

Rev. James Karnusian, Retired Pastor and One of Three Persons to Establish ASALA, Dies in Switzerland

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Abstract (summary)

The late Rev. Karnusian, together with Hagop Hagopian, the legendary leader who was murdered in Athens a few years ago, presumably by former ASALA men who opposed him for his type of rude and often violent leadership of the underground organization, and a third person from Beirut, Lebanon, who is still alive, got together in the early 1970's to create the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia - ASALA for short. Their aim was to bring to the forefront Armenian issues, mainly the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Turks and attendant unresolved issues, through the activities of that group.

In an interview with Edward K. Boghosian, conducted over the course of a week in the summer of 1987 on the Greek island of Mykonos, the late Rev. Karnusian confided to the interviewer about his involvement with ASALA on the condition that the interview would not be published as long as he was alive. He told Mr. Boghosian how, with ASALA on the condition that the interview would not be published as long as he was alive. He told Mr. Boghosian how, with two other associates, including Hagop Hagopian, ASALA was created to give a new breadth and dimension to the Armenian Cause and to rescue it from oblivion. He admitted that ASALA was created at the urging of another intense Armenian patriot and thinker, the late Simon Simonian of Beirut, Lebanon, who conceived the guidelines to give new dimensions to the Armenian cause, dimensions which would be drastically different from those offered by the traditional Armenian political parties.

A few days before the Congress convened, recalled Karnusian, [Hagopian] ordered it canceled, arguing that he was not ready for a second such international confab. "Despite my repeated demands," explained Karnusian, "for an explanation why the conference had to be canceled, Hagopian disdainfully refused to provide any, as by then he had become a despotic leader, who sought to take credit for all aspects of ASALA's achievements."

Full Text

Rev. James Karnusian, Retired Pastor and One of Three Persons to Establish ASALA, Dies in Switzerland

Rev. James Karnusian, one of three individuals who were instrumental in the creation of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) in the early 1970's, passed away in Moosseedorf, a suburb of Bern, the capital of Switzerland, April 8 at the age of 72. His interment occurred on Tuesday, April 14.

The cause of his death, according to his widow, was health complications brought about by kidney failure.

The late Rev. Karnusian was a profound Armenian patriot. Even though he lived and worked most of his adult life in the German-speaking section of Switzerland, away from the mainstream of Armenian life, and in the Swiss resort town of Gstaad, where he was the only Armenian, he was always preoccupied and concerned with the future of his people, both in Armenia and in the Diaspora.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Rev. Karnusian studied in Greece and Switzerland and was later, in 1960, ordained a minister in the German Protestant Church. He served that church all of his adult life till his retirement a few years ago, when he left Gstaad, the winter playground of the rich and famous, to live in a suburb of Bern.

Rev. Karnusian was also instrumental in organizing the two World Armenian Congresses, which were held first in Paris, France and then Lausanne, Switzerland in 1979 and 1983 respectively.

The late Rev. Karnusian, together with Hagop Hagopian, the legendary leader who was murdered in Athens a few years ago, presumably by former ASALA men who opposed him for his type of rude and often violent leadership of the underground organization, and a third person from Beirut, Lebanon, who is still alive, got together in the early 1970's to create the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia - ASALA for short. Their aim was to bring to the forefront Armenian issues, mainly the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Turks and attendant unresolved issues, through the activities of that group.

As is recalled, ASALA organized and carried out a series of terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of several dozen Turkish diplomats stationed in overseas countries. At the time of such terrorist attacks, the attention of the whole world became riveted on Armenian issues, leading to frequent discussion of how Armenians suffered at the hands of the Ottoman leaders. In short, ASALA succeeded in placing the Armenian Cause at the forefront of the international scene.

The achievements of ASALA led the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, the Dashnak party, to create its own underground terrorist organization, the Justice Commandos of Armenian Genocide, to prevent party youth from switching allegiance and joining ASALA. REVEALING INTERVIEW

In an interview with Edward K. Boghosian, conducted over the course of a week in the summer of 1987 on the Greek island of Mykonos, the late Rev. Karnusian confided to the interviewer about his involvement with ASALA on the condition that the interview would not be published as long as he was alive. He told Mr. Boghosian how, with ASALA on the condition that the interview would not be published as long as he was alive. He told Mr. Boghosian how, with two other associates, including Hagop Hagopian, ASALA was created to give a new breadth and dimension to the Armenian Cause and to rescue it from oblivion. He admitted that ASALA was created at the urging of another intense Armenian patriot and thinker, the late

Simon Simonian of Beirut, Lebanon, who conceived the guidelines to give new dimensions to the Armenian cause, dimensions which would be drastically different from those offered by the traditional Armenian political parties.

