

**SHARA
ZHIENKULOVA**

AS THE

**“FEMINA
SOVIETICA”**

EMANCIPATION IN STALINIST KAZAKHSTAN

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abstract

This article explores the potential of the Kazakh “model woman” narrative in the context of the socio-cultural perspectives of Stalinism in traditional oriental societies. In her well-written memoirs, Shara Zhienkulova, founder of the Kazakh dance school, reconstructs personal accounts of the Bolshevik cultural modernization project, through the introduction of new cultural practices and her own hard-won battle for a place in the new Soviet culture. We argue here that while her body served the regime as a kinesthetic mediator for the projected ideological imperatives to be oriented on European style – in the Soviet manner – her soul and mind remained (as containers of personal and ethnic memory) ethnic Kazakh in nature. Through her memoirs Shara Zhienkulova intended to leave not only a name but also a voice in the Kazakh culture, recounting the inner world and thoughts of subaltern women.

KEYWORDS: Shara Zhienkulova, Kazakhstan, Stalinism, new Soviet women, cultural revolution.

Women’s issues were an integral part of basic criticism of the capitalist system in Bolshevik political programs. Women as objects of exploitation were to be emancipated from religious, familial, societal, cultural and outdated moral constraints and bonds, granted equal status with males, empowered by gaining civic, political and economic rights, driven to active participation in political, economic, social and cultural processes to become builders of the new society, and to develop all the necessary skills during the process. Discussions of modalities and taboos were to be left for literature and pamphlets of pre-revolutionary times. The emancipation of women in traditional societies was however in practice quite problematic for the regime to handle, as gender issues were entangled in a sophisticated net of property, clan, status, moral, inter-clan and intra-clan relations, all sanctioned by religion and clan politics. Kazakh women’s status in society and family was generally regarded as low in those traditional societies.¹ Externally, the position of Kazakh women seemed to be less restricted in comparison to more rigid Islamic societies of the region, as the Kazakh women were not veiled and enjoyed relatively more freedom in some family issues; however, their destinies heavily depended likewise on males (father, husband, son, relatives of a deceased husband). The emancipation of Kazakh women thus needed to be handled in a delicate way. This emancipation of Kazakh women also came to involve the exposure of their bodies and feelings in public. The former invisibility of women, physical, verbal and visual due to taboos, were replaced by placing the Kazakh women’s

“EMANCIPATED KAZAKH WOMEN WERE EXPECTED TO EMBRACE NEW CULTURAL NORMS AND CELEBRATE REGIME-CREATED HOLIDAYS.”

bodies and voices in the public domain. Art forms such as opera, ballet and dances were used to emancipate women in the socialist meaning of modern.

Shara (full name: Gulshara) Zhienkulova (1912–1991), the first Kazakh professional dancer, rose to fame in the early 1930s, and was the founder of the Kazakh dance school. Zhienkulova’s written memoirs shed light on the process of creating the new Kazakh woman in Stalinist times via European cultural forms. This article elucidates how she as a model Kazakh woman, constructed her life course in the Stalinist era and justified it in the post-Stalinist period. It is worth reflecting on how the hidden, unconscious pressure of the past influenced the memoirs that she wrote down later in more secure times. What is silenced and not spoken, and why? For instance, she shares no analysis or closer description of the tragic episodes of the 1930s.

This article is based first and foremost on the analysis of Shara Zhienkulova’s autobiography, but also those of her husband, Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov,² and the family friend and famous actor Kanabek Baiseitov,³ and further on archival materials, works about Shara Zhienkulova, and interdisciplinary research on the Soviet ‘new woman’ creation program.

SHARA ZHIENKULOVA did not keep a diary (materials were verified in the State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty city), but reconstructed events from notes made on the professional schedule – performances, trips, meetings, and articles in the Soviet mass media glorifying her. She was very disciplined and hard-working: she could reconstruct every element in a choreography and recall moment of how she managed to perform some gesture. She remembered and could in detail describe the technique of inventing new dances, and the emotional and psychological costs behind. Why then did she write her memoirs, she never herself answered this. Her memoirs were published

after those of K. Baiseitov, who gave his interpretation of the Zhandarbekovs’ family life, and the reasons for their painful separation. Contemporary portrait colored her as the materialized shining star, a myth that Shara Zhienkulova maybe wanted to deconstruct? We argue that the motivation behind her memoirs was both personal, to give her own account of her life course in arts and the public mission, and socio-cultural, to shed light on the costs of becoming a model woman for all epochs.

The general issue under consideration in this article is “How Soviet was Shara Zhienkulova in her memories of Stalinism?” That issue can be divided into a number of supportive questions: How did she react to the regime? Did she grasp the ideology to follow it consciously, and especially its major normative, instrumental, operational components? How was the Stalinist era embedded in her family life? Descriptions of and attitudes to the leadership established in the 1920s dominate her narrative in the 1980s. But how did it happen that a woman born into a rich family accepted the lifestyle of the poor actor, unsta-

ble in terms of position and income? How confident was she in regime's longevity to correlate with the revolutionary changes?

The theoretical approach employed in this study of the woman in Stalinist cultural processes in Kazakhstan is the subaltern concept.⁴

Emancipation in Kazakhstan

From the early 20th century on, liberal-minded Kazakh intellectuals proposed several reforms and programs to upgrade women's status, without introducing radical changes to the existing social order. The imposed Soviet reforms aimed to provide a complete solution to the very system of traditional ethnoso-social system maintenance, as women's status and property rights were singled out as the key element of the economic and political basis of Kazakh society. Through legal and institutional reforms during the 1920s, Kazakh women were granted equality and relative freedom in economic and civic aspects and further encouraged to get education and information on sanitary and hygienic norms. The success of the changes, however, depended on men's readiness to liberate women, and the women's preparedness to take up the freedom granted as an opportunity to start up a new but risky life without male and clan support, thus taking on the responsibility and burden of being an unsupported female.

The Soviet reforms resulted in the setting up in 1921 of *zhenotdels* (departments for women's work) in Kazakhstan, backed by so called *delegatskie sobraniya* (female delegates' meetings) to reinforce state decisions. The idea was to encourage women to take part and join in activities to fight illiteracy, polygamy, child marriage, bride purchase, and domestic violence, and instead to introduce sanitary and hygienic norms and promote the mastering of various skills for women and involve them in economic activities. Further, emancipated Kazakh women were expected to embrace new cultural norms and celebrate regime-created holidays.⁵ Women were allowed and encouraged to speak out through oral and written complaints to Soviet bodies on the problems they encountered. Many representatives, both men and women, of Kazakh and other ethnicities, were invited to share views on women's issues in the strive for progress and modernization. A newspaper that discussed gender issues in the Kazakh language was launched in 1925. It had the symbolic title *Tendik* [Equality], and soon grew in popularity; it was promptly renamed *Äiyel tendigi* [Female Equality] and was active until 1934. Originally the main readers were literate urban Kazakh women, but in time it became oriented to rural women as well, especially when more of the latter became literate. The question arises as to what extent the strongly ideological texts really mirrored or represented the life of Kazakh women.

ALL THE PROCESSES in Soviet Kazakhstan were state-initiated, including the imposed transformation of traditional culture. The debates on what kind of culture the traditional nomadic society needed were launched in Soviet Kazakhstan in the early 1920s and abruptly ended by the 1930s, which were marked by



Soviet poster, 1920s.



Women in the Adaevsky district, 1926.



Women and children in east Kazakhstan, early 20th century.

the persecution and eventual purges of the nationalist-minded (pan-Turkic, pan-Islamic, pan-Turanist) representatives of political and cultural elites. By the early 1930s the major components of socialist realism were developed and coined by M. Gorky. From the early 1920s, some cultural innovations, like drama, became the symbols of liberation, new life and potential creative realization for Kazakhs. The Kazakh Drama Theater operated in Kyzyl-Orda until 1927, moving in 1928 to the new capital Alma-Ata that became the center for cultural experiments and the shop window for the achievements of Soviet Kazakh culture. Few people in the arts left memoirs (if they survived the Stalinist times) to reconstruct the history of the Cultural Revolution. The personalities involved in the arts are not symbolic per se but represent the escape from harsh reality provided by the arts, as they generated the art of survival, navigation, conformism/avoidance, or public activities of a new type – to be in line with the official course.

