

Editorial **THE CORE AUTHOR OF ALI & NINO**

Does It Really Matter?



by Betty Blair
Editor

So just who was this mysterious person behind the bittersweet love story *Ali and Nino*? Who was this astute observer of human nature, of traditions, politics and history, who felt compelled to hide behind the pseudonym Kurban Said?

Which author was capable of describing the delights and discovery of first love, while also identifying core issues that were tearing society apart? Who was this prophet who warned of the dire consequences of judging others, based exclusively upon nationality, religion or gender?

Back in the summer of 2004, the question of the authorship of the novel *Ali and Nino* was the furthest thing from our minds at *Azerbaijan International*. In fact, one might say we stumbled into this research quite by accident. It started with a simple question: How broad was the appeal for this book worldwide—this sensitive, cross-cultural love story between a Georgian beauty and an Azerbaijani youth—Christian and Muslim—and their quest to shape their world beyond the typical stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in early 20th century Baku? We wondered how many languages the novel had been translated into? We thought there might be six—the original German (1937), Italian, English, French, Russian, and Azerbaijani. Were there more?

Three months later, after late nights surfing the Internet, we had identified 21 languages. Our most recent find—Albanian—was published in October 2009. Today, covers of nearly 100 editions in 33 languages may be viewed here in this issue, as well as on Azerbaijan International's Web site—AZER.com, and soon at ALI-NINO.com.

Kurban Said, we researched written sources in 10 languages (English, Azeri, Russian, German, Italian, French, Georgian, Turkish, Persian, and Swedish). Even alphabet changes for Azerbaijani—Arabic, Latin and Cyrillic—brought on by the reversals of political policy, have complicated the search.

Then there were visits to Tbilisi to retrace the steps of *Ali and Nino* there, to the Ehrenfels castle in Lichtenau, Austria, to meet with the copyright owner, and to old Istanbul where Chamanzaminli had served as Ambassador. Add to this, months and months of research at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), delving into their vast collection of books and literary journals of the 1930s. Nor can one over-state the power of the Internet in facilitating our research and in fostering friendships that led to further links and discoveries.

In Baku, with the help of our magazine staff—recent university graduates, Konul Samadova, Sevinj Mehdizade and Aisha Jabbarova—we began delving into documents at the Azerbaijan Republic State History Archives as well as into Chamanzaminli's diaries, essays, short stories and novels. His collection, archived in Baku's Institute of Manuscripts, is one of the most extensive literary funds that exists for 20th century Azerbaijani writers. Its description alone fills a 200-page book.¹

It was in Chamanzaminli's works that we discovered the genesis of social concern related to Azerbaijan's independence, beginning as early as 1907 when he was a student. We found him to be a keen observer of society and a strong advocate for women's rights at a time when few Muslim girls had the chance to go to school. Chamanzaminli understood his people, and

“Without love, there is no life. With it, we can reach the summit of morality.”

—Yusif Vazirov (Chamanzaminli)
High school student in Baku, September 17, 1907
In a letter to Jahangir bey Nasirbeyov

In 2005, Tom Reiss in his book *The Orientalist* (New York: Random House) claimed that Lev Nussimbaum (1905-1942), who called himself Essad Bey, was the creative force behind the narrative *Ali and Nino*. Finally, Kurban Said had been identified—or so it seemed. We were ready to announce Reiss's discovery in our 2005 summer issue of *Azerbaijan International* magazine, but then we hesitated. What was the Azerbaijani point of view? Could we counter any arguments that might arise? Shouldn't we listen to the Azerbaijani side and try to understand their point of view?

The greatest advocates for the authorship of Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli (1887-1943) as Kurban Said were his sons. However by then, Fikrat Vazirov (1929-2004) had died. His older brother Orkhan (1928-2010) graciously welcomed our inquiries. Frankly speaking, we went to visit him filled with skepticism, convinced that the issue had already been settled. But by the time we left, we realized that we were “back at zero.” Maybe Essad Bey wasn't the author, after all.

