

## THE LIBRARY-READING ROOM OF THE SHUSHI BRANCH OF THE CAUCASIAN ARMENIAN CHARITABLE SOCIETY (1889 - 1900)

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### **Abstract**

In March 4, 1882 in Shushi was opened the local branch of the Caucasian Armenian Charitable Society (henceforth, CACS) aimed at the development of educational and cultural activities of population. The productive functioning of the Society lasted until 1899-1900 when the library-reading room at Shushi was closed. The library-reading room played a significant role in the activities of the Shushi branch of the Caucasian Armenian Charitable Society, which made the Armenian society a communicator not only of Armenian but also of world literature. Owing to periodicals, the reading room was one of the main sources of information for the local society. The library-reading room, in the short period of its activity (March 10, 1889 - January 1, 1900) managed to become the most important educational and cultural center of Shushi.

**Keywords:** Caucasian Armenian Charitable Society, Shushi, library-reading room

The idea of establishing charitable societies in the Caucasus was determined by the social and socio-economic conditions and needs of Armenians, and the purpose of the appearance of such societies was not only to support those in need, but to develop educational and cultural activities. One of those charitable societies was the CACS, which started its activities in Tiflis in 1881. Articles 1 and 2 of the CACS charter stated the main goal of the Society was to contribute to the dissemination of enlightenment and material support in the Armenian-populated areas of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, to maintain the already existing Armenian schools and promote the creation of new ones, to support the dissemination of crafts, books and publishing of periodicals, the establishment of libraries, printing houses, etc. For their implementation, the CACS had to receive official permission from the authorities. It also had the right to establish branches in the Armenian-populated places of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia. One of the first was the Shushi branch.<sup>1</sup> The activities of the Shushi local branch of the

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<sup>1</sup> Leo 1911: 40-42.

CACS began on December 22, 1881, when Hambardzum Arakelyan, the inspector of the Karabakh Armenian Theological School, invited 26 people who were ready to join the charitable society to a general meeting, undertaking the election of the local board. By the decree of March 4, 1882, the Tiflis Council of the CACS declared the Shushi branch open, taking over the management of affairs.<sup>2</sup>

From the very beginning, the Shushi local department of the society focused its attention on increasing the number of members and financial resources by urging various people to join, make donations, organize performances and collect funds in other ways, which we learn from the department's 1882 activity report. On the other hand, in order to profitably use its scarce resources, the department decides to open a public library-reading room in Shushi first, and then also contribute to the opening of rural schools. Despite this, the administration knew that opening the library required a lot of money, which they did not possess. The department could buy all the books of the previously closed "public library" worth about 400 rubles and the bookcase at an extremely affordable price (100 rubles)<sup>3</sup>, so the latter did not want to miss this opportunity. We see this already accomplished in the department's 1882 report, according to which they acquired the bookcase and books (419 pieces of literature).<sup>4</sup>

On August 8, 1882, the department applied for the first time to the Tiflis council to open a library-reading room in Shushi, stating that the council had greater powers than the department to apply to the local government.<sup>5</sup> The board responded on September 6 that, according to the Society's charter, the department has the authority to apply to the local government for permission to open a library-reading room.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, on October 8 of the same year, the council decided to personally appeal to the governor of Elizavetpol to allow the opening of a library-reading room under the government of the Shushi local department of the CACS.<sup>7</sup> This and the next two applications (February 16<sup>8</sup>, 1883 and April 26<sup>9</sup>, 1883) did not receive any response. From the 1880s, the Russian policy towards national minorities could already imply manifestations of the bureaucracy's tyrannical attitude, and on this basis, the indifference of the governor of Elizavetpol to these applications becomes understandable.

1884-1886 were quite difficult years for the local department of Shushi. The number of members was greatly reduced. In 1882 the department had 86, and in 1883 - 82 members, then in 1884 - 36, in 1885 - 20, in 1886 - 14 members.<sup>10</sup> The financial situation became so difficult that the department had to sell the previously acquired

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<sup>2</sup> Harutyunyan 2014: 79.

<sup>3</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 1004, sheet 33, etc.

<sup>4</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 1004, sheet 36.

<sup>5</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 1004, sheet 18.

<sup>6</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 1004, sheet 19.

<sup>7</sup> NAA, fund 28, file 269, sheet 1.

<sup>8</sup> NAA, file 269, sheet 3.

<sup>9</sup> NAA, file 269, sheet 7.

<sup>10</sup> Taraz, 1891, No. 48, p. 714.

“public library” book fund. In 1886, the number of members of the board (14), according to the statute of the CACS, was the minimum threshold, which, if not overcome, the local board had to stop its activities.<sup>11</sup> And the membership itself implied the collection of membership fees (5 rubles per year), which was one of the main financial sources of the department. With the money from the above-mentioned sold books, the department had a goal to stabilize its financial situation. Therefore, the idea of a library-reading room would remain fruitless. In this most difficult year for the department, on November 16, 1886, the board once again turned to the governor of Elizavetpol for permission to open a library-reading room.<sup>12</sup> The council realized that the opening of the library would stimulate interest in the local department.