In accordance with a 1933 decree of the Kazakh ASSR Central Committee, “On development of national art”, a musical theater and ballet studio were set up to answer the need to create local national cadres of cultural workers. The Soviet regime constructed a “new woman” via public representation and exposure of the female body, establishing criteria for her exterior – clothes, body posture and its parameters, cosmetics, manners, and fertility control.⁶ Shara Zhienkulova was to embody physically the male ideals of female beauty, erotic and sexual, and to gain the admiration of young healthy woman, but still to remain inaccessible. Her dances were designed to produce a stimulating effect on men – *look, that is a new woman*. The Stalinist project also envisioned the creation of a new woman’s inner world – feelings, dreams, beliefs, mannerisms, and conduct. Shara Zhienkulova was to transmit to the public not “Kazakh-ness”, although some exoticism was accentuated (“Eastern-ness”/ *vostochny colorit*), but to emphasize emancipation, hidden sexuality, bodily health, physical endurance, and beauty variation as her face and some parts of her body were visible. Her image provided a chain of discontinuous messages, not linear, but cyclical, generating one thought after another. Stereotypical perceptions of Kazakh women through photos and images of Western travelers and Russian photographers showed the Kazakh women as rigid, shy or hiding their faces behind scarves, looking aqunt.

Shara Zhienkulova’s memories

Although Shara Zhienkulova’s memories are titled *My life is art*, she tells us about the invisible division between right and wrong that lay behind life in the country. Her memoirs deserve careful reading, as female self-narration was a novelty for Kazakh literature and history studies. The social aspect of the memoirs is limited to descriptions of her origins, and one can guess how she followed the channels of social mobility opened by the regime

to people in the arts. Shara describes her life as a cycle of scenic performances with mystical/divine intervention:

My life entered a new stage – I am in a boat on the big river moving forward. That is the first step on the ladder of arts, given and opened to me by God.⁷

In the second part of her memoirs, Shara primarily describes her love of Kurmanbek and meetings with some celebrities of the time. Ordinary people in Kazakhstan respected them and perceived them as saints; therefore, her stories addressed the general public: “Look, we must be grateful to them that they were part of us”, and also refer to herself: “I am one of them!” She provides selective statements, declarations and remarks that evaluate only her actions and achievements.

THE MEMOIRS ARE WRITTEN in the literary Kazakh language, enriched with numerous beautiful and smart folk expressions that have mostly fallen out of use in the modern language, but that

precisely and vividly relay certain moments and the author’s emotional state. Fragments of articles from the central mass media support her text, highlighting her role in the Soviet culture. But she did not report on meetings with the public (unlike Roza Baglanova,⁸ who gave a lot of pictures with her fans) which supports the notion of her self-awareness of her status that she took for granted. The actress communicated face-to-face with prominent people in the arts and politics in the Soviet Kazakhstan; moreover, she represented all the women of new Ka-

zakhstan before the top Soviet leadership. She was aware of the vulnerability of the politicians who could be doomed by actors’ wrong words and gestures if misinterpreted by the top leadership or critics. Various signs of conformism, fear, suspicion, and disloyalty are given between the lines in intonations, descriptions of actions, and mysterious disappearances. Events in her memoirs are not given as a personal account of class conflict manifestation and gradual implementation. Shara tried to come to terms with a series of upsetting incidents. She however writes almost nothing about ordinary people.

Shara Zhienkulova passed away in 1991, the same year as the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Her dance, once at the forefront of women’s emancipation, had been superseded. By now, the female body sent far more individual messages, and the coordination of dance, costumes, morale, and training had developed further to become more flexible, sexier, liberated, and inventive.

Shara Zhienkulova’s memoirs are today a source for decoding the discourse or to be used as a window into the Stalinist era. As R. Bart stated, an author’s language speaks even after their death.⁹ The experience of surviving Stalinism became part of the collective memory, as new generations accepted survivors’ positions on key events as an integral part of the social capital resource for navigation in extreme political conditions.

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The embodiment of “femina Sovietica”

Shara Zhienkulova was born in a prosperous family, but her father lost his property and was arrested as a socially alien element by the Soviet regime in the late 1920s.¹⁰ Shara, the eldest of the children, became a breadwinner in the late 1920s when the state opened social mobility channels for Kazakh women via education, and access to public entertainment (concerts, cinema, parks, new fashion, dances, social career, theater, gender code and conduct, etc.). She and her sisters often visited public places, where she was charmed by theatrical performances and by a talented actor, Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov. They fell in love, and as the Soviet regime allowed free choice marriages, they married, although she was only sixteen. Her husband introduced her to an artistic life; she performed as an actor and then as a dancer, mainly by order of the Minister of Culture and Enlightenment of the Kazakh ASSR, T. Zhurgenev. As her dances were amateur, a group of professional trainers arrived from Moscow and Leningrad, and she went through arduous work to become the first professional Kazakh ballerina. Shara was committed to contribute via dance to a gender code and a new tripartite gender contract agreement – state-men-women. The Soviet regime intended to construct a new woman out of the ideas and representations of the best qualities suited to the purpose of building a new society. The real new women differed from the ideal, that varied across the cultural, geographical, gender and temporal realms in the USSR, and at the top, middle and bottom levels of society. Shara Zhienkulova was designated to become a type of a new woman formed out of the Kazakh woman, Islamic and Oriental by nature. Shara Zhienkulova framed the narrative of her life in a feminine way – telling first about her youth and then marriage as a route. In fact, her memoirs are about her life with Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov and without him, as if she realized that her life in arts would never have happened or been so bright and successful, if not for her meeting and family life with Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov.

T. Zhurgenev¹¹ designated Shara Zhienkulova to be a ballerina, and Kulyash Baiseitova to be an opera diva:

You are the dancer, Shara, but you have to train in classical ballet. You will become the founder of Kazakh professional dance, and in that way, even if you fail to master the art of international classical ballet, then do whatever is in your powers – learn. To that end I invited Alexandrov, a dancer and ballet master from the Moscow Bolshoi Theater. He will lead the ballet studio, and train ballet students; he will design your dances. You will also learn classical dance, inclinations and the rest from him. Do you mind?¹²

Zhurgenev referred to the example of famous Uzbek dancer Tamara-khanum¹³ and said: “Kazakhstan also needs its own dancer”. No objections were tolerated. Shara Zhienkulova described Temirbek Zhurgenev as an ardent proponent of the regime, strongly committed to the idea of the practical transformation of Kazakh society by communist ideological schemes.

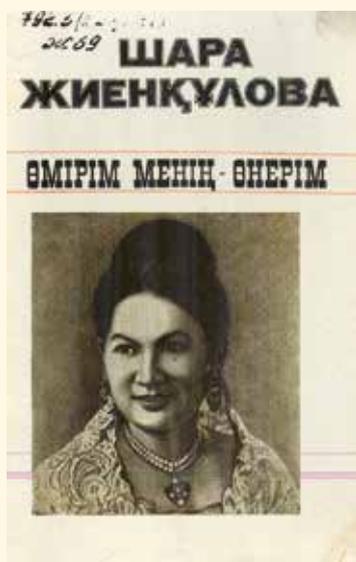
Natural diligence, endurance, flexibility, and an innate sense of rhythm helped her to cover the strict ballet studio program in five years. She was twenty-two, mother of two sons. Normally, girls start ballet studies at the age eight or nine and it takes on average about ten years to master the classical elements. Through pain and moral-psychological tests, she formed not only her professional career but also an identity for many Kazakh girls, to become an icon of grace and style. Zhienkulova spent six hours a day at the ballet studio, worked for the theater, and performed family duties as a mother and wife. She remembers that she used to cry, being exhausted not from pain but from the desire to eat, and she rapidly lost weight, so that even her husband protested in vain to the ballet master. Artemy Alexandrov¹⁴ and Shara Zhienkulova made numerous trips to rural areas to collect material for inventing dances. They meticulously noted nuances of female movements, both natural and those connected with physical activities, and coded women’s symbolic and actual roles in dances to provide insight into the nature of gender labor, and that women perform well-over eighty percent of housework in a nomadic household. Shara Zhienkulova also embodied the ethnic flavor in dance and paid close attention to clothing styles to match the historical and socio-cultural context. Through her, the regime transmitted the idea of a new way of life. She was initially included in that process unconsciously, being obsessed with her professional acting career, but later she deliberately created new ideas and meanings. However, she resisted radical modernization through her artistic activities and preserved ethnic identity by using scenic costumes and ornaments.

