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***TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME***

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

EDITED BY

SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA  
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO



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**Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto**  
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## HAIK BEK-ARAKELOV: AN ARMENIAN OFFICER AND ISLAMIC POET

Harry Halén  
*University of Helsinki*

Haik Minas Suleiman (or Haik Sultan-Minas or Gaik-bek Minas Sultan-ogly) bek-Arakelov (Гайкъ Минасъ Сулейманъ / Гайкъ Султанъ Минасевичъ бекъ-Аракеловъ / Гайкъ-Султанъ-Минасъ Бековичъ Аракеловъ) was born in Tiflis on 26 September 1880 and died as an emigrant after a period of prolonged suffering on 24 September 1944 in Nikkilä near Helsinki. He belonged to an old soldier family of Turkish-Armenian origin with a Muslim background, but he himself was a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church. His forefathers had been Muslims over the centuries, as seen in the composition of his name. His father was an active colonel in the Tiflis *guberniya*. Although sometimes entitled Prince (князь), this rank is missing in the Imperial Army's official listing from 1909 (and no other Arakelovs are found there). The military records state only that he belonged to the nobility, which in Russia does not say much.

### CAREER

Arakelov received his basic schooling at the Tiflis Junker school (cadet corps) and his military training at Pavel's war school. He entered military service in the Imperial Russian Army in 1898 in Caucasia, and he was promoted to lieutenant in 1904. In 1905, he was transferred from the 77th Tenginskaya Infantry Regiment to the 1st Finlyandskii Rifle Regiment. He came from St Petersburg to Helsinki where he met his future wife, the postal apprentice Signe Maria Johansson (née Sitinsky). In 1904, Signe had been married to the postal official Anders Hugo Johansson, but then divorced. Her daughter Ruth was born out of that marriage in 1905. In 1908, Staff Captain Arakelov was transferred to the 3rd Finlyandskii Rifle Regiment.

In 1909–1911, the family lived near the Imperial naval port in the Katajanokka district (Luotsikatu 8 A). Arakelov quickly learnt Swedish, which became their home language. They practised music, and Signe had a fine singing voice. The family lived in poverty, but managed through the severe hardships of that time. In 1913–1914, they lived in Turku (Åbo). After the death of Signe in 1928, left

with four small daughters and a son, Arakelov married Adèle (Adelaida) Karlovna Rafanowitsch (née Fastberg), the daughter of an artillery engineer officer born in 1879 in the Sveaborg sea fortress of Helsinki.<sup>1</sup>

WWI brought about a decisive change in their life. Arakelov served at the front and could seldom see his family. He is said to have fought on the Galician front, so his unit must have been mobilized with the 22nd Army Corps, which had left Finland in August–September 1914 for the IXth Army on the Southwestern Front, where it saw the first part of the battles in Galicia and the Chenstokhovo-Kraków operation. In 1916, he served with a captain's rank in the 16th Finlyandskii Rifle Regiment. After recovering at home from an illness, in September 1916 he was ordered to the 74th Reserve Infantry Regiment. Arakelov reports that he was captured during the Russian Revolution on 15 September 1917 and then imprisoned in the town of Bykhov in the Mogilyov *guberniya* of White Russia, together with General Lavr Kornilov and other White staff officers who had been betrayed to the enemy. As a colonel, Arakelov later volunteered his services to Koltchak and the North Russian White Army of General Miller in Murmansk.<sup>2</sup>

In July 1920, Arakelov applied for Finnish citizenship and in 1922–1923 he lived in Oulunkylä north of Helsinki, earning a scanty livelihood from odd jobs like loading firewood in Sörnäinen. His property was sold or pawned, with a wife sick in the hospital and three daughters between one and eleven years of age. The Finnish Red Cross provided financial aid to his family, as it did to many other impoverished Russian emigrants at that time. Well-versed in French, Arakelov tried to teach language classes, but then he was again necessitated to find various other jobs. The daily struggle was difficult for a man devoid of business skills, yet he could give his last coins to street-children to buy ice cream. In 1910, he placed an advertisement in a periodical, offering for sale a new unused violin and a writing table, although only ten days earlier he had been seeking a cook capable of Russian cuisine.<sup>3</sup> The premature death of his lovely wife left him helpless and without bearing. In order to improve his chances, some years later he moved to Paris, but he had to return the same year, disappointed and in self-denial. Finally he could do nothing but apply for social support; having a proud and sensitive mind, he naturally felt this to be deeply humiliating. The place of his death, Nikkilä, is best known for its mental hospital.

