

## The Tadem Educational Society

Robert A. Kaloosdian's *Tadem, My Father's Village: Extinguished during the 1915 Armenian Genocide* chronicles the horrors that befell a small Armenian village in eastern Turkey during the time surrounding the Great War. The purpose of the book, however, goes beyond making known the injustices perpetrated against Kaloosdian's ancestors and the suffering that resulted. The book also celebrates the memory of old Tadem—its people, its culture, its ancient heritage—Tadem as it was both when the village was flourishing, and also later when its people were oppressed but still fighting spiritedly to maintain their way of life. Kaloosdian's reverence for Tadem's past is particularly well showcased in his discussion of the Tadem Educational Society, an American organization of Tadem émigrés that devoted themselves to improving educational opportunities for Tadem's youth, both boys and girls alike. What makes this historical development so remarkable is the progressiveness of the ideals that were championed by the Tadem people. For an apolitical, agrarian people of the Muslim-dominated Ottoman Empire and their recent émigrés, who were mostly factory workers, exalting public education and encouraging the education of young girls were not attitudes one would expect to find. Tadem was truly ahead of its time.

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, the Armenians of Tadem were still mostly farmers, and the industrial revolution had not yet reached their lands. Still, owing to a favorable climate, fertile farmlands, and their unyielding work ethic, the villagers were more than capable of providing for themselves. Indeed, Tadem had been quite prosperous for much of its history. But the village began to suffer when a thuggish, opportunistic Turk named Hadji Bego moved into town and started exploiting the Armenian natives in whatever way he could get away with.

The oppression left the villagers poor, and soon they could not afford to keep their one-room community schoolhouse in operation.

But the Tademtsis were a people that understood the value of education, and they would not let their school wither without a fight. In 1890 Father Hagop Boghosian, the priest of Tadem, sent letters to some of the young men of Tadem that had immigrated to America in search of work, and asked them to take up the cause of supporting their hometown school. The conditions in Tadem being difficult as they were, a number of young men had made the journey to America, usually with the intent to earn money to send back home, and to return to Tadem when doing so became feasible.

The Tadem immigrants took up Father Hagop's request for action in earnest. On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1891, seven of them organized in Portland, Maine to found the *Tademi Lusavorchagan Usumnasirads Engerutiun*—literally the “Tadem Enlightenment Education-Loving Society,” but known generally as the “Tadem Educational Society.” Their stated purpose was to establish a coeducation institution in the village of Tadem, and to support and improve the school year after year “financially, morally, and intellectually.”

Even though the founding members had little idea how to charter or govern an organization—they had to ask Father Hagop to draft the bylaws—The Tadem Educational Society was an immediate success. The founders started recruiting their friends—other émigrés from Tadem—and by the second meeting in September, 1891, the number of participants had doubled. As word spread further from Tadem émigré to Tadem émigré, and more and more of them signed on, it became clear that the Tadem Educational Society provided more than a means to contribute to a common cause. It provided an infrastructure for community involvement, and gave purpose to a displaced people. In this way, the Tadem Educational Society had a

galvanizing effect on the Tadem diaspora, and membership soared, soon totaling over fifty young men. Chapters sprang in a number of cities, including Lowell, Lynn, and Brighton Massachusetts; Providence, Rhode Island; Orleans County, New York; and Waukegan, Illinois.

By the end of 1892, the Tadem Educational Society had raised a substantial amount of money, over \$353, and had decided to send a generous payment to Tadem to cover the needs of its school. Given that the money came exclusively from the wages of the organization's members, rather than from any fundraising campaign, and given that the members were mostly factory workers or other low-wage laborers, \$353 is quite an impressive figure. Public education in Tadem appeared to have a bright future.

But it was not long until tragedy struck Tadem, and the philanthropy of the Tadem Educational Society was put to the test. In October 1895 the Turkish government, in coordination with Hadji Bego, let loose an armed mob that pillaged Tadem, killing hundreds in their wake, and setting flame to almost every house and building. The school the Tadem Educational Society had worked so hard to establish was now destroyed.

The commitment of the Tadem Educational Society did not falter upon receiving the tragic news. If anything, the group became even more emboldened about their cause. They set out to fund and organize the building of a brand new, two-story school building, as well as an additional school for girls. Built by the most skilled carpenters and laborers in the region, the school turned out beautifully. Among its notable features were glass windows, which made the classrooms bright with natural light. Once the school was built, qualified teachers were hired. Some were from Tadem, some from the surrounding region, and some were from abroad. By 1905, the Tadem school was clearly the best around.

It is truly remarkable that given their cultural background, the people of Tadem from this time period valued education—education for girls as well as boys nonetheless—as fervently as they did. For one thing, the Tadem villagers, and even the émigrés that came to constitute the Tadem Educational Society, were poorly educated themselves. If they had attended the Tadem school as a child, they would have received a basic education, but not much else. After all, Tadem was around the turn of the twentieth century still a small, pre-industrial, agrarian village. The people were by and large too removed to have been affected by the developments in literature, philosophy, science, and the arts that had been taking place in Europe and elsewhere for the last several centuries. Nor were there vocations available in Tadem for which expertise in such intellectual domains would be of great value. For the most part, the way to make a living in Tadem was to cultivate farmland. It is unsurprising then that before the emergence of the Tadem Educational Society, the Tadem villagers were not well educated, and that the village lacked an intellectual culture. Still, somehow, the Tademtsis latched on firmly to the ideals education and learning, with the émigrés even going so far as to use the term “enlightenment” and the phrase “education-loving” in the official title of their organization.

What is more, Tadem was embedded in the Ottoman Empire, a place where, buttressed by widely held tenets of Islam, opportunities for women were greatly restricted. Public education for women was not just rare, but also taboo. Yet however well entrenched in the greater society, these sexist attitudes about education were eschewed by the Armenians of Tadem. To them, it seemed clear that the opportunity for public education must be extended to young girls.

The progressiveness of the Tadem people is a fascinating facet of their story, and worth celebrating. But of course, Kaloosdian’s book is also about tragedy, and this theme applies no less to the village’s developments in education than to other parts of the story. When massacres

once again began to afflict Tadem in 1915, the village's cultural and educational life came to a halt. The school and village church were destroyed, and the population was decimated.