SHARA ZHIENKULOVA’S career peaked in the 1930s. This was also when the Stalinist regime introduced the cultural revolution, aiming to eradicate outdated cultural patterns and implant what they regarded as civilized forms of cultural development such as ballet and opera. In her autobiography, published in early 1980s,¹⁵ Shara Zhienkulova voices no criticism of the Stalinist transformations, although her family was persecuted (as socially and politically alien to the regime). On the contrary, she seems to be grateful for the chance of becoming one of the creators of the Kazakh dancing school. She became a role model for modern emancipated Kazakh women, cherished by the regime, but more than that, she became a mediator and a messenger from the regime to all Kazakh women. Shara Zhienkulova’s body was used by the Soviet regime to encourage or rather push millions of Oriental women to embrace development. Was she fully aware of this role, and did she have the opportunity to agree to carry out this mission placed upon her: to be the embodiment of “femina Sovietica” in Kazakhstan?

Shara Zhienkulova lived under Stalinism for twenty years, which meant that she had to face many challenges and gained experiences on how to not only survive but also do so being part of the system. Her own personal development and changes impacted her perceptions of the contemporary political situation, but also her memories of the processes in the post-Stalinist period (she died in 1991). This article argues that memories as interpretations of the past are by nature social phenomena, including



Shara Zhienkulova on the cover of the magazine Театральная декада [Theatrical Decade] in 1936.



Cover of the memoirs *My life is art.*

typified verbal and symbolic representations, that provide a field for interdisciplinary studies: How past externally imposed schemata could live for a long time in a new era, formatting the vision of the past and creating a perception of the Stalinist past for future generations.

Despite the Soviet regime's expectations that whatever was ethnic should be cast away, Shara Zhienkulova remained deeply Kazakh, which is shown in the memoirs. She was the *Queen of Kazakh dance/Kazak biinin padishasy*. Female dance was tabooed in the traditional Kazakh cultural complex, being an entertainment only for little girls. Shara Zhienkulova created *ex nihilo* the forms for her dance, driven by her genuine intuition and sense of rhythm, under the guidance of Russian classical ballet teachers. Shara Zhienkulova writes nostalgically in her memoirs about her life in Soviet Kazakhstan, how she contributed to its development and established lower and upper limits of what was happiness for some people in Soviet times: to live and die for the Leader. Shara Zhienkulova, like Kulyash Baiseitova, the Kazakh Soviet opera diva, ascended to the top of the political Olympus during Stalinist times. They both performed for the leadership but managed to avoid closer contacts. In doing so they escaped the tragic fates of other famous people in the arts, who were purged and disappeared in the Gulag camps and NKVD prisons.

The memoirs' contextual background covers the late 1920s and 1930s, coinciding with the social transformation of Kazakh society following the Minor October Revolution (a second colonial revolution), followed by the start of the Cultural Revolution, the establishment of the Stalinist regime, the elimination of opposition to modernization, collectivization, political reprisals, culminating in the Thermidorian in 1937, and the formation processes of the new culture and new man through ideological propaganda, socio-cultural engineering, and surviving cultural practices. The Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and the subsequent post-war era followed in the 1940s. Some of her family members joined the Bolsheviks, but no information is provided about what motivated them – true belief in the ideals of Bolshevism, or mere survival strategy?

THE MEMORIES PROVIDE an exciting insight into the mental mapping of the cultural changes in Stalinist Kazakhstan as a complex cultural transformation in the context of social-economic transition, when all subsystems of the habitus were turned upside down, the habitual was prohibited, while the unthinkable came to power. Shara Zhienkulova was not only an object of influence but also an active subject herself, demonstrating the potential to read reality in order to survive. Conventional wisdom and social background were her major capital.

After Stalin established his personal power regime in 1927, the processes of constructing the socialist economic basis and relative superstructure (*nadstroika*) were launched in the USSR. The idea was declared an absolute, was promoted at all levels, and in culture in particular. To be in the cultural sphere meant to embody the idea of the state, to polish and present it to the public, urging them to follow it. It was very problematic for the

people in the arts to retain their personal identity, not to dissolve in the service of the *idea*. But the *idea* could be portioned into constructive blocks, be differentiated into main and supportive parts, and the performer could find the right methods to express it, while keeping moral and physical distance. In the *hierarchy of ideas*, one was declared predominant – *the idea of the Leader who embodied Absolute Truth and Wisdom*.

Family-life in Kazakhstan

Shara Zhienkulova appeared on the Kazakh cultural scene as a girl with a strong educational background, a world outlook, skills, ideas and physical appearance as her main assets. Her childhood was happy – she was born to her father’s second wife as his fifteenth daughter. The family was big (two wives, with nineteen children) and was guarded by the careful support of numerous relatives and servants. Her father, Baimolda Zhienkul, was a rich cattle owner and merchant. The revolution did not substantially change the family’s economic position; the property was confiscated only in the late 1920s. She grew up as lively, smart and cute girl; her successes made father happy, and she was educated in traditional Islamic and Russian/Soviet styles. By the age of fifteen she was able to enter Alma-Atinsky Kazakh-Kyrgyz pedagogical institute but could not complete her studies because of the abrupt downgrade of the family status after her father’s arrest and the urgent need to support the family. She does not dwell on her understanding of the radical political transformations of the Kazakh colonial periphery of the empire – revolutions, civil war, and how her family survived the events of 1916. The political and economic changes are given in a sketchy way as her family, especially the senior generation, was acquainted with the figures of new Kazakhstan in the 1920s – Tokash Bokin, Zhubanysh Boribayev, Magazy Masanchi, Gani Muratbayev and others.¹⁶

Shara Zhienkulova devotes more space to idealized descriptions of her family’s lifecycle:

We spent time in the city (Verny) and moved with the first spring days, following the cattle across the Alatau Mountains to the place named Kokqairyk, at the crossing of Kazakh and Kyrgyz lands. As soon as Kazakh and Kyrgyz people arrived at the pasturelands and set up their accommodation, they used to host guests; we called that “seri”. It includes the arrangement of horse races of various types, wrestling of strong young men, and musical-poetical contests. Feasts, weddings, and marriage activities were initiated. Kazakh singers used to sing songs and accompany them on the dombra and qobyz, while Kyrgyz epic reciters and poets narrate to the accompaniment of the qomyz or silver komei.¹⁷

From the mid-1920s, a new cultural space emerged that also provided opportunities for Shara Zhienkulova to attend public performances in the city parks that she describes with little reference to the historical context and socio-cultural realities. Public parks in Verny, as well in other urban centers of colonial Turkestan, were created by the Russians as symbols of European-style cultural life for Russian city dwellers. The imperial policy on urban development stipulated that the aboriginal population was to be kept away from the cities, especially from the administrative and military objects, as Fort Verny used to be. The majority of urban settlers were Russians, while Tatars, Uighur and Dungan people were merchants and traders. Urban parks opened as cultural innovations for non-Russians and the socially disadvantaged only after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, changing the lifestyle of the people in Soviet Kazakhstan and breeding a new sense of civic identity. Shara Zhienkulova lists instruments for cultural development and modernization: parks, gardens, cinema, theater, dances, and festivals. But she does not mention that before the relocation of the capital, the majority of the urban population was not Kazakh.

SHARA ZHIENKULOVA does not describe how subsystems of her life collapsed after the confiscation of her father’s property in 1927 and his arrest, triggering a sudden drop in material status.¹⁸ Her discourse reflects her regrets about this unexpected and unfair treatment, supposedly initiated by someone:

“SHARA ZHIENKULOVA WAS NOT ONLY AN OBJECT OF INFLUENCE BUT ALSO AN ACTIVE SUBJECT HERSELF, DEMONSTRATING THE POTENTIAL TO READ REALITY IN ORDER TO SURVIVE.”

My studies at the institute abruptly ended. My father got into trouble and was persecuted. Due to somebody’s complaint, he was under investigation and was in custody for some time. I remember quite well that it was summer. We are in light dresses and light footwear, my mother is carrying her baby and I am leading the kids who can walk; we are bringing

some food to father in prison. We are short of resources, and do not know how to survive the next day. Then I went to the Labor Exchange and registered as job-seeking. Soon I was employed as interpreter-secretary to that office.¹⁹

Shara Zhienkulova could easily find work, changing her position within one year in search of better-paid positions, and was even put in charge of the forest, fields and warehouse. She was aware of her beauty and charm, conscious of the impression she made on influential men, but wrote about getting so tired by nighttime that she fell asleep instantly. She writes that she enjoyed exposing her beauty in public places, although it was risky, as her father was under arrest and could not protect her. Alma-Ata in the later 1920s was not safe, but her father’s reputation might have kept her safe from any accidents.

