

Quest for Freedom

(1960-1991)

Profile of a Dissident

Bakhtiyar Vahabzade

(1925-February 13, 2009)

by Jean Patterson

AI 7.1 Special Feature Articles

Late one night in 1952, Azerbaijani poet Bakhtiyar Vahabzade lay wide awake in bed.

He couldn't stop thinking about the conversation he had had earlier that day with a close friend, composer Gambar Huseinli. They were both critical of the Soviet government, but at the same time suspicious of each other and afraid to talk about it openly. Huseinli had already been arrested once before, allegedly for referring to Stalin as a "dictator" in a private conversation.



Right: Bakhtiyar Vahabzade in 1969

Earlier that day, Vahabzade had asked Huseinli why he had been arrested. Huseinli had exploded in anger, cursing Stalin and complaining about how badly he had been mistreated. He regretted his words at once, and suddenly halted his tirade. Trying to console him, Vahabzade admitted that he agreed with him about Stalin, that the man was a cruel dictator who had killed thousands of innocent people.

Later that night, a sleepless Vahabzade worried about having been so honest about his own beliefs. Huseinli had just been released from prison. Was he a spy for the KGB? He had heard that political prisoners were often recruited as such. Would his friend turn him in? Paralyzed by fear, Vahabzade decided to go to Huseinli's house first thing in the morning and beg not to be betrayed.



That night, shortly after 1 a.m., Vahabzade heard a car stop outside his house. During the repressive Stalin era, political prisoners (including poets who refused to conform to Soviet ideals) were usually arrested at night. Cars called "black ravens" would pull up around 2 a.m. There would be the sound of footsteps, a knock at the door, then people would be whisked away, never to be seen again. Was it his turn? Vahabzade panicked, got up and burned anything that he thought could be used as evidence against him - namely the

anti - Soviet poems he had written over the previous decade but had shown to no one. A few poems he decided not to destroy. He hid them inside his mother's artificial leg.

Left: Sketch by Gunduz

It turned out that the car was not a police car and had come for someone else. Early the next morning, as he was getting ready to go visit Huseinli, there was a pounding on his door. Outside was a terrified Huseinli, who also had not slept all night. He begged Vahabzade not to turn him in. They both took back their words from the day before, repeating to each other, "Stalin is our father, he is our leader."

Vahabzade later wrote about this experience in his poem "Two Fears" (Iki Gorku) (1988) which he published on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He vividly evokes the Stalin-era atmosphere of suspicion and distrust of even closest friends.

Two Fears **(1988)**

(Dedicated to the memory of our deceased composer Gambar Huseinli)

He was a friend of mine, Composer Gambar,¹
Whose songs ever smelled of the native land.
The sweet songs we two had once composed
Were passed from mouth to mouth.

He had never told me, but I knew that
He had been arrested some years before.
But I did not know what his fault was.
I never asked him, nor did he tell.

Once Gambar was complaining to me
about his life,
I felt heaviness of heart...
I asked him:
But why did they arrest you?
Suddenly he exploded like a bomb:
Don't you know why?
Because I had cursed the world.
I had called "The Father of the Nations," ² enemy.

Then he became frightened of what he had said,
And suddenly stopped, not breathing a word.
Evidently, he was afraid of me,
Thinking I might be a spy.

"Sorry, I got excited," he said suddenly,
"Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing."
I felt the humility in Gambar's voice,
But in a way he was right to be suspicious.

I supported everything that he said
In order to dispel his doubts...
After arriving home from Gambar's place
I started thinking,
Fear and agitation gave me no peace.
I remembered our talk...

I said to myself, you fool,
Why did you get yourself into trouble?
Why did you confirm his words after all?
How do you know that Gambar was not saying
Those words against that despot deliberately?
When thousands of innocent people
have been executed,
And thousands exiled,

Will they set someone free
Who has called the government leader "enemy"?
Where was the logic in this, after all?
I couldn't believe his curses were honest.
What if he were complaining deliberately
about his life, about the times,
What if he were trying to get my opinion.
And what did I do? Me, fool that I am,
told him what I thought.

That night I couldn't sleep,
With thoughts I fought...
What thoughts did I have:
When they come to imprison me,
They will search my archives,
And then my writings, dear me.

