *seh-* would be “universal”; and *šaiž-ille*, “sciences”. Supposing a use of vowel gradation as above, *sam/sem/som* might mean “plethora, many, hardly any”; whilst rhyming *vom/vam* could be the connective terms of the comparative “more... than”. *Bes* would be “one only, sole” (for *aik* is ordinal “one”, cf. Sanskrit *eka-*, Persian *yek*); and *iun*, “various”. The phrase *hrum šai iram* could be “on all earth” in that order, with *rum/ram* a pair with the root sense “surface” perhaps. All roads, a Greek or Armenian might say, lead to Hrum (for a rough breathing must precede the initial R of the name of the Eternal City where the itinerant Bedros briefly sojourned)... The numbers give us *-mun-*, “and, plus” and *-om*, the marker of a hundred. Most of these decipherments are of necessity hypothetical and could quite easily be wrong.

Bedros Tghransar, whom I like to imagine, not as “moved by mind” but as an immovable Tigransar, a lonely mountaintop (Arm. *sar*) with the proud name of the Armenian king of the first century BC, Tigran II the Great (and, *inter alia*, the invented *nom de plume* encodes his outer-world surname, *T-n-g-r*, so for all we know there is a three-way word-play hidden here), shows a marked predilection in his *a priori* language (the only word I have found related to anything is that for “one”) for monosyllabic roots — a nod, perhaps, to Chinese, for which he seems to have a particular regard and consciousness. Though his alphabet provides amply for Arm. *ts*, *dz*, *ch*, and *ch'*, these are strikingly absent from what little Seh-lerai we have; and the value of the vowels follows French, not Armenian: the vowel spelled as *-u-* is frequent but to be pronounced as in French, transliterated into Arm. as *-iw-/yu/*, not *-ow-/u/*. It would have been a cumbersome language, no matter whether written left to right, right to left, or from the top down. Yet one hopes the poems, grammar, and glossary may yet be discovered. At the beginning of Kevork H. Gulian’s *Elementary Modern Armenian Grammar* (printed by the Vienna Mekhitarists) is this quotation from Lord Byron (who stayed at San Lazzaro with the Venice Mekhitarists in 1816, when Bedros was a seminarian at Vienna): “I have begun, and am proceeding, in the study of the Armenian language... It is a rich language, and would amply repay any one the trouble of learning it.” Few take that trouble; and although the dervish-like Bedros evidently had frequent callers at his temple of wisdom with its cabinet of curiosities and somber tomb, we are told that they contented themselves with French translations of his verses, so one feels fewer still learned Seh-lerai. But this fleeting acquaintance with a 19th-century eccentric, intellectual, and idealist does afford an intriguing glimpse into the rich diversity of late Ottoman Armenian life and letters, and that is ample repayment. As though the quest were anything but an exciting adventure in any case.

6. AN ELEGY FOR SMYRNA.

Smyrna, Izmir, Zmiwinia— the second largest city of the Ottoman Empire— was the major trade emporium of the Aegean and a cosmopolis of culture, enlightenment, and sophistication. It stood in the heart of ancient Hellenic Ionia: Homer was born on the nearby island of Chios. Armenians are known from the 13th century and their numbers grew following the collapse of the Cilician kingdom in the 14th century and the chaotic conditions in the Anatolian heartland during the Jalali rebellions of the 17th century. The Church of St. Stephen was built in the

