

# Reinventing Life

Nouritza Matossian on Arshile Gorky: the Black Angel from Vaspurakan

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

**A**rshile Gorky, a painter... the first cousin of Maxim Gorky, the writer... ends life," wrote *The New York Times* in a short obituary on July 22, 1948.

Arshile Gorky had introduced himself as a Tiflis-born Georgian prince who had fled his native Caucasus mountains and Bolshevik persecutions. He had studied in Paris, he said, with the great artists of the time, such as Maillol and Kandinsky, and continued his studies in the US at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

The artist who had assumed the pseudonym of the Russian playwright to whom he was not related was in fact born in 1902 in the village of Khorkom, in Van, Western Armenia. His mother, Shushanig Adoian, named him Manoug but called him after her hometown, Vosdanik.

Gorky had reinvented himself in America having survived immeasurable horrors in his early life. "No other major artist of this century had experiences as dreadful as those endured by Gorky in the years between 1915 and 1918," wrote Richard Dorment in *The New York Review of Books*.

His "fabulous dark looks, soulful Armenian eyes and magnificent" six-foot-four frame, coupled with his wit, charisma and passion made Gorky a "celebrity" in the New York art scene. He barely made ends meet despite giving private art lessons, teaching at the Grand Central School and occasionally selling paintings.

Over five decades after his death, Nouritza Matossian, author of a new book on Gorky, *Black Angel: The Life of Arshile Gorky* (Overlook 2000), presents a comprehensive new study of the life and works of one of the most famous modern American artists.

"My whole intention was to find the real background of who Gorky had been," says Matossian. "Artistically, I wanted to find out why his paintings were more mysterious and had different colors and textures, why they



Arshile Gorky, 1924.

were so individual compared to other artists of his generation with whom he was being constantly compared. And I thought, and I still do, that the keys of his genius are in his childhood. Indeed, what one absorbs unconsciously and then what one does with it in maturity is very important. When you take on all this experience, you learn from the world

outside you, bringing ideas and techniques and you ask questions and you try to find answers. Finally, you marry that with who you are instinctively. Then you can do something really extraordinary. And that's what Gorky did."

Many scholars consider Gorky the founder of the New York School. "The very

shown very early on in the Whitney Museum of American Art, twice a year, attests to his role in New York," explains Matossian, who has interviewed over 100 individuals connected with Gorky's life.

"His students say that Gorky was the leader they needed. He gave them the paintings that they needed to study. Artists and students would sit down and listen to him and study his paintings. That's what created a movement," continues Matossian. "He was always questioning and criticizing." Indeed, "in the 30s when people were producing paintings by formula or assigned by the government, Gorky did not follow the norm. He went on to produce some of the most interesting abstract murals of the period."

Today, Gorky's paintings hang in some of the most prestigious museums and galleries in the US and England, among them the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC and the Tate Gallery in London. A Gorky painting today could sell for upwards of seven million dollars. Too late for an artist who was barely able to pay for his supply of brushes and paints.

The memory of the Armenian Genocide is the subtext of Gorky's life in America. And Matossian threads Gorky's personal experience with the universal dimension of human suffering. "I wanted to see the Genocide through Gorky's life and experience," says Matossian. It was important for her to visit his birthplace, the only Gorky scholar to have done so. "It became very clear to me through my research that his whole painting, his style and the way he approached his subjects, based on his memory, always was an attempt to be with his genocide past, with the fracturing of his life and with his loss. You can almost assemble a painting together and reconstruct your life, your past, you can make the shattered pieces of your life come together again. There is also a great tendency in his paintings to dismember things, like the bits of bodies he saw. The bits of the country side which got chopped off," explains Matossian.

Cyprus-born Matossian, who is also the author of a book on composer Iannis Xenakis, passionately explains that *Black Angel* has a message of hope despite its sad ending. "I think this book has an amazing message for everyone. For people who are dispossessed, there is a message of survival; Gorky's life shows that with courage and tenacity you can achieve what he achieved. It is only a message of hope," she concludes.