I thought what I had, white or black!
Like a stranger I looked inside myself,
Then got out of bed at midnight,
And began scrutinizing my poems.

Like an inspector, I looked at the poems
still unpublished
And a shudder came over me.
"If they find these," I said to myself,
"That despot will kill me,"

Maybe to burn them? What else could I do?
After all, who is indifferent to the life he leads?..
Such trouble to burn the poems
That demand truth and justice from this world!
I have to sacrifice my thoughts and feelings
Just to live out the rest of my life!

My body became cold, my heart trembled
With the fire and flame of the burning poems.

But I spared some of them
Saying, "It is enough,"
Saying, "That'll do."

I spared some of my poems that day,
Crumpled papers still remain.
I hid them for the future,
I hid them in my mother's artificial leg.

I turned over my thoughts and judgments
page by page:
"As soon as the dawn breaks
I'll go to him.
I'll ask him not to betray me,
I'll tell him I was lying yesterday,
'Let's keep it between ourselves.
I was agreeing just to support what you had said.
In fact, I love that genius leader very much.
He has bestowed these happy days upon us.
He is our only support in this world,
He is our thinking brain, our seeing eye."

"What a mistake I've made,"

Thinking so till morning, I blamed myself.
As soon as the dawn broke, I got up and dressed.
At the same time, someone began knocking
at the door...
Who might it be so early in the morning?
I stood before the mirror
My body trembling.
I had no strength even to open the door.
"He must have already betrayed me last night.
They're coming to arrest me, where shall I flee?"

And knocks continued-
Knock, knock and knock.
The knocking wouldn't cease
Without achieving its aim...
"Who's there?"
"It's me, brother."
It was Gambar's voice.
That was enough for me.
Perhaps he had come as a witness,
Or come to make me be silent.

I opened the door with trembling hands,
He fell on my neck and embraced me,
And began crying bitterly.
He cast a sorrowful glance
To the left, then to the right.
Began hastily interpreting
The talk we had had a day before.
"I was just joking yesterday;
In truth, I love that genius leader.
He is our only support in this world.
He is our thinking brain, our seeing eye."

I understood him,
But kept silent... Realizing the falsehood
Of all those interpretations.
Time had made hypocrites of us all,
Making us deny all we had said a day after our talk,
It turned out he also had not slept that night.

Footnotes:

- 1** Gambar Huseinli is perhaps most fondly remembered for his children's song, "[Jujalarim](#)" - [My Little Chicks](#) [See AI 5.4, Winter 1997]. Sound Sample: www.azer.com. [Up](#)
- 2** The father of the nations - meaning Stalin. [Up](#)

**Can the country that has such guns be afraid of anything?
But you are afraid of everything even today
And yesterday, you were afraid.
One bright mind, One worrying heart
Are more frightening to you than thousands of H-bombs!**

(Words directed at the U.S. but intended for the USSR) - Bakhtiyar Vahabzade

Much of Vahabzade's poetry did criticize the Soviet system. Sometimes, he kept those poems private. Some of the others that he managed to get published incorporated clever strategies to circumvent Soviet censors.

Early Struggles



Vahabzade's resistance to the Soviet government began during his early childhood in Shaki, a mountain town in northwestern Azerbaijan. In 1930, there was an uprising there against the Soviet government's collectivization policy. Vahabzade, who was five years old at the time, remembers clearly how the Soviet army sent from Baku cruelly suppressed the protesters. Thousands of people were jailed; some were shot, others fled into the mountains and lived as outlaws. The government continued their pursuit of them for more than a decade.

Vahabzade's family had a deep hatred of the newly installed Soviet government. Several close relatives had died in the uprising. "Outlawed Abbas," famous for his bravery and fearlessness among the people, was captured and killed. It was the first corpse Vahabzade had ever seen in his life. He remembered, "I saw how my grandfather sitting in front of the window cried bitterly over his death, and how my grandmother, wearing a black silk scarf over her head, was wailing the loss."

In 1933, Vahabzade's father and uncles were arrested for helping the outlaws but were released when a relative in the police force intervened. To escape further danger, the

family fled Shaki for Baku.