And, thus, began our long and circuitous journey for the identity behind the mysterious penname of Kurban Said. Little did we know our quest would take six years. The problem is that time passes, memories fade, witnesses die. And the paper trail becomes less and less visible. Documents get destroyed; sometimes accidentally; other times, deliberately. In the case of

realized that, for the most part, they were blindly following the traditions of their forefathers. But he yearned for a new world—a new society—which could transcend cultural differences, where individuals could be judged on their own unique merits, not the divisive stereotypes attached to religion or nationality. In Chamanzaminli's diaries, we even found the prototype for Nino, a young Jewish girl that he met in Ashgabad in the summer of 1907.²

At the same time, we began collecting every book we could find which had been published under the name of Essad Bey. His penname is attached to 16 books, which appeared in the phenomenally short span of eight years (1929-1936), especially given their scope and size. Essad Bey and his publishers claimed that many of his works were biographical—*Stalin* (1931), *Mohammed the Prophet* (1932), *Nicholas II* (1935), *Lenin* (1935), *Reza Shah* (1936), and *Allah ist Gross* (Ibn Saud of Arabia, 1936). We soon discovered that historians and critics begged to differ, denouncing Essad Bey as a reliable scribe and interpreter of history.

As we began to look more closely at Essad Bey's texts and articles—there are at least 150-160 of them—questions began to arise. Could this person really be the same author who had penned *Ali and Nino*? If so, why was the tone and spirit so different? Why had he not written more about his alleged Homeland—Azerbaijan?³ Why was he so cavalier in his attitude towards truth? How was it that Essad Bey's non-fiction read like



Albanian



Urdu



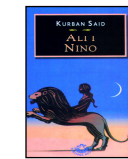
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Serbian



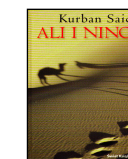
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Persian



Norwegian



Korean



Japanese

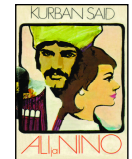


Italian

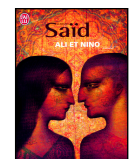


Indonesian

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Finnish



French



Georgian



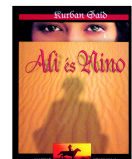
German



Greek



Hebrew



Hungarian

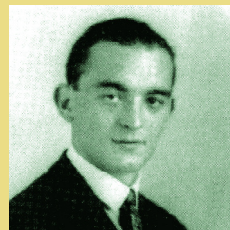
“A ‘Must Read’ for anyone interested in knowing the burning issues of the Caucasus of the last century, which identify the realities of today—not only for the region, but for the entire world. A superb read!”

—Azerbaijan International

Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli
(1887-1943)



Lev Nussimbaum Essad Bey
(1905-1942)



“Damn everything!
Long live truth, honesty and sincerity!”

—Diaries of Yusif Vazir (Chamanzaminli), 20
January 8, 1908

sensationalized fiction, while the novel *Ali and Nino* read like journal entries of a youth genuinely questioning the contradictions that intruded upon his everyday life.

We began to stumble upon substantial clues that revealed that Essad Bey could not possibly have been the core author of *Ali and Nino*.⁴ In fact, two months before his death in August 1942, Essad Bey, more or less, confessed that the manuscript had not originated with him. On his deathbed, stricken with a painful and rare blood disease that had led to gangrene of his feet,⁵ he implied that the story had been passed to him. He wrote his Italian friend Pima Andrea: “There were only two times that I had thought neither of the publishing company, nor of royalties, but just wrote happily away. These were the books Stalin⁶ and *Ali and Nino*. The heroes of the novel simply come to me demanding: ‘Give us shape’—‘we also possess certain characteristics that you’ve left out, and we want to travel, among other things.’”⁷

We’re convinced of Chamanzaminli’s authorship now.⁸ This is not what we had expected to find. Yes, Essad Bey’s fingerprints can be found in the novel.⁹ Descriptions of legends and sometimes historical background (some of which is not true) can be traced to him—like icing on a cake, functioning primarily as extraneous, superfluous elements which, though colorful, are not critical to the story line and its deeper themes. It seems, however, that Essad Bey coordinated the final version and contract with the publisher.¹⁰

Then there was the Georgian writer Grigol Robakidze (1881-1961) whose work *The Snake’s Slough* (*Das Schlangen Hemd*, first published in German in 1928) was incorporated into the narrative, especially in passages related to—of all things, given Essad Bey’s admission about adding dimensions of travel to the novel—the young couple’s visits to Tiflis and Iran.

delved into documents related to both sides—Chamanzaminli’s as well as Essad Bey’s—both inside Azerbaijan as well as in Europe and the United States. No one had ever examined both sides so extensively.

