

# Nina G. Garsoïan: A Professor Who Incubated Scholars, a Scholar Who Vitalized an Historical Era<sup>1</sup>

Dickran Kouymjian

I met Nina Garsoïan a half century ago, when she came to Columbia University's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literature to teach Armenian studies; specifically, Armenian history, as a part-time visiting professor while continuing fulltime at Smith College, where she had started teaching in 1956 while finishing her doctoral dissertation for Columbia. The commute for her was weekly from Northampton, Massachusetts, to Manhattan, and she made it for three years, after which she returned to her alma mater as the fulltime associate professor of a newly revitalized Armenian discipline. Only now as I think back do I realize that I too some years later got caught up in a much longer academic commute between Paris and Fresno, California.

I had arrived in New York a year earlier, in 1961, as a doctoral student in the Near Eastern Department in Armenian and Turkic studies, after completing an M.A. in Arab Studies at the American University of Beirut. The choice of this university was made because I was hired as an instructor in the Humanities Program of Columbia College based on my teaching experience in a like program at the American University. This provided a modest income and free tuition. Armenian language and culture was then taught by a parttime lecturer who relied on students given almost automatic scholarships by the Armenian General Benevolent Union to cover the high cost of tuition for any student who would enroll.

As is already evident I have been unsuccessful in avoiding a pitfall I anticipated shortly after accepting the unexpected invitation to pay homage to Nina Garsoïan, namely: Is it possible to explain a

---

<sup>1</sup> Talk delivered on April 12, 2013, at "L'Arménie entre l'Iran, Byzance et la Russie: Journée d'études en hommage de Madame Nina G. Garsoïan," Fondation Simone et Cino del Duca, Paris.

relationship with a person so important to one's formation without including one's self in the narrative? I was not sure, especially when I indicated to Professor Calzolari that I would be talking more about the person I have known than analyzing her intellectual achievements, which others would certainly address. Thus, looking back on the relationship is in fact reflecting on an important part of my own life and journey in the jungle of academia with all of its dazzling colors and landscapes and its many strange creatures.

It is perhaps important to point out that when Nina Garsoïan began teaching the specialty she became famous for, the larger discipline of Oriental Studies, as they were and still are sometimes called in Europe, was passing through a transition in the United States, one that would impose a new perspective on the components of the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean world, the Holy Land, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, as well as Iran and the Caucasus. The traditional elements of the discipline—ancient languages, philology, patristics, history, archaeology—and the established chronological parameters—pre- and ancient history of the Near East, the classical, late antique and early Christianity world, and medieval and post-medieval times—were being challenged by the perceived needs of western governments, particularly that of the U.S., to accommodate the need for skilled personnel able to deal with the international competition that began to rage ferociously during a new power struggle known as the Cold War.

The result was the phenomenon of “area studies.” Philology and training in classical and ancient languages slowly gave way to a broader view of the study of the Near East and its cultures, with a de-emphasis on so-called dead languages and the introduction of a heavy dose of social sciences, not history, but political science and sociology, combined with a vital interest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than the traditional mastery of the ancient and medieval world. The latter were relegated to the position of necessary introductions for the real work, the study of the present. Government resources were poured into this venture of “area studies” with massive federal scholarship programs for the study of modern Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and of course Russian, under various names usually beginning with word title—Title IV, Title V, and so forth.

This shift toward area studies was nearly concomitant with another phenomenon which was to affect our discipline, namely the mushrooming of “studies” of all kinds, in particular ethnic studies, which in many universities eventually gave room for women's studies and then gender studies and other studies that those of a younger generation can enumerate much better than I. If one searches for a common denominator, it might be to lump time periods and geographical areas together, to accept a wider approach to scholarship by enhancing the importance of sociology, psychology, economics, and political science, and underplaying, or in some cas-

es eliminating, philology and ancient languages. Such new fields as Middle Eastern Studies also allowed a certain permissiveness: for instance, scholars who wanted to do research on Islamic North Africa or the Fertile Crescent, but had poor or no Arabic, could pursue their interests by learning French or Italian and concentrating on colonial documents or excellent secondary sources. Another expeditious maneuver to accommodate the need for instant experts was the accelerated doctoral programs, championed by Princeton University, for example, where a young college graduate could enroll directly in the program without passing through the heretofore mandatory masters degree and its thesis, saving two or three years and becoming a Ph.D. when only twenty-five or twenty-six years old.