Left: Bakhtiyar Vahabzade in his study, 1992.

Growing up witnessing these violent events, Vahabzade became more and more indignant against Soviet authority. While in high school in Baku, he started channeling his anger into poems, describing feelings that could not be expressed publicly.

In the meantime, he pursued a career as a poet and professor. In 1942, Vahabzade was admitted to Azerbaijan State University to study philology and later became a professor there. In 1945, he was accepted as a member of the Soviet Union's Writers' Union.

**If, in your mother tongue, you cannot say
"I am free, I am independent."
Who can believe that you really are?
- Bakhtiyar Vahabzade**

Defending the use of Azeri

One thing about Soviet Azerbaijan that particularly upset Vahabzade was that his native Azeri tongue was being systematically replaced by Russian. In one poem he wrote, "Once it would flow fluently/ But today it is frozen./ My mother tongue is so miserable today/ As if it has been trampled."

In his poem "Mother Tongue" (1954), he vents his frustration at the substitution of Russian for his mother tongue. Naturally, it was difficult for him to get the poem published. When the famous Azerbaijani poet Samad Vurgun heard about the poem from his son Yusif, he told Vahabzade that he would help him publish it. As Vurgun and Vahabzade sat in his study, reviewing the poem, Vurgun suggested that he add an epitaph from Lenin to serve as a "shield". It read, "We love our mother tongue and our country." Since the words could be directly attributed to Lenin, no one could accuse Vahabzade of being nationalistic. The poem was published a few days later.

This kind of technique soon became a characteristic feature in Vahabzade's work. In order to

outwit the censors, he masked his true intent by transferring Azerbaijan's problems to a different time period or a different geographical setting. In this way, he could address contemporary issues by simply displacing them from the context of Soviet rule.

For instance, "The Roads, The Boys" (Yollar Ogullar) (1964) is a poem about the national liberation movement in Algeria. Vahabzade realized that the Algerians' struggle also epitomized Azerbaijan's struggle against the Soviet government. But he succeeded in getting the poem published. A friend informed the KGB, accusing Vahabzade of criticizing Russia. It was Mehdi Husein [see *Underground Rivers Flow into the Sea*], then secretary of Azerbaijan's Writers' Union, who vouched for Vahabzade, insisting that the poem was not anti-Soviet.

In the 1970s, Vahabzade decided to write a poem about Andrei Sakharov, the famous Russian physicist who was being threatened for his anti-Soviet opinions. Vahabzade wanted to write about the scientist's brave protests, but dared not. Instead, he concentrated on Linus Pauling, who had been blacklisted in the U.S. He knew his readers would recognize that he was actually alluding to Sakharov and the USSR, not Pauling and the U.S.

Dawn **(1972)**

American chemist Linus Pauling (1901-1994), the focus of Vahabzade's poem "Dawn," was awarded the International Lenin Prize (1970) "For Consolidating Peace Among Nations" and the distinguished honor of two Nobel Prizes, one for Chemistry (1954) for his work on chemical bonds. His second, the Nobel Peace Prize (1962), was awarded for his efforts on behalf of the nuclear test ban treaty that was signed in 1963.

During the 1950s, Pauling became a victim of the McCarthy-era "witchhunts" in the U.S. His passport was withdrawn by the State Department because his "anti-Communist statements were not strong enough." In fact, this travel restriction almost prevented him from going to his own Nobel award ceremony. Pauling was targeted because he spoke out repeatedly against official U.S. government policies during his campaign for peace, disarmament and the end of nuclear testing.

(Addressing the U.S. government)

You have your own position
In the line-up of governments.
You have atomic and H-bombs,
You have tanks and cannons,
You have these weapons,
You have those weapons!

Can the country that has such guns
be afraid of anything?
But you are afraid of everything even today
and yesterday, you were afraid.
One bright mind,
One worrying heart
Are more frightening to you
Than thousands of H-bombs!

You were never afraid of atomic bombs
As much as you are afraid of such thoughts
of such minds!
Why did you become afraid of one mind
Which was able to separate colored lies
from the truth,
To distinguish truth from abomination?
-I know why!
If Linus is a slanderer, if he is a liar,
Then why do you hold back what he has said

from the people?
And why are you arresting him?

