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**BEDROS ALAHAIDOYAN: DOCUMENTATION OF SONGS AND
STORIES, PRESERVATION OF THE VIRTUAL HOMELAND**

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Abstract:

Introduction: The article discusses the life and endeavor of Bedros Alahaidoyan¹, a dedicated song and lore collector from survivors of the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire, one of the few devotees to Armenian song collection in the Diaspora. A son of survivors himself, Bedros Alahaidoyan grew up in Beirut, Lebanon. On the 70th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide Alahaidoyan turned collecting songs, stories, and testimonies of Armenians in the Diaspora into his life endeavour. He toured old people's homes and community centers starting 1985 and collected songs, stories and testimonies, searching mostly for authentic rural songs, what he called “Tohmik Yerger.” The principles and methods of collection that Alahaidoyan abided by are identified and highlighted. This is followed by a few examples from Alahaidoyan’s collection. In the conclusion, the approaches on which these materials will be used in the author’s dissertation are indicated.

Methods and materials: Bedros Alahaidoyan’s collection, articles published by him in the press and reviews of his work, radio and press interviews with him were studied to compile Alahaidoyan’s principles and perspectives. **Results:** Principles and key directions that will be followed to analyze Alahaidoyan’s compilation for the author’s dissertation are presented.

Key words: *Bedros Alahaidoyan, Armenian folk songs, song collection, Armenian Genocide, rural songs, cultural memory, folk song notation, oral history.*

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¹ Alahaidoyan’s last name appears in various spellings in printed and online materials: Alahaidoyan, Alahaidoian, Alahaydoyan in French and English and as Ալահայդոյան, Ալահայդոյան, Ալահայդոյան in Armenian.

**ՊԵՏՐՈՍ ԱԼԱՀԱՅՏՈՅԵԱՆ. ԵՐԳԵՐԻ ԵՎ ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ
ՎԱՎԵՐԱԳՐՈՒՄ, ՏԱՐԻՐԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՅՐԵՆԻՔԻ ՊԱՀՊԱՆՈՒՄ**

Ծովինար Ա. Արծրունի

Հայաստանի ամերիկյան համալսարան, Երևան, ՀՀ

Ամփոփում

Ներածություն. Հրապարակումը վերաբերում է Պետրոս Ալահայտոյեանի կյանքին ու գործունեությանը: Նա Օսմանյան կայսրությունում Հայոց ցեղասպանությունից փրկված հայերի երգերի և պատմությունների նվիրյալ հավաքող էր, Սփյուռքում հայկական երգերի հավաքման գործին նվիրված հազվագյուտ ուսումնասիրողներից մեկը: Ցեղասպանությունից փրկվածների ընտանիքում ծնված Պետրոս Ալահայտոյեանը մեծացել է Բեյրութում (Լիբանան): Հայոց ցեղասպանության 70-րդ տարելիցին նա վճռում է ամբողջությամբ նվիրվել Սփյուռքում հանգրվանած հայերի երգերի, պատմությունների և վկայությունների հավաքագրմանը: 1985 թ.-ից սկսած՝ այցելել է ծերանոցներ և համայնքային կենտրոններ՝ ձայնագրելով երգեր, պատմություններ ու վկայություններ՝ առանձնահատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով գեղջկական երգերին, որոնք նա անվանում էր «տոհմիկ երգեր»: Հոգևորականները վերլուծում են Ալահայտոյեանի հավաքչական գործունեության սկզբունքներն ու մեթոդները, ինչպես նաև ներկայացվում է նրա հավաքած նյութերից մի քանի նմուշ: Եզրափակիչ մասում նշվում են այն սկզբունքներն ու մոտեցումները, որոնք կկիրառվեն հեղինակի դիսերտացիայում Ալահայտոյեանի հավաքածուի վերլուծության համար: Նյութեր և մեթոդներ. Պետրոս Ալահայտոյեանի հավաքած նյութերը, նրա հոգվածները, նրա գործունեությանը վերաբերող անդրադարձները, ինչպես նաև ռադիոյի և մամուլի նրա հարցազրույցները ուսումնասիրվել են՝ վեր հանելու նրա հավաքչական գործունեության սկզբունքներն ու մոտեցումները: Արդյունքներ. Ներկայացվում են Պետրոս Ալահայտոյեանի հավաքածուի վերլուծության հիմնական սկզբունքներն ու ուղղությունները, որոնք հիմք են ծառայելու հեղինակի ատենախոսության համար:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Պետրոս Ալահայտոյեան, հայկական ժողովրդական երգեր, երգերի հավաքագրում, Հայոց ցեղասպանություն, գեղջկական երգեր, մշակութային հիշողություն, ժողովրդական երգերի նոտագրում, բանավոր պատմություն:

