

Ashgabat Collection
by Olga Mehti, 2019

Let us recall that when the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia in connection with the colonization of Central Asia and Transcaucasia opened a special Training Department – officer classes of Oriental languages, the first graduate student Alexander Tumansky, instead of summer camps near St. Petersburg, asked for the new Russian city of Ashgabat in order to practice Persian, since he learned that many speakers of this language from Iran appeared there. And the director of the academic department, Matvey Avel'yevich Gamazov, agreed and allowed the promising graduate to go at his own expense to distant Ashgabat to train in Persian, as he wanted to learn more about the followers of the new religion, already known to the whole world as a Baha'i Faith, and at that time new to foreigners.

Bahá'u'lláh ordered his subjects to go from Iran to Ashgabat, because there they were subjected to persecution, they were tried to be exterminated. Bahá'u'lláh foreshadowed the glorious future of the Turkmen land, where there will be no wars, where the seeds of peace will sprout. Indeed, in Ashgabat, displaced people felt protected by local laws of hospitality and religious tolerance. Governor-General A.V. Komarov at the trial with Shiites defended the laws of the adherents of the new religion, defining its independent character. An orientalist Alexander Grigoryevich Tumansky actively assisted migrants from Iran as well. He described his first impressions in this way: “Arriving in Askhabad on June 29, 1890, I easily got acquainted with the most interesting of the Babis. Thanks to their decent lifestyle, they are accepted by the Russians as well as possible. For that reason, acquaintance with them did not present the slightest difficulty”. The community of people who believe in the oneness of the Creator and the soonest unity of all mankind has won authority among the local residents; their representatives were even elected to the city government and actively participated in cultural life. For example, they were in the commission for the construction of a monument to Alexander Sergeyeovich Pushkin. “...That is why acquaintance with them was not difficult at all. Seeing my desire to learn about their religious education deeply, three of them eagerly competed with each other to help me in it”. (“The Last Two Babid Revelations”. Notes of the Eastern Branch of the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society, No. 6, 1891).

Tumansky had many new friends in Ashgabat; among them is Aboul Fazil Golpaygoni, a former Muslim teacher from Tehran who has become an outstanding Baha'i scholar. With him the Russian officer “delved into the dark meaning of the *Kitabe Akdas* and other writings of Bahá'u'lláh”. From the article “The Newly Discovered Persian Geographer of the 10th Century and News of the Slavs and Russes”: “Our conversations repeatedly turned into historical topics as well, and I listened with pleasure to the Persian scholar. But no matter how learned was my unforgettable colleague on translation of *Kitabe Akdas*, I was able to tell him something new, namely, to acquaint him with an Arab geographer, whose discovery is associated with the name of Mukhlinsky (Professor of St. Petersburg University). In these same conversations, I urged Mirza to search for ancient manuscripts and, among other things, to study the history of the four Uluk-Bek uluses in Bukhara where he was soon to go. (The author’s spelling of proper names characteristic of that time has been preserved everywhere). These conversations took place in the spring of 1892... The summer with a memorable Ashgabat cholera passed, and in the autumn I was happy to know that Mirza was alive and well and lives in Samarkand. Soon I received a letter from him as of October 13 (25), 1892, i.e. “During (my) stay in Bukhara, no matter how much I searched for, the book *Four Ulus* did not come across, however, one copy of an ancient book, very good one, containing four works, has been found...”. This was the first news about our geographer, obviously too insufficient to understand the meaning thereof. However, in the spring of 1893, I managed to arrange a trip to Bukhara, and I was happy to know that Mirza Aboul Fazil was coming there too. Arriving in Bukhara, I ... went to the native city where I stayed with the Babis in the same room with Mirza Aboul Fazil. There was no limit to my delight when I saw this manuscript, and especially when I was given it provided that it should be published and not permanently lost for science.

(This manuscript was published in St. Petersburg and in London: in 1930 a facsimile edition was published in the original language edited by academician V. V. Barthold, who translated a fragment devoted to the Eastern Europe into Russian. In 1937, Oxford University published full English translation made by a friend of Tumansky, an orientalist and diplomat V. F. Minorsky. And the invaluable manuscript, which was hunted by many experts and amateurs, had a very difficult fate, passing after Tumansky’s death into their hands, till it got to its proper place – the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences) ...Then I, certainly, informed baron V. R. Rosen about this finding, who guided me for the entire visit to the East. I take this most appropriate occasion to express my heartfelt gratitude to him...”.