(Addressing courageous ones like Linus Pauling)
You who suffer because of the Motherland,
You who don't keep silent but ever speak,
You were destined for death and jails!

(Again addressing the U.S. government)
You have atomic bombs; you have missiles,
In spite of all these weapons, you are afraid.
The heaviness of this fear
Is the weight and price
Of the harm you have done.
Look at that scarlet horizon,
It is dawn,
It is dawn!

Despite this literary sleight of hand, Vahabzade's readers read between the lines and understood what he was saying. He even believes that some of the censors understood, but let the poem slip through if they could do so without being caught.

Photo: A plaque in the Writer's Union gives tribute to 25 writers who were killed during the repressive years of Stalin. The names include: Amin Abid, Kazim Alakbarli, Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli, Bakir Chobanzade, Sultan Majid Ganizade, Gantamir, Mustafa Guliyev, Seyid Husein, Ahmad Javad, Husein Javid, Ismayil Katib, Vali Khulufli, Salman Mumtaz, Atababa Musakhanli, Mikayil Mushfig, Alabbas Muznib, Hajibaba Nazarli, Ali Nazmi, Omar Faig Nemanzade, Aghahusein Rasulzade, Ali Razi, Haji Karim Sanili, Taghi Shahbazi Simurg, Boyukagha Talibli and Hanafi Zeynalli.



The most famous of these writers are featured in this issue: Ahmad Javad (27), Husein Javid (20) and Mikayil Mushfig (26).

A Close Call

Some poems did not manage to "slip through". For example, Vahabzade narrowly escaped serious trouble for writing "Baku" (1956). In this poem about 18th-century Azerbaijan, Vahabzade describes the fortress walls that surround old Baku but actually refers to Soviet Azerbaijan:

Those stones piled up like teeth,
The honor of our ancestors is valuable for us.
Those white stone teeth showing
Are clenched
Showing the hatred towards foreign enemies.

A well-known poet turned him in for this poem, saying that it was "anti-Soviet." The poet wrote a letter to the secretary of the Writer's Union, Ali Valiyev. Fortunately, Valiyev was looking out for Vahabzade, the friend of his son. Valiyev dictated a statement to help him clear his name. It read: "While saying 'foreign enemies,' I haven't meant the present time but the times when the fortress walls were built. Because these fortress walls surrounding Baku were constructed with the purpose of defending Baku from the foreign enemies in those days." Valiyev showed the statement to the informant and told him to put an end to the matter.

Getting Caught

Vahabzade was not always able to dodge his censors and detractors. One of his poems even cost him his job. In "Gulustan" (1959), Vahabzade objects to the division of Azerbaijan into two

parts by the Gulustan Treaty of 1813. This treaty between Russia and Iran assigned "Northern Azerbaijan" (the modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan) to Russia, and the other part which is commonly referred to as "Southern Azerbaijan" to Iran. Vahabzade's poem was too controversial to be published in the mainstream press, but he managed to get it printed in "Shaki's Worker" (Nukha Fahlasi), a newspaper in his hometown. Word of the poem soon spread throughout Azerbaijan. When the Central Committee found out about it in 1962, Vahabzade was fired from his job as a university professor and branded as a "nationalist".

Vahabzade also got into trouble for questioning the Soviet Union's suppression of the Azeri language. During the Soviet period, the Azeri language, like the national languages of other Republics, was systematically replaced with Russian, which became the official language of all government dealings.

As more and more parents sent their children to Russian-language schools, the number of Azeri-language schools decreased. Sometimes, the children who were taught in Russian could barely speak Azeri. Vahabzade sent his own children to Azeri-language schools and often argued with parents who did otherwise. When he found out that his son's literature teacher was sending his own children to Russian-language schools, he angrily confronted him and questioned his logic. (Without Azeri-language schools, the teacher would have been out of a job.) The next day, Vahabzade wrote a poem about the incident entitled "Hypocritical".

Vahabzade believes the existence of any nation is first of all connected with its language. As he puts it, "No language' means 'no nation.'" Throughout his career, he has repeatedly mourned the suppression of Azerbaijan's mother tongue.

