



International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies

ISSN: 1829-4405; eISSN: 2738-2931

[Journal homepage](#)

Serob Kosyan, «Նորահայտ» Շատախը. Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը վերապրած շատախցու հուշագրություն [“Newly Discovered” Shatakh: A Memoir of a Shatakh Survivor of the Armenian Genocide]

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How to cite: Serob Kosyan, «Նորահայտ» Շատախը. Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը վերապրած շատախցու հուշագրություն [“Newly Discovered” Shatakh: A Memoir of a Shatakh Survivor of the Armenian Genocide], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide* 14. Editor, author of the preface and references Elina Mirzoyan. Yerevan: AGMI, 2025, 344 pages, 1-6.

Submitted: 08.04.2025

Accepted: 10.05.2025

Published online: 15.05.2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51442/ijags.0066>

SEROB KOSYAN, «ՆՈՐԱՀԱՅՏ» ՇԱՏԱԽԸ. ՀԱՅՈՑ

ՑԵՂԱՍՊԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՎԵՐԱՊՐԱԾ ՇԱՏԱԽՑՈՒ ՀՈՒՇԱԳՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

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The history of Shatakh's Armenian population during the massacres of 1894–1897 and WWI remains relatively underexplored. Existing accounts are scattered across contemporary press reports and a few specialized studies, providing only a fragmented picture of local experiences.¹ However, beyond these materials, there are unpublished primary sources that shed unique light on the period. Among them, the memoir of Serob Kosyan stands out as a particularly valuable testimony, preserving voices and perspectives otherwise absent from the historical record.

Serob Kosyan was born in 1899 in Tagh, the administrative center of the *kaza* of Shatakh (Van vilayet), and was the sole surviving member of his family during the Armenian Genocide. Coming from a family of weavers, he completed seven years at the parish school before choosing to follow in his father Hovhannes's footsteps as a weaver. His adolescence was disrupted by the events of 1915 when, at the age of sixteen, he was expelled from his birthplace along with thousands of others. Reflecting on this moment years later, he recalled that on 22 July 1915, “like millions of others, [they] too left behind [their] homes and possessions, taking only a piece

¹ A-Do, *Մեծ դեպքերը Վասպուրականում 1914-1915 թվականներին* [The Great Events in Vaspurakan 1914–1915] (Yerevan: Luys, 1917); Hamlet Gevorgyan, *Ազատագրական պայքարի ռազմավարությունը և էջեր նրա հերոսապատումից* [The Strategy of the Liberation Struggle and Pages from Its Heroic History] (Yerevan: n.p., 2012); Hayrik Muradyan, «Շատախի հերոսական անցյալից» [From the History of the Heroic Past of Shatakh], *Etchmiadzin* 5(1968): 39–48; Anahide Ter Minassian, “Van 1915,” in *Armenian Van / Vaspurakan*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (Costa Mesa, CA: MAZDA, 2000), 209–244; Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I. B. Tauris., 2011), 331–333.

of bread,” and that they set out “without knowing for what crime [they] were punished or where [they] were being driven.”²

The retreat quickly turned into a scene of relentless violence and death. According to Kosyan, the surviving Armenians fled day and night, driven by hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and constant fear. Pursued by Ottoman forces and Kurdish auxiliaries, they reached the Berkri valley, where they were surrounded and subjected to another wave of massacres. He described how the defenseless population scattered in panic, abandoning children, possessions, and even the bread tied to their backs, while the cries of the wounded filled the valley. Those who escaped the slaughter faced yet another peril: the Bendimahi River, whose swift currents “completed what the sword had left unfinished,” sweeping countless deportees away. Among those lost to the river was Kosyan’s twelve-year-old sister, Arshaluys. With this, the last of his family perished, leaving him utterly alone.³

Together with other survivors, Kosyan reached Ejmiatsin after fifteen to eighteen days of wandering. Their condition was desperate: skeletal, starving, and destitute. He remembered that in the makeshift refugee camps, no one was able to contain the spread of cholera, which claimed thousands of lives. Wagons could not carry the dead to mass graves quickly enough, and in many families, no one survived at all. As he observes, the epidemic of cholera “completed the massacres left unfinished by the Turkish government.” Having lost his entire family, Kosyan spent nights without shelter until he was able to find work.⁴ He labored in the cotton fields of Noragavit, weeding from dawn until sunset for Persian employers, and later in a tannery and other workshops in Yerevan. His survival in these years depended on hard physical labor performed under dire conditions.