A Russian orientalist, an Arabist, academician of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences, baron V. R. Rosen was a teacher at the Oriental courses, a mentor and a friend of Tumansky. They were united, first of all, by the understanding of the new spiritual teaching emerging as a new world religion.

The Ashgabat book of Tumansky *The Military Art of the Ancient Arabs* draws attention as well. His translation of the book *The Genealogy of the Turkmen (The Genealogical Tree of the Turkmen People)* by Abulgazi Bakhador Khan was also published in Ashgabat. A well-known orientalist I. Yu. Krachkovsky recalled the following: “Tumansky was one of the rare orientalists not by profession, but by calling”. Shortly after the death of the founder of the Baha’i Faith, Tumansky expressed his attitude towards Him in an article by the *Kavkaz* newspaper dated July 9, 1892: “This is a wonderful person who managed to attract about a million followers in different parts of Persia, gave Babism the peace-loving character which followers of this religion differ with. Out of the proud Shiite Persian recognizing friendship only with his co-religionists and complete alienation from the followers of other religions (Teberra and Tevella), this doctrine made a humble man who considered all people brothers, Babid”. Among other publications of Baha’i letters in the original, accompanied by his Russian translation, there was the Testament of Bahá'u'lláh, in which Tumansky in 1893 calls Bahá'u'lláh a “prophet”. In letters from Ashgabat, the copies of which we received in the Russian National Library, the orientalist corrects his friends that the followers of the new religion should not be called Babits, but Baha’is. Unfortunately, the habit is strongest, and in Ashgabat some used the word “babi” until the 80s of the last century (however, they were strangers).

Two years after the first summer trip, Tumansky again returned to Ashgabat and spent there up to seven years in military service. However, he points out the following in letters: “P. S. my address is Transcaspian Region, Alexandrovsk Fort”. This is far from Ashgabat, it is the place of exile of Taras Shevchenko, and there Alexander Grigoryevich was an assistant to the Head of Mangishlak district for some time. Officer Tumansky was very busy with studies on the topography and communication of the new territories of the Russian possessions in the Pre-Caspian region; however, he did not leave the job of translating the Scriptures of the founders of the new religion. This can be judged again from the letters of A. G. Tumansky, which are stored in the St. Petersburg Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian National Library and the National Archive of

Georgia, and now copies of these important documents of a bygone era are kept in the Archives of the House of Justice on Carmel in Haifa. Among them are letters to baron Rosen and letters to Edward Grenville Brown, the senior researcher of the history and teachings of the Bahá'ís. Note that before arriving in Ashgabat, Tumansky did not know his works, but he became acquainted with the Babi movement in Iran only by means of the book *Bab and Babits* by A. Kazembek, but he made friends with the British scholar during his studies of the Babite movement through baron V. R. Rosen. From the Ashgabat letter dated December 20, 1893: “Dear Viktor Romanovich! I hasten to thank you for sending Brown’s book, which I received in full prosperity. I kindly ask you not to refuse, on occasion, to convey my sincere appreciation to E. G. Brown, whose assessment of very modest work strongly embarrasses me ... ”. The orientalists have become friends due to the fascination by a new religion and a great desire to see the Bahá'ís.

On December 9, 1893, Alexander Grigoryevich reports that he is “again in his Askhabad shelter, again the Babies, and, thank God, I do not receive any special assignments, so I can do the previous work again. I certainly began with the *Kitabe Akdas*; I compare the canonical edition with the manuscript, and note the variants that are interesting to me in what the fluctuations of the grammatical views of the editors of this book show. I am going to finish this work along with the final version of the translation this or next week... ”. Tumansky was the first to open for Russian-speaking researchers and readers the information about the Babi movement in Persia in the middle of the 19th century and about the first Bahá'ís, found and translated into Russian the Scripture of Baha'u'llah *Kitabe Akdas*, which contains the basic laws for the new spiritual age of humanity. This fundamental study of the orientalist was published in the “Notes of the Imperial Academy of Sciences”. I will note that in 1899, the Russian orientalist read excerpts from his translation of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh for the first time before his fellow officers in an officers’ meeting in Red Village (Dudergof) near St. Petersburg. This building is preserved on 79 Lenin Avenue, and may in the future have a memorial significance to the history of Bahá'ís in St. Petersburg, like many other buildings in the city on the Neva River, where events connected with Faith took place.