# [excerpts]

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Author Nouritza Matossian

## Manoug Adoian as a Child in Vaspurakan

The small boy climbed a poplar tree, his bare legs and arms wrapped around the white trunk. One hand over the other, he inched up, without looking down. Twenty feet up, crows circled the top of the tree, dived, and flapped black wings – 'Kra-a-k! Kro-o-k!' The scarecrow boy had a mess of twigs on his head.

The row of poplars in bright sunlight were laden with nests. He perched on a forked branch, which dipped under his weight. One wrong move, and he would fall. The nests looked like scribbles in the sky; they were full of eggs. He stretched to steal a few and slip them into his sweater. They dived for his face, but the crown of twigs protected him. He needed the eggs to paint for his mother.

Storks' nests were even higher up but he wouldn't touch those. He swung in the treetop, exhilarated by the motion. His house was down there among the patchwork of flat mud roofs of Khorkom. Mountains reared up their snowy peaks, Mount Sipan higher than the rest. The turquoise lake shone in the sun, and further out, the rocky island of Aghtamar hunched like a turtle, on the edge of Lake Van. The tip of the church pointed at the sky. He was alone on top of the world.

## 1902 Birth

In the early years of the century, Khorkom was a small village by Lake Van, in the province of Vaspurakan, Western Armenia. Armenians had lived continuously on the rugged highland plateau since pre-Christian times. The plateau

was edged with lava fields, cut through with rivers. One third of it was taken up by Lake Van, 5,500 feet above sea level. In the Lower Valley of the Armenians, Vari Hayotz Dzor, the lake had risen, flooding fields and squeezing out the people. The Turks, under whose authority the Armenians had lived in the Ottoman Empire, also oppressed them.

The village still stands, under another name, although the original inhabitants have been wiped out. Arshile Gorky was born Manoug Adoian. His large, patriarchal family was one of the wealthiest in the poor village, which lived off the land and the lake. A high bluff, with a church standing on it, overlooked the lake, protecting the village, which nestled in a hollow behind. In fact, *khork* means 'deep,' and *koum*, 'stable', in Armenian.

The people of Khorkom were Christians but their rituals and way of life originated from ancient cults of nature. They believed that at the birth of a baby, angels and demons waged war over him. As the boy grew up to become a man, he would feel that demons and angels were never far away.

His mother, Shushanig, went into labor in a mud brick house smelling of farm animals and manure. She was twenty-four and this was her fourth labor. Her long face had filled out in pregnancy. Her large almond eyes were bright. She lay by a fire in the central room on bedding laid out on the floor. Her husband and all other men had left the house.

Childbirth was dangerous. Many women died, and fewer than half the infants survived until the age of two. The elder sisters-in-law were on hand to guide her: 'When labor starts, the angel comes down and takes all your sins and puts them in a bag and hangs them over your head. When the baby is born, the angel will return and sprinkle all your sins back on to you.'

After three daughters, Shushan prayed for a son. A woman on either side of her, at her elbows and knees, supported her back.

'A boy! God bless him. A boy!'

—

Young Manoug was often woken by bel-lowing oxen. Then he heard waves beating on the lake shore, and hoarse, shouting men. His father Setrag and his uncle Krikor yelled and fought daily, and the small house shook with their rage.

Shushan escaped the noisy arguments in the cramped house by taking Manoug out to the fields, and the orchards of pears and apricots, where she worked while his sisters played with him. She made toys for him out of bits of wood and cloth. He watched her take a cork



In 1935, Gorky (center) with artist friends Wyatt Davies, Charles Mattox and Peter Bursa and their wives. Davies' wife Mariam took the photo.

and a few feathers, work them with her long fingers and suddenly, a bird was flying above his head on a string. Manoug loved to twirl the bird, thrilled with his mother. He told a friend years later in New York that her handiwork was as fine as the sculptures Picasso assembled out of found junk, and that it was his mother who first encouraged his love of art. He buried his face in her apron as she sang and told him tales: a shepherd played a trick and was imprisoned in a rock, spirits inhabited trees, giants fought and wrestled, then turned into mountains - 'see Mount Sipan over there?'

