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ARMENIAN  
INDEPENDENT  
CULTURAL  
ASSOCIATION of  
ATLANTA, INC.



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# VARTANANK

## AN ARMENIAN EPIC

The history of Armenia is full of great exploits and grandiose events which have been transmitted through the generations since as early as 835 B.C.

Nowadays, all the Armenians around the globe celebrate in unison every year in the month of February its most important epic, commemorating the great Vartan and his brave army.

" It was in the year of grace 448 .... " With these words, the great Armenian poet Alishan started his narration of the VARTANANK epic.

Vartan Mamigonian ( or Mamikonian ) was an Armenian general who had in his credit more than forty victories and no defeat in his service with the friendly Persian army and yet fought the Persians to defend his Faith, his People and his Homeland. The fight was against Yazdagerd the Second, King of Persia surnamed " Chah-en-Chah " or the king of kings, who ruled from 438 to 457 A.D. and who wanted to turn all the Armenians to fire-worshippers. Being the first as a nation to have converted to Christianity, the Armenians were enjoying the pureness of behaviours and the rules of the original morale of Christianity.

Believing in the strength of his army and the impressive number of elephants in dread of the Roman legions, Yazdagerd issued a decree to the Armenians ordering them to worship " Mazda " .

The Armenians took this threat very seriously and at once called for a meeting in Ardashad ( Artaxada ), the capital of the Ardasheesian kingdom founded in 180-160 B.C. Among those present were the Catholics Hovsep, the Archpriest Ghevont, the great general Vartan ( the good guy ), Vasag Syooni ( the bad guy ), and many princes, bishops, priests and great other noble personalities. As a result of the meeting, an answer was sent to Yazdagerd, in which they refused to betray their faith in Christianity.

Yazdagerd was very angry. He called all the responsible Armenians and noblemen to meet with him in Dzbon where he interrogated them and threatened to kill all of them and burn the " small Armenia " unless they gave up their religion. Vartan stepped forward and as the spokesman of the Armenians said :

" O Chah-en-Chah ! the great and most powerful, my friends  
" and I have always been and still are very faithful to you and  
" I am always ready to serve you to conquer your enemies and  
" enlarge your kingdom. Our faith in Christ, our culture and  
" our way of living belong to nobody but ourselves and no one  
" has the right to clear us away from them, whatever powerful  
" he might be. Nobody will force us, because of threats, to  
" change the faith we learnt when we were children and I would  
" rather die than betray my faith. "

Yazdagerd got extremely furious. Seeing his reaction, the Armenian noblemen asked him for time to think and make a decision. As Yazdagerd



could become uncontrollably nasty, the Armenians decided to pretend to convert, then return to Armenia where they would either start a rebellion or leave the country. All agreed with the decision except Vartan. They tried to persuade him, but he was obstinate. They repeated their pleas and said to him: "Visualize the weeping of the mothers and the laments of the children, and the captivity of the old. All these things may happen if we do not return to our homeland." But Vartan was still refusing and said: "I cannot betray my faith on account of my wife and children." As a last resort, the Armenian noblemen brought the Gospel and swore on it that they would remain loyal to their faith once they returned to Armenia. With tears in his eyes, Vartan agreed to pretend to betray Christianity.

The noblemen went before Yazdagerd and announced to him that they decided to convert from Christianity. Yazdagerd was very happy, gave them costly gifts and sent Zoroastrian Magi (priests) to Armenia to preach fire-worship.

In the meantime, the news of their decision had reached Armenia and the Armenians refused to receive the Zoroastrian priests. The relatives of the noblemen met them in anger and no one would come near them, neither wife nor child, neither son nor prince.

When the noblemen saw the state of the Armenian people, they immediately explained that they had only pretended to convert so that they might be able to return and defend the people who would otherwise not have had any leader. Secretly for two years, Vartan was able to train 15,000 soldiers. In the meantime, the Armenians scorned the Magi whom Yazdagerd had sent, and let them go hungry. Nobody would let any one of them into his house. When the situation was becoming suspicious, the Armenian noblemen called for a meeting to plan a revolt and prepare to fight Yazdagerd's powerful army. Vartan Mamigonian was the leader of the meeting, and the participants vowed to fight to the death for Christianity and to preserve their nation and language. They had no intention to conquer the invader. But unfortunately, Vasag Syouni, a governor who loved glory and wanted to become king of Armenia by making friends with Yazdagerd, was also present. Soon after the meeting, Vasag gave to Yazdagerd his message which hastened the events.

In the spring of 451, the Persian army of more than 250,000 well trained soldiers as well as many elephants and war carriages, started their journey towards Armenia. Beside his 15,000 soldiers, Vartan had 35,000 volunteers. (Some old Armenian song quotes sixty thousand behind Vartan.) The Catholicos Hovsep and the heroic priest Ghevont were both in the Armenian ranks. On the night before the battle, the Armenian army was full of inspiration, they were strengthened by the love of self-sacrifice, and stayed awake all night, praying and encouraging one another. The Divine Liturgy and prayers were offered and all the soldiers took communion. The Elder Ghevont delivered an inspired sermon and Vartan added with a speech encouraging his troops.

The battle lasted one day in Armenia on the banks of the river Dughmood in the field of Avarayr. The Armenian soldiers excelled with bravery during the fighting. Four thousand Persian soldiers were killed while the Armenians had lost Vartan and sixteen hundred from which about six hundred were soldiers, the remaining being brave volunteers. With the death of Vartan, the army spread in the neighbouring mountains and in spite that the battle was won by the Persians, Vartan's army has never been considered as defeated nor underestimated since the ultimate dreams of Yazdagerd to conquer Constantinople and then Rome were not realised as he could not advance while leaving behind him the strong and brave Armenian army.

Armenia remained in the faith that Saint Gregory the Illuminator had implanted in the heart of her children; the Armenian culture was saved together

with the Alphabet of St. Mesrob Mashdotz, and the good behaviours and traditions of the Armenians remained unchanged.

As for Vasag Syooni, he and his followers were found among the Persian army during the battle fighting against the Armenians. Yazdagerd did not search long to discover he was a hypocrite and traitor of his own people. He condemned him to jail where he died of an atrocious sickness.

The Armenians have proven to themselves that they can defend bravely their Faith against powerful tyranny, and that they can lose a battle but never die. They can go through suffering, but they will never sacrifice their rights.

Moreover, those sixteen hundred children of Avarayr have proven to the world that civilization existed many centuries before those nations who called themselves civilized, since fifteen centuries later, year for year, in 1948 at the United Nations headquarters in Paris, the resolution of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms" was adopted unanimously by 48 members who were present. ( Russia, Czechoslovakia and Poland were absent.)

In our prayer to the All-Mighty, we in Atlanta thank Him that we live in a country where Human Rights are respected by Law, and ask Him to give every one of us the necessary strength in our difficult times. A very special prayer for our present Catholicos Vasken in Armenia, may Christos Asdwadz give him the power and wisdom he needs to guide all the Armenians to maintain the honour, because if our honour is crushed down, our fathers and ancestry will never forgive us and we shall not be able to say :

" I A M T H E G R A N D S O N O F V A R T A N T H E G R E A T "

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The celebration of Serpotz Vartanantz Zoravarantzen is usually on a thursday in mid-February according to the Armenian Church calendar.

Exceptionally this year, it is on Monday the eleventh because of the advanced date of this year's Easter.