Among the active working correspondence of A. G. Tumansky on the research of the Babid movement, I suddenly read a completely non-business letter that filled me with a premonition of the novel, the Ashgabat novel. Alexander Grigoryevich writes

the following to Baron Rosen "...Viktor Romanovich, now please allow me to share with you my personal joy as well. I met the one whom I will soon call my wife. My bride, without any fear, decides to go with me to Persia, but you can't imagine what kind of the moral responsibility I have to take ... by going with my wife to the places where Kurds and semi-independent Turkmen can be expected to attack. (Author's orthography). In addition, the journey through Khorosan presents great difficulties for a woman. Perhaps, having familiarized and got used to the conditions of traveling around Persia at first in a lighter situation, we, if necessary, will dare to go this way". And then, on February 17, 1894, he writes the following: "Now, regarding the wife and marriage: my wedding is on Sunday, the 20th. After the wedding, my wife and I will go to Bukhara for a few days, and then return to Askhabad and go to Persia on March 7th. Further, if it turns out to be impossible to travel with my wife (which I suppose is very possible), I will leave her in Tehran and go the rest of the way alone. I propose to go on the following route: from Uzungan I am going to Astrabad, from Astrabad to Shahrud to Tehran. In Tehran, I will make a small stop and go to Yazd, Kirman, Shiraz and via Isfahan back to Tehran, where I think to stay for about a month, and then return to Askhabad...".

They started the journey together on the steamship "Caucasus and Mercury". However, Tumansky returned to Ashgabat alone, and his wife, because of her ill health, had to be sent from Tehran to her parents. It is a pity that the personal correspondence of the family of Tumansky couple has not been preserved in the scientific archives, but I am sure that letters flew from Ashgabat to Russia and back on the wings of love. The young, of course, recalled the church, where they got married. Perhaps it was in the officers' church of the Taman regiment, where there was a garden near — a favorite resting place for officers, where there was a lot of greenery in the winter, because exotic evergreen and early flowering plants were specially collected there; their remains are still preserved in the old neighboring courtyards.

The era of multinational Ashgabat, which is now legendary, began at those times. These are special traditions of common neighbours, streets, districts. In Russia, they recalled Ashgabat, the generosity of its long summer not only because of fruit and vegetables, but also for the special atmosphere of friendliness. In the gloomy Petersburg evenings, memories of the Ashgabat grape arbors, where they lingered after midnight, warmed them up. There unmanned grape leaves soared in the quiet autumn,

circling the ground with a yellow carpet in the morning. And the mistresses tried to clean their yards and sidewalks before dawn, and pour water on them, because everyone, regardless of nationalities, loved their city, even if they were simply sent for work from Russia. It certainly was like that. I judge this by the statements of even those generals who came with arms to seize the Turkmen land, and then, in several years, they admitted in their memoirs that they loved our land. For, it is impossible not to fall in love with Ashgabat.

However, let us return to the description of Tumansky's future activities in Ashgabat. In January 1895, Alexander Grigoryevich was fully engaged in the preparation of a trip report, which was arranged by a Bahá'í, but, of course, sanctioned by the Russian authorities. They always kept abreast of the new religious movement in Persia. The Russian officer wrote: "I intend to divide my report into two. One will be of a purely military nature, which will include topographical and ethnographic information, as well as surveying the paths; I consider that the other report on babism should be presented only after the end of the printing of the *Kitabe Akdas* translation. The material for this report will be my personal impressions from the acquaintance with the Babids in Rasht, Qazvin, Tehran, Hamadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Neyriz, Yazd, Kashan. In addition to these points, I met Babids in some intermediate points, namely in Melair (Doulet Abad) on the way from Hamadan to Burujird. There are many of them in the vicinity of Isfagani, namely in Najaf Abad, in Sideh, in Abadekh as well. In Fars they are grouped in Zergan, Servistan and Neyriz. In the southeastern Fars they do not live at all, neither they do in Bender Abbas. I noticed the complete absence of them in Borujird as well. They are few in Kirman, but there are several of them in Sirjan and in Rafsindjan. There are also quite a lot of them in Yazd and its surroundings... Babids are currently especially numerous in Tehran, among which there are very high-ranking and influential people. In addition, Babism serves as a banner around which the elements dissatisfied with the existing regime are grouped. Among those are very influential khans and leaders of nomadic tribes..."