It is precisely in this context that the determined effort to develop the study of Armenian history and culture within the American university system sprung up, with the founding in Boston of the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR) in 1955, having as its first expressed goal the establishment of a permanent chair of Armenian Studies at Harvard University, considered then the most prestigious institution of higher education in North America.

Nina Garsoĭan was plunged into this effervescent moment in the evolution of Middle Eastern and eventually Armenian Studies, with a training and worldview resembling more the European orientalist than the new breed of American “studies” specialists. At Columbia University she could not have felt more at home, because when I arrived, among the twenty-four or twenty-five professors and language instructors in the Department, nearly all, certainly 90 per cent, were born or trained in Europe, among them scholars such as Joseph Schacht, Tibor Halasi-Kun, Ihsan Yarshater, and Karl Menges. The hiring of Nina Garsoĭan as a Visiting Professor of Armenian Studies was a confirmation of a growing trend already manifest with Avedis Sanjian and Robert Thomson at Harvard.

Moving into fast-forward for a moment, the so-called NAASR phenomenon led to endowed positions fully or partially funded by that organization not just at the two east coast institutions but also at the University of California in Los Angeles, home to Gustave von Grunebaum, a *transfuge* from Harvard who soon invited Prof. Sanjian to join up. This mushrooming of programs also included modern history, with Richard Hovannisian attracting a large group of young scholars devoted to recent times, the “studies” part rather than the traditional language and textual pursuits. This “studies” movement created a kind of schizophrenia between the traditional European orientalist and the new political and social science advocate of the modern period, which in the Armenian case included genocide studies, a totally new field.

In 1974 at the November meeting in Boston of the Middle East Studies Association, a professional society formed five years earlier to reflect the new interest in modern area studies, it was de-

cided by scholars of Armenian in attendance to form an auxiliary or ancillary organization directly tied to MESA. Under the organizational leadership of Prof. Hovannisian, the Society of Armenian Studies was founded, which was to serve as a model for the formation a decade later of its European counterpart, l'Association Internationale des Études Arméniennes under whose auspices we meet today to honor Nina Garsoïan. Four of the five founding members of the Society—Richard Hovannisian, Avedis Sanjian, Nina Garsoïan, Robert Thomson, and myself—three of whom are present today, decided unanimously that Professor Garsoïan should serve as the first president; she graciously accepted.

This is not the moment to discuss the histories of SAS or AIEA and their approach to Armenology. The “orientalists” saw serious scholarship reflected in the kind of articles published in the *Revue des études arméniennes*, while the “studies” group felt the need for a periodical that would also cater to, or at least entertain, modern studies, such as the *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* started in 1984. Nor is this the place to analyze the consequence of these two, perhaps artificially, different approaches, because our work today is devoted to the career of Prof. Garsoïan.

This excursus, however, was intended to contextualize the decade of the 1960s in which Nina Garsoïan began to form scholars in Armenology and I began the serious study of Armenian history. There was a certain excitement among those of us studying in the Department and interested in Armenian when the news spread that a Columbia alumna was coming back to establish a more consistent and hopefully permanent program in the fall of 1962. From the beginning of the fall term, Professor Garsoïan would drive down to New York each week for her class in Armenian history held in seminar fashion in her office in Kent Hall. Her critical approach to the discipline from pre-history to early modern times was to mark my own later teaching of the Armenian saga. Her instruction was a meticulous, methodological, and clear presentation of events and currents within the context of Armenia's neighbors to the west, the Roman and Byzantine world, and east, the various Iranian dynasties, the Arab conquest, the Turkic and Mongol invasions, and the Turko-Persian successor states culminating in the Safavid-Ottoman and eventually Russian rivalry. She emphasized a critical approach to the sources and always referred to Hagop Manandian's *Knnakan desutiwn hay zhoghvordi patmutedan* (A Critical Examination of the History of the Armenian People), the four-volume history based on primary sources, whose narrative unfortunately ended just shortly after 1400. It was during these years that she translated and was seeing through the press Manandian's *The Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*, and I can remember how proud I was to have been asked to help edit its index and look at other parts.