16th century and restored in 1853. The first Armenian printing press of Smyrna opened in the 18th century (T'ēodik gives the precise year 1676, however, as the date when the *Tparan S. Eĵmiacni ew S. Sargsi Zōravari*, “Press of Holy Echmiadzin and St. Sergius the *Strategos*” opened its doors); and in the 19th century the city was a center of Western missionary operations, with Mekhitarist schools (the first one founded in 1847), Protestant presses, etc. The majority of Smyrniotes were Greeks; the Armenian quarter, Haynoc', was next door to the Jewish one. In 1841 the American traveler Valentine Mott wrote of the Armenians of Smyrna, which he calls the Paris of the Levant, “These people have their own quarter, and are numerous and wealthy, of fine persons and great dignity of deportment, and wear a costume of their own, of which the huge cap is the most striking.” He then describes vividly a church service in Haynoc'.³⁹ In 1861, the city had about 124,000 inhabitants. Armenians were prominent in commerce, with trading connections at Trieste, Vienna, and Manchester, but never numbered more than 15,000 or so. It was a city of the Armenian cultural renaissance: major figures include the author Grigor Č'ilingirian; the philologist Galust Kostandian; the lexicographer Mesrop Nuparian; the poet Rubēn Vorberian; and many others. Major institutions included the Mesropian School and Surb Lusaworič' (Holy Illuminator) National Hospital. A number of benevolent societies functioned, including the Siwneac', Aragacuneac', and Haykazean. The prominent Freemason Matt'ēos Mamurian shines perhaps most brightly in the constellation of Smyrna Armenian intellectuals of the day: he translated Voltaire, Dumas, Goethe, Lessing, Stendhal, and Tolstoy, wrote the social critique *English Letters* mentioned earlier in this study, and championed an Armenian woman writer, Srбуhi Tiwsap, in her struggle to make a career in *belles lettres*.⁴⁰ The publishing house of the Dedeyan Brothers, mentioned above, was founded in 1851: among its publications was a book on Joseph Balsamo, or Cagliostro, the enigmatic Freemason of legend and conspiracy theory.⁴¹ “(Smyrna's) prosperity,” wrote the American traveler John Price Durbin in 1845, “is to be attributed chiefly to the capital of the Armenians, and the commerce of the Greeks and Franks, that is, to the Christian population,” of a country, he adds darkly and presciently, “in which, though they be subjects, they are not citizens.”(This could be the epitaph of millions of Mercurians of the 20th century.)⁴²

The 19th century was a time of hope for progress in the Ottoman Empire punctuated by Imperial decrees that expanded, or purported to expand, the liberties and protection of individuals and national-religious minorities: in 1839, the edict *Ḥaṭṭ-i Şerif* guaranteed life and property; the *Ḥaṭṭ-i Humāyūn* of 1856 expanded these reforms and liberties; the Tanzimat period of 1839-1876 saw the formation of commercial and criminal courts and the establishment of a unified customs tariff; and at the mid-point of the 19th century Victor Hugo prophesied that in a hundred years Constantinople would be the capital of the world. In 1863, one year before the printing of T'nkār's manual of *Seh-lerai*, Armenians celebrated the promulgation of a national Constitution (*Sahmanadrut'iw*n) codifying their communal rights. The poet Bedros Tourian in a prose poem evoked that Constitution as a mighty ship sailing into a shining future. But that future might better be seen as the Titanic. The massacres of Armenians in 1894-1896 were the whiff of arctic cold; and the 1908 revolution of the Young Turks was the ghostly ice mountain looming suddenly in the dark, with its murderous submarine mass cutting a gash in the hull in the black waters below the surface where lights glittered and the band played.

The metaphorical ship carrying the passengers celebrating their century of progress, with all its bright hopes, went down in the night; and all historical Armenia was destroyed. Smyrna itself was spared, for a time. The horrors of the Genocide of 1915 bypassed the city: it was too profitable a place, nearly all *gāvur* “infidel” Smyrna was Christian, and there were too many foreign eyes trained on the city. After the Great War the Greeks invaded Ionia, pursuing the phantom of Venizelos' *megalē idea*, but what had begun as a triumphal sweep towards Angora ended as a rout. In early September 1922, a few days short of one year after the publication in *Bizantio* of Stamatiadis' “*La lingvo Sehlerai*”, Turkish forces under the command of Mustafa Kemal (the hero of the defense of Gallipoli, soon to be dubbed Atatürk, “Father of the Turks”) conquered Smyrna. His men forced its Christian inhabitants to the quayside and systematically burned the great city behind milling, teeming crowds, in such a conflagration as history had not known hitherto. Thousands were massacred in the town and on death marches into the interior. Turkish troops waded into the helpless multitude at the shore, severing limbs and casting victims into the sea, even as the crews of Allied warships moored in the harbor watched impassively, sometimes turning up their gramophones to drown out the clamor. Fleets of Greek fishing boats rescued some of the survivors, and ancient Athens saw the construction of a new kind of city, a refugee quarter, Nea Smyrnē. But in a matter of days in September 1922 the largest and most secular, cosmopolitan city of the eastern Mediterranean, the embodiment of the proposition that Muslim, Jew, and Christian might live and prosper together, had ceased to exist.

³⁹ Cited in Ghazarian 1997, p. 308.

⁴⁰ See Hovannisian 2012; for pictures of the Haynoc', S. Step'anos, and the Mesropian school, see Kévorkian and Paboudjian 1992, pp. 160-172. Köker 2005, p. 133 pl. 278, provides an illustration of the church of the Capuchin priests at Buca (Boudja), the village where Petros T'nkār lived. It is a pleasant white building in a park of cypresses.

