

## GHIRSHMAN (Tania)

(1900-1984)

"Archeologist in spite of myself", such is the translation of the title that the wife of the French archaeologist Roman Ghirshman chose for the work of her memoirs in 1970<sup>1</sup>

This title resumes the entire paradox of a life devoted to a career that Tania Ghirshman had not chosen, that she pretended having never liked, but that in devotion to her husband she was compelled to practice somehow, accompanying and completing him for half a century.

Antoinette Levienne, born in 1900 in Constantinople, spent her youth in imperial Russia, in Bakou where her father was a tradesman. She came to France at the age of six with her family, settling in Paris. The fact that she lived in Russia which language she spoke influenced her destiny as we shall see, she brought back the nickname Tania which she kept all her life.

After her secondary schooling, she chose a career in Dentistry, a field for which she shared a passion with her three sisters who chose the same profession. It is in her dental office that she saw a Russian immigrant as one of her patients, in the late twenties. The man who was to become her husband was studying archeology of the Near East at the Ecole du Louvre and at the Sorbonne, all the while working at different jobs to earn a living.

No doubt Russia was the subject of their first conversations and it brought them closer together. They married a short time before Roman left to an archeological expedition in Iran in 1931.

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<sup>1</sup>Tania Ghirshman, *Archéologue malgré moi. Vie quotidienne d'une mission archéologique en Iran*, Editions de la Baconnière, Neuchâtel (Suisse), 1970.

It is only the following year that Tania decided to leave momentarily her dental practice to follow her husband, "emptying their drawers to finance the cost of her trip from Marseille to Beyrouth", as she humorously wrote. The story of her first contact with the Orient, of the stops in Cairo, Haifa, of Beyrouth, of the desert crossings to Baghdad, via Damascus, finally by train to the Iraq-Iran border, shows her gift of critical observations and also her reaction to the climate, to the heat, to the dust, to the lack of hygiene. This was a travel-test in which the traveler wondered whether she would stay or leave.

She arrived sick on the site of Tepe-Guyan on the North face of the Luristan mountains, but as soon as she was well again and during more than three months, she classified and drew the artifacts as they were being discovered, for their future publication. Thus, the book of G. Contenau and R. Ghirshman, *Fouilles du Tépé-Guyan, près de Nehavend 1931 et 1932*, published in Paris in 1935, is illustrated with 36 drawing plates, representing decorations of painted sherds and material from the tombs, signed with the superposed initials GT, which she will adopt from now on for the numerous works of her husband, illustrated by her in the future.

In those days, traveling between the sites under research and the living quarters was done with horses (Fig. 1) and the French couple could only praise the general hospitality in a period when a woman without veil was the object of intense curiosity, before Reza Shah ordered Iranian women to take off their *chador*.

As early as 1933, during fall and winter there were each year four or five months sojourns at different sites in Iran (Tepe Sialk, Bichâpur) and in Afghanistan. Travels during those days, particularly in Eastern Iran and in Afghanistan, were not exactly peaceful. In 1936, while her husband was

leaving by road with the Director of the French mission in Afghanistan, Joseph Hackin, Tania joined the mission in Tehran by train through the USSR.

She left with gifts to offer cousins or friends in Bakou, left thirty years earlier – a real adventure for a young woman alone – but everything went fine as far as the Tehran junction. From there, the travels of the mission toward Caboul covered more than 2000 km through Iran and Afghanistan. The stay of nearly two months in the Afghan desert in November and December, with torrid heat during the day and freezing cold during the night, was followed by three months of excavations in Iran at Bishâpur, residence of the Sasanian king Shâpur the first, in the Fars province. It is at Bishâpur that the French mission received the unexpected visit of Reza Shah, who terrorized his subjects but left an unforgettable impression because of the power he released, as Tania relates in her book.

The couple returns to Paris in 1939 and Tania resumes her career as a dentist. After the war declaration against Germany, Roman is sent in a military mission in Tehran, January 1940, and Tania waits impatiently in Paris until the German armies invade France in June 1940. Having decided to join her husband at any cost, she invents an order for a mission and sails away for a tumultuous crossing of five weeks to Alexandria where she arrives in July, because of a one month delay in Malta, under Italian bombs. Then Beyrouth, Alep, Baghdad where Roman was waiting for her under 40° centigrade heat. They both went back to Tehran and resumed the digs of Bishâpur where Tania began to restore the Sasanian sculptures – beginning of a new activity as a restorer which she will practice with talent to the end of her career on archeological sites.