Ինչպես հղել. Արծրունի Ծ. Պետրոս Ալահայտոյեան. երգերի և պատմությունների վավերագրում, տարիքական հայրենիքի պահպանում // ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ՇՀՀ կենտրոնի «Գիտական աշխատություններ»: Գյումրի, 2026: Հ. 2(29): 159-165 էջ: DOI: 10.52971/18294316-2026.29.2-159

INTRODUCTION: Dickranuhi Khatchadourian, a survivor of the Armenian Genocide, remembers: “In 1923, we were at the French orphanage: 105 orphans, six nuns, two friars. Before that, we were among Arabs, here and there. We had forgotten the Armenian language. When you're orphaned at four years old, what else could happen? The French nuns would teach us embroidery, and along with it, force us to sing, saying, ‘sing, so that you embroider beautifully.’ I don’t know: at the time, did they [the nuns] understand that we would rediscover our language with these songs? I had a songbook, tiny, half the size of my palm. In it, in very small letters, there were

150 songs written. The songbook was handwritten by my friend Aghavni. Alas, Aghavni died in Adana. The songbook remained with me as a keepsake. I kept it like the apple of my eye. Last year, someone came from Belgium, he was a song-collector, lore-collector; his surname was Alahaidoyan. I told him my story, I told him that we would embroider and sing, I told him too that if it were not for this songbook, we would not speak Armenian now. At the end, he asked for the songbook. I did give it, but it felt like something was taken off my body. What could I do? He needed it.” [4, pp. 170–172]

The one who gave a piece of herself with the songbook in 1990 in France was Dickranuhi Khatchadourian, born in 1911 in the village of Ishkhan of the Sebastia region of Western Armenia. And the collector, the one who needed the songbook, was Bedros Alahaidoyan, whose life endeavor is the topic of this article.

Born in 1934 in Beirut, Lebanon, the only son of Genocide-surviving parents, Bedros Alahaidoyan showed a love for music from an early age. Many people who knew him remember him with a violin case in his hand, his unruly curls blowing in the wind.

Alahaidoyan grew up in Beirut’s vibrant Armenian community and had his first professional musical experience in the choir of Parsegh Ganatchian, a disciple of the great Komitas. Alahaidoyan later became a Ganatchian scholar, compiling his works and consulting on CD recordings.

Initially studying pharmacy in Belgium, he returned to Lebanon to run his father’s drugstore. But that did not last long. Music was calling him. And he returned to Belgium to study musicology.

About two decades later, Bedros Alahaidoyan embarked on what would become his life journey. Here is how he puts it himself: “On that morning of April 24, 1984, the verdict was pronounced: I had enlisted myself to [a battle] against invisible dragons. I would at all costs meet with dignity the year 1985: the 70th anniversary of the Genocide and also the 50th anniversary of Komitas’s death. There was no challenge more noble and more revered, especially for an Armenian musician. I had resolved to personally “take care of” Armenian grandmas and grandpas, to the extent possible in a scholarly manner, and as comprehensively as my abilities would allow. My preparatory works were many and required a long time, because, with hopelessness as a shield to confront the irresolute mentality of the Diaspora, it was secretly and on my own that I would carry out this gigantic endeavor: the bringing together of old and not-yet-sung songs and not-yet-recorded testimonies on my voice recorder, directly from the lips of the last representatives of our senior generation, wheresoever they may be.”²

People called him “crazy” for undertaking such a huge endeavor alone. But Bedros Alahaidoyan had found his true calling.

As the generation that had survived the Armenian Genocide was slowly fading away under his eyes, Alahaidoyan made it his mission to record with a tape recorder whatever he could of their legacy. In addition to rescuing from obscurity what he considered to be treasures and relics of folklore in their original dialect, be it songs, dance-tunes, epic tales, legends, customs, and rituals, he also collected ethnographic information and documented the everyday lives of his informants, their ancestral villages, and harrowing memories of deportation and loss. Reluctant and cautious at first, the elderly saw he was earnest, trusted him and opened their doors, hearts, and souls to him.