Still there are mysteries. Perhaps there will always be. Pieces are still missing from the puzzle—though the identity authorship is clear. Chamanzaminli, not Essad Bey, is the core author of *Ali and Nino*.

But does it really matter? Does it really matter if the true author, the core writer of this timeless work, is identified and acknowledged? Some Web sites, including catalogs from reputable university libraries, have already begun replacing the pseudonym “Kurban Said” with the name of “Lev Nussimbaum.” Even the Cantonese edition of *Ali and Nino* (2007) claims that the pseudonym Kurban Said is really Essad Bey, penname for Lev Nussimbaum, who is identified as a German author! Currently, Wikipedia erroneously directs inquiries about “Kurban Said” directly to the entry for “Lev Nussimbaum.”

How is it that in death, one author is credited for the brilliant original work of the other, especially given that these two individuals—Chamanzaminli and Essad Bey—were so opposite in character, so different in their sensitivities about society, so antithetical in their concerns and dreams for the creation of an independent state of Azerbaijan? How is it that one was so disdainful of women,¹³ the other, so sympathetic¹⁴—yet the one is mistaken for the other?

Furthermore, Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli, 33, was outside of Azerbaijan, serving as the First Ambassador from Azerbaijan to Istanbul when the Bolsheviks took control of Baku in 1920; Essad Bey, a young lad of 14, fled Baku with his father, never to return. But Chamanzaminli, admittedly homesick, made the decision to go back to his roots and his people, fully

“I am humiliated... I end up being insulted because I’m Turk. But to this day, I have never insulted anyone, nor will I. Although I have not loved everyone equally, I have never hated anyone. I do not hate people because of their nationality and I do not take religion seriously. I believe in the equality of all nations, religious beliefs, women and men. I long for truth and humanity.”

—Yusif Vazirov (Chamanzaminli), 19
Diaries, July 15, 1907, Ashgabad, Turkmenistan

Whether Robakidze agreed for his material to be incorporated into the text or whether it was a situation of blatant plagiarism is not known. Documents exist showing that Robakidze and Essad Bey did know each other.¹¹

And German documents confirm that Austrian baroness Elfriede Ehrenfels (1894-1982) registered “Kurban Said” as her own pseudonym, apparently to facilitate the passage of royalties¹² to Essad Bey, who had been stripped of his membership in the German Writers’ Union in 1935. Ehrenfels may also have been involved in polishing the novel, as she herself was a writer, but this has yet to be proven.

We’re not the first to claim that Chamanzaminli was the author of *Ali and Nino*. Others, in Azerbaijan, have preceded us—specifically, the sons of Chamanzaminli—Fikrat and Orkhan Vazirov, along with Professor Tofiq Huseinoghlu of Baku State University, who has studied the life and works of Chamanzaminli for more than 40 years. Also the Azerbaijan Writers’ Union, led by Anar (Rezayev), had made a determination and declaration about Chamanzaminli’s role. There have been others as well, who vouched for his authorship. But our research differs from those who preceded us as we

conscious of the perils and risks that he might face, since he had been so outspoken against the Bolsheviks.¹⁵

Vazirov arrived back in Soviet Azerbaijan in 1926. Barely a decade passed before he found himself in serious trouble with authorities. Stripped of membership in the Writers’ Union in 1937, he disappeared underground. In 1940, he was arrested, branded as a counter-revolutionist, and sentenced to eight years in the GULAG, Stalin’s onerous system of political prison camps. He died there in 1943—broken in body and spirit, and leaving behind a widow and three orphaned children.

These days the Republics of the former Soviet Union are beginning to commemorate the 20th anniversary of their independence from the repressive government (1920-1991), which began at the time the fictional character Ali Khan gave his life fighting against the onslaught of Bolshevik ideology. During these past two decades, millions of former citizens have been trying to assess and figure out for themselves what is their new identity, their new allegiances.

