

AN EPISODE FROM THE HISTORY OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

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Abstract

The conflict between the two Catholicoses Davit and Daniel started due to their desire to ascend to the throne of the Catholicosate which lasted about 6 years (1891-1897). The underlying issues of the conflict were conditioned by such factors as the self-interest of different members in the ecclesiastic elite, their interpersonal and in-group discords. The rivaling Russian and Persian diplomatic circles who desired to keep their influence on the Catholicosate, fuelled the ongoing discords. Moreover, the Ottoman government pursued an indirect policy toward the conflict which was reflected in the fact that during this period the Patriarch Grigor Khamsetsi succeeded the Catholicos Hovhannes after his forced resignation. At the same time, the given circumstance showed that the elite of the Armenian community in Constantinople had changing attitudes towards the two Catholicoses Davit and Daniel in terms of their recognition.

The existing controversy between the groups, supporting either Catholicos Davit or Daniel is also obvious. This controversy had a negative impact on the Armenian communities in both Constantinople and Smyrna. It disrupted the communities' normal life, leading to unnecessary disputes among the population.

Keywords. *Catholicos Davit, Catholicos Daniel, Patriarch of Constantinople Grigor Khamsetsi, Margar Aproyan, Ambassador V. Tomarov, Archbishop Martiros, the order of St. Echmiatsin.*

During Tanzimat period and even long before it along with the differences in the means of organization, the national administration of the Smyrna Armenian community mainly tackled ownership, property related issues as well as matters, concerning financial allotment and the money supply to hospitals and schools via traditional institutions up to 1860s. The supervision of church-community money was carried out by secular leaders or the so called "*ishkhans*" (noblemen). Among these *ishkhans*, as a rule, were wealthy merchants as well as the ecclesiastic leader and people who enjoyed public trust. However, this system which seemed to have stood the test of time might unavoidably be disrupted due to disagreements, emerging from the ongoing rivalry between the members of the elite that handled community matters or due to the controversy between the leader and the public (tax imposition or fair administration of public finances would be a case in point) and finally because of the outbursts of greed or vanity from which no society is secured. Generally, the costly issues of church renovation or church building as well as the fundraising for public buildings caused

controversy. Such were the processes of charging donation taxes when the clergymen responsible for collecting donations, driven by their desire to please Echmiatsin or succumbing to their own preferences surpassed the reasonable amount of contributions dedicated to church. The Echmiatsin Catholicoses themselves repeatedly called for commonsense.

Since 1775 we have witnessed the unfolding discord over church building in the Smyrna Armenian community. Zakaria, the Patriarch of Constantinople was forced to issue a *kondak*¹ directed to parties involved in the controversy: “However the issue of church building ended in bold fulfillment, unreasonable acts and biased behavior. Thus, I order that everybody - the clergy, noblemen and other important figures involved secure peace and unity among themselves”.²

It is worth mentioning that no church was built in Smyrna in 1775, hence the patriarch was either to refer to the renovation of St Stepanos church or to an initiative of a church building (either building or renovation) in one of the dioceses which led to constant discords in the community, otherwise the patriarch would not have interfered to placate the parties.

In the second half of 1790 the construction of St Lusavorich Church in VerinTagh, in Manisa led to equally serious escalation among the Armenian community of Smyrna. The church finances were to cover the expenses of building St Lusavorich Church. Margar Aproyan, one of the outstanding figures of the community paid 350 *kurushes*³ for the *ferman* of building the church on condition that he got a refund from the national treasury. Some of the bigwigs of the Armenian community opposed paying back the debt. Subsequently, Catholicos wrote to his supporters that they were unaware of the sum that Margar had paid for the *ferman*. It follows that according to the Catholicos, it was Margar’s own initiative to spend the sum, leaving the community to cope with the accomplished fact.⁴ Patriarch Zakaria’s *kondak* (issued on August, 4, 1796), addressed to the Smyrna Armenian community proves that the Ottoman authorities entrusted the Patriarchate of Constantinople to make an inquiry in which the representatives of the parties, “*alt gemmat*” (six districts that is how the Armenian community of Constantinople were referred to in the official documents) and fifteen *amiras* participated. The given arbitral meeting confirmed that Margar’s claim in respect to the sum of the expenses was grounded, “thus, during the trial they reached a verdict that the church should pay the expense of the *ferman* to Mr. Margar”.⁵

It is noteworthy that the patriarch did not conceal his and jury’s reverence for Margar who represented the seedy Aproyans’ family. Moreover, he admonished “some

¹ An official written manifesto issued either by Catholicos or bishop on a matter of great importance.