My self-esteem was high, but thoughts of the unfair treatment of my father worried me constantly. And at that time, I met Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov.²⁰

Her family survived hardships; the family had to move from the palace to modest premises. She had to take responsible decisions for the family and her own life too, even concerning marriage plans. But she emphasizes her self-confidence at that time, stressing not material interests but love and the desire to be in the arts with her husband:

My salary was high, I could afford nice clothes, and visit public places for dancing and entertainment. The theater moved to Alma-Ata; life was interesting. Actors of the Kazakh drama theater staged performances in the park. And we, twelve adult girls, sisters, occupied the front rows at the performances.²⁰

In the new social conditions, she had to learn how to earn a living despite her aristocratic origins, while her parents' dreams of arranging her marriage to a rich nobleman failed forever. When she married Zhandarbekov, her father could see in the poor actor "a man with strong heart and dignity", but her mother didn't easily accept her choice of husband.²¹

The second period of her life was marriage and the start of her professional career. She underwent personal re-formation and life took a critical turn as she became a married woman, lost her father, and gave birth to three sons, two of whom died soon after birth. She had to provide moral and psychological support to her husband and was also a breadwinner with ambitions as an actor. Shara Zhienkulova undertook severe efforts to adapt to the new realities and cope with material problems; she did not enjoy the support of her mother and other relatives. Kurmanbek's world became hers, and she developed into a strong personality and actor with talents in drama, dance, and later choreography.

Galatea and her Pygmalion or the model Soviet family

The gender roles in Sovietized Kazakhstan were dictated from above; Kazakh women actors, as bearers of new type of culture and heralds of new gender roles in the 1920s, were taken into an already organized environment. By the 1930s, a number of couples emerged in on the Kazakh culture scenes, that embodied the new family with relations based on love, shared interests and friendship, and yet upholding manhood and femininity. Kurmanbek and Shara Zhandarbekov definitely ranked among the most popular of them. Their family life, achievements, way of life and interests were the focus of public attention, arousing not only admiration but jealousy as well, and rumors, gossip, and intrigues surrounded them.

She was well prepared for systemic, hierarchical family relations, having been brought up in a polygamous family with strong central paternalistic authority and patronage. Her marriage began as a western-style thriller with an exotic oriental flavor. When Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov fell in love with her he sent his people to talk to her parents about possible marriage but was turned down, because of his poor social and material standing. Even the mullah's mediation failed. His friends therefore suggested bride kidnapping, as she was willing to marry him despite the family's protests. A kidnapping was organized in the middle of the night,²² giving a new twist to her biography. It was a marriage founded on love, as every word of Shara Zhienkulova's memoirs proves. In the words of their family friend, talented Kazakh Soviet actor and singer Kanabek Baiseitov:

When they were dancing (Shara and Kurmanbek), it was so gorgeous and elegant that the public admired them. How perfectly they matched each other! One is a sultan among the young men [jigits], and she is the most beautiful fairy among the girls. Most people in the hall were novices to the miraculous art of dancing, but for that couple it was natural, as if habitual since early childhood.²³

Kurmanbek fascinated the young girl with his talent and attitude to life, being independent in mind and actions, but as she notes in her memoirs responsible and very hard working. Kurmanbek became everything to her; she relied on his professional intuition and experience, and his praise meant more than the opinion of other critics. But Kurmanbek's behavior worried Shara, as he lost his temper easily, got into conflicts over theatrical problems with colleagues, and could hurt people, although a strange force saved him every time; most of those with whom he was in conflict easily pardoned him, otherwise he could have

“KURMANBEK FASCINATED THE YOUNG GIRL WITH HIS TALENT AND ATTITUDE TO LIFE, BEING INDEPENDENT IN MIND AND ACTIONS.”

lost not only his job, but also his life.

Shara fitted the ideological machinery in her behavior, success, and image of a stylish, soft and pleasant woman. Harmonious family relations depended on wife's proper understanding of her role, as family comes first; only where professional duties clash with her wifely duties does Shara surrender before the professional. However, Shara was much concerned with materials aspects of life, she avoids describing her first house after marriage (hen house, in her words), as it was too miserable: They slept, ate, and rested on the floor. She could not find words enough to express her admiration of the interior of Moscow theaters and hotels. Shara was formed by her time and the main Pygmalion was her husband, but the chief designer was Stalin, whose great project modernized Kazakh life. Her loyalty to the traditional code of gender roles was reflected overtly in language: She uses only polite forms of address to her husband, highlighting his

status, not only his role in Kazakh Soviet culture. Pages of memories about him are full of love and deep respect; even when he was angry, she finds the words to apologize on his behalf for such improper conduct:

He was pure by nature, easy-going, never remembered what and who hurt him, and was not vengeful. No matter how upset he was, he never attacked physically or verbally, and tried to turn his anger into peaceful words.²⁴

Kurmanbek was Shara's mentor: she liked being praised and when she didn't hear positive words about her acting, burst into tears. A relative remembers Kurmanbek initiating conflicts with Shara because of his jealousy – she was too attractive, drawing the attention of other men. He often resorted to the threat of Islamic divorce: “I will *talaq* you!/I will divorce you by pronouncing triple *talaq!*” (the Islamic formula of divorce initiated by the man). Shara's attitude to Kurmanbek's line of behavior was typical for most Soviet women – they perceived drinking as a compensatory remedy for stresses in reality and work. In her memoirs she writes that she was aware under what type of psychological and even physical pressure and stress Kurmanbek was as the head of the theater – responsible for the repertoire, the performances of every single member of the collective, and the interpretation of text, music and gestures. Much in Shara's treatment of her husband was typical for women in Soviet Kazakhstan – most women worked hard to make their family life normal in conditions of abnormality – got married, bore children, maintained inter-generational and other social networks, received guests and visited others, arranged holidays, and through occasional shopping trips to bazaars settled what was regarded as the eternal women's questions: what to wear and how to look to make all around them die of jealousy. They forgave or did not notice their husbands' adulteries, their deviations – alcoholism, rudeness, disrespect, demonstration of their higher standing by shouting, violence, verbal and physical assaults, and direct instructions. Moreover, male status was backed by the regime, which acted as the “Main Man”. Women had to stick time and existence back together when these were torn apart and sought to give existential meaning to the chaotic fragments of ongoing events. Voice, grace, common sense, and beauty saved the Kazakh world from finally slipping into the Soviet foundation ditch (*kotlovan*). But why this the women's activities supported the Stalinist thesis: *Life is getting better and jollier*.

KURMANBEK WAS THE CHIEF person in the family; no decision could be taken without his approval. When T. Zhurgenev awarded the Zhandarbekovs a money prize after the success at the Kazakh SSR Cultural Decade in Moscow, they went to a large store and Kurmanbek bought twenty-three pairs of shoes for all the members of the family including all the children (Shara's nephews).²⁵ In her memoirs Shara often is preoccupied with her appearance – clothes, haircuts, decorations of various types, as well as the impressions she makes on people, namely

men; she remarks on how men were charmed by her dances and could not resist the desire to get her under their patronage, even in presence of her husband. In her world, her body could be a mean for her to gain power over men and her appearance was the resource, or investment for her.

The Zhandarbekovs' belongings in 1933 however were modest:

One wooden sack, where we packed our clothes, two red blankets to put on floor, some pillows, one blanket to cover us, wooden spoons, two-three china cups.²⁶

The living conditions at this time were poor: an old two-room house, shared with the Baiseitovs. Food was cooked on a primus kerosene stove, and their diet was traditional – meat with flour (*beshbarmak*). The baby was kept in the *besik*, the traditional Kazakh cradle.²⁷ They lived in a small room in the two-room barrack, provided for them by the theater. All conveniences (cold water, toilet) were outside the house; there was no heating or stove. They had no furniture and used to sleep on the floor, as was quite typical for all Kazakh families, except for the few rich ones. The description of *byt* (material conditions of life) is mentioned by Shara only to emphasize her emotional and psychological state. The menu was quite plain – meat and tea, though they often did not have one of these, as food supplies in urban areas were poor in the early 1930s. But she provides a picture of rich feasts full of food in the Alma-Ata parks and public places – even in the harsh times of famine, to comply with the official silence over the tragedy.

Artistic career, or becoming like the Other

Shara stated in her memoirs:

It is important to get achievements in any type of work. But for the arts it is necessary, as an actor must be talented. And without talent, neither writer nor scholar should exist at all! I cannot understand when it is said that he is a good actor, poor actor, or an actor with medium skills.²⁸

This statement proves her mission and deflects possible accusations that her career was due to the status of the famous and talented actor – her husband. Shara's coming to the theater was fortuitous (due to her marriage to Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov), but the events that followed in her private life and professional career were in line with the course of cultural transformation in Soviet Kazakhstan. European cultural models were alien to most of the Kazakh populace, and the Soviet regime forced people to accept the translated cultural forms into their mental map and normative value scale via education, music, and the visual arts. But the correct interpretation of gestures and movements to express certain meanings had to be coded in the right way to convey them to the public. Shara's body was subjected to manifest ideas and messages emanating from the political leadership

to the public. Shara staged and performed dances approved by the theatrical administration. The ideas of social progress dominated the minds of Kazakh intellectuals, and Shara, as the wife of the man who was an integral part of the cultural and ideological process, easily captured the spirit of cultural innovation that dominated the cultural centers at that time.