1 Адресь-Календарь на 1911 годъ. Гельсингфорсъ 1911; Baschmakoff & Leinonen 2011: 471; Luettelo täällä olevista venäläisistä (no. 244). (Bbc 5).

2 National Archives: Russian military documents. VeSA 13033: Arakelov's military records (1907); Ministry of the Interior: VN AD 3691/451/1920.

3 *Hufvudstadsbladet* 3.3.1910: 12, 13.3.1910: 14.

## LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS

One day Arakelov showed up at the reception of a physician and presented in his temperamental way that Prophet Muhammad had appeared to him. Arakelov answered questions by delivering his work, *Arabia and Muhammad*, which he had published in Russian with the support of a local Muslim, allegedly one of the wealthy Tatar merchants in Helsinki. He told people – as well as his daughters, who had heard the typewriter rattle night after night – that the text had been dictated by Muhammad. Obviously his difficult situation produced such a strong impact on his subconscious mind that it manifested in the form of Muhammad standing before him, taking him back to the marvelous world of his childhood.

Arakelov confesses that he had always cherished Islamic culture and its great Prophet. Thanks to his father, who knew several oriental languages, including Arabic, Arakelov was very knowledgeable about the history of the Orient and the legends surrounding Muhammad. Aside from stories that he had heard from his father, for his stanzas he used the Russian translation of Washington Irving's *Life of Mahomet* (1850; Russian translation, St Petersburg 1875).

It is said that Arakelov was a dreamer and fan of literature more than a soldier. About the purpose of his poems, Arakelov says that he just wanted to offer his modest work to all history lovers, particularly those fond of the Orient, giving them a possibility to become acquainted in a poetic form with this subject that had not lost its interest. He especially had in mind the young generation of Russian emigrants thirsting for knowledge. The resulting work about Arabia and Muhammad is entitled *Аравія и Мухаммедъ. Поэма, часть 1-я. (главы 1-5). / За рубежомъ. Сборник стихотворений* (Гельсингфорсъ 1933, 128 pp.).

In the first part of the book, Chapter 1 (pp. 5–76) opens with a geographical description of Arabia and deals with old legends concerning the origin of Arabs; Chapter 2 treats Near Eastern beliefs prevalent before Muhammad; Chapter 3 gives the lineage of Muhammad and his birth; Chapter 4 offers legends about Mecca, Ka'ba and the sacred well of Zam-Zam; and Chapter 5 discusses Muhammad's first caravan journey as a boy to Syria. At the end, the author promises a continuation to the poem. A journal publication describes the work as a major historic-theological poem cycle, which aroused considerable and reverent attention in the Russian Muslim and oriental world. In the stanzas, the author puts forward his opinion that he himself might very well be a descendant of the sons of the Arabian desert. Since his childhood, he has dreamt of a bow on his back – and how else, he asks, could his love for the ancient Orient be explained?

The second part of the book (pp. 77–128) contains various poems meant generally for Russian emigrants. The first poem is dedicated to Caucasia. The author is

longing for his native land of Aragva (north of Akhalkalaki in Georgia), as well as the brave Georgian Khevsuri and Pshav peoples. In his opinion, all Caucasians are like twins. Two poems (one in French) are dedicated to Finland. Several poems describe his experiences in WWI and feelings in prison with his brave fellow-officers. One piece is dedicated to the death of Lermontov and Pushkin, another to the musician and actor Boris Wittenberg (\*1910), the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Sigismund Wittenberg, chief secretary of the Helsinki Evacuation Commission (*Likvidatsionnaya komissiya*) and former comrade-in-arms from the Murmansk Front. Some quite monotonous and sentimental love poems complete the collection. The author mainly emulates Pushkin-style rhymed quatrains. The National Library of Finland holds Arakelov's posthumous manuscripts, which contain more poems written in his large and very neat hand (*Гайкъ М. бекъ Аракеловъ, Сборникъ Неизданныхъ стихотворений*). Among these one can meet Armenia, Ararat, Arax River, the Echmiadzin, Kazbek, Kakhetian wine, Queen Tamara, Jesus Christ, and even St Petersburg in the author's nostalgic memories. As an appendix, there are several emendations to his numerous poems entitled "Caucasia". His stanzas are full of longing for faraway countries visited by nobody and where celestial love prevails. The poems were written in 1934–1938. Some of them were published in Swedish translation.<sup>4</sup>