² MM, f. 6, doc. 77.

³ Lira was the currency of the Ottoman Empire.

⁴ See The corpus of Armenian history 1909: 393.

⁵ MM, f.6, doc.89. The same *kondak* by the Patriarch has been preserved. In the manifesto (*kondak*) he warns of the possible sad consequences which will cause the eventual failure of building the church (MM, f. 6 doc. 71).

rivaling bigwigs” to accept the court’s verdict and not to protest, appealing to the Sultan’s or great Vizier’s mercy, otherwise they would impose great sanctions on the complaining party. The patriarch urged to take into account the fact that “his deceased ancestors” (the Aproyan dynasty - A.Kh.) originally worked hard for the benefit of our nation”.⁶ It should be mentioned that Daniel, the Archbishop of Smyrna supported Margar Aproyan all along the dispute which would turn Aproyan’s adversaries against the Patriarch.

As further developments show the opponents of Margar Aproyan continued their fight up to 1799, when Daniel Surmaretsi who during the unfolding dispute was the ecclesiastic leader of Smyrna had already occupied the patriarchate throne in Constantinople. It is also evident that Margar in his turn was not satisfied with the financial compensation provided by his adversaries as this time he demanded 1000 *kurushes* from the Manisa community in return for the sum he had spent on building the church. The new leader of Smyrna Archbishop Martiros having replaced Daniel in 1797, tried to impede the refund, but in vain as the dispute did not end till Grigor Khamsetsi’s interference who was back then the Patriarch of Constantinople. Despite the ecclesiastic leader’s and his supporters’ strong opposition, by the order of G. Khamsetsi Margar received the refund. In December, 1802 the Archbishop Martiros notified the Catholicos Davit about the refund.⁷ This refers to the notorious conflict between Davit and Daniel the backlash of which would long be present in Smyrna.

The controversy between Davit and Daniel is one of the darkest pages in the new history of the Armenian Church. It reflects the striking vanity in some members of the Armenian ecclesiastic elite, their obsession to rule or occupy important posts and their “rich artillery” which was used to satisfy their thirst for power via vile actions. This was a fight between two high-rank clergymen which reminded of the notorious Constantinople patriarchate rifts of the 17th century. People and church had to suffer long the consequences of the fight. Throughout his fight to occupy the Catholicos’ throne Davit’s negative traits were fully exposed, i.e. via impingement and conspiracy against the elected Catholicos Daniel, by violating his right he tried to ascend the much desired throne. The origin of the issue, its circumstances and details were revealed in *vardapet* Manvel Kyumushkhiant’s famous account based on a primary source can be regarded to be of great value of as well as M. Ormanian’s bulky work where in point characterizations are introduced.⁸ The 1801-1807 lengthy conflict ended in the Catholicos Davit’s dethronement and Daniel’s return to the Catholicos’ throne that brought about a belated but fair outcome. Quite understandably, following the logical thread of our investigation the involvement of the Smyrna diocese’s ecclesiastic leader and community in the conflict between Davit and Daniel is even more noteworthy. A.

⁶ MM, f.,6, doc. MM,c.71. Catholicos Ghukas sensibly prioritized the peace of people. The Patriarch Zakaria pursued the same policy, thus, maintaining neutrality he hailed the peacemaking activities.

⁷ MM, f. 13, doc. 264, p. 3.

⁸ See The corpus of Armenian history 1917; Ormanyan 2001: 3786-3861.