For the largely illiterate Kazakh women, visual images were most illustrative, as well as mythologized stories of female successes in overcoming the everyday routine and building their lives on new paths. Shara's external appearance (clothes, facial changes with cosmetics and hairstyle, body) and career trends were intended to exhibit the Soviet-oriented move to progress.

The parameters of a *new woman* were never fixed but changed over time from idealistic descriptions and contradictory realistic manifestations of Bolshevik female leaders to male-oriented schemes of exterior (bodies, faces, clothes, matrix of conduct, interests and emotional taxonomy) and interior (hidden, therefore, women were not trusted) representations of an ideal new woman. Oriental women (of the eastern Muslim colonial areas of the Russian empire) were an enigma for the western-minded Bolshevik leaders, whose opinion of how to emancipate such woman meant not only to open up their faces, dress them in new garments, and liberate them from various forms of enclosure, but also to transform their mindset by erasing old clichés of what was proper and decent. As a ballet dancer, actor and performer of folk dances, Shara embodied the physical characteristics of the ideal (desired, meeting the established parameters) body of a Kazakh (or more broadly, Oriental – *vostochnaya*) woman. But Shara's dances were Kazakh, although there had been no Kazakh female dances. She created a dance coined as traditional that also transmitted the regime's ideas and messages, but most of the typified movements were purely Shara's products. Shara does not tell us whether she resisted interference in her creative work and the inner laboratory of the dances' inception.

WHEN SHARA ZHIENKULOVA performed in Moscow for the first time in 1935, the public was astonished as nobody knew what to expect from Oriental women, but her performance surpassed all expectations. Shara surprised the audience and critics by maelstroms achieved by powerful spins and pelvic movements; it was shocking as the movements demonstrated innate female energy and desire expressed in a rather uncontrollable way; a release of hidden and suppressed potential. The evaluation of new-born Kazakh dances was Eurocentric, an attitude that used to perceive indigenous performances as shamanic and uncivilized, a spontaneous release of huge energy that contains untamed destructive force. The European criticism of dances rests on the proposition that they are an interaction of body and instinct.

If European dances (ballroom or folk) were interpreted as two levels of cultural and intellectual expression the dances of the indigenous populace were labeled as uncivilized, close to nature and displaying deep instincts. But Shara invented Kazakh dances under the careful guidance of Russian classical ballet makers, and therefore, little was left of uncivilized moments, but if some ethnic specifics existed, they were carefully polished and put into canonical classical forms. Alexandrov, as Shara highlights, learnt the Kazakh language to talk to women and figure out what was behind the internal mechanics of gestures they used in daily activities and in communicating with each other. Therefore, Shara decided what was typical for Kazakh women and converted

“SHE CREATED A DANCE COINED AS TRADITIONAL THAT ALSO TRANSMITTED THE REGIME’S IDEAS AND MESSAGES, BUT MOST OF THE TYPIFIED MOVEMENTS WERE PURELY SHARA’S PRODUCTS.”

that in ideologically suitable ways. The dances were Shara's corporeal interpretation of female Kazakh-ness in the Soviet cultural framing. Her body exemplified how Russian and European dance forms produced the Soviet-ness of Kazakh ethnic dance. But Shara was truly Kazakh; she never imagined herself being a version of a Russian heroine, or bearer of other ethnic and cultural components in her behavior, although her lifestyle (fashion, etc.) was an attempt to reach higher status and cultural level in the Soviet Kazakh society in creation – but not by a change of ethnocultural

code. Through her dances, Shara visualized the ongoing transformations of Kazakh women, changing their level of consciousness and understanding of themselves.

The Other is present invisibly in Shara's memoirs and her discourse, embodied mostly in the ideal she has to imitate and create in herself via her new lifestyle, clothes, manners, tastes and visual representation. The One is presented in her text in terms as small as a hairstyle or perfume, and the Big as materialized greatness of the Soviet power – the Lenin Mausoleum, the Kremlin, the Bolshoi Theater and people in power – the political leadership. The only example of the “new Ones”, portrayed is her influential ballet master A. Alexandrov, while the “Other Ones” are mentioned in a sketchy way, simply listing their roles.

Sacrifices on the altar of success: Antigone

Shara offered a compromise line for women – the public and professional should not prevail over family duties; she sacrificed her professional career opportunities many times for the sake of the family balance and her role as mother and wife, although her records of the 1930s can be condensed in one feeling – tiredness. Training, rehearsals, performances, self-control almost killed her so that she had no time to contemplate external processes, and perhaps that saved her from the need to make accounts, analyze and come to certain conclusions, to get “mad” as things went in their own way. Her career developed but she lost two sons, being extremely busy with rehearsals, performances, and

a tough touring regime under the close supervision of external and internal invigilators demanding that she follow the schedules strictly.²⁹ Shara made tremendous efforts to accommodate herself to the new way of life with Kurmanbek.³⁰ She writes in a calm manner about the material conditions the young family had to endure, how her husband carried her to the maternity hospital in his arms in the middle of the night as no transportation was available, but nothing is said about how their living conditions improved. The government allocated the Zhandarbekov family a separate comfortable apartment in an elite area of Alma-Ata for their service to the regime. She on the other hand dedicated several pages to the episode of her father's hiding in their small closet when they lived in the "hen house".

Shara's father shared the fate of numerous innocent victims of that time – groundless accusations based on an unreliable social origin, and a chain of social and material losses. In Shara's memoirs all those events are given in a regular order but repeated in a circular form – she keeps returning to the father's fate, each time adding more details of a psychological-emotional character. She makes no effort to find any excuses to justify her father as an innocent victim of the regime; on the contrary, she was greatly concerned with the lack of confidence and loyalty among her colleagues and friends of the family, who several times attempted to get rid of her and her husband from the theatre when the campaigns to purge unreliable elements were initiated. The tragedy in the family (her father's persecution and eventual loss, and colleagues' intrigues) are described as "hard events" explained by enemies' plots (that emulates the regime's grounds for reprisals): "Everyone has enemies".³¹

SHARA REPEATEDLY wrote about the break in her trust of people around her – when one of her superior colleagues refused to support her in her father's transportation in the train, and again when she realized that her friends were not on her side during the campaigns against hidden enemies in the theatre collective, and when the colleagues were on her husband's side after they separated. In Shara's memoirs, the reasons for reprisals are human mindset and jealousy. These were also given as the major reasons for persecution of her father and Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov.

She described her father's first salvation as a miracle:

In 1932 our theater was on tour in Semey, Kyzylzhar, and Aqmola. Once a militiaman approached Kurmanbek after the concert, asking: "Excuse me, but are you familiar with an old man named Baimolda Zhienkululy?"³²

The militiaman kept him in his house. Baimolda, her father, was ill and in rags. Kurmanbek and Shara washed the old man, dressed him in clean clothes, fed him, expressed their gratitude to the militiaman's family, bought some flour, sugar, tea, bread, and presents, left some money, and took the old man to Alma-Ata. But their colleague, an actor famous at that time, did not allow Shara's father to go by the train designated for the theater



Shara Zhienkulova and her husband Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov worked together in the Kazhak film *Amangeldy*, 1938.



Kurmanbek Zhandarbekov in the Soviet film *Dzhambul*, 1952.

staff on the pretext that there were no vacant seats, although many relatives of other artists followed them. Kurmanbek had to give Baimolda his seat and took another train. Shara was with her baby during the tour, her second son Zhanibek, but other actors had occupied her and Kurmanbek's seats, and she and her son had to sleep on the train floor during the ten-day trip back. The baby got sick on the way and died soon after they returned to Alma-Ata. Shara describes in detail how upset she was by her colleague's aversion. She writes bitterly that for a long time, she was a partner of that man in the theater. Much time passed by, but she did not forget the unpleasant episode that was typical for that time.

After 1927, arrests were launched against former political opponents of the Bolsheviks (Alash-Orda members), sympathizers to sectarians within the communist party, and social "aliens" (the bais and moderately prosperous people). Her father was persecuted,³³ but his family members luckily escaped serious charges for their origin, or relations with the political aliens.