In 1916, like many other refugees from Van, Kosyan attempted to return on foot to his birthplace in Vaspurakan. After a month of travel, however, he was forced to abandon his journey, acknowledging that “[he] could not succeed in reaching Shatakh. Vostan had become the border between Armenians and Turks.” For the next several years, he moved between Turkey, pre-Soviet Armenia, and eventually Soviet Armenia, enduring what he described as a

² Serob Kosyan, «Նորահայտ» Շատախը. Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը վերապրած շատախցու հուշագրություն [“Newly Discovered” Shatakh: A Memoir of a Shatakh Survivor of the Armenian Genocide], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian genocide* 14, editor, author of the preface and references Elina Z. Mirzoyan (Yerevan: AGMI, 2025), 36.

³ Ibid., 37.

⁴ Ibid.

life of poverty and hardship. “My biography,” he later reflected, “has been a painful one. We endured many years of famine and suffering, like many others in pre-Soviet Armenia.”⁵ The establishment of Soviet rule marked a decisive change in his life. Only then, he explained, did his circumstances begin to improve.

In 1924, he married, eventually raising five children, all of whom received higher education and entered professional careers. In 1958, he was granted a modern apartment in Yerevan, complete with amenities. In contrast to his youth, which had been shaped by genocide, dispossession, and famine, his later years were defined by stability and security. He described himself as enjoying a “happy old age,” a striking conclusion to a life that had begun in the crucible of mass violence and displacement.⁶ Serob Kosyan died on the night of 28-29 January 1982.

In 1968, Serob Kosyan composed a remarkable two-part memoir of his experience, a work that he intended to serve as both a personal record and a legacy for future generations. The memoir is divided into two volumes: *The Valley of Shatakh* (Book One, 370 pages, of which 10–20 were damaged but later restored) and *The Daredevils of Shatakh* (Book Two, 76 pages). The originals are preserved in the collections of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute (AGMI), having been donated to the institution by the author’s son, Suren Kasyan, on 26 April 2008 (AGMI Museum Collection, Part 8, files 119–120). They are accompanied by a surviving photograph of Kosyan in his school years and a hand-drawn map of Tagh created by the author himself.

The first volume, *The Valley of Shatakh*, presents the author’s birthplace, the town of Tagh. It is written with the double perspective of childhood memory and old age reflection, bringing together the beauty of the landscape, the lives of successive generations, and the deep sense of loss following genocide and displacement. Kosyan described the act of remembering in vivid language: “Every time you remember the happy and carefree days of childhood spent in your beautiful, incomparable homeland, especially when you have been violently torn away from that sweet paradise, the mountains, forests, rivers, springs, and green meadows of Shatakh rise again before your eyes and mind, and you cannot but sigh with longing.”⁷ Writing in his later years, he admitted that “when the breath of darkness and death reaches the back of your neck,

⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 47.

one must not despair, but summon all one's strength and return to old memories, finding in them new life and feeling once more the breath of youth."⁸ The memoir, therefore, was not only a personal act of recollection but also a conscious effort to preserve a world that had been destroyed. Kosyan stated clearly that he wrote so that his children and grandchildren would "form at least some idea of the land and life of their ancestors."⁹

The second volume, *The Daredevils of Shatakh*, is shorter but distinctive in character. It contains portraits, anecdotes, and satirical sketches of individuals from Shatakh and surrounding villages. In this way, he combined personal observation with stories collected from others, preserving a record of character and mentality that otherwise would have vanished. Kosyan also used the second volume to recall the neighboring village of Kajet', whose inhabitants played an important role in self-defense during the massacres. He remembered, for example, the fate of Petros Ter-Hovhannisyan, an important figure in the self-defense battle in the village of Kajet', mentioned in other sources, who was treacherously killed while a guest in the guardhouse of Khumar.¹⁰ With sorrow, he described how one by one the Armenian villages of the district - Kajet', Jnuk, Hinents, Kaghp, Sak, and others - were destroyed in those years. These recollections connected his more humorous and ethnographic sketches to the tragic historical events that reshaped the entire region.