Ayvazian was right in stating that in comparison with other cities Smyrna had a far greater involvement in the Catholicos controversy.⁹ The reasons for such an involvement were introduced above, it is also worth mentioning that the Diaspora communities of Smyrna and other coastal regions had already been divided into groups in the years of Daniel's rule as Catholicos which was vividly expressed in escalation (the point in question were the arguments over the financial allotment to building a church in Manisa). The controversy between Davit and Daniel was certainly to lead to local arguments between the elite and different layers of population in various Diaspora regions, and one of the parties would naturally support Daniel, while the other one would sympathize with his rival in their unrelenting fight. Furthermore, Martiros, the new leader of eparchy occupied the vacant patriarchal post and united Davit's supporters as because of Daniel Martiros was forced to leave Smyrna, in 1797 being unable to find common ground with his opponents. It was under Martiros' protection and on his instruction that in 1801-1807 the large number of our compatriots in the Smyrna diocese supported Davit, opposing Daniel's backers with whom he had some unresolved issues. In Echmiatsin Martiros quite possibly had already developed certain affection for the outstanding people before occupying his post in Smyrna. K. vardapet Shahnazarian who was really knowledgeable in the issue stated: "Being Daniel's opponent, Martiros came to Izmir patriarchate and allied himself with many people in his fight against the latter."¹⁰

His character and behavior was similar to his defendant Davit Enegetsi who had boldly seized the Catholicos' throne. Throughout the three years of his first term as the leader of eparchy he succeeded in forming a significant group of supporters both in Smyrna and other locations of the diocese and leaning on them he managed to be re-elected. In this respect, Davit with contentment referred to loyal priests and *ishkhans* in 1801 "who asked to appoint their favorite archbishop as the leader of eparchy".¹¹

Martiros' influence on Smyrna was strengthened due to the support offered by Catholicos Davit's followers. Famous merchants were among Martiros' supporters who were well-respected in the community and with whom Davit was in correspondence. Davit himself was obliged to them as they helped him to gain enough support among the secular and ecclesiastic elite for him to be able to fight against Daniel. Among Davit's supporters were Hovh. Savalanian nicknamed Moskof, K. Chelikian, St. Khachatryan an imprinter at chintz factory and many other people who continued the work of uniquely entitled patriarchs. Harutyun di Murat, Petros di Papi, Karapet di Harutyun, Poghos Aghachanian, Georg di Ohan and other imminent figures of the community were Davit's ardent followers. The majority of Davit's supporters had the honorific "*mahtesi*".¹² On May 5, 1803 they sent a credential to the Catholicos Davit in

⁹ Ayvazyan 1900.

¹⁰ The corpus of Armenian history 1899: 746.

¹¹ The corpus of Armenian history 1904: 100.

¹² Mahtesi signifies a Christian devotee who went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

which they acknowledged his patriarchal authority.¹³ Margar Aproyan, the Melikzarmians along with their followers opposed Davit's supporters as their relationships had worsened with the abovementioned outstanding individuals because of the arguments over the construction of Manisa church in 1790s.

As seen in Davit's correspondence with Margar and Arakel Aprozans, he displayed fake amiability to soften or neutralize those Smyrna Armenians who posed real danger to him.¹⁴ If necessary, when he didn't have to resort to cunning maneuvers, Davit attacked his rivals with direct intent of weakening them. In 1803 he tried to turn the Smyrna Armenians against Margar Aproyan, reminding them about the aforementioned notorious incident of "church building *ferman*". Davit exhorted to demand that Aproyan should return the sum which the latter had allegedly seized from the community.¹⁵ On March 13, 1803, Martiros informed the Catholicos Davit who was his ally and patron that Margar Aproyan had neither returned the money to Echmiatsin (which was formerly donated by Margar's brother) nor the expropriated sums which were spent on the *ferman* of building the church.¹⁶ Since Davit's self-proclamation as Catholicos, Martiros became more intolerant towards his diocesan adversaries. Meanwhile in the Armenian community of Constantinople, which was oscillating within the discords between Davit and Daniel, Patriarch Hovhannes claimed victory (he succeeded Grigor Khamsetsi). The Patriarchate naturally could not remain indifferent to the ongoing events, when Patriarchs of Constantinople were either elected or dethroned due to the twists of this fight, depending on which group of *amiras* and high rank clergymen gained more favorable position. The latter was achieved via efficient strategies of bribes and corrupt intentions which had been part and parcel of the Armenian community in Constantinople since the notorious Patriarchate fights in the 17th and at the beginning of the 18th centuries. While now throughout the conflict between Davit and Daniel the Patriarch Hovhannes lost his position to Gr. Khamsetsi (October, 1801) then in a year's time Khamsetsi himself ceded the Patriarchate throne to Hovhannes.¹⁷ These replacements were conditioned by the fact that the Patriarch Hovhannes led Davit's supporters, while Khamsetsi was the head of Daniel's followers. The fact that up to the end of the conflict (1807) and in the aftermath Hovhannes remained on the Patriarchate throne testifies that Davit's followers had triumphed in Constantinople at the Ottoman government's dictation to counterbalance the political favorites of the Russian government. It should be noted that Davit's victories (in addition to Martiros' triumph in Smyrna) over his rivals were conditioned by the Patriarch Hovhannes' and his fellow *amiras*' support. It was these *amiras* who turned to the Russian ambassador V. Tomarov, exhorting to acknowledge Davit's election as legal (1803 April - May). Moreover, they sent a written