Writing about her father, Shara uses some myths; some of them was unmasked in 1930s, but most remained as the coded untold stories about the life of Soviet celebrities in the common folk imagination. The real problems over her father would start later on, when Kurmanbek was seriously criticized at meetings in the theater for his social-political misalliance – his wife was the daughter of a rich de-classified *bai*, who served a sentence for his origin and crimes against the Soviet regime. Shara even had to change her name – shortened from Gulshara and registered by her husband's family name, Zhandarbekova (after she divorced him in the 1940s, she once more took her maiden name Zhienkulova).

IN HER MEMOIRS, Shara displays to the public the topic of her father's non-burial and in that way reminded society that millions were not buried. It was her last tribute to him – *Father was a victim* in her memoirs. Many episodes express Shara's gratitude to him – for her unique natural talent, and investments in her education and upbringing, but she could not find the right place for him in the new Soviet realities; he had to hide in the closet of her small apartment when he returned from exile, and he finally left the scene to nowhere. Upon her father's sudden (but predictable) disappearance, Shara had no information on him, but probably guessed that he had tragically died. He might have told her not to seek him for their own safety. She reconciled with her father's death in public only when she was allowed to cry in the film "Amangeldy". "The dead must be buried, making the past public as on the theatrical stage". In the revealing interview on the "Amangeldy" film shooting, Shara writes: "I remember the episode when I had to cry. I was told: "Shara, burst out crying!" But on the contrary I was about to burst out laughing. The producer explained that Amangeldy was arrested in that scene, and it might be the farewell meeting of the heroes. But I was alone at the site and could not make myself cry! Then Moisei Zelikovich

Levin, (producer of the film) asked: "Was there anything tragic in your life recently?" I responded: "My father died not long ago." Tears come from my eyes of remembering that story. "All right", the producer encouraged me, "imagine that you are saying farewell to your father!"³⁴

Shara could not mourn her father but transferred her perception of fatherhood onto the Soviet leaders – Lenin and Stalin. In the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow, she talks to Lenin, but Stalin is more feared, although respected, and we cannot find any attempts to establish a dialogue between Shara and Stalin, or

any other great Soviet leaders. She gives no description of close contact with the Soviet leadership, using only common phrases or metaphors: Great leader, Baba, etc., as if distancing herself from them even in time.

The Soviet leaders in the 1930s were associated with death; it was somehow close to Shara's state of mind – her father's death, purges of Kazakhstani

leaders and people of culture, fear for her husband and family members.

In 1935 Shara emotionally describes her visit to the Lenin's Mausoleum:

We all went to the Mausoleum. My blood rushed to my head from the very thought that I would see the Great Old Man. The daughter of Kazakhs, who yesterday were just nomads, is dancing today in the golden center of arts; her star is shining as an equal among equals! All that became possible only due to you, Great Old Man! Thanks to Great Lenin and the wise policy of the Bolshevik Party, people who love the arts got an opportunity to fulfill their dreams, and many others would follow them. The talents of young men and girls from the sister nations surprised not only the capital's inhabitants, but the English people as well. Among them, the Kazakh arts were displayed in the Bolshoi Theater for first time by the first swallow of Kazakh dance, me, daughter of Zhienkul, and now I come to bow my head before you, oh, Great Lenin Baba! [35] When pronouncing those words I looked at the image of the Great Man who was sleeping for eternity, and tears poured from my eyes when I told him "Good-bye" ...³⁵

Shara's appeal to Lenin is symbolically eclectic; in addressing him as "Great Old Man", "Great Lenin", she reveals ideological stereotypes incorporated into deeply rooted religiosity. Tumarzin states that the cult of Lenin has folkloric and religious roots.³⁶ After the loss of her biological father, Shara transferred her love to the political leadership.

Shara draws a personal intimate line between herself and Lenin, but she does not ask him what her father's fault was in the eyes of the Soviet regime. She did not pray, or beg the regime and its leaders to save her father, as she knew that it was impos-

“SHARA’S PARTICIPATION IN THE 1936 MOSCOW DECADE MADE HER A SUPERSTAR OF SOVIET SCOPE.”

sible, and they (she and Kurmanbek) would perish forever, if they dared to start their own investigation or even simply ask: “Why?” The visit to the Lenin Mausoleum was a test of her “Soviet-ness”, while attendance at the Bolshoi Theater showed the level of her “culturedness” (*kulturnost*), an assessment of the Kremlin-approved political loyalty. The episode of 1935 was vividly recorded in 1980s, as a proof – by that time, the “femina Sovietica” had been formed. Ideological frames were deeply rooted in her mindset, as in retrospect she draws on Soviet codified cliché formulas to write about the Stalinist times. Shara’s dialogue with the audience and time made her immortal, in a sense. She realized this quite clearly when she starred in the legendary film-myth about Amangeldy Imanov, the hero of the 1916 events and civil war in Kazakhstan, where she had the role of the hero’s girlfriend and then wife. Her friend, Tamara-khanum, a professional dancer from Uzbekistan, wrote: “How happy you are, Shara! Your face, dances and image are immortalized forever!”. But in her memoirs, Shara immortalized her love to three men in her life – her father, her husband and her son – in time’s perspective; in that way she contributed to the establishment of a certain perception or blueprint for seeing time for the generations to come.

The happiest time in the Reign of Terror

The main events in the memoirs indicate Shara’s social and personal vision of *happiness*, in two locations – Alma-Ata since the late 1920s and Moscow during two of Shara’s visits. Pages dedicated to Shara’s husband and son are very sentimental, especially when telling of the happiest time in the 1930s when they collectively worked under Zhurgenev’s guidance for the Kazakh SSR Culture Decade in Moscow in 1936 and then visited Moscow with a grand performance. Shara was to dance in the opera “Qyz-Zhibek/Silk Maiden” and perform a solo. During the preparation she could not pay proper attention to her newborn son, who eventually got pneumonia and died. From time to time, her mother brought the baby to the cold theater for feeds, where he might have got sick. Shara dedicates only few lines to the death of her son, as the external pressure not to mourn but to concentrate on work prevented her from expressing her true feelings.³⁷ She only describes her husband’s emotions in one sentence. However, she describes in detail the rest of the time spent in the Medeu resort with Baiseitov family before the artists departed for Moscow, and how warm relations were between the two families sharing the house.

In her description of her participation in the Kazakh SSR Arts Decade in Moscow (1936), Shara portrays herself primarily not as an ethnic culture representative but as a woman. In retrospect, she explains that so many events of that time were imprinted in her memory in a certain way due to her young age. She was in Moscow on tour with her husband and son, and their wellbeing, and her representation of a new Kazakh female body image, were more important than any other events around the Decade. The most revealing is Shara’s distancing herself from the top Soviet politicians, or even fear of them, given at the description of the banquet arranged in honor of the Kazakh delegation in the

Bolshoi Theater, attended by Stalin and his close officials. Even forty years after that remarkable incident Shara is afraid to disclose her real feelings, although emotionally that meeting deeply impressed her. But she tells the reader more about troubles with her husband at the performance; his singing was technically not perfect as he spoiled his voice by drinking the day before the concert (in Shara’s version). Shara says that she was more worried about their naughty son left alone in the hotel alone. Between the lines on her husband and son, she tells us that she earned applause and pleasant words for her performance.³⁸

SHARA’S LIFE COULD HAVE suddenly taken a new trajectory if she had accepted the invitation and patronage of P. Kerzhentsev³⁹ to stay on for an internship in the Bolshoi Theater. When the Decade was coming to an end, he suggested Shara should try casting for the role of Zarema in the B. Asafiev ballet “Bakhchisaraiskii fountain”:

In appearance you are like Zarema as if the role were made for you. Two goals would be reached – you would perform Zarema and learn from famous ballet dancers.” Shara recalls that her heart was beating happily, she started dreaming, but all depended on her husband’s decision. Kerzhentsev was getting more persuasive: “**Why don’t you want to move to Moscow? Three or four years would pass like a day. Over that period you will master all the secrets of classical ballet, become a top ballerina, and bring so much help to your people.**”⁴⁰

Shara was faced with a dilemma: Art or Family, but Kurmanbek was categorical:

If you stay in Moscow, you will never see your son again, and never set foot in Alma-Ata!” Shara surrendered and had to beg her husband to forgive her for selfish vanity, bursting into tears: “**Pardon me, Kurmanbek, that I put you and myself into that hard situation. I would never leave you and will stick to you forever. How can I forget all the goodness you have shown towards my parents and brothers! My late father blessed me for this marriage.**”⁴¹

Although the couple reconciled, the memory of the lost chance of joining the cohort of famous Soviet ballerinas was aching in her heart for a long time. But she did not mention that Kerzhentsev fell out of Stalin’s favor and barely survived the purges.