⁴¹ See T'ēodik 1912, pp. 133-138, on the history of Armenian publishing in the city.

⁴² Cited by Ghazarian 1997, p. 330.

The grim story is well known: the American consul and eyewitness George Horton published his scathing *Blight of Asia* four years after the disaster, and his white hot fury still burns through the pages. Marjorie Housepian, professor of English and dean of Barnard College, published in 1971 her meticulously researched *Smyrna 1922*, whose archival sources and testimonies recount the horror with a different, cool precision that makes the blood of the reader, too, run cold. Most recently, Giles Milton, *Paradise Lost: Smyrna, 1922*, fills out the record with a lyrical memoir of the opulent life that preceded the sudden and utter destruction: the villas, parties, cinemas, cafes, theaters, sports clubs, daily papers in a score of languages. Marge Housepian-Dobkin is the mother of one of my oldest friends and Columbia classmate, Stephen Andrew Johnson. Though I first met her when I was an undergraduate, I first read her book a few years later as a graduate student at Oxford, opening it early one fall evening at the Wadham College library and meaning to read for an hour, only to finish the last pages in the chill morning after a sleepless night. The murder of an entire modern city and the world's indifference on a scale just as grand became a precedent for both vast crimes and moral oblivion. As I write these lines one of the oldest cities on earth, magnificent Aleppo, with its vibrant Armenian community dating back to the Middle Ages, is being destroyed and not a single world power is helping its population. One recalls the Nazi massacre at Babi Yar and then the silence captured in Yevtushenko's poem: Над Бабьим Яром памятников нет:/ Крутой обрыв, как грубое надгробье. "There is no monument over Babi Yar:/ A steep ridge, like a crude grave piled." There is a monument on the outskirts of Kiev now; but memory in the rebuilt Izmir belongs to the victors, who were mass murderers like the Nazis, not liberators like the Red Army. And each calendar day of the deadly month Eylül/September of conquest and destruction has become the gloating name of an Izmir street, or a square. The officially defined, homogeneous *türklik*, "Turkishness", of the present has no room for the cosmopolitan babel of Greek, Armenian, Ladino, French, Italian... or Seh-lerai. Yet there are cracks widening in the wall of silence, and Turkish scholars and humanists themselves (for there is no such thing as a criminal nation) are, more and more loudly, speaking the truth of history. Some day when the entire record is written, perhaps this small study will be a footnote. I tried in a book to render the homage he felt his due to young Bedros of Constantinople, the poet; and here I have attempted the rescue of another Bedros from the same city, then of Smyrna, of Boudja and Aspra Khomata, of Paradise lost, from oblivion.

The square stone edifice of the man alone on the hill, the Ayzeratand, is gone, too, though here memory is not entirely dead. For the place at Buca where the Temple of Wisdom once stood is still called Tingirtepe, "T'nkær Hill"; and upon its summit are now statues (see Plate 4), frozen in their whirling dance, of the 13th-century Persian poet and mystic Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi (Maulānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī), whose tomb at Konya in western Turkey is a major pilgrimage site. Rumi had espoused a mystical strand of Islam, Sufism, that addresses God through love, as Christians are taught to do. Rumi taught his dervish disciples through poems, parables, meditation, chanting, melodies, and the dance; and he shunned the divisions of language and creed as illusion and wickedness. Some of the mourners who joined his funeral procession, indeed, were Armenians. There, there, in that undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns, there where there are no dogmatic religions, divisive ideologies, or determined nationalisms, there Mevlana and Bedros, and Bedros, walk together.

Here on earth, happily, the Tingir clan survives, and here my evidence is photographic: Dr. Raffi Tingir describes the family pictures from Istanbul he has kindly provided, here Plates 5-7 (letter of 27 November 2012): "The first picture has my father Nurhan with his brother Levon (with glasses) and their father Mihran, *circa* 1952. The second picture depicts three generations of Tingirs: my younger brother Zohrab and I, with our father Nurhan and paternal grandfather Mihran Tingir, *circa* 1959. The third picture shows the Armenian-American author William Saroyan visiting with my maternal grandparents, father, brother and me, *circa* 1962. Bedros Tingir is three, four, and five generations apart, respectively, from Mihran, Nurhan and Raffi." May Bedros' family prosper. To him, to them, and to the gentle dreamers and inventors of a peaceful future, I dedicate this work.

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- 2. Tghransar, *Ans Haïlanzar ou Alpha-Gnomonic de Seh-lerai: ouvrage*, Smyrne, 1864.

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