¹³ MM, f. 14, doc. 56. See also The corpus of Armenian history 1904: 584-586.

¹⁴ See The corpus of Armenian history 1899: 187-188, 234-238, The corpus of Armenian history 1904: 282-285.

¹⁵ The corpus of Armenian history 1909: 394.

¹⁶ MM, f. 13, doc. 262.

¹⁷ See Ormanyanyan 2001: 3814, 3832.

appeal to the military commander of the Russian armed forces in Tiflis asking him not to give importance to Bishop Yeprem and others who were promoting Davit's cause.¹⁸

In the Smyrna community Davit's and Daniel's followers alternated each other as leaders of the national administration, depending on which party gained more advantageous position in Echmiatsin and Constantinople Patriarchate. In his letter to the ecclesiastic leader of Prusa Poghos vardapet (July 1802) Davit wrote that Daniel got a *ferman* from the Ottoman court and sent it to Smyrna "In order to arrest Martiros, the ecclesiastic leader of the Smyrna diocese. He was placed on a horse naked with his hands chained like death convict and was made to walk to Daniel's vicious supporter who had caused so much damage to the poor residents of Smyrna".¹⁹

Indeed in 1802 the Patriarch Gr. Khamsetsi, being Daniel's ardent follower turned to a certain Aghaton who served in the Russian diplomatic corps and informed him that people recognized Daniel as Catholicos, whereas Martiros, the ecclesiastic leader of Smyrna forbade to mention his name in church: "thus, following the noblemen's advice, by the regal order he found it appropriate to send Martiros to the Holy See since his arrival".²⁰

With the help of heartrending details Davit probably exaggerated the rumors that the Patriarch Khamsetsi persecuted Martiros. However, T. Palian's following statement testifies to the fact that the authorities tried to fulfill the Patriarch's wish: "On March 26, 1802 decree on Martiros' exile was sent to Smyrna a deacon named Arakel and a policeman came there. Martiros with all his property found shelter in agha Ruseci's house. Deacon Arakel and the policeman having come to Smyrna did not find Martiros as he stayed at the abovementioned agha's house, which was situated in Burnova (a district in Smyrna - A.Kh.) up to November 8, while on St Angels' celebration day he entered the city with great pompousness."²¹

Successfully escaping the exile and supporting Davit anew, the leader of the eparchy had more active involvement in the community life up to 1807 when Daniel (Davit's rival) claimed a final victory. In August and September of the same year in their letter to Nerses Ashtaraketsi (who initially being Daniel's supporter and adherer had greatly contributed to his success especially among Russian elite) the Melikzarmians of Smyrna complained that Martiros persecuted Daniel's supporters in Smyrna. On the church altar the leader of the eparchy ranted and raved at the rivaling party's followers: "he wished to annihilate and destroy Daniel's supporters".²² Another letter by the Melikzarmians revealed that Davit's followers occupying administrative positions in the

¹⁸ MM, f. 13, doc. 263.

¹⁹ The corpus of Armenian history 1904: 543. Davit's supporters from Smyrna saved Martiros. Moskof Hovhannes Savalanian played an important role in saving the latter. As Davit wrote in August, 1802 "from the tricky evil machine" (The corpus of Armenian history 1904:568).