As soon as Manoug could hold a pencil, he had started to draw. But he refused to utter a sound even by the age of six. Shushan cajoled and bullied Manoug, but he refused to speak.

One day she walked with him to the top of a crag and showed him that unless he spoke to her, she would throw herself off the edge. She hurtled to the cliff's edge as if intending to jump off. The boy cried out:

*'Mayrig! Mother'.*

It became his template for dealing with crisis in adult life.

**1908**

Manoug never forgot the day his father left. Setrag took his own three children, Satenig, Manoug and Vartoush, put them on his horse and led them to his huge wheat field by the lake. Setrag kissed them one by one and said, 'Can I be sure of seeing the three of you again?'

It was the only story he told about his father as an adult.

Manoug found solace and total absorption when his hands were busy. His prodigious talent showed itself early to his friends. He drew with such a passion that Akabi, his half-sister, retained an odd memory: 'He used to draw in his sleep. You could see his hand moving.'

Ado, his cousin, also recalled, 'he sculpted incredibly delicate dogs and Van cats. We were amazed since none of us could make them.' He carved and whittled as soon as he was allowed to hold a knife.

Manoug carried a little slate on which he copied letters and numbers with a nub of white limestone. Paper was precious and the slate was a prized possession. He discovered that

he could draw on it. Often, in class, he became so engrossed that he hardly heard the teacher, but his talent made the teachers reluctant to punish him. One day the master, Mr. Mihran, noticed Manoug hunched over his slate at the back of the class.

'Bring your slate here,' he ordered.

On the slate, with just a few lines, he had drawn two savage dogs snarling and biting while six children stared aghast. Manoug waited. 'What miracle is this, my boy? Surely you will become a painter!' exclaimed the teacher.

'I... don't know... what I'll become...' Manoug stammered, 'but I love to draw.'

Later in New York, Gorky was known as a magical storyteller. As a child in Khorkom, when deep snow covered the ground, he had sat in the evening with several families around the tonir filled with hot embers and a frame spread with a cloth over it. Story-tellers, their own shepherd of Khorkom in particular, had memorized vast epics in verse, and Manoug enjoyed the exciting stories of monsters and princesses, kings and djinn, in the local dialect with its guttural earthquake rumbles.

**Aghtamar**

Shushan could not leave her house for long, with the animals and crops to care for. But, they would not miss the most important pilgrimage to the magnificent church of the Holy Cross on Aghtamar Island.

The children were thrilled to sail there: 'It was the harvest festival, the Adoiars and all the villagers went by boat to Aghtamar,' said Ado, 'You could see Aghtamar perfectly well from our village, the walls and fortifications.'

Clutching his mother's hand in the stone interior of the square church, squeezed between adults, he stood beneath the central dome. A boy turning his head from side to side would see, tall forbidding saints with round eyes in severe faces stare down at him, book in one hand and finger raised in warning. Haloes and rounded Armenian eyes, bare feet and hands, made rhythms and patterns against the ascending line of singing. They settled in the boy's memory.

On the walls of Aghtamar, the sandstone texture and lines of masonry showed through peeling colors. He would paint and scrape off, layer upon layer, revealing the substance beneath like an archaeologist getting to the substratum of his memory.