The most prominent expression of this outrage is in his poem "Latin" (Latin Dili). In 1967, Vahabzade visited Casablanca and found a similar case: the indigenous language was dying out there because it was no longer the official language. In his poem, he writes that the Latin language is not really a "dead" language-it is used today throughout the world by doctors and academics. The original nation no longer exists, but the language does. On the other hand, a contemporary nation that no longer uses its mother tongue does not fully exist. He writes:

If, in your mother tongue, you cannot say
"I am free, I am independent."
Who can believe that you really are?



the poem was about the Arabic language, not Azeri.

Line of Defense

To cover himself, Vahabzade wrote "Casablanca" at the bottom of the poem to detract from its intended geographic context. The KGB was suspicious, but even after questioning Vahabzade, they couldn't prove that the poem was actually about Azerbaijan. Vahabzade defended himself by maintaining that

Photo: Poet Bakhtiyar Vahabzade (right) meeting with Suleyman Demirel, President of Turkey (1995).

In private, he wrote a poem about the experience, "In the Mourning of Others," describing himself:

"Assigning my people's troubles to others,
I wept for my loss through their mourning."

After writing "Latin", Vahabzade was called into a meeting with Jafar Jafarov, a scientist-critic who worked as an ideological secretary of the Central Committee. One of Vahabzade's friends, Teymur Elchin, was also there. When Vahabzade defended himself by saying that his poem was about the Arabians, Jafarov exploded: "Do you think we're idiots? We know perfectly well what

you're talking about. You've been reprimanded before-when will you learn your lesson?" He threatened to have Vahabzade fired from his job.

Vahabzade still insisted that the poem was about what he had seen in Casablanca. Elchin laughed at his words and said to Jafarov, "I think he sees his mistake. In the future he will be more careful." A few days later, Vahabzade learned from Elchin that Jafarov had been directed by the KGB to try to "cultivate" him. After that, it was much more difficult for Vahabzade to push his poems past the censors.

Today, Bakhtiyar Vahabzade's situation is quite different. He is known as the "People's Poet of Azerbaijan" and is an independent member of Parliament. Some of his more controversial works have been published for the first time in volumes such as "Fairy-Tale Life" (1991) and "The Bridge Has Come Far From the River" (1996). An English-language collection of his poems and short stories, "Selected Works of Bakhtiyar Vahabzada," was recently published by Indiana University Turkish Studies Publications. The New York Times even featured him in a October 9, 1997 article by Stephen Kinzer entitled, "In Azerbaijan, Poets Tear Down the Fences."

Fairy-Tale Life (1964)

Though you are my own mother,
I am so upset with you, mom...
You taught me to feel and to think,
But I wish I had been deprived
of feeling and thinking.
You taught your baby to see, to speak,
But I wish I had been born deaf-mute
to this world.

Taking me by the hand you taught me to walk,
I went round mountains, round lowlands.
Instead of teaching your baby to walk and to run,
You should have taught him how not to fall...
Thoughts flow over me layer by layer,
Answers too venturesome, questions forbidden.
Life is strange to those who know it,
But so familiar to those who don't know.

Where are you? My only mom, where are you?
Come! I want to put my head upon your lap again.
Tell me tales again, let the time stop,
Let me see how heroes in those tales
Conquer double-headed ogres,
And how they escape from wizards.
Tell me, where is peace?
Why won't it come to our lands?

Don't tell me anything, don't, mom, keep silent.
I can't understand the legends you tell.
I've seen such real giants in the world
Ogres from those tales are like chicks in comparison.
I've seen such ignorant and stupid persons
Who call hills, slopes and slopes, hills,
just to please others.
I've seen such foxes that call
The steel chains on their arms, bracelets.

I've seen bandits relaxing
After ransacking their own countries.
I've seen merchants who have sold
Their Motherland not for jewels

But for simple applause, "Good for you's."

I've seen old women, atheist, godless,
Who call roses, thorns and thorns, roses.
I've seen leaders, brutal, merciless,
Cursing their fathers, bowing down to others.

Since the time I have felt this world and known it,
Life has fallen into disgrace for me.
The horrible things that appear in fairy-tales,
I have seen in real life in this world, mom.

Mazahir Panahov contributed to this article and Aynur Hajiyeva translated the poetry.

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