Finally, on June 9, 1888, the Elizavetpol governorate responded to the application by allowing the opening of a library-reading room under the personal responsibility of the CACS Board. This note bears the two inscriptions of the vice president of the council (September 10, 1888), according to which the latter instructs to send the certificate to the Shushi local administration to open a library-reading room, as well as to draw up the charter of the reading room and send it to the council for approval.<sup>13</sup> However, this time the permission to open a library was definitely not accepted by the local administration of Shushi. There were serious doubts about the public interest in the reading room, and therefore the availability of a sufficient number of readers. And the supporters of the opening of the library saw the solution to the problem in the direction of generating demand and interest in the public.<sup>14</sup> It was decided that the Shushi branch must have its own library. On October 27, 1888, the administration presented the charter of the library-reading room to be opened in Shushi to the council's examination and approval<sup>15</sup>, which was approved on February 12, 1889.<sup>16</sup>

On March 10, 1889, the Shushi local department of the CACS issued a bilingual (Armenian and Russian) announcement, according to which it was planned to open a library-reading room on Armenian Square, in the attic of the Khublaryan brothers' store, from March 12. The reading room would be open daily from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. For each reader who was not a member of the society, the following subscriptions were valid: 4 rubles per year, 50 coins per month and 5 coins per day. The members of the society were exempted from subscription, as they provided the board with an annual membership fee of 5 rubles.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Taraz, 1891, No. 48, p. 714.

<sup>12</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 269, sheet 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ib NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 269, sheet 9.

<sup>14</sup> Taraz, 1891, No. 48, p. 715.

<sup>15</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 269, sheet 14.

<sup>16</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 269, sheets 17, 18.

<sup>17</sup> NAA, fund 319, inv. 1, file 169, sheet 1.

In the first year (1889), the library-reading room had only 587 books and received 17 periodicals. It did not have a manuscript section, and the book collection was only in Armenian and Russian.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1889 activity report of the Shushi local department, the expenditure for the whole year was 725 rubles, of which 465.75 rubles were set for the expenses of the reading room to be opened.<sup>19</sup> The department intended to allocate most of its funds for the needs of the library-reading room. Although the activity of the library-reading room was quite slow from the beginning, gradually it became able to attract the sympathy of a part of society, meeting the demand of the readers.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important achievements of the first years of activity of the library-reading room were the published catalogs, with which the latter was accountable to the council, the reading society, donors, as well as to all those who were interested in the library's book stock. Thus, from a letter dated March 7, 1891, we learn that the entire list of books in this library was being prepared for printing, after which the department would present it to the council.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, on February 21, 1892, the department presented to the council the library's only printed directory and a handwritten list of periodicals in individual newspapers. From the note dated February 21, it is clear that the library had books worth 1638.11 rubles and publications worth 634.05 rubles, excluding daily newspapers. There are 32 units of Russian and 108 units of Armenian periodicals in the manuscript list, and 1346 units of Russian and Armenian books in the printed directory.

A list of new books to be acquired for the library was also to be published as an appendix. The administration had to present these applications to the council every time as information.<sup>22</sup> Based on the information of the letter of February 21, 1892, which refers to the catalogs of the Shushi library-reading room, we tried to find out how many printed catalogs the said library-reading room had during its existence. Thus, in the bibliographic lists, there are two known printed directories of the Shushi library-reading room of the CACS (published in the "Armenian Spiritual Inspection" printing house of Shushi). They are: "Directory of the Caucasian Armenian Charitable Society in Shushi" (1891, 80 pages) and "No. 2 Directory of the Caucasian Armenian Charitable Society in Shushi" (1894, 70 pages). The catalogs are made up of two parts, the first part of which is Russian books, and the second part is Armenian. The directories have an orderly (systematic) structure. Descriptions of both the Russian and Armenian parts of the 1891 directory are presented in 12 sections. The orderly divisions of the Armenian part are: I. Religious, philosophical, psychological, II. Education (literary, novelistic, poetic), III. Bibliography of our ancestors, IV. History, biography, ethnography, V. Geography, travel, topography, VI. Education, textbooks, VII. Folk and children's books, VIII.

<sup>18</sup> Ethnographic journal 1897: 103.

<sup>19</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 1004, sheet 108.

<sup>20</sup> Taraz, 1891, No. 48, p. 715.

<sup>21</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 269, sheet 26.

<sup>22</sup> NAA, fund 28, inv. 1, file 269, sheets 29, 30 and 31.

Linguistic, archeological, IX. Natural sciences, professional, X. Medical, healthcare, XI. Legal, political, sociological, XII. Miscellaneous. Both sections of the directory N 2 published in 1894 are almost completely similar to the structure of the previous directory, with the only difference being that the Russian section here consists of 13 chapters (the chapter “Periodicals” was added), and the Armenian-language chapter “Legal, Political, Sociological” was replaced by the chapter “Periodical Publications”.