Taken together, *The Valley of Shatakh* and *The Daredevils of Shatakh* form a rare and invaluable source. The first volume reconstructs the land, life, and traditions of the district, while the second depicts its personalities and social fabric. They combine autobiography with ethnography, testimony with folklore, and personal memory with communal heritage. In doing so, Serob Kosyan ensured that the stories, language, and traditions of his birthplace did not disappear with the generation of survivors. His memoirs allow us to see him not only as a survivor of genocide but also as a careful observer and preserver of culture - an "unknown folklorist of Shatakh," whose writing safeguarded the memory of a community that might otherwise have been lost forever.

The significance of Kosyan's memoirs lies in their wide scope. By recording folklore, humorous tales, proverbs, anecdotes, moral parables, and poems, he preserved fragments of

⁸ Ibid., 46-47.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰ Petros Ter-Hovhannisyan is mentioned in the article authored by ethnographer Hayrik Mouradyan. See Hayrik Mouradyan, «Շատախի հերոսական անցյալից» [From the Heroic Past of Shatakh], *Ejmiatsin* 5 (1968): 39-48.

Shatakh's oral tradition. Many pieces are given in the Shatakh dialect, some in mixed colloquial language, and others in modern Armenian, making the text valuable not only for history but also for the study of language and folklore. At the same time, his detailed descriptions of the environment, customs, and community life provide a cultural and ethnographic portrait of Shatakh on the eve of the Genocide.

The memoirs of Serob Kosyan cover a wide chronological and thematic range, stretching from the author's earliest memories of childhood to his reflections in old age. Within this frame, he addresses his youthful life in his native homeland, his family home and its surroundings, daily customs, traditions, school, classmates, local habits, and the oral lore of the community. Alongside these depictions of everyday life, the memoir also includes brief yet poignant episodes of the Hamidian massacres, recalled through sketches and anecdotes, as well as accounts of the Armenian Genocide, with vivid portrayals of massacres, deportations, and the subsequent struggle for life in Armenia.

The chronological arc begins with Kosyan's own childhood and school years, reaching its turning point in 1914, when he was fifteen years old, on the eve of the Genocide. This section introduces figures from the Kurdish and Turkish ruling classes, whose presence and actions foreshadow the destruction that was to come. At the same time, through the framework of short stories and vignettes, Kosyan looks back further, to the heroic moments of Shatakh's Armenians in the 1890s. He recalls the resistance struggles of 1890–1900, and in particular the Hamidian massacres of 1896 in the town of Tagh, embedding them in the broader history of Armenian endurance and self-defense. Thus, his narrative is not only personal but also historical, tying the fate of his own generation to that of earlier ones.

The memoir's last chronological layer emerges in the author's old age, when his memories are interwoven with his own poetic compositions. Both volumes of the work close with a series of his original poems. Although the second volume repeats the same poetic samples found in the first, the preserved collection demonstrates that Kosyan considered poetry an inseparable part of his remembrance. His verses are not the spontaneous outbursts of an untrained pen but rather carefully crafted literary works, with rhyme, richness of content, and smoothness of imagery. They confirm that, while he never sought to be a professional writer, Kosyan possessed a natural literary talent.

This talent is equally visible in his prose. Through flexible and artful narrative solutions, Kosyan succeeded in recounting reality without embellishment and without turning away from the harsh truth of events. His aim was never simply artistic expression but rather the preservation of memory. He wrote, above all, to leave a record for his people and to rescue from oblivion the rich heritage of his native land, of which he himself had been a living bearer. The memoirs thus move through time from childhood to genocide, from survival to old age, but they remain united by a single purpose: to ensure that the land, culture, and traditions of Shatakh would not perish with the generation that had witnessed their destruction.