Azerbaijanis, living in a small country, the size of Austria or the state of Maine, used to feel themselves under the umbrella of one of the largest countries in the world. Yet, during those 70 years under Soviet rule, they, like many others, were not allowed to fully identify with their own national traditions or language. These were the same issues that Ali Khan was complaining about under the rule of the Czarist Russia.

So is it not worthwhile for them to search for spiritual legitimacy in cultural expressions—their own art and literature—to identify deep thinkers, true heroes, like Chamanzaminli, who grappled with these same concerns?

And is it not crucial for all of us—as members of the human race—to search for ways to limit the consequences of a fractured, polarized world, especially after the hatred and destruction of 9/11 (2001), which has since multiplied exponentially? Is it not imperative to recognize that much of the cause of this enmity was defined by Chamanzaminli, nearly a century ago? How dare one judge and discriminate against another person based on preconceived notions of nationality, and religion.

Ali and Nino focuses on a goal that is so simple, yet so hard for us as individuals, to achieve—that of trying to forge our own identity in a world of contradicting beliefs and practices. Perhaps, that explains the universal appeal of this novel. For if we were able to successfully find ourselves and our own worth—unencumbered by labels, status, fashion, possessions, borders and beliefs, would we not be able to begin to value others who are different from us, and to cast aside prejudices which limit human potential—nationality, religion, gender and even age.

May this life-long journey of assaulting artificial man-made barriers begin for each one of us, through love and the daring embrace of others who are different than we are, just as the author of *Ali and Nino* envisioned.

But beyond borders, nationalities, race and creed, it’s crucial that we come to acknowledge genuine creators of truth and beauty in any genre and sphere. In a world inundated by charlatans, con artists and profit-seeking propagandists, don’t we all deserve to know and acknowledge genuine heroes. And don’t our young people need to know that in the end, truth really does matter. Still.

Our next issue of Azerbaijan International—Vol. 16:1—will feature “The Life and Works of Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli.” Up until now, these works have only been available in Azeri and Russian. We introduce his works—his diaries, autobiographical sketches, essays, and short stories in English for the first time. Unfortunately, there was not enough space in this issue of our magazine. Again, editions will be published both in English and Azeri. ■

NOTES

- 1 Jannat Naghiyeva, *Description of Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli’s Archives* (Baku: Ornak, 1999).
- 2 This issue, “Jewish Girl was Prototype: Yusif Vazirov’s Diary Suggests Identity of Nino.”
- 3 More at “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) 60-69.
- 4 This issue, “Essad Bey and *Ali and Nino*: Seven Reasons Why It Just Ain’t So—As Core Author.”
- 5 Most likely Lev Nussimbaum died of Buerger’s Disease, not Raynaud’s Disease, as suggested in Tom Reiss’s *The Orientalist* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 320, 328. Buerger’s Disease usually afflicts males, ages 20-40, often of Ashkenazi descent; Raynaud’s most often affects women. (FAQ) 137-138.
- 6 Literary critic Joseph Shaplen, without even knowing about the discovery of this letter written by Essad Bey, points out that the two sections of Essad Bey’s “biography” of Stalin differ significantly from each other. And he’s right. He notes: “This is a dangerous book to put before the general public. The average reader not familiar with the background of the Russian revolutionary movement may be misled by the undocumented and purely legendary pages that fill the first half of this biography of the ‘legendary Georgian’ written by the mysterious Essad Bey. This part of the book is rather fictional, although containing some illuminating material on the forces and environment that molded Stalin’s boyhood and youth and influenced his character as a revolutionary and a Marxist.
- 7 “The second half of the book, dealing with the historical record, as against what may be termed Stalin’s pre-historic period, is by far the more valuable...” Joseph Shaplen, “Stalin, Symbol of Asia’s ‘Cruelty and Power,’” in *The New York Times Book Review* (March 27, 1932), p. 10.
- 8 Reiss, *Orientalist*, p. 302, quoting letter from Essad Bey (Lev Nussimbaum) to Pima Andrea, dated June 11, 1942. Lev died August 27th. More: FAQ 15.
- 9 This issue, “101 Reasons: Chamanzaminli as Core Author of *Ali and Nino*.”
- 10 This issue, “Cut and Paste Author: Essad Bey’s Fingerprints in *Ali and Nino*.”
- 11 Lucy Tal (1897-1995) writes about meeting Erika Loewendahl (Essad Bey’s ex-wife), an acquaintance of hers in New York, and suggests she could ask her if *Ali and Nino* was really written by Essad Bey and whether the pseudonym Kurban Said belonged to him or not, but then Tal adds that Erika may not have known, as she may have already left Essad Bey by that time. [Erika left Essad Bey in 1935, *Ali and Nino* was published in 1937]. Lucy Tal writing to her lawyer [F.A.G. Schoenberg in London] in a letter dated June 2, 1973. Lucy Tal’s correspondence is kept with Martin Skala, Darien, Connecticut.
- 12 However, nearly 15 years later, when challenged by the Ehrenfels about the copyright of *Ali and Nino*, Lucy Tal claimed that the contract for the novel had been made with Essad Bey: “I had never heard of the Baroness [Elfriede Ehrenfels] and the contract was made by my