Shara’s participation in the 1936 Moscow Decade made her a superstar of Soviet scope – she performed in the Bolshoi theatre, became familiar with the most talented and renowned artists of the USSR, was recognized by them as an outstanding performer of folk dances with huge potential, and as the most beautiful woman of the Soviet Orient, performing at the reception before the Soviet leadership – Stalin and others.⁴² She was admitted into the integration channels of grand Soviet art and culture. Her



Two Kazakh legends: Shara Zhienkulova and opera singer Kulyash Baiseitova.



Shara Zhienkulova at a Kazakh stamp from 2012.



Image of Shara Zhienkulova dancing.

charming dance with its strong exotic and erotic components confused even Stalin. Shara danced “Bylqyldaқ” with music by Tattimbet.

Along with many other people of culture in Soviet Kazakhstan, Shara was awarded the state order for preparation and participation in the Kazakh ASSR Decade in Moscow. That series of cultural performances was to prove the degree of Soviet-ness of Kazakh culture. At the same time, it was the test for the readiness of the republican leadership to comprehend the nature and specifics of Socialist Realism in building Soviet culture out of the traditional arts.

During this Moscow visit, Shara was introduced to the high style of arts, as well as the art of being beautiful. She made contact with renowned Soviet celebrities of the time who taught the techniques of beauty – opera diva Maria Maksakova, legendary actor Zinaida Raikh, muse of the talented people of Soviet arts, graceful ballerinas Olga Lepeshinskaya and Galina Ulanova, etc. But Shara was given a valuable lesson in how to be charming from Saken Seifullin⁴³ in the Bolshoi theatre hall before the performance started. Shara and Kulyash Baiseitova were waiting in excitement for their turn to come to the scene, confident in their charm, being young, dressed in brilliant concert costumes. Suddenly Saken approached them and said very pleasant words on how charming they were, but after kisses he remarked:

You are so beautiful, but how awfully you smell! It is not your fault but that of your men, who happened to get into possession of such flowers, not knowing how to care for them properly!” And he took out of his pocket a bottle of French perfume: “That is how you should smell!”⁴⁴

Shara and Kulyash hastily poured the entire bottle over their heads and gave the empty bottle back to laughing Saken. That small incident made a big impression on Shara, as she remembered every minor detail of it. She could not fall asleep that night for a long time, being excited by the compliments of the most brilliant man of the Soviet Kazakhstan. She writes that she found a book of his poems and imagined that Saken personally recited them to her. A year later Saken was purged, along with other prominent people of culture; his image and name were erased from textbooks and mass media outlets, while in radio and newspapers releases, he and others were named “dirty dogs, enemies, etc.” Shara did not write about the tragic fate of these people even in safe times. According to his contemporaries’ descriptions, Saken Seifullin was a very handsome man. Composer Yevgenii Brusilovski remarked:

Saken Seifullin was not only the first Kazakh writer. He was the first chairman of the republic’s Sovnarkom, the first editor-in-chief of the Kazakh republican newspaper, in short, one of the founders of Soviet power in Kazakhstan. He was handsome, like a film star, with black moustache, looking down in Kazakh way, with a proudly set head and the slow, confident walk of a

man with strong sense of dignity. He liked to exhibit his beautiful appearance and looked after himself carefully – how elegant was his costume, always brand-new and tidily ironed. Among all his other merits, Seifullin also played *dombra* quite well in the east-Kazakhstani manner and loved singing his songs... His vocal qualities were modest, but he could sing expressively and with good taste⁴⁵

Shara does not mention Seifullin's tragic fate, emphasizing the romanticized episode instead.

There is much that you cannot find in Shara's memoirs: There are no famines, reprisals, or people of other social and ethnic groups. There is no evaluation of the situation or any hints about her political views – one can read the hidden message only between the lines – or mentions of proper or improper ethical behavior. Personal tragic losses overshadowed others' tragedies. Her attitude to death was given a complex interpretation: as a sacrifice to something bigger and horrible, primarily as a biological fact – people used to die under different circumstances and not as part of a social-political process, when people disappeared due to a combination of objective reasons and human interference. But she remembers in detail emotional expressions after the humiliating experience of her inability to save her father and provide decently for his care and treatment due to his age and status, and the trauma of his non-burial. As an afterthought, she does not write about mother's sufferings and tears; she had to endure the tragedy in calm and patience. Shara does not highlight her mother's contribution to her success either, namely that she was doing all the housework for Shara after the disappearance of her father. The father proved to be much more significant; that is seen in the reference to the role of Stalin as a super-father who replaced the real father for her.

ARTEMY ALEXANDROV was arrested in 1937 and sentenced according to the 58th article to ten years in Krasnoyarsk camp of the GULAG. Shara's text explains his sudden disappearance as being due to misfortune.⁴⁶ She regrets his absence in the theater, as he was indispensable and could organically transform a Kazakh dance into a ballet performance without risking damage to both. Ballet was enriched by ethnic dance elements, and that was his invention. The first Kazakh ballet, *Qalqaman-Mamyr*, failed mainly due to not being staged by Alexandrov, in Shara's opinion. Among other reasons behind the failure, Shara points to her non-classical ballet education, defects in the music, and heavy, clumsy costumes.⁴⁷ The ballet survived only two seasons and was deleted from the repertoire. Although Shara does not write about the reasons behind the Alexandrov's fate (in the 1980s it was still dangerous to refer to the victims' background), she happened to learn about his tragic fate, and even intended

to support him, as her relatives remember in retrospect. Alexandrov wrote her from Krasnoyarsk GULAG: "Sharochka, save me, I am starving; if you do not support me, I will die of hunger". Shara's biographer, Sharbanu Kumarova, states that when she actually found him, he had died.⁴⁸ People co-existed at the same time and space, but why were their fates were so different? They shared much in common in professional activities and interests, worked together day and night to realize some cultural project, although in different capacities, and with different degrees of responsibility. If a choreographer was the inventor of gestures, what was wrong in his interpretation of gestures to be performed by dancers? However, both ballet master and dancers took risks, experimenting with a strange mix of exotic and ethnic dances, and classical ballet.

Conclusion

Shara's memoirs, set in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era, show how private life meets the Soviet imperative to dissolve the personal/individual in the collective/public. But the memoirs are formatted to ignore external reality: As an actor, Shara could hide her inner world, incorporating her achievements into the

narrative of the Soviet regime's successes in transforming Kazakh life and constructing a new culture and a "model woman". Unlike many other women in the intellectual and artistic sphere, Shara was in a favorable position, being backed by a strong, talented and influential husband, who was appreciated by the regime for his great talent. But she never usurped the power due to his position; she worked long hours, and really earned her fame.

The Soviet regime exploited Shara's body, but she could still think and many

years afterwards she provides a synopsis of the Stalinist period as her most successful, as the first Kazakh professional dancer and founder of the Kazakh dancing school. Her mind also conformed to the regime's policies and justified her compromised existence by professional activities for the sake of becoming a professional dancer. Shara Zhienkulova incorporated her mission profoundly, and in later years people still saw her as an icon of Kazakh female grace and beauty. But she does not present herself as a victim of the regime, instead preferring to be part of the Soviet official cultural vanguard that aimed to form tastes, interests and ideals of the Kazakh Soviet woman. If Shara had been the victim, she would not have employed her talents to be among the favored ones who enjoyed privileges and fame. Shara believed that she lived a happy life, being loved by the most talented man in the Soviet Kazakh arts, mother of a very talented writer, cherishing her grandchildren, and that she was blessed by the regime and its leaders, welcomed by critics, recognized as the symbol of grace and beauty for several generations of women. But the most remarkable of all – she survived Stalinism. If we compare the memories of those who were victimized by

“THERE IS MUCH THAT YOU CANNOT FIND IN SHARA'S MEMOIRS: THERE ARE NO FAMINES, REPRISALS, OR PEOPLE OF OTHER SOCIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS.”

the Stalinist regime and her memories about those years, one might think that historical backgrounds were taken from different countries, although the events occur within the same chronotope – Soviet Kazakhstan, Alma-Ata. Between the lines, Shara hints at postponed resistance to the regime: “*Despite the harsh environment and personal losses, I created a new form of cultural capital, but also augmented it*”. She managed to appropriate and subjectivize ascribed identity. That identity was Soviet, coded in understanding of her mission, the need to fulfill duties, not to betray the republic’s political leadership, to represent a new Kazakh Soviet woman and culture. Contrary to the tragic sentiments, Shara demonstrates her love, not fear. Etkind claims that the dominant feeling of Stalinist narratives is mourning. Nostalgic admiration of Shara in modern-day Kazakh culture, and society in the broad sense, indicates the level of consciousness and historical memory, as well as durability of the cult for talent. Those who survived – in particular, those who enjoyed the regime’s paternalistic support – are currently employed for state and nation building processes. Zhienkulova upgrades herself to the level of historical subject. Memoirs can correct the vision of a person’s ego; she/he makes efforts to correspond to the constructed stereotypes that fit that time and ideological frameworks.