Prof. Garsoĭan's Armenian history course was not a simple matter, but a long continuum of events started in her first class in September 1962 only to end four semesters and two years later in May 1964. I was enthralled by the ritual: a few of us seated around her desk while she presented and discussed what often seemed arcane events using as a guide her own neatly written pen and ink narrative on 8 1/2 by 11 inch sheets of pink colored paper, which I assumed was some sort of "official issue" from Smith College. I tried to take verbatim notes on smaller pads, which I carefully guarded and ultimately had bound into a single volume a few years later in Cairo. At some point, either then as part of my review and preparation for examinations or to keep as an eventual reference tool, I typed out the notes, with one or two carbon copies, which I guarded preciously in a binder. Later when I began to teach Armenian history in Cairo, Beirut, Fresno, and at INALCO here in Paris, I too tried to use a four-semester sequence. I also distinctly remember her excellent seminar on Armenian historiography, where we students had to prepare detailed individual dossiers on each of the major historians from the beginning of Armenian letters into the very early modern period. During the recent celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Armenian printing, I was reminded again of the intellectual debt I owed to Nina Garsoĭan for her carefully prepared presentations on the Armenian merchant class of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the enlightenment movements of the eighteenth.

There were also other fringe benefits that Dr. Garsoĭan brought along in those first years. For instance I remember a memorable ride probably from Boston after a conference when Nina chauffeured me along with a group of her young students from Smith, which was then an exclusive girls college. Some of these "Smithies," as I called them, also graced her Columbia seminars. Among my classmates during the three years I studied with Prof. Garsoĭan, culminating in doctoral exams in 1965 after which I worked in earnest on my dissertation, there was of course Ronald Suny, who came to Columbia after me, but got his degree in Russian Studies a year before I got mine in Armenian. There was also Benon Kouyoumdjian from Cyprus, who during those years changed his name to Benon Sevan and later became an assistant secretary general of the United Nations; the late Corrine Heditsian, who eventually went into the diplomatic corps and caught up with us in Cairo and later Paris; Loretta Nassar, and others. When I was finally able to get back to New York in the spring of 1969 to defend my thesis, completed under Nina Garsoĭan for its historical and Armenian dimensions and Dr. George Miles for the numismatic side, I remember meeting some of Prof. Garsoĭan's younger doctoral candidates: Levon Avdoyan, who later transformed and expanded the Armenian holdings of the Library of Congress into a major research resource; my old friends Ralph Setian and his wife Sosy; Jack Var-

toogian, who, after completing his thesis on seventeenth century travellers to Armenia, went on to become one of the great photographers of dance in New York; Krikor, now Fr. Krikor, Maksoudian, who seemed to know everything; and Robert Bedrossian, whose online translations of primary Armenian sources have been rather handy. I do not remember just when I met James Russell who was in that group, but I had heard about him already when as valedictorian of his class at Columbia College he gave the commencement speech in classical Armenian! In this context one might also mention Sergio La Porta, my successor as the second incumbent of the Haig and Isabel Berberian Endowed Chair of Armenian Studies at California State University, Fresno, who received his B.A. from Columbia College and went on to take his doctorate at Harvard with Prof. Russell, continuing a chain of Armenian Studies which seemed always to lead back to Nina Garsoïan. And though Prof. La Porta was never Nina's student he has told me with affection how she took him under her wing during his first academic conference in Louvain in the mid-1990s.