From 1900 to 1905, Tumansky served as Vice-Consul in Turkish Van. These reliable facts of his service refute the information by some publications that Tumansky helped Bahá'ís during the construction of Mashriqul-Azkar, which earlier provoked me to look for an orientalist in a famous group photo among the participants of the significant event of the foundation

of the Bahá'í Ashgabat temple on September 10, 1902. Memories of Haji Mirza Haydar Ali Asqui, one of the famous Bahá'ís of the times of Abdul Bakh and Shoghi Effendi, the author of *The History of Faith in Azerbaijan*, about the meeting with Tumansky in the consulate of Tabriz are also confirmed. Then they, Ashgabat friends, embraced. The narrator showed him a picture of the Ashgabat temple. Tumansky said that he really wanted to visit Ashgabat once again to see the temple, to visit friends. But he could not.

And from 1908 to 1909, Alexander Grigoryevich was again in Persia.

Judging by the documents from Georgia as of 1911, Madame Tumanskaya, already with three children, arrived with her husband in Tbilisi, where, at the Headquarters of the Caucasian Military Command, he headed a school of oriental languages, similar to the one in which he studied in St. Petersburg. And in March 1917, Tumansky resigned from military service with the rank of Major General of the tsarist army. They would finally have a calm and measured family life in glorious Tbilisi, where they again gained many friends, and the tireless Tumansky also engaged in Caucasian studies. However, the tragedy of all of Russia – October 17, crushed the already established life of a huge empire and their personal lives, too.

From the Bolshevik Revolution, the family fled to Constantinople, where in 1920 A. G. Tumansky passed away. His widow and children emigrated to the Belgian Liege. The Russian Bahá'ís from Belgium, Tatiana, helped me to learn the details. She was so imbued with my research idea that with great difficulty, she still managed to get information about Tumansky's descendants and his wife in the local archive. The Belgian archivist mentioned in a certificate that Elena (so, finally, she knew the name of my heroine) was a countess. (This was also a news for me, although it is not surprising, for Mr. Tumansky himself was from a very ancient noble family). It also became known that the widow was a “teacher of linguistics”, but in Liege she worked as a maid in a hotel. Probably, there was no other way out. As stated in the certificate, she and the children arrived in Liege as refugees...

The search continues

We will tell you that Alexander Grigoryevich Tumansky collected in Ashgabat and then in Persia the manuscripts in Persian, Arabic, and Turkish. He conducted extensive correspondence with many Orientalists of the Russian and foreign academies. Most of Tumansky's letters remained, but the answers of those scholars with the Ashgabat postmark are still unknown, but they could clarify a lot in Oriental studies. No one knows where the writings of Bahá'u'lláh are now, from which Tumansky has been translating, and which were his personal acquisitions. The orientalist did not part with this collection; it was his constant scientific bag, despite the fact that he had to visit different countries and cities due to the military profession. Information on the sale of manuscripts from such an important collection always immediately becomes known to the learned world, but there is still nothing heard about the sale of letters by academicians-orientalists or Bahá'í Writings. It is only known that at the request of the orientalist V. V. Barthold, she transferred from her husband's archive through F. Minorsky the earliest specimen of a geographic treatise in Persian, the manuscript "Hudud al-Alam" – "The Frontiers of the World from East to West" to the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts. The treatise of 982 by an unknown author, which was hunted by many experts and amateurs, had a very difficult fate, passing from a person to person after the death of Tumansky, until it got into the proper place – the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Besides, we also think that at that time very few people in Europe were interested in the Bahá'í topic, and therefore much of the Tumansky collection should have remained somewhere.

It was the idea to find this collection that recently held me in Germany near the border with the Netherlands for a long time. I already knew from archival data collected by friends from Belgium and the Netherlands: Tania Genco, Jelle de Vries, Lilia Plooi, Joop Kieft, J. P. Laperches that the granddaughter of Alexander Grigoryevich Tumansky and the daughter of his son, also Alexander, still live in Liege. Marie Tumanskaya was born in the same Liege in 1930, and after marriage with the Dutch citizen Francois Henry Joseph, left Liege and moved to Kerkrade in the Netherlands. I was waiting for a response from Marie Tumanskaya to the constant calls of my friends. But she was silent... At my request, they also wrote a letter to her, but there was

no answer either. But at first it didn't upset me. A month ago, I didn't know about Madame, such an important link in my research on Alexander Grigoryevich Tumansky, a Russian orientalist who left a noticeable mark on Bahá'í history.