It might be that the difficult conditions of Arakelov's life produced escapist dreamlands as an ideal and safe dwelling place. The hard reality had become a nightmare to him, from which he woke up in remote Caucasia, the promised land of his youth. He became alien to everything surrounding him in the cold North. And although he had warm fatherly feelings towards his own children, he somehow stayed outside their sphere of life. "You, are you *really* my children?" he would repeatedly ask. His heavy gaze turned more and more languishing and pining, while homesickness filled his soul to the brim. He could never see his native country again, but he constantly dwelled there in nostalgic dreams. However, returning to Soviet Georgia or Armenia may perhaps have been a new and unbearable shock to him. Finally death freed his shattered mind from the merciless fate of unbearable poverty, sickness, and longing.<sup>5</sup> Haik Arakelov was buried in the most remote southwest corner of the cemetery of the Helsinki Orthodox Congregation. No trace of his tomb there remains.

4 "Bortom gränsen" – *Helsingfors-journalen* no. 14 (7.7.1934): 334 (three poems in Swedish translated by Rafael Lindqvist: "Finland", "Varför?", "I går").

5 Glip, "Ett människoöde" – *Astra* 12 (1.12.1944): 274–275, 295.

## SAMPLES OF ARAKELOV'S STANZAS

<p>О, Мухаммед, пророкъ Великій,  Мой трудъ прими, благослови;  Въ стихахъ пишу Твой быть арабскій  Съ волненьемъ автора къ крови.</p>	<p>Oh, Muhammed, the Great Prophet,  Receive my work and bless it;  In verse I describe Your Arabian life  With the author's blood boiling.</p>
— — —	
<p>Пошли мнѣ силу вдохновенья  И просвѣти мой слабый умъ,  Пророкъ земли, Твои мышленья,  Есть океанъ великихъ думъ.</p>	<p>Send me the power of enthusiasm  And enlighten my weak intellect,  Prophet of the earth, Your thoughts,  Are an ocean of immense ideas.</p>
— — —	
<p>Кочевники степи обширной  Хранили въ полной чистотѣ  Характеръ націи отважной,  Въ ея наивной простотѣ.</p>	<p>The nomads of the vast steppe  Have preserved in its full purity  The character of the brave nation,  In its naive simplicity.</p>
— — —	
<p>Передъ концомъ шестого вѣка,  По исчисленіямъ христіанъ,  Послало небо человѣка,  Который далъ намъ Эль-Коранъ.</p>	<p>Before the end of the sixth century,  according to the style of the Christians,  The heaven sent a human being,  Who gave us the El-Koran.</p>
— — —	
<p>Года проходятъ незамѣтно,  И подрастаетъ Мухаммедъ,  Любимый дядей беззавѣтно,  Достигъ онъ отроческихъ лѣтъ.</p>	<p>The years roll on without notice,  And Muhammed is growing up,  Being definitely dear to his uncle,  He came to the age of boyhood.</p>
— — —	
<p>Въ немъ духъ всезнанія проснулся,  Все хотеть знать пылливый умъ,  Чего бы только не коснулся,  Все зарождаетъ много думъ.</p>	<p>The spirit of omniscience awoke in him,  The searching mind wants to know  everything,  Nothing at all was left outside its scope,  Everything wakes up many thoughts.</p>
— — —	

Коранъ и весь народъ Ислама Высоко ставитъ нашъ Заѣтъ; А где у насъ храмъ Авраама	The Koran and the whole people of Islam have our Testament in high esteem; But where among us did the temple of Abraham
Нашель вполнѣ достойный свѣтъ?...	receive its wholly deserved light? ...
Зачѣмъ въ трудахъ людей великихъ Осталась мелочь на показъ? Въ мѣстахъ воистину глубокихъ – Пренебрежительный рассказъ... – – –	Why in the works of great persons Are trifling matters left on display? In places which are really deep – Contemptuous stories ...
О, Мухаммед, пророкъ Великій, Миръ вѣрить въ Бога, какъ и Ты, И Духъ Всесущій – миру яркій –	Oh, Muhammed, the Great Prophet, The world believes in God, so You too, And the Spirit Omnipresent – bright to the world
Источникъ вѣчной красоты!...	The source of everlasting beauty! ...

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