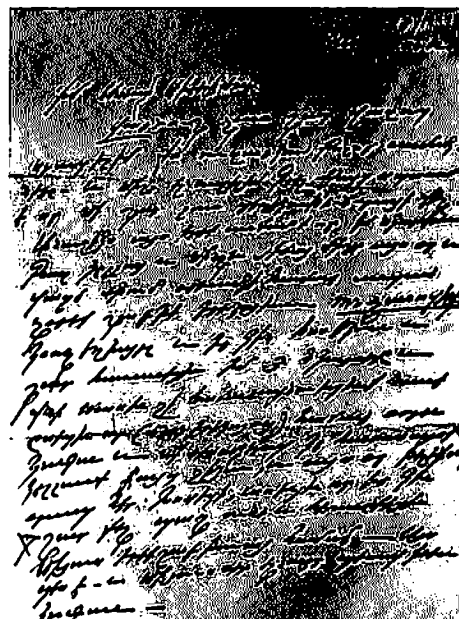
At school the children learned that they lived in a place with a mythic past. Manoug's first lesson in history was the legend which every Armenian schoolboy is taught about the origin of the nation.

**1915 The Heroic Defense of Van**

On the night of Monday, 6th April, 1915, Manoug was startled by gunfire and blasts so powerful that he was sure the house blew up. The porch was hit again. The house shook. It was exactly on the front-line between the Armenians and the Turks, and shells kept exploding on the porch. In the distance could be heard 'the roar of the artillery, which was making the heroic city of Van tremble to its foundations and turning it into an immense cauldron wherein were consumed daily hundreds of innocent women and children whose only political offense consisted in being Christians.'

The war was to be Manoug's rite of passage to boyhood. He was 13. Manoug scoured the ruins together with other small boys, gathering empty shells, cartridges. They set to work emptying them so that jewelers and metalworkers could make new ammunition. The orphanage workshops were busy with children making ammunition. 2,000 cartridges and case bullets were made in a day.

Fearless and plucky by nature, he learned to act coolly. The Vanetzis were combative sur-



Gorky's letter to his sister, written in 1937.

vivors. This was the root experience for Manoug, the making of Gorky, and the secret of his courage in facing crisis later. But its tumult would remain in him all his life in the words of the poet Daniel Varoujan, 'The Armenian nation wept and roared in me.'

**March to Echmiadzin**

'Walking night and day for eight days, our shoes were all gone. We clambered over hills and fields. We slept at night a little bit but we had to wake very early to set off because the people who left after us were all killed on the field of Bergri. The Turks attacked them and killed them, almost 40 or 50 thousand were killed there. Some went down to Persia but we took the route to Erevan.' Vartoosh recounted.

They continued on over the plain, black lava fields stretched out for miles in every direction. Dark rocks in jagged shapes jutted in sharp angles. There was not a tree or a blade of grass. The stony ground tore at their feet. Vartoush described the journey in hushed tones: 'We had no food or anything. We had no water. We dug to get a little moisture. If there was anything, we gave food to Gorky, because we had to look after the boy, the man in the family. He was thin anyway. Mummy always trembled over him.'

**Echmiadzin**

The family was marooned in Echmiadzin for several weeks. Akabi began to recover, but the overcrowding worsened and food was harder to find. 200,000 fugitives who had lost most of their possessions in Kurdish raids, came through Transcaucasia. The water

became polluted, and it was impossible to provide adequate sanitation. Suddenly they were in the middle of a national catastrophe. Vartoush said:

'Then cholera came and people suddenly went black and died. People... half-alive, they piled up in carts and took away and buried... on top of each other.'

Manoug acted quickly. His mother and sisters seemed unable to make a move but Vartoush remembered how he took charge.

**1919 In Yerevan**

Manoug begged for work at the orphanage again. But every day he and Vartoush walked past bodies lying in the street, half-dead from cold, their bones sticking out, covered in a few rags. By the end of spring 1919, 200,000 people had died: one fifth of the total population of the republic.

Mother was slumped against the window sill. Thawing snow was dripping through the holes in the roof. She was debilitated, her stomach was swollen. Her long fingers had become spindly. Her eyes were sunken and cavernous. She had sores in her mouth and her lips were coated and furry. She was dictating a letter to her husband. Manoug huddled at her feet, crouched over pen and paper, copying down her words. Vartoush watched.