Between 1985 and 1994, Alahaidoyan collected 126 audio reel-to-reel tapes and 450 cassettes. Armed with his heavy real-tape recorder, later replaced by his still cumbersome cassette

² *Alahaidoyan, B., personal sound archive, 1987.*

tape recorder, he documented recordings from Armenians from France, Belgium, the United States, Greece, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran.

A red thread runs throughout his entire legacy: songs on the Genocide of the Armenians. Alahaidoyan has recorded rare songs from survivors of the Genocide, rich in historical, geographical, and ethnographical information on this great calamity.

It was not a superficial endeavor. It was not a simple job. Here is how Alahaidoyan describes it in an 1986 article:

“... It would [soon] be nine whole months... the elderly, nursing homes, retirement homes, forced deportation, calamity, massacres, maledictions, song books, hubbub...”

“... The challenge was thrown: I had to enter the battlefield to hunt for songs, beg for songs, ask for songs. I was searching for songs: unsung, buried, collapsed songs of the old and lost homeland: miry, dismembered, or mixed with Turkish [words] – I had to save them from a final annihilation. The [underground tunnel], damaged and clogged for seventy years —seventy resounding and breathing years—, the muddy, grimy, gloomy, bloody, underground tunnel in ruins that stretched from Der Zor to Alforville, I so wished for it to suddenly bloom, for its mould-covered cracks to wear green, for a thin ray of light to strike its damp walls like an arrow, for a brook to flow here, for a mill to turn there, for an ox to make a furrow in the dark soil, for a dream to sprout somewhere, and for a song to burst out like a fountain in a corner [and] become the sacrament, the sign, the vitality, the prayer, the lava or the sweat and saliva of this crumbling, impenetrable tunnel that was slowly being illuminated...” [3, pp. 39-47]

On many occasions, be it in articles or interviews, Alahaidoyan has highlighted these findings, discussed their importance and differences. An example of such a featuring is his article “Songs of Lamentation” on the Houshamadyan.org website, where 5 songs on the theme of the Armenian Genocide are featured in notes and lyrics.

One of the songs is “Der Zori Tcholer”³ (The Deserts of Der Zor) featured in two versions—one in Armenian and one in Turkish. Throughout the years, Alahaidoyan has collected many versions of this song, in both languages.

In parallel to collecting songs, Alahaidoyan penned articles in the Armenian press, introduced Armenian music to non-Armenian musicians and audiences at large through his work at the Belgian national radio. Slowly but steadily, his name and work became known in the Armenian Diaspora, and Armenians from around the world invited him to collect songs and stories from their elders. The Zoryan Institute, for example, invited him to collect folk songs in the United States. In 1987 and 1988, he travelled to then Soviet Armenia, where he was impressed by the professional way folklore was being collected.

Alahaidoyan had great insight into the Armenian reality. Although he did not consider himself a musicologist trained in Armenian music, he was well-versed in Armenian folk music. He knew very well that folk songs and tunes were transmitted orally, that they were created, modified, altered, transformed, impulsively, embellished and perfected over time, based on the emotions, mood and environment of the songster. He considered every version of a folk song a jewel of its own and would not hesitate to record different versions of a same song.

He did not trust music notation to fully capture all the sounds, pauses, and individual details of the singer. He did not trust the European music notation system, with its only half-step/whole-step temperament, strict bar lines, and time signatures to accurately reflect the inflections and rhythm

³ <https://www.houshamadyan.org/themes/song/music-gallery/songs-of-lamentation.html>, last accessed 2026-06-19.

of Armenian music. In the same manner, he did not trust written script to truly reflect the phonetic and prosodic particularities of the singer's dialect enunciation. He insisted on documenting on tape stories and songs, wanting to also preserve the peculiarities of the vocal rendition of the songsters—voice tremors, the breathing, the occasional slips and the mood of the songsters, in one word—the whole emotional realm of the song.

Later, as he prepared his findings for publication, he insisted that the original materials on CDs always accompany the music notes and lyrics of the songs. Guided by Komitas's paradigm, Alahaidoyan conducted a comparative study of each song he discovered. Moreover, every song was accompanied by a glossary of dialectal words and idioms specific to it and its origin. He published two such books: *An Ethno-Musicological Collection of Palou and its Neighboring Areas* in 2009 and *Van-Vasbouragan Ethnological Typical Song Samples (From Author's Collection)* in 2015.

After 2011, he also published many songs on the Houshamadyan.org website.

Bedros Alahaidoyan would encourage his songsters to also sing and narrate in languages other than Armenian, knowing very well that in some regions of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were forbidden from speaking Armenian, and they poured out their hearts in other languages.