There was also a succession of young scholars who were recruited by Prof. Garsoïan to teach at Columbia: Krikor Maksoudian, her student, Peter Cowe, now the Naregatsi Professor of Armenian Studies at UCLA, and several others.

During those Manhattan years and after, I, along with my wife-to-be Angèle, had the pleasure to know Nina in real life, as they say, outside the domain of the academy. In 1962 or early 1963, I had moved uptown from Greenwich Village, literally around the corner from Nina and her mother Inna Garsoïan's apartment on 79<sup>th</sup> street. The natural hospitality and the cosmopolitan life of the two-woman Garsoïan household counted a great deal for me in so many ways. One of the greatest treats was being invited, impromptu, for dinner, always with a delicious soup served in pewter bowls. I remember Inna Ivanovna as very distinguished and always gracious, with a perfect chignon and a certain breathless enthusiasm when she spoke. Her occasional stories, or Nina's retelling of them, about the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in Paris and New York for which she painted sets and designed costumes, made me wonder, as I prepared these reminiscences, if we ever talked about Leon Danielian, the remarkable dancer of the New York troop, whom I knew after he had retired from direct stage performance to teaching. But the Garsoïans knew everyone: artists, musicians, intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic as anyone knows who has read Nina's fascinating autobiography *De Vita Sua* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011) with its profound reflection on her life and our discipline.

The Garsoïan apartment was for me a sanctuary of the arts filled with Nina's vast library with distinctive Venetian bindings, color-coded by discipline. Her mother's paintings were everywhere. I still remember vividly a very large one predominantly in amazing

shades of green, a lagoon scene, perhaps painted from the Zattere in Venice, a city full of indelible memories, not always happy, for both mother and daughter. Perhaps I felt so at home because of the third member of their family, Tigran, Nina's remarkable and ever present Van cat, with its magnificent grey-blue fur coat. From the beginning I was Tigran and never Dickran.

Nina was a multi-talented youth destined to be a concert pianist and was only later, fortunately for us who have benefited, side-tracked to archaeology and history. I was struck back then to hear, for instance, that she had close ties through her Paris connections to the composer Virgil Thomson, whose music, at least in those days, I admired.

It was in the New York apartment she continues to occupy that my wife Angèle met Nina for the first time at a party she had given for her graduate students. In many respects studying with Nina Garsoĭan also prepared me for my close ties with Sirarpie Der Nersessian and Haĭg Berbĕrian, who became as important to my academic career as they had been for hers. Some years later, my in-laws invited Nina for dinner in Paris, in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement where they lived and where Nina was born and grew up; I was reminded that Frédéric and Hermine Feydit, friends of the Kapoĭan family, were also invited to that dinner. It was only after her retirement and her own apartment in the Marais that we would again see each other more regularly.

Nina Garsoĭan's post retirement reintegration into the academic life of Paris as an Orientalist in the traditional sense is a logical consequence of what has happened in recent years to Armenology at Columbia, Michigan, and to a lesser extent at Harvard and UCLA with the continued emphasis on "area studies". Yet, her students or younger scholars she directly influenced are prevalent almost everywhere in American and European academic circles interested in pursuing the unraveling of Armenian history and culture without an ethnic or nationalistic determinant. Does the recent trend of teaching by internet, that is the virtual elimination of the customary teacher-student relationship or personalized mentoring, coupled with the now familiar questioning of the utility of higher studies in humanistic disciplines, announce the decline, perhaps the demise, of the kind of scholarship that Nina Garsoĭan, her students, her colleagues, that is all of us, have devoted a lifetime of research, teaching, and reflection to? This celebration of Nina Garsoĭan's career serves to demonstrate, and dramatically so, that she, and with her the discipline and its practitioners, are pushing forward and with remarkable persistence and an explosion of new perspectives. We thank you Nina.



Nina G. Garsoian with Robert W. Thomson and Emmanuel P. Varandyan at NAASR Conference on the Armenian Language, 1964.