²⁰The corpus of Armenian history 1902: 195.

²¹Palyan 1921: 60.

²²MM, f. 18, doc. 108.

community had abused their power, using it against their rivals. They asked for Nerses Ashtaraketsi's help "to cleanse the community institutions (A. Kh.) where fights and scandals occur".²³

The conflict between Davit and Daniel would have ended far sooner but it had ceased being only a purely Armenian issue as political interests and unavoidable conflicts between Russia and Persia along with the Ottoman directives on the aforementioned parties escalated the matter.

Driven by the strategy which consisted in strengthening and extending their positions in Transcaucasia, the Russian political and diplomatic circles were noticeably active as they sought to achieve greater influence on the Catholicosate of Echmiatsin. They took into account the future Catholicos' political sympathies towards Russia and in this respect his reliability. Russian diplomat Tomarov's (in the Armenian sources he is referred to as Tamarov, Tamar) and his confidant Aghayekov's active involvement in Davit's promotion played quite an important role in the latter's ascension to the Catholicosate throne (April, 1801). Then in September of the same year they started backing Daniel and made the move official when the Russian government drastically changed its policy, favoring the latter.²⁴ Undoubtedly, in the light of conflict certain factors such as the inherent traits in Catholicoses Daniel and Davit as well as the initiatives that ecclesiastic and secular figures took in their name were of great significance. However, it was not for the aforementioned factors that would secure Daniel's victory in this never ending conflict (1807). It was the final say of the Russian authorities along with Persian government's acceptance of resolution that put an end to the conflict. Even the superior position of Daniel's rivals was of minor importance during the phase of the clashes when in the person of the Constantinople Patriarch Hovhannes with a united front the whole Patriarchate acted to strengthen the self-proclaimed Catholicos Davit's willfulness (the appeal of December, 1802 via which the Armenian community of Constantinople acknowledged Davit as Catholicos).²⁵

The conflict between Davit and Daniel could only be used by Russia and Persia but nothing more; neither of them was interested in the continuation of the conflict. Moreover, in this respect the election of the Echmiatsin Catholicos could merely mean that target was "hit". To a certain extent the followers of the aforementioned Catholicoses escalated the conflict when the Echmiatsin fraternity supported Daniel, while the Patriarchs of Constantinople Hovhannes and Grigor along with their fellow *amiras* who were Davit's supporters acted in line with their preferences.

The eminent figures of the Smyrna Armenian community were also involved in the conflict. On one hand, these outstanding individual served as link between the wealthy people of Echmiatsin and those figures, acting in European markets on the other hand,

²³MM, f. 18, doc.133.

²⁴ With a written notice served on September 26, 1802 Alexander I ordered Tomarov to change the previous policy and cease supporting Davit (See Ormanyanyan 2001: 3810).

²⁵ Ormanyanyan 2001: 3833.

they connected the latter with the ecclesiastic and secular elite of Constantinople. In this context the Smyrna Armenian community was bound to have a great significance in the unfolding conflict. Moreover, the Echmiatsin and Constantinople Patriarchate forced the escalation of the conflict (which had both local and intermediated significance) between the eparchy leader Martiros and rivaling bigwigs of Smyrna. The given controversy had a negative impact on the Armenian community of the Aegean coast as they were caught in unnecessary discords and turmoil. The community was forced to be part of a futile and lengthy conflict where neither part could claim victory, perhaps with Archbishop Martiros' exception who successfully escaped the turmoil of the struggle. After Daniel had been indisputably proclaimed Catholicos (1807-1808), Martiros kept his position either thanks to Daniel's forgiveness or to his prudent policy which consisted in not agitating Davit's supporters in Echmiatsin and Constantinople. Archbishop Martiros was one of the longest ruling eparchy leaders in the Smyrna diocese, keeping his position during Catholicos Yeprem's (since 1809) ascension to the throne. He did not return to Echmiatsin up until 1816, conceding his position to the Archbishop Pilipos.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MM - Matenadaran after Mesrop Mashtots (The Corpus of Catholicosate).

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