husband with Essad Bey. My husband died in December 1936 [actually November 30, according to Murray G. Hall in *Österreichische Verlagsgeschichte*, 1918-1938 and the copyright date for *Ali and Nino* is printed as 1937, though Lucy claimed that it had already been printed before her husband’s death]. It seems she really knew little about the novel’s preparation and publication herself.

Lucy Tal continued: “Only much later, when for some reason we looked at the *Buchhaendler Boersenblatt*, we discovered the Baroness as “Kurban Said.” Of course, under the Nazis, pseudonyms were born, people unrightful had themselves as authors with books they had stolen from Jewish authors. All kinds of things went on.” Lucy Tal to her lawyer Schoenberg, June 1, 1987.

11 FAQ 22: “Did Essad Bey know Robakidze?” FAQ 155: “Further research: Grigol Robakidze.”

12 “The Baroness was, undoubtedly, closely befriended with Essad Bey; he had full confidence in her. He used her as subterfuge to secure the income from the book for himself via the Baroness. Essad was an Oriental fable teller and may have faked that contract” [the one that Ehrenfels’ lawyer sent Tal indicating that Elfriede Ehrenfels had signed the original contract with E.P. Tal Publishers]. Lucy Tal to her lawyer Dr. Schoenberg, June 1, 1987.

13 Essad Bey, in his quasi diary-like fictional account, *Der Mann, der Nichts von der Liebe Verstand* (*The Man Who Knew Nothing about Love*), which was never published, wrote that unfaithful wives should be sewed up in a sack together with a wild cat and thrown into the Bosphorus. Or they should be buried up to their heads in desert sands to be devoured by wild dogs at night.

Wilfried Fuhrmann, “Amazon—Kurban Said—the Unfaithful Wife,” in *Mediaforum.az* (in Russian), October 15, 2009, quoting *Der Mann*, Notebook VI, p. 82.

See also Essad Bey’s flippant attitude towards women and his claim of being Persian in “Wives, Odalisques, and Ssighes,” in *Vanity Fair* (New York), Vol. 21 (September 1935), p. 16. Also an abridged version of the same article, “Wives, Ssighes and Odalisques,” in *Readers’ Digest* (December 1935), 24ff.

14 In contrast, Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli wrote many short stories about the plight of Muslim women, particularly how they were abused by men in marriage. He also wrote a major essay tracing the treatment of women throughout history. See “The Situation of our Women” (*Arvadlarimizın halı*). Chamanzaminli felt that in marriage, women should walk hand in hand with men, and should be intellectual and emotional companions, not just servants or baby-makers.

15 In a speech given in Kyiv, Ukraine, on July, 29, 1919, Yusif Vazir spoke about the dangers of Bolshevism to Azerbaijan’s newly established independence, reprinted as “The Fear of Bolshevism,” in Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli, *If We Want our Independence*, compiled by Tahira Mukhtarova, transliterated from Azerbaijani in Arabic script, with Foreword and Notes by Aikhan Bayramoghlu (Baku: Ganjlik, 1994). ■