'Mummy was speaking. She was saying, 'Write that I can never leave Armenia. That I will never come to America. They've abandoned us completely.' Then suddenly we saw that mother had died.' They rushed to her. They felt her face and hands but she was limp. The awful realization that she was gone for ever stunned them.

Manoug and Vartoush set out for the journey from Erevan in early summer, 1919, taking very little with them. All he wanted was to leave the chaos and misery behind him. He was becoming conscious that a whole civilization had been shattered. Manoug had struggled through each horrific episode, had lost his home, his mother; his childhood paradise was ravaged. He was taking with him a tragedy which filled his heart and against which he would have to battle for the rest of his life.

**1928 Arshile Gorky in New York**

Gorky grew a shaggy mustache, beard and long hair, in 1928, when other men shaved clean, wore the thinnest mustaches, pomaded their hair flat. He had grown to a full 6'4", with a broad frame. His dark coloring and coal black eyes, gave him the look of a smoldering hero of the silent movies. Proud of his physique, he invited men to punch his stomach when he was off his guard. It was hard as

a board. 'He looked like Rasputin. A real Armenian! Robust and a man of principle,' said Hazarian.

His sister Satenig quizzed him gently about his appearance. 'Gorky, why do you have a beard?'

'I want to paint myself as Christ, with long hair and a beard.'

Whenever he sat on the porch to draw or walked out, the street kids followed him. 'Hey! Here comes Jesus Christ!'

### Beautiful Sirun

One evening, as he prepared to leave Grand Central School, Gorky glanced into the life-class. A tall model was surrounded by students sketching at their easels. Gorky stopped wiping his hands and stared. The girl was slender, her fine features were chiseled in clean lines. She had large eyes, full lips and a high forehead framed by golden brown hair which rippled down her shoulders. He sauntered over to a student and looked at his sketch, then said in a loud voice, 'Here you have a beautiful white Arabian horse! And you make a mess of dirty socks.'

He hovered, while she collected her things. Mischa was waiting in the hall, to go out with Gorky. She said to him, 'Thank you.'

'Oh, that's nothing.'

She mystified him. He sensed something familiar about her. He blurted out.

'Are you Armenian?'

To his amazement she replied, 'Yes.'

'Where were you born?'

'Van!'

'It was like the sun had risen after a million years,' she said years later. Even the girl's name fitted into Gorky's dream - Sirun Mussikian. *Sirun*, 'beautiful,' in Armenian.

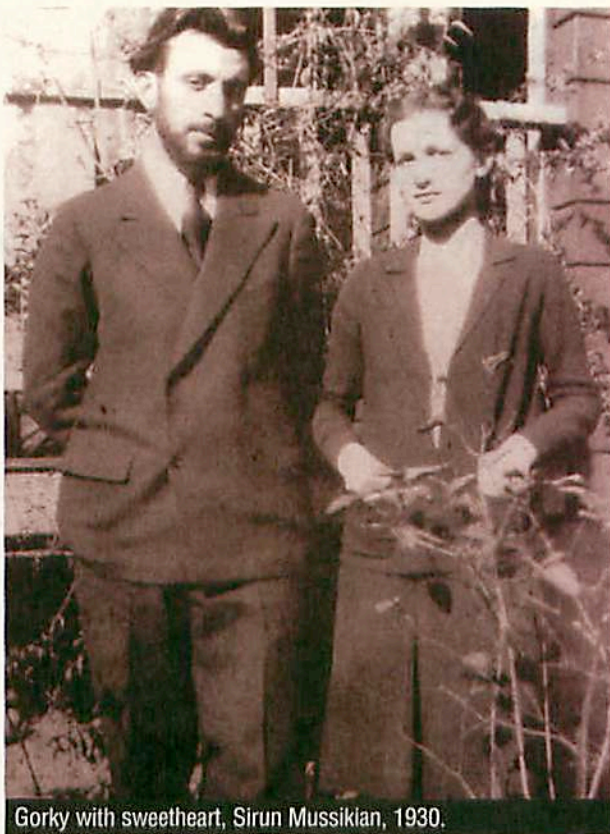
He enjoyed Sirun's companionship. The cold space lit up with her presence. He sketched and painted her endlessly. Gorky still taught Nathaniel Bijur, who came faithfully every Saturday. Sirun said,

