

Echoes of Days Gone By: Ottoman Words in the Former Concentration Camp Gusen II, Austria

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Context

It was a speck of colour on an inconspicuous table, a small watercolour painting printed on a 'postcard' whose colourful design and motive mismatched the sombre atmosphere of the room dedicated to commemoration: It was the painted testimony devoted to the unlikely survival of Henri Cheramian, a former prisoner in the Austrian concentration camp Gusen (Upper-Austria), who contributed to a memorial project initiated by the Polish survivor Stefan Józewicz in 1946, prior to his death. His entry, showing a mosque (reminiscent of Ayasofya in form, shape, and number of minarets) through an artistically shaped archway and a brief four-liner underneath, was duplicated and transferred onto a 'postcard,' consequently made available by the Gusen Memorial Committee. Having been created between summer 1944 and May 1945, the aquarelle preceded the text which was added later in the course of the memorial project. The aquarelle thus constitutes a prime example of clandestine artistic activity in concentration camps but deviates from other contributions as far as its theme is concerned: In contrast to other paintings and sketches secretly created in concentration camps,¹ Henri Cheramian's aquarelle is not concerned with camp life and its horrors, but with life before: Encouraged by the camp scribe Stefan Józewicz, he created a colourful, material memory of his home country that is ripe with nostalgia and internal conflict linked to his life as an expat and French citizen.²

Interestingly, the four-liner underneath also constitutes a reminiscence of days gone by as it is composed in Ottoman Turkish: a language that is at odds with both time and place. By referring to a cultural heritage that had been largely diminished to a side note in Republican Turkish historiography, the Ottoman script constitutes an echo of the past and reconnects the author and painter to his Ottoman roots: Henri Cheramian, born in Diyarbakır on 5 March 1904 as Haroutioun Cheramian, left his country of birth

¹ For camp Gusen, see Franciszek Znamirovski's ten aquarelles that provide a very clear picture of camp 'life.' (Hanausch et al. 2012).

² I sincerely thank Mr Rudolf A. Haunschmied, founding member of the Gusen Memorial Committee, for sharing his knowledge regarding the origins of the aquarelle. Additional thanks goes to the Gusen Memorial Committee for allowing me to publish said aquarelle.

and emigrated to France. While the date and circumstances of his emigration are left unclear, his Armenian name points towards forced migration as a result of the Armenian genocide. In France, he adopted the name Henri, settled in Bourges (Central France), and worked in construction: His prisoner cards [*Häftlingskarten*] later compiled by the Nazi camp authorities identified him as a concrete worker ‘concreter’ [*Betonierer*]. Arrested in the autumn of 1943 as ‘protective custody prisoner on political grounds’ [*politischer Schutzhäftling*], he endured imprisonment in Bourges, Fontevrault, Blois, and Compiègne before he was transferred to the concentration camp Mauthausen (Austria) on 22 March 1944. There, in a camp infamously known as ‘*Mordhausen*’³ owing to the high death rates attributable to the work in the local quarry, he suffered imprisonment until 12 May 1944, when he was transferred to the satellite camp Gusen II. Only a few kilometres away from Mauthausen, camp Gusen II mirrored the main camp with regards to death rates and backbreaking labour. He endured almost a year in Gusen II before he was liberated on 5 May 1945. One year later, he commemorated his survival by adding the four-liner to his aquarelle in Stefan Józewicz’s memorial book and hence left a lasting mark that links the gruesome story of Gusen to Turkey, and to the nine Ottoman-born prisoners⁴ that did not survive to tell their story in the camp system Mauthausen. His entry is an echo of the hell he and many others went through in Gusen or other satellite camps within the Mauthausen camp system. Adding a further dimension of remembrance, Ottoman Turkish, the chosen language of verbal expression, links his words, few as they may be, to an old self and an era gone by: Notwithstanding emigration and adoption of French citizenship, Henri Cheramian seems to turn into Haroutioun again, the Ottoman Armenian living in Diyarbakır, and hence testifies to the longevity of Ottoman heritage ingrained in individual identity and identity construction. This might also be

³ A pun used among camp prisoners that was based on the German word ‘*Mord*’ referring to ‘murder.’ (See Wachsmann 2016, 253).

⁴ All nine were listed as Jews, eight of them were Turkish citizens: Abdul Hasan, Abramo Amiel, Davide Amiel, Nissin Amouraben, Alexander Aslan, Maurice Eskenazi, Rifat Sevi, Victor Sidi. Maximilian Schiffmann, born 1899 in İzmir, was identified as a citizen of Nazi Germany.

underlined by his choice of motive: While it can only be speculated why he chose Aya-sofya or a mosque with striking similarity as his motive, it stands in line with his choice to use Ottoman-Turkish as his language of verbal expression. Potentially driven by nostalgia and an inner urge to express his identity as a former Ottoman, he may have picked it as a site of cultural heritage that was popular enough throughout Europe to stand out as a signifier of his Ottoman identity: an identity which he seemed to cherish despite the time that separated him, a survivor of Nazi extermination policy, from his former self.