My friends have already found her address in Kerkrade: Anjelierstraat 1, 6466 Kerkrade VX, the Netherlands. Phone: 0031-45-5411470. But the active Bahá'ís found her only at a new address: Spireastraat 56, Kerkrade at 6466, the Netherlands. Neighbours told that she lived a very isolated life, did not want to meet guests and always kept her door closed. They confirmed that Ms. Tumanskaya came from Belgium, but no one had ever heard her speak Russian, though they noticed her “difficult” name (she called herself Marusya, but wrote her name as: M. De Tumansky M).

On December 1, Ms. Tumanskaya's nurse reported to my friends from Belgium that her patient had passed away. The apartment was photographed and sealed. They were unable to contact any of the relatives of the deceased, and the apartment owners began a professional search for heirs. My friends, the Belgian Bahá'ís, informed the lady who was responsible for this procedure about our great interest in the archive, books, letters and photographs and asked to report contacts with any relatives who could be found.

I, who had so many questions for Alexander Grigoryevich's granddaughter, sat in Germany, disappointed with this outcome. But the friends still managed to visit the apartment of the deceased Ms. Marie Tumanskaya at Kerkrade and even, since the relatives of the deceased were not found, they were allowed to collect and take with them all the books, papers, letters and photographs in that apartment. It turned out that Ms. Tumanskaya had only a few books in Dutch, and the interior of the apartment had no references to her Russian roots, despite her portrait in an elegant Russian costume. But the costume is so stylized that it can be taken for Polish, and the genus of Tumansky was precisely these roots. Photos might be important to search for: among them is a portrait of a man at a table with a typewriter. A.G. Tumansky?

Portrait of a woman without a hat. Marie? Portrait of two women and a child. Judging by the fashion, the photo was taken in the 1930s. Most likely, this is Marie (as a child) with her mother and grandmother. Portrait of Marie and her mother in 1947. Portrait of Marie's uncle - Kirill Alexandrovich Tumansky, 1948. USA. Portrait of Inna Tumanskaya - von Keller, Kirill's wife. 1949. No letters or other papers concerning Mrs. Tumanskaya's grandfather were found.

Perhaps, the archives of their father were taken by the sons Alexander and Kirill after their mother's death, who emigrated to New York, the USA before World War II. And then the search should be transferred there, that is what the orientalist Loni Bramson recommended to me.

However, there is still a front line of work in Europe, because we still have a thread, however, a very thin thread, this is Katya, the daughter of Lydia, the aunt of the deceased Marusya. We learned that Lydia Tumanskaya lived until 2010 at the Elderly House in Brussels (Fleurs d 'aubepine Uccle, tel 023730272). One of my friends found an archival newspaper, which said that when Lily was 96 years old, her daughter Katya scolded local employees for not caring for her mother. In that nursing home, my friends were given a photo of Lydia, but flatly refused to give Katya's phone, since this is strictly prohibited for them. There they learned that Lydia was then transferred to another nursing home (Nazareth tel: 023736411). There they did not give any information either – the European laws are very strict.

In the telephone directory of Brussels, there are more than 40 people named Katya Tumanskaya, but these were not our Katya. After all, our Katya is not Tumanskaya... She probably has her father's name..... Yes, that's it! The most important thing is that Katya does exist...

I, as a foreigner, cannot find Katya, but I clearly see new search paths in the Netherlands. Marie was divorced, and her ex-husband Francois died on September 28, 1976 in Kerkrade, the Netherlands. The couple did not have children, but one can search for his relatives, who may know something about Marie's relatives – about Lydia and her daughter Katya. And also it is worth asking the names of the owners of the studio, where photos of members of the Tumansky family were taken. A large photograph

of the portrait of Mr. Kirill Alexandrovich Tumansky was taken at the Shelburne Studio in New York in 1948. The photographs of the other portraits have no information about the producer, and such would have been useful for our investigations. The University of Liege would be well positioned to look for information on the linguistics teacher Elena Mitarevskaya, who had valuable manuscripts. I can't do this anymore, but maybe special services can do it either through participation in TV programs where they search for people. Unfortunately, some previously published manuscripts or those used for publications in pre-revolutionary Russia were not found.