Mr. Simonian was a prominent educator, writer, author and, for many years publisher of "Spiurk," an independent Armenian weekly, in Beirut, Lebanon. Mr. Simonian had met Hagop Hagopian while the latter was involved in the Palestinian liberation movement.

The three founders of ASALA each held responsibilities in the underground organization, with Rev. Karnusian involved in the political aspects of the operation. The minister acknowledged that plans for the first terrorist attack against Turkish diplomats was conceived and the first explosive was assembled in secrecy at his own home in Gstaad. **PREMATURE EXPLOSION**

Plans of this attack failed to materialize when the explosive prematurely exploded as it was being checked out in a hotel room in Geneva, wounding Mr. Alex Yenikomshian of Beirut, Lebanon. Miss Suzy Mahserjian, a young girl from Los Angeles, his associate, survived the explosion with little or no injuries.

Rev. Karnusian explained that the explosion was set off when Alex Yenikomshian tried to check out the explosive's triggering mechanism, using a tweezer borrowed from Suzy. He revealed that the first operation in Europe against Turkish diplomats would have taken place in Paris; after the attack and provided the perpetrators escaped and survive, they were all to meet in Milan, Italy to celebrate their victory.

"The explosion in the Geneva hotel room was accidentally set off," Karnusian remembered. **COMPLETELY BLINDED**

Mr. Yenikomshian a bright young man from a prominent Armenian family in Beirut, lost his eyesight and is presently completely blinded with no hopes of ever seeing the light of day. He is believed to presently live in Lebanon. Last fall, he was seen in Yerevan, Armenia, the first time he ever visited Armenia.

Suzy Mahserjian is married to Markar Melkonian, brother of American-Armenian hero Monte Melkonian, and is believed to be living in San Francisco Bay area where they are raising a family. Monte was killed in combat during the liberation war for Karabagh.

Rev. Karnusian recalled that the French Secret Service, unknown to them, photographed his meeting with Mr. Hagopian and the third leader during an encounter in Lyon, France. "We suspected being followed at this meeting. A few days later, three French secret service agents visited me in my home and showed the photo taken. I did not deny that I was with Hagopian, but they left with a warning that I should not associate with him since they could not prove that I had any role in a string of terrorist activities in France and in other European countries. **FALLING OUT WITHIN LEADERSHIP**

The three ASALA leaders soon went through a falling out over the manner in which the organization would move and function or who would be the top leader. The two men in the partnership accused Hagop Hagopian, a native of Mosul, Iraq, who had assumed a leading role in organizing terrorist attacks against Turkish targets, of running the underground organization with an iron hand and selling himself to foreign countries, including Libya whose leader one time funded ASALA's terrorist activities.

Rev. Karnusian and the third person in the triumvirate of ASALA leadership charged Hagopian with taking money and orders from other countries to stage bombings which did not have anything to do with Armenians or the Armenian Cause.

"I personally witnessed a case," confided Karnusian "when Hagopian took orders from Libya and then phoned ASALA operatives in France to stage bombings on behalf of these Arab countries."

Rev. Karnusian spent considerable time in organizing the first World Armenian Congress in Hotel Nikko in Paris, France in 1979. His plans called for the creation of a worldwide Armenian political organization to take advantage of the international ruckus the series of bombings and terrorist acts had raised on the political front. He said he realized that the continued killing of Turkish diplomats would not resolve the Armenian Cause nor would it effect results. He maintained that success in terrorism must be converted into political gains. He was, however, disappointed, noting that Hagopian had resorted to terrorism to uphold and protect his own role in the organization's leadership and held little interest in converting the movement into a political venture.