'He was painting my whole body. It was beautiful, too. I posed for both of them, and Gorky was painting a huge nude. He also did a beautiful head of me.'

Gorky teased her during the modeling sessions, quoting Cezanne:

'Women should be like cabbages. When they sit, they should not move.'

She perceived him differently from the others: 'I had never known anybody more Armenian than Gorky. He loved it, was proud of it. He felt that they had more soul. They were



Gorky with sweetheart, Sirun Mussikian, 1930.

superior. The look of the people which he loved as a painter. The eyes. 'There's real soul there.'

With Sirun he dropped all his defenses. 'He talked of the wonderful mother. Probably every woman he painted looked like his mother.'

Her comment that every woman he painted looked like Shushan is very astute. As Raphael, Boticelli and Ingres, had sought out and created their own type, he was in the process of creating one. Sirun was the incarnation of the perfect Gorky woman.

### Mother

Gorky's vast studio was dominated by a single large painting which seemed to float like an altarpiece, five feet high. More than any other work, this compelling masterpiece has come to symbolize Gorky's love for his mother, and by extension his love for his country. In exhibition it overshadows other paintings with its tragic aura.

A dark-haired boy stands next to a seated woman. Her pale oval face, a pallid moon, hangs above the rose and lavender pyramid of her apron and long skirt. The enlarged saintly eyes of the woman and the boy's startled gaze in dark eye sockets are haunting.

Gorky had studied the sepia photograph which his mother had sent Setrag. He had borrowed it from his sister Akabi - a solitary image of himself with his mother before Van

had burned and their world fallen apart.

Gorky drew from that photograph like a man possessed using different media to analyze different parts of the image: pencil, pen and ink, crayon and pastel. 'See the excitement of the brush!'

Homage to his mother was bound to take on a sacred quality. Afraid of losing his childhood and his identity, by painting himself next to his mother, he painted her back to life. He would atone for abandoning his name by recreating her as a goddess. He would save her from oblivion; snatch her out of the pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal. In Armenia, relatives frequently sculpt crosses for their loved ones; graveside feasts are held on the Day of the Dead. To be buried in an unmarked grave is the worst fate. Gorky built a monument to her. Perhaps unconsciously, he painted his mother and himself in shades of the rose tufa of Aghtamar. She is the resplendent Armenian earth and stone.

In 1941 Gorky married a Bostonian, Agnes Magruder nicknamed Mogooch, and had two daughters.

### 1946 The Museum of Modern Art

On 10 September 1946 Gorky attended the opening of *Fourteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art. This was the first public showing of *The Artist and His Mother*, which made a deep impression on many abstract painters at the time, and gave a substantial exhibition of his work, a sign that he was now considered one of the top painters in America. Meanwhile on the roof terrace Matta flirted and made passes at Agnes who laughed him off.

After a fire in his studio and a life-threatening operation Gorky suffered a car accident and his marriage broke up in 1948.

The account of Gorky's last two days are confused, 'various and appalling.'

Wilfredo Lam (the Cuban artist) wrote, 'Gorky had had his car accident and I found it strange that he wanted to be alone in New Milford. When we arrived I took several photos of Gorky seated on the lawn outside his studio with his strange plaster neck brace to prevent him from moving his head.'

Years later, among Lam's possessions, a snapshot was found of Gorky sitting in the shade of a tree. The sun casts dappled shade over him in the photo as he leans on a rough wooden post. ■