Transcription⁵

Mināre[y]i çalan kılfını hāzır (!) yapar⁶
Guzen kân[p]ında (!) durduğum günlerden
Ştefan arkadaşım yādīgeri (!)
Harutyun Şiramyān

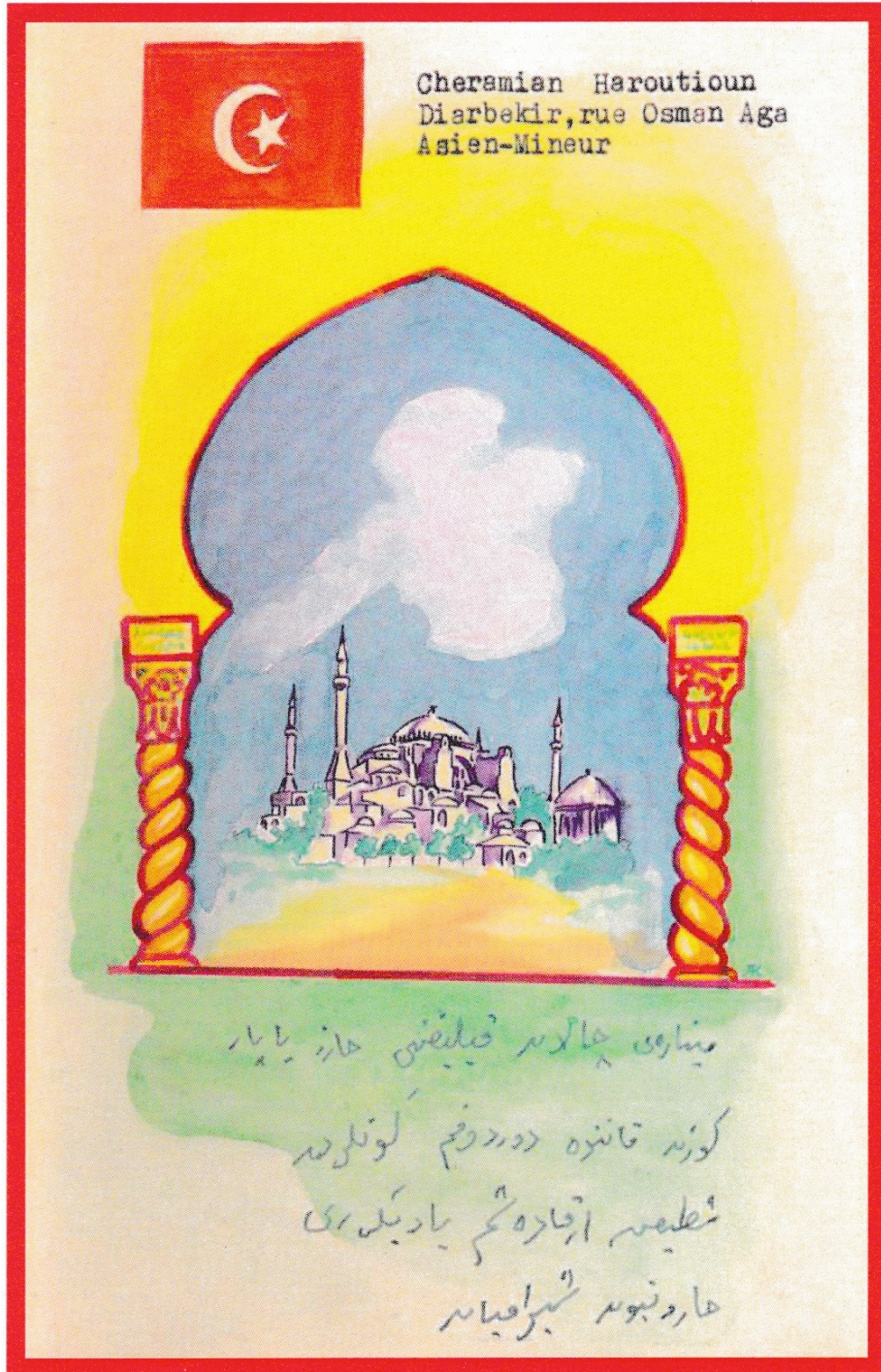
Translation

Those committing a crime brace themselves
 From the days which I spent in the camp Gusen
 In memory of my friend Stefan
 Haroutioun Cheramian

⁵ Many thanks to Hülya Çelik who assisted me with the transcription.

⁶ According to the *Atasözleri ve Deyimler Sözlüğü*, this proverb refers to 'kolay kolay gizlenemeyecek kadar büyük bir yolsuzluğu yapan kimse, sorumluluktan kurtulma yollarını önceden düşünür' [someone committing such an evil deed that it will not be easily disguised thinks about ways to escape responsibility]. See *Türk Dil Kurumu Sözlükleri. Atasözleri ve Deyimler Sözlüğü*. URL: <https://sozluk.gov.tr/> (visited 26-07-2023).

Facsimile



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