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*The Librairie Orientale: An Exilic Bookstore in Paris and the Making of a Diaspora Community*

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The Librairie Samuelian (also known as Librairie Orientale) was founded in 1930 in Paris as an antiquarian bookstore of scholarship on the “Orient” (including books on Armenian subjects), a small publishing house, a bindery, and a seller of Armenian books. Over the next decades, the bookstore would become one of the two Orientalist bookstores of record in Paris.

The founding of Librairie Orientale was also one of the defining cultural initiatives in the transformation of the Armenian refugees arriving in Paris into a diaspora community. Among the others was the Paris Armenian newspaper, *Haratch*, in 1925, with which the founder of Librairie Samuelian, Hrant-Samuel, was closely associated.

Fleeing from the Genocide, these waves of refugees settled mainly in the Ninth Arrondissement; most were employed as workers in factories. (\*) For these exiles who settled in the French capital between 1920-1930, the bookstore became more than an antiquarian spot in the Sorbonne neighborhood. It was a public space, functioning alongside the church on Jean-Goujon Street, as an institution, for the care of the educational and literary aspirations of the new arrivals. “[At the Librairie Oriental, they would look for counsel, for an address; here, they would meet a compatriot. They would meander and they would be instructed; they would discover a book, an author, a journal.” (\*)

Over the course of eight decades, the Librairie Orientale expanded its dual role. It was a repository of scholarly knowledge *and* a site of political/community action; a commercial enterprise *and* a “living library” to borrow a term from Walter Benjamin ; a family business, a bookstore known the world over, and a destination for visitors to the French capital. Gerard Chaliand summarizes the scope of Librairie Orientale’s mission best: It was, he said in a 2009 tribute/exhibition at the Maison de Culture Armenienne, “a site of international culture, a meeting place, and a home for the exchange of information.”

How was the LO able to accomplish this complex set of tasks that looked both inward and outward, to action and knowledge, to books and their afterlives, with such limited resources, and for such a long time? And what were the limitations, if any, of these accomplishments?

Three elements account for Librairie’s Orientale’s biography as a site of scholarship, commerce, acculturation, sociability, and praxis:

the founder, the space, and the legacy

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The founder: At the center of Librairie Orientale’s biography stands the burly figure of Hrant Samuelian. Originally from Marash, orphaned in the 1895 when his father and brother were killed by the Turks, educated at the Seminary of Sis and Darson College, the Faculty of Law in Constantinople, Samuelian arrived in Paris in 1920 to continue his legal studies. He was 30 years old but already carried a heavy biography, verging on the novelistic. (\*). Anahid Ter Minassian) He was also a book collector, a prolific journalist, and a polyglot world citizen, perhaps even a cosmopolitan. Sometime soon after his arrival in Paris, he joined the ranks of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and held several key positions in the Party. In 1947, he assumed the presidency of the Delegation of the Armenian Republic in exile. A skilled negotiator, as delegation president he was in regular contact with the Georgian and Azerbaijani delegations-in-exile in Paris; some of these meetings probably took place at the Librairie. If, as Ter Minassian asserts, Samuelian’s entire life was intertwined with the history of the Armenian diaspora, then Samuelian certainly placed himself and his bookstore at the intersection of its two flanks of exile, the Western Armenian and that of the Armenian Republic. Until his death, he was the larger-than-life figure towering over this intersection.(\*)

According to Mouradian and Kunthe, the “original funds of the bookstore were from Constantinople,” from the Balentz collection, which itself was the exiled book collection of a prestigious publishing house established in the Ottoman capital in 1860. (\*) The way Mouradian and Kunthe recount the story, it seems as if the Librairie Orientale began rather inauspiciously. Samuelian was a lawyer; Balentz was a bookseller and publisher who wanted to cede his collection to someone who would be its trustee. But as Benjamin writes, “to a true collector, the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.” (\*) Samuelian seemed passionate about books and about Western Armenian; he was an engaged intellectual, a member of the ARF. Perhaps like Jack Roth, himself a collector and owner of J. Roth/Bookseller of Fine & Scholarly Judaica, Samuelian possessed “the attitude of an heir –the sense that he had been entrusted with a responsibility to care and preserve his beloved Jewish book collection.” (\*) The rebirth of old books would go hand in hand with forging of a collective Armenian diaspora identity. But, as Benjamin says, the book collector is the one who sees himself as the one who liberates books from their captivity. How did Samuelian negotiate this contradiction of being a book collector and a bookseller?

Samuelian’s biography and political activities are intimately related to the character of his bookstore, not only because the Librairie was an emblematic location, but also in the way he situated Armenian books within a larger cultural, linguistic and historical realm of scholarship and knowledge. Armenian books would be the cornerstone of the bookstore and Samuelian himself their guardian, but because Samuelian was also committed to what Chaliand calls “universal culture,” the bookstore would extend its realm to the entire “Orient” in its many languages, histories, and cultures.

We may never know for sure if this was a conscious decision. His choice may have been motivated by financial concerns or by his Orientalist worldview. Perhaps the invisible paperwork in those drawers is made public, it will reveal some facts about my conjecture. In today’s diaspora communities, from Beirut to Los Angeles, we are accustomed to clearly defined Armenian bookstores. Librairie adhered to a different idea; even if it was sustained by an Orientalist world view, this idea may have offered the readers and visitors, the new arrivals particularly, not so much a refuge as a space of memory but also possibility.