From these directories, we get information about the fund assets of the library-reading room, which were formed from the donations of various individuals and the funds of the department. The administration was doing everything to maintain the library and replenish the funds.<sup>23</sup> In general, the department allocated 11001.61 rubles for the library’s ten-year operation (1889-1899), and received 1894.18 rubles as profit. In fact, the shortfall amounted to 9107.43 rubles. And most of the library’s profit was formed from subscriptions. During ten years of operation, the total number of annual subscribers was 68 readers, 3143 monthly readers, and 3389 daily readers. During that period, 51,042 units of books and periodicals were taken home with “pledge”. At first glance, it is unclear how the number of monthly and daily subscriptions could be so close during a decade of operation. This is explained by the fact that almost half of the readers were students and pupils, who, naturally, could not pay. Therefore, it was more appropriate to use daily and monthly subscriptions, which were relatively affordable. In order to make the library accessible to all sections of society, from the fifth year of its operation, the department reduced the prescribed subscription fee for poor readers, by which the latter could use the library by paying 1.50 rubles per year instead of 4 rubles, for half a year - 1 ruble, 20 coins instead of 50 coins per day, 2 coins instead of 5 coins.

According to another clause, the socially unsecure readers were exempted from the “pledge” when taking books and periodicals home, instead, only a written guarantee from one of the members of the Society was sufficient.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the department had approved a new payment procedure for the poor readers. This was done in order to provide the library with the largest number of readers and to make it accessible to different layers of society.

In 1889-1898, the statistical data of the nationalities of the readers of the library are: 80-85% Armenians, 3-10% Russians, 2-8% Turks, 2-5% Georgians and foreigners. According to the classification, 40-50% of the readers were students, 20-25% merchants, 10-15% officials, 5% teachers, 3% craftsmen and 2% women.<sup>25</sup> During the ten-year operation of the library, novels were the most popular (60-70%), followed by periodicals, historical, biographical, medical, health, natural science, sociological and

<sup>23</sup> If in the first year of operation, the library-reading room had 587 books, then at the time of its closure, the total number of books exceeded 5000 (on average, the annual addition is 450-500 pieces of literature), which was not a small number for the given period.

<sup>24</sup> Bulletin 1894: 43-44.

<sup>25</sup> The statistical figures were obtained by comparing and summarizing the annual reports of the Shushi library-reading room.

other literature. The library was also quite rich in scientific literature.<sup>26</sup> The most read Armenian authors were Raffi, Shirvanzade, P. Proshyan, Kh. Abovyan, Tserents, Leo and others, among European writers - A. Dumas, J Verne, F. Schiller, J.-B. Molière and others (in Armenian translation), and among the Russian authors - L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky, N. Gogol, A. Pushkin, A. Chekhov and others. Among the Armenian periodicals, "Murch", "Araks", "Taraz", "Experience", "Alghbyur", "Tatron", "Mshak", "Nor-Dar" were the most read, and in Russian «Artist», «Vestnik Evropy», «Knizhki Nedeli», «Russkaya Misl», «Severij Vestnik», «Mir Bozhij», «Russkoe Bogatstvo » and other journals, weeklies, as well as dailies.

When studying the newsletters and official reports related to the library-reading room, we do not find any shortage of books or journals. This is a remarkable circumstance from the point of view of the organization of library work, which testifies to the high level of activity of the Shushi library-reading room. In different years, Arakel Babakhanyan, Mirzajan Lalazaryan and Bagrat Ter-Sahakyants were the directors of the library-reading room, and Kristapor Tumyan worked as the chief librarian.

In 1899, after the change of the charter of the Society, all its branches were closed, including the Shushi branch, as a result of which on January 1, 1900, the library-reading room was finally closed.<sup>27</sup> According to the order of the governor of Elizavetpol dated January 24, 1902, addressed to the Main Department of the Civil Department of the Caucasus, as a result of the liquidation of the former Shushi department of the CACS, the stock of the local library-reading room (more than 5,000 books worth 8,000 rubles) and all movable property (chair, table, drawer, etc.) were transferred to the local authorities of the city of Shushi under the management of the public department<sup>28</sup>.

The Shushi local branch started functioning again on March 6, 1908. As on January 31 of the same year, the newly written charter was approved, the CACS could again operate with its branches in the Armenian-inhabited areas of the Caucasus<sup>29</sup>. One of the first steps of the re-opened local administration of Shushi was the return of the library of the previously closed branch from the municipal administration, which took place on November 1 of the same year. In a short time, the library-reading room was put in order, and the readers began to use it regularly<sup>30</sup>.

The library-reading room played a significant role in the activities of the Shushi branch of the Caucasian Armenian Charitable Society, which made the Armenian society a communicator not only of Armenian but also of world literature. Owing to periodicals, the reading room was one of the main sources of information for the local society. The library-reading room, in the short period of its activity (March 10, 1889 - January 1, 1900) managed to become the most important educational and cultural center of Shushi. The library was used by the broad segments of society.

<sup>26</sup> Ethnographic journal 1897: 105.

<sup>27</sup> NAA, fund 1262, inv. 2, file 287, sheet 150.

<sup>28</sup> NAA, fund 1262, inv. 2, file 347, sheet 266.

<sup>29</sup> Leo 1911 (ed.): 334.

<sup>30</sup> Bulletin 1909: 63-64.

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