



**Russian Bazaar, Dec.23-29, 2010, #766**

**ДЕТИ АРАПАТА The Children of Ararat**

Review by Nina Alovert

Translated by Zobeida Ghattas

New York's bustling theater life continues at any time of the year. Not only are famous ballet troupes performing and artists from other cities touring but events occur that are not always associated with famous stages. Sometimes, one-time only events are put together which truly reflect the dance scene of America. And in the Church of St. Clements, a series of concerts were held dedicated to the culture of Armenia – *Passage Through Light and Shadow: The Children of Ararat*. Some of these concerts were preceded by recovered snippets of the unique film *Ravished Armenia* – a film about the 1915 Armenian genocide, when the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was practically wiped out. This black and white silent film was produced in America in 1918 based on the book of the same name by Aurora Mardiganian.

Mardiganian was a resident of the Turkish region of Armenia. The girl bore witness to the deaths of her family – her parents, sisters and three brothers. She herself was sold into a harem to Kamal Efendi for 85 cents. Aurora was able to escape after two years (at this time the Turks were German allies in WWI and Russia was able to help the Armenian population emigrate). Mardiganian went through St. Petersburg to finally move to America. She was only 15. With the help of screen writers Harvey and Eleanor Gates, she was able to write her autobiography – a book which MGM studios used as the basis for the film. The film premiered in 1919 in New York.

Provided with captions, only fragments survive from the film, but even they leave an enormous impression -- the murder of priests who chose not to deny their faith, the rape of women, mass murder, the utter horror, the useless search for rescue. Especially horrific are the scenes when raped girls are returned to their mothers – to die. The final surviving clip, which closes this collection of fragmented images, is of an open field with a series of crosses on which are crucified young women and girls. This horrific row of crosses is filmed and shown on a diagonal, and on the final cross, as if completing the image, sits a vulture.

Aurora's book has withstood many editions. But fate continued to be merciless to her. When she was dying in 1994 in an old-age home, there was nobody with her – not her son, not friends, nobody from the Armenian community for which she had helped raise much money and much awareness in America. Mardiganian's body was cremated and since nobody came for her ashes

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during the course of a year, it was buried in a mass grave at an unknown location. Destiny continued to haunt Mardiganian even after her death. In 1964, the film was burned in a fire. All the documents which Mardiganian had saved were thrown away after her death. The remaining ribbons of the film were found thanks to the initiative of the Near East Fund, one of the first international humanitarian organizations.

The performance in New York was organized by Anahid Sofian. She is a dancer, choreographer, teacher (she has her own dance studio in Manhattan). She is a specialist in Middle Eastern Dance. As an Armenian herself, Anahid produced this show in memory of her Armenian parents who survived the genocide. Anahid organized this program in honor of her love for Armenian culture. During the performance, an ensemble of dancers presented theatrical folkloric dances and tableaux based on Armenian legends as well as religious scenes. The choreographer, Gagik Karapetian, also participated in the production. Anahid herself not only danced, but also read portions of modern poetry. During the concert, projected photographs were shown of Armenia and her churches, and incredibly beautiful shots from the film by C. Paradanov, “*The Color of Pomegranates*.” The whole production reflected the sadness as well as the beautiful pages of the history of Armenians – Children of Ararat.