The space: Six years after arriving in Paris, in 1926, Samuelian married Ashkhen Kherian, an orphan originally from Akn, and a descendant of *amiras*. According to Mouradian and Kunth, she provided the initial financial backing for setting up the antiquarian bookstore; she was also a skilled book binder. (\*) The Librairie chose a location in the Sorbonne area, away from Belleville neighborhood of the Ninth Arrondissement. Between 1920 and 1930, some 60,000 Armenians settled in the Ninth, Eighteenth and Twentieth Arrondissement.

In a 1957 article in *Haratch*, titled “Armenian Paris,” Samuelian wrote: “There was a time when Paris held a superior position in the Diaspora.” Samuelian had in mind the Paris of those inter-war years when Paris had become the center of Armenian culture, called up to replace Istanbul and Tiflis. (\*) In Paris were gathered not only the exiled Armenian diplomats but also political figures and activists, teachers, writers, and university students, as well as workers who lived in quarters for foreign populations in municipality or factory barracks or in worker-cities and abandoned, crowded buildings. (\*)

Many of these workers had limited education and were the beneficiaries of Samuelian and Chavarch Missakian’s efforts. “In those days, and under the tutorshipof [Haratch], ” says Samuelian, “a new, modest generation was blossoming, from Paris to the provinces.” This generation—the students (սաներ) of Haratch--was made up mostly of orphans who had been deprived of formal education; through Haratch they were able to perfect their Western Armenian. (\* ) Samuelian himself instituted a system of lending books to Missakian’s students. (\* )The more literate Armenian readers would hold gatherings at the Librairie or at the nearby Café de Fiore where impassioned debates on literature and politics took place.

But perhaps equally significant was the less tangible benefits of the bookstore. Laurence Roth, the son of the Jack Roth, says that to being at J. Roth was an interaction of acting and being acted upon by the books, an engagement in self-definition and self-explanation. “ (\*) for the aspiring refugees and groups of literary minded men and women, the Librairie was both refuge and a space of fashioning a post-exilic personal and communal identity, rooted in Western Armenian language and memory but also related to the “Orient” on the one hand and to the new, foreign context.

The legacy: By the late 1950s, the “Armenian Paris,” of which Samuelian wrote so sadly, were long gone. He lamented the fact that the new generation of French-Armenians was not interested in reading Armenian-language materials. In 1965, as Ter Minassian notes, and in the wake of the massive demonstrations in Armenia on the fiftieth anniversary of the Genocide, the ARF decided to replace the Delegation of the Armenian Republic in exile with the Committee for the Defense of the Armenian Cause. Samuelian was its president, his mission, the recognition of the Genocide. The list of Sameulian’s initiatives in this realm is long, almost all of them motivated by the same dual purpose that he imputed to the Librairie. After his death in 1977, when Alice Aslanian and Armen Samuelian, took over ownership of the bookstore, and also Samuelian’s legacy. Against the background of political assassinations of Turkish diplomats, and the renewed interest in Armenian issues, the Samuelian siblings were instrumental in the publication of A Crime of Silence (1984) based on the testimonies of the People’s Permanent Tribunal. In 1988, Alice Aslanian was instrumental in the publication of a special issue of Les Temps Moderne on the Armenian Diaspora followed in 1989 by the French publication of Samvel Shahmuratian’s The Sumgait Tragedy .

After 82 years of operation, the LO is rumored to be closing its doors this December. This possibility gives my a presentation an elegiac quality--for the end of an important Paris Armenian institution, for the changing face of a once productive community, even for the replacement of Orientalist scholarship for other paradigms. But such a possibility also raises questions about the limits of what Roth calls “limits of transmissibility.” In the case of the Librairie—the impediments are different than those Roth lists: the limits of an institution made in the image of one person; the changing habits of owning, collecting, reading books; the ascendancy of technology and the eclipse of physical space as an anchor of possibility and memory. The list is long, the factors ever-shifting. What is constant, at least until the final closing of the doors, is the Librairie Samuelian; what remains still open to study and interpretation is the bookstore’s afterlife in the shelves and drawers, but also in the memory of Alice and Armen.

Works Cited

A note about sources: A note about sources: Despite its place in the history of the Armenian diaspora of Europe, the LO has been difficult subject to research. A smattering of articles in community newspapers in the US and France, references in the Paris Armenian daily *Haratch*, a chapter about Alice Aslanian, the daughter of Hrant Samuelian and current co-owner of the bookstore, in Claire Mouradian and Anouche Kunthe’s book, Les Arméniens en France: du chaos a la reconnaissance, is all I could locate in Boston.

Krikor Beledian’s massive Cinquante Ans de la Littérature Arménienne en France is an invaluable work of literary criticism. The early parts describe the formation of the community and the cultural initiatives which led to the “creative explosion” of 1929-1934.

But there are also the invisible and silent resources which may in fact explain the paucity of the written sources and allow the researcher to conduct the kind of investigation that Robert Darnton proposes in his “What is the History of Books?”: the invisible resides on the shelves, in the drawers, and storage space of the LO, in the paperwork of buying and selling antiquarian books, taking orders, renting out books, in short in the material economy of books, and particularly Armenian books. This material, when and if it becomes available to researchers, could prove useful in charting the physical travel of books and the ways in which books were integrated in their new environment, how they were used by the readers/refugees.

As for the silent resources, they are missed opportunities, or victims of circumstance: The generation of Samuelian and his wife Achkhen is gone; the current owners (the grown children of Hrant Samuelian) and their circle are advanced in age. Rumors abound that the Librairie will shut its doors by the end of the year, five years after the Armenian-language daily, *Haratch,* the other remaining cultural project from the decade of mass immigration to France,ceased publication.