SHARA WAS AWARE OF the power of the external forces regulating the lives of millions of Soviet people, but for the sake of her and her family’s survival, she selected the most rational option – to hide away in the arts and family affairs. However, the fear was so strong that even many years later, she did not dare to let her thoughts about those forces come out. Shara Zhienkulova reveals the feminine features under Stalinism – flexibility, adaptability, and conformism, the attempt to settle conflicts peacefully or to avoid them. There were three men in Shara’s life to whom she dedicated her memoirs – her father, husband and son; although the book is titled “My life is arts”, it expresses her love for them. Her love of her husband is evident in every line, but brief expressions of her attitude to her father reveal her deeply hidden sorrow about his tragic fate and her fulfilled duty before him – to highlight his name via her deeds. Her text is purely feminine – what is the mission of a daughter, wife and mother, while motherhood was embedded into the pursuit career of a career. As a subaltern object, Shara was instructed to follow the classical patterns of body control as an intermediary between the civilized and those under the civilizing process, but gradually upgraded from the visualized conformity to hidden nonconformity, when she dared to write more about her genuine feelings behind her career achievements: love and fear. ✕

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- 3 Kanabek Baiseitov, *Na vsu zhizn*. (Alma-Ata: Zhazyshy, 1983).
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- 6 Choi Chatterji remarked, “...Soviet heroines were completely dependent on the state to uphold their authority in both the public and the private spheres”. //Women in the Stalin Era. p. 65.
- 7 Zhienkulova, *Omirim benim-onerim*, 37.
- 8 Roza Barglanova (1922–2011) – Kazakh Soviet signer, performed songs of various genres. She left memoirs of her life and time. “*Ainalaiyn halkyma erkeletken*” / “*I am grateful to my people for tender love to me*” (Almaty: Atamyra, 2007).
- 9 Roland Barth, *The Death of the Author*. http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf
- 10 Shara’s ancestors controlled the trade and production facilities along the border with China and the route from Verny to Bishkek was named “Baibulan’s route” (after Shara’s great grandfather). They were known for hospitality and charity. Before the family property was confiscated in 1927, most of the houses and apartments in Verny city belonged to Shara’s father. Many prominent people of arts of 1920s rented rooms from her father. The father of future opera diva Kulyash Baiseitova was a shoemaker for Shara’s father; while the father of the future Soviet leader Dinmukhamed Konayev was a customer in one of the family business networks. Shara’s father intended to give her an Islamic education, and from the age of seven she learnt Arabic and Koranic texts. But after the revolution her uncle, Sultan, joined the Soviet regime and encouraged Baimolda Zhienkul to give the girl a Soviet secular education in Verny grammar school. Her father regularly came to school to make *namaz* with Shara, and classmates teased her as “mullah-girl”. Shara attended grammar school with the future leaders of Soviet Kazakhstan, for instance, Dinmukhamed Konayev.
- 11 Temirbek Zhurgenev (1898–1938), Commissar of Enlightenment and Education in the Kazakh ASSR (1933–1937), was purged in 1938. T. Zhurgenev was surprised by the heroic efforts and solidarity expressed by Kazakh writers during the preparation for the Decade. Most of them perished in the Great Purge. If Shara did not mention their fates, her ex-husband was more grateful and expressed deep regret about their early tragic deaths: “All were eager to support, helping and advising. If only it were like that all the time. I regret their fate, my dear seniors” // Zhandarbekov K., *Korgenderim*, 76.
- 12 Zhienkulova, *Omirim benim-onerim*, 37.
- 13 Tamara-khanum (Tamara Petrosyan, ethnic Armenian, 1906–1991), the first professional dancer in Uzbekistan.
- 14 Alexandrov-Martirosyan Alexandr Artemievich, born in 1891, in Tiflis, Georgia, Armenian, secondary education, ballet maker, worked for Moscow, then for Alma-Ata theaters. He was arrested on November 19, 1937 in Alma-Ata, sentenced on 31 December under 58th article of the criminal code (articles 10 and 6) to 10 years in the Far East, rehabilitated on May 25, 1989. Source: Data from Department of the Committee of the National Security of Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty // <http://lists.memo.ru/d1/f328.htm>
- 15 Zhanat Kundakbayeva, *Modernizatsiya rannei sovetskoi epohi v sudbah zhenschin Kazakhstana, 1920–1930 gody*. (Almaty: Kazak universiteti, 2017), 24–71.

- 16 Tokash Bokin (1890–1918), Zhubanysh B ribayev (1898–1927), Magazy Masanchi (1885–1938), Gani Muratbayev (1902–1925). They were participants in the 1916 events, then joined the Bolshevik party and contributed to the establishment of Bolshevik control over Kazakh lands during the civil war. Their fates were different and ended tragically in the Stalinist purges (M. Masanchi was repressed in 1938).
- 17 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 27.
- 18 In 1925 J. Stalin appointed F. Goloschekin (1876–1941) the first secretary of the Kazakh ASSR Communist party, who upon arrival initiated the so-called Minor Revolution (second revolution) to cleanse the party cadres. After 1927 he launched series of punitive campaigns to eradicate the social and economic basis of traditional society and eliminate all real and potential opponents.
- 19 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 30.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 After Shara fled with Kurmanbek, her father Baimolda Zhienkul was released from prison for a short term. He learnt of his daughter's choice and came to talk to Kurmanbek. Shara did not know what the content of the conversation was, but her husband remarked that Shara's father blessed them with the words: "You will be patron and savior for my Sharazhan, my dear son. I also entrust you the patronage over my family".
- 22 Kanabek Baiseitov wrote that they hired two phaetons to kidnap Shara, one for the young couple, and the second for themselves. They first arrived at the place where Shara's elder sister, Khadisha, was living, and she supported her sister, as by that time she had already started an artistic career. Some days later by tradition, representatives of Kurmanbek – Zhumat Shanin, Amre Kashaubayev, Isa Baizakov, and Kanabek Baiseitov, people of the arts who were famous by that time – visited Shara's father, but he was very angry and refused to talk to them, while her mother told them that she had never thought of their daughter's marriage to the poor. Kanabek Baiseitov, *Na vsu zhizn*, 64–65.
- 23 In Kazakh traditional norms sanctioned by Islam, female body was the property of the family/clan and belonged to the father or other senior male within the family. After marriage, the right passed to the husband. Public exposure was possible only for women washing a body for funerals. Shara does not tell us how she dared to transgress those taboos. But, probably, her innate sense of freedom, her father's absence, and the backing and encouragement of her husband liberated her from outdated vision of what the female body is for. In the new conditions, it became an image of model woman, of the regime – the icon of style and example of proper female standards. She understands that in society, the female body never belongs to the woman.
- 24 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 40.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 35.
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- 28 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 30.
- 29 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 39.
- 30 Ibid.
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- 33 Most of other sources indicate that he died at the Shymkent construction sites in 1937, at the GULAG construction site. Relatives of Shara (in a retrospective, 2012) gave an account that the Soviet politics in general was not favorable for their clan members; many perished or were socially downgraded: "Upheaval, famine, the purges of 1937, and the Great Patriotic war seriously affected the Zhienkulov clan. Most of the males perished or were wounded at the front. Shara's father, Baimolda Zhienkul, was sentenced, and died around the Taraz area during the famine. During the confiscation process, the Soviet authorities loaded his property onto 18 big carts. His two-storey palace was located where the Musrepov Kazakh Drama Theater for Youth now stands. That building was also removed. The family got into a miserable state, and only Shara could save them by her hard work..." in K. Stambekov, *Actor renowned among the people*, in Shara. Compiled by .Diyarova, 143.
- 34 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 48.
- 35 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 98–99.
- 36 Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin lives! The cult of Lenin in Soviet Russia*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- 37 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 107–108.
- 38 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 98–99.
- 39 Kerzhentsev P. (1881–1940), Soviet statesman. In 1936–1938 was chairman of the Committee of Arts under the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Zhienkulova, *Omirim menim-onerim*, 99.
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