

*Translations from Armenian into Dutch, 1991 to date*

a study by Next Page Foundation in the framework of the Book Platform project

conducted and translated from Armenian into English by Anna Maria Martirosjan-Mattaar<sup>1</sup>

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The most important result of the cultural relations between Armenia and the Netherlands is probably the first Armenian printed Bible (1666). With this goal in mind, Mattheos Tsaretsi traveled to Amsterdam in 1658, where he founded the first Armenian printing house of the city in the neighbourhood of the Kromboomsloot street. This is where, in 1660, Nerses Shnorhali's "Yisus Vordi" appeared. Tsaretsi intended to print an Armenian Bible, but he wasn't able to realise his plan. The honour to print the "queen of printing", the first Bible in Armenian language, belongs to Voskan Yerevantsi, who had taken over the direction of the printing house. This printing press has been used in Amsterdam for nine years, after which it was taken to Livorno, then to Marseille and afterwards back to Amsterdam. It has been the most long-lived of all Armenian printing houses, and of all first ones the most productive: in approximately 25 years it printed 40 books, in large numbers of copies.

But the relations between Armenia and the Netherlands are far older. As long ago as in the fourth century Christianity was propagated in the Netherlands by an Armenian, Servatius (died in 384), who was to become the first bishop of Maastricht and later on the first Dutch saint. Servatius worked several miracles, one of them in the city of Tongeren, where he spoke to the inhabitants about God. And in spite of the fact that he was speaking Armenian, his Dutch audience understood every single word.

Unfortunately, almost two thousand years later the Dutch seem to have lost their ability to understand Armenian, and translations have become necessary. Remarkably, until 2010 no Dutch translation of any Armenian literary work had been published. What were the reasons for this lack of translated works?

The first reason is that there haven't been (and still are not but one) any literary translators from Armenian to Dutch. Some of the Armenians living in Holland master the language well enough to be able to make good translations of official documents. However, this kind of translation differs essentially from literary translations, which are creational pieces of work and require such knowledge of the Dutch language, that usually only a native speaker has. But only very few Dutch people have mastered Armenian. The universities in the Netherlands don't offer a possibility to study Armenian language. From 2007 to 2010, the University of Leiden did have an Armenian department, and the head of this department, the late professor Jos Weitenberg, has fulfilled a very important part in the field of armenology, but he has never taught the Armenian language to Dutch people.

Another big problem is the reservation of Dutch publishers toward the publication of Armenian literature. In the Netherlands, generally it is the publisher who wholly finances



the publication of books, and therefore, decides what to publish. The decision whether to publish a book or not depends on commercial perspectives, instead of literary considerations. Besides, the general public in the Netherlands is not familiar with Armenian culture and literature, oftentimes not even with Armenia. Because of this lack of knowledge, the publishers think the financial risk of publishing Armenian literature is very high. Maybe it will be possible to convince Dutch publishers to publish Armenian literature, offering to financial part of the costs from other sources, in order to reduce the financial risk. The Dutch government, through a special institution, gives subsidies for translating and publishing Dutch literature into other languages, and in this way propagates the literature of its own country throughout the world. It would be desirable that the government of Armenia founds a similar institution. There may also be Armenian charitable foundations, maybe even Dutch cultural foundations, that are willing to support literary translations. This question needs further examination.

Besides all this, there is also a political problem: most Dutch publishers are afraid that the publishing of Armenian literature may be considered as anti-Turkish activity.

Until recently, the republic of Armenia didn't have an embassy in the Netherlands. Hopefully the embassy, which officially opened on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2011, can play an important role in familiarizing the Dutch people with Armenia and Armenian culture, especially Armenian literature. Greater familiarity will increase the probability of publication of Armenian literature in Dutch translation.

At last, in the year 2010, the first two books translated from Armenian were published in the Netherlands: Nairi Zaryan's "David van Sassoen" (David of Sassoon) and Vahe Arsen's poetry book "De terugkeer van de groene goden" (The return of the green gods). It would be good to try to find out why exactly these books have been published, and not any others. The story of the heroes of Sassoon is of course one of the highlights of Armenian literature, because it is the national epic, but at the same time it displays great general human values. And it is the latter reason why it is possible to enjoy this work, also without any knowledge of Armenian history. The translator chose the prose version of the epic, because it is easier to read. Moreover, the publisher decided to give the illustration of the book in hands of the famous Dutch illustrator Peter van Hugten, in order to make the story more apprehensible for the Dutch reader. It is true that this way the book has lost a bit of its Armenian connotation, but it has got a wider acceptance. Two of the most important Dutch newspapers have publicated extensive positive articles about the Dutch translation of David of Sassoon (of which 900 copies were printed). In these articles particular



emphasis was placed on the poetical language of the work, the humoristic descriptions and on the goodness and simplicity of the heroes.

Although there were only 300 copies printed of the Dutch translation of Vahe Arsen's poems, the book was welcomed by both readers and critics with such enthusiasm, that the poet was invited to the Poetry International Festival 2012 in Rotterdam, which took place from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2012. Thanks to the same Dutch translation of his poems, Vahe Arsen was invited to the international poetry festival "Czas Poetow" in the Polish city of Lublin in May 2012. And in the Netherlands, the poet received the "Jambe" Prize for "Best Poet of the year 2010", for the Dutch translation of his work. The Dutch literary critics emphasize the independent character and own voice of Arsen's poetry and its way of capturing the modern world. Vahe Arsen's work as a professor of world literature at Yerevan State university probably helps to make his poetry more understandable for the European reader. The main themes of his poems, the chaos and cruelty of a big city and the emptiness of modern life, are as appropriate for western countries as they are for Armenia. Maybe that is the reason why the famous Dutch literary review "De Gids", for its one hundred and seventy fifth anniversary, again chose a Vahe Arsen poem ("Nocturne") out of a number of works from different Armenian poets, which was published in Armenian, English and Dutch in their electronic review.

The best selling literary genres in the Netherlands are literary thrillers and fantasy novels, which both are genres that are not much written in Armenia nowadays. Nevertheless, the Dutch publishers don't restrict their publicational activities to these two genres only. Publishers in general concentrate their activity on one or some specific genres. It is very important that translated works are offered to the right publishers. For each book it is important to find a publishing house, that is specialised in just the genre of this specific book.

Publishing houses in Western-Europe and the United States often make agreements about the translation and publication of each other's books, on occasion of international book fairs. However, this working system is only applicable when the publishers know about the books that have been published in other countries and other languages. This is not the case for the books printed in Armenia. In this area, the Armenian publishers could play an important role, if they participate more actively in international book fairs and put information about their new books on the internet. This information is also very important for literary translators who live outside Armenia, because they need to know about new books to be able to decide which books they should translate.



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Summarizing the situation of Armenian literature in the Netherlands, it can be concluded that there is still a lot of work to be done, by Dutch translators as well as by Armenian publishers, and by the government and embassy of the Republic of Armenia. It is time the Armenian modern literature takes its worthy place in the literary market of the Netherlands.

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*Sources:*

*Library of the University of Amsterdam*

*Personal library of Anna Maria Martirosjan-Mattaar*

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