His recording sessions would turn into family and community gatherings. One person would begin to sing something, another would join, another would prompt. And, galvanized by Alahaidoyan's questions and promptings, one after the other, songs and stories would resurface in the memories of the survivors to be immortalized on Alahaidoyan's tape recorder.

When listening to the sonic documents recorded by Alahaidoyan, one realizes the method and meticulousness with which Alahaidoyan documented a comprehensive “profile” of his informants. For example, in a 1989 recording from Derik, Syria, featuring 88-year-old Hovsep Hagopian, originally from Slivan in the Tigranakert province of Western Armenia, before singing, Hagopian recounts his life: the start of the deportations, how a Kurdish man helped his family reach Syria, but then murdered his mother when she refused his advances, and how he, Hovsep Hagopian, a 17-year-old teenager, avenged his mother and killed her assassin.

He then sings a well-known dance-song about the 1898 Battle of the Watermill in Ruins in Sasun, Western Armenia, where Armenian fedayees clashed with Turkish and Kurdish joined forces [5, pp. 167–169].⁴ Knowing a Kurdish version existed, knowing that Kurds sang the praises of fedayees as well, Alahaidoyan asks Hagopian to sing the Kurdish version too, producing an invaluable recording that corroborates these historical facts. It is the famous song “Araqel, Mushegh lernerits ijan” (Araqel, Mushegh, came down the mountains).⁵

Unbeknownst to him, Alahaidoyan has, in a way, also documented snapshots of the history of the Armenian Diaspora. In his continuous endeavor to document the stories of the survivors, he has also documented the evolving realities of Armenian communities, many of which were affected by wars and upheavals. And Alahaidoyan's documentation is twice as valuable now.

He also returned to some of the non-Armenian inhabitants of Anatolia, mostly through Houshamadyan.org, pieces of their collective memory that the authorities are fervently trying to extinguish. For example, in 2022, Kurdish singer Ali Doğan Gönültaş referred to Alahaidoyan's collection for his CD *Kghi* [6].

Bedros Alahaidoyan passed away in 2022, in Glendale, California, surrounded by his loved ones, aching over the new sufferings of the homeland. Per his wish, the majority of his large

⁴ A detailed account of the battle is brought in the memoirs of the famous freedom fighter Ruben Ter-Minassian.

⁵ *Alahaidoyan, B.*, personal sound archive, Syria, 1989.

collection is now housed at the Institute of Arts of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia. Another part is in the United States with the UCLA Armenian Music Program.

Alahaidoyan had his own system of numbering and classifying his recordings. He immediately made copies of them, on the spot. He also took precautions not to look suspicious at border controls with his rather large number of cassettes. The cassettes of his recordings made in Syria, for example, start with Arabic and European pop songs of the time. He humorously recounts one such episode in his first published book. [1, p. 68]. The majority of his archive is now digitized and in the process of being catalogued.

Many Armenian folk music ensembles have included songs unearthed by Alahaidoyan in their regular repertoire. His collection is an invaluable source not only for musicians but also for historians, ethnographers, dialectologists, and especially for scholars studying the Armenian Genocide.

Bedros Alahaidoyan believed that by bringing the music of the lost homeland to light, it would be infused with new life and become part of people's everyday lives again, perhaps in a new form, but true to the original essence. He was convinced that through this, the lost homeland would breathe a new life.

It is impossible to disagree with him, especially when it comes to rural folk songs, what Alahaidoyan called “տնհմիկ երգեր” and searched for the most. This is one of the reasons why the dissertation of the author focuses on rural songs preserved in his archive.

The deciphering of lyrics will naturally entail cross-disciplinary research into different language as well as music dialects and into Armenian history. In addition to transcribing the tunes - using a now-developed elaborate music notation system- the work on the music will require the creation of a searchable database of entries of Alahaidoyan's songs.

It is just as important to situate each recording in its time, place, and historical context, which requires deeper investigation and repeated cross-checking- through language analysis, comparison of dialects, oral-history work, and archival confirmation.

C O N C L U S I O N: Bedros Alahaidoyan was a noble soul who, singlehandedly and against all odds, accomplished the work of many. The mission he has assigned to himself was to save from oblivion the songs and stories of the lost homeland. He believed deeply in the spirit of the Armenian people. He believed that any salvaged song fragment also signified the salvaging of the native land that had borne it.

In this sense, Bedros Alahaidoyan's endeavor is truly a remarkable feat

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Տեղեկություններ հեղինակի մասին

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