The Paris conference was well attended by as many as 400 Armenians from all over the world. The second conference, held in Lausanne in 1983, in the very same hotel where the Treaty of Lausanne had been signed sixty years earlier, was less successful, as the rift between Hagopian and the two other leaders had grown deeper and to the extent that the leadership was split halfway. **CANCELLATION OF CONGRESS**

A few days before the Congress convened, recalled Karnusian, Hagopian ordered it canceled, arguing that he was not ready for a second such international confab. "Despite my repeated demands," explained Karnusian, "for an explanation why the conference had to be canceled, Hagopian disdainfully refused to provide any, as by then he had become a despotic leader, who sought to take credit for all aspects of ASALA's achievements."

Apparently unable to force Karnusian into canceling the Second World Congress, he ordered the terrorist attack on the Turkish Airlines check-in counter at Orly Airport with the hope that the resulting outrage and apprehension would cause the cancellation of the congress since many participants would withdraw their participation in the Congress in fear of retribution from the Turks.

The original plan was to explode a bomb when the Turkish plane was in the air. The explosive accidentally went off prematurely at the check-in counter, causing the death of a number of Turkish passengers. The attack, nevertheless, accomplished its purpose, as numerous people canceled their participation in the Congress.

Subsequently a handful of Armenian youth were apprehended, convicted and imprisoned. Mr. Varoujan Garabedian, convicted as the leader of the Orly Operation, is presently serving a life sentence in a French prison, although he may soon be released after former President Levon Der Bedrosian interceded with French President Jacques Chirac on his behalf.

Rev. Karnusian considered Hagop Hagopian a military genius, but not a political leader. The latter was associated with the Palestinian underground organizations and had mastered the techniques of terrorist operations. The son of an ARF party member, he had little to do with Armenians once he had grown up. He was introduced to the Armenian liberation movement and to his future associates by the late Simon Simonian, who also helped him raise funds from wealthy Armenians, both in Lebanon and in Europe.

"I recall a telephone conversation," remembered Karnusian, "from Hagop Hagopian demanding from me not to deal with Ara Toranian, claiming that e was an informer and that he would soon be assassinated."

Karnusian further inquired as to what proof or evidence Hagopian had to substantiate his allegation against Toranian, a young French-Armenian attorney, who often acted as the spokesman for ASALA. Hagopian, as before, did not both to provide any proof or elaborate on the matter. **ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS**

Subsequently, Mr. Toranian became the target of more than one assassination attempt in Paris, obviously ordered by Hagopian and carried out by operatives loyal to him. Presently Mr. Toranian lives in Paris and edits Les Nouvelles D'Armenie, a colorful monthly magazine focusing on news and events in Armenia.

The rift and, later the split, of ASALA into two estranged groups subsequently led to collapse of Rev. Karnusian's ultimate plans to turn the terrorists' achievements into political gains for

the Armenian people. He ended his efforts on behalf of his people, retired in isolation in Gstaad - a broken and frustrated man, whose dreams of creating a new Armenian political movement, known as "Armenism," fell short of its goal and was subsequently abandoned.

In 1976, Karnusian published a booklet titled *Return to the Ararat Plateau*, which outlined his vision for the future of the Armenian people. Concluding that the Armenian Diaspora had no future, he called on the creation of a "Pan-Armenian Liberation Movement," which would struggle to have the Diaspora Armenians return to the "Ararat Plateau," their ancestral homeland, which essentially would be the sole place where Armenians will prevail as a people and a national.

Karnusian wrote that "the complex question of liberating our lands and the difficult but sacred mission of returning the Diaspora Armenians to the Ararat Plateau are largely the obligation of the Diaspora." Hence his advocacy of his conviction that the return of the Diaspora can only be realized with the liberation of ancestral Armenian lands, a dream that can become a reality if all Armenians link their resources and efforts.

Following Armenia's independence, Rev. Karnusian travelled there. At one point, he even wanted to settle down there and serve as a minister in one of the Protestant and Evangelical churches. However, he gave up the idea of relocating to Armenia and returned to Switzerland to retire there, away from his own people for whom he was willing to bring new hopes of light and salvation.

A major cause of his despondency was the total alienation of his own family from the roots of their father. Neither his Swiss German wife nor his two sons and three daughters had any interest in the ideals of their husband and father, nor his appendage to their father's Armenian roots, since they had been brought up and grown up as Swiss Germans.

Surviving Rev. Karnusian, in addition to his widow, five children and four grandchildren, are brothers and sisters in Beirut, Lebanon and Canada.