Ghirshman cleared the great room of the palace, with its mosaic border, faithfully reproduced by Tania and kept in the Tehran and the Louvre

museums. At that time, color photography did not exist and it was necessary to invent a technique for color reproduction even though the "archeologist in spite of herself" had never before held a brush in her hand.

Decided to join General De Gaulle and the Free French, Roman and Tania were sent to Caboul to replace J. Hackin and his wife who had been torpedoed in the Mediterranean near the French coast in February 1941 as they were rejoining their station as the head of the French archeological Delegation in Afghanistan. The Ghirshmans will remain in Afghanistan until the Fall of 1943, all the while digging in Begram and staying in Begram during the winter. It is from there that they left definitely for New Delhi.

From New Delhi, Roman reached Algiers (where the provisional government of the Free French was established). He wanted to receive instructions from General De Gaulle, so he left Tania to manage alone, with her dog and fifteen luggage pieces.... With her usual tenacity and energy she went by train to Karachi, where, after many troubles because of her big dog, she managed to board an oil-tanker that dropped her at Abadan, in Iran, and from there she was driven by car to Basrah, in Iraq. Once there she learned that her husband had been sent on a mission to Cairo where he cabled her to join him in early 1944.

New odyssey (without money) in the direction of Baghdad, Damas, Haifa and finally Cairo where the couple settles for three years at the French Institute. Tania types and corrects the proofs of two volumes her husband is writing about his excavations in Afghanistan.

Ghirshman having been nominated Director of the French Archeological Delegation in Iran, the couple leaves Egypt in a truck to go to Tehran and Susa, where the first campaign happened from December 1946 to April 1947.

It is the start of a new life in the Susa castle where Tania took control four months every year during 21 campaigns until 1967: she directed the servants, taught French to young Mohammad, newly arrived in 1951, at the age of 17. He became through the years their faithful and devoted administrator. While keeping an eye on the comfort of the staff of six members, she sketches and restores each artifact extracted every day from the field, always ready to welcome the numerous visitors to "King Darios inn", the humorous name she gave to the castle. After each season, she took note of how many breakfasts, lunches, suppers and cups of tea were offered and it added up to a pretty large number. Until 1965 there was neither running water nor electricity at Susa and it required great vigilance from the mistress of the house, nicknamed by a regular guest *shush banu*, which means "Lady of Susa" in Persian.

But in 1946, after seven years of neglect, the castle was home to different animals, there was no more glass on the windows, the furniture was eaten by termites, there were neither pots and pans, nor oil lamps: everything had to be done and repaired. It was also necessary to prepare in Tehran the house to be occupied by the director of the Mission, in the garden of the new Franco-Iranian Institute, usual lodging away from the areas of digging. Everywhere Tania gets to work, sewing curtains, bed spreads, even mattress covers, to better the lodgings with available materials.

Then, from 1952 to 1962, a second work field functions in Tchoga-Zanbil, 30 km from Susa at the same time as Susa's excavations. This necessitates the construction of new housing in the desert and to face several problems, such as supplies. One day of December 1954, Tania asks herself the same question asked one day or the other by every archeologist in the field, several thousand km from one's country: "What are we doing

here, in the middle of Asia, all alone in this desert, without comfort and leading a most primitive life?" and yet she concludes: "Such calm here, such peace".

She decides to build right there a sectional model in balsa wood, representing the tower of Tchoga-Zanbil, five floors high. Effectively the 14th century B.C. *ziggurat* is built differently from those known in Mesopotamia. The building of this model, which allows us to understand the different steps of the construction of the tower required her to work for two months and ten hours a day. This ingenious work, being also an artistic success, was offered by her creator to the Department of Oriental Antiquities of the Louvre museum where it was then exhibited.

That same year, back in Tehran in the Spring of 1957, Tania rebuilds with great amounts of plaster, the innumerable fragments of a large terra cotta bull from Tchoga-Zanbil in the Tehran museum, using her knowledge as a dentist! Ten years later, she managed to finish the restoration of an other animal of the same fabrication, a winged quadruped with the head of a griffin, exhibited at the Susa museum, which opened in 1957 (Fig. 2).

After 21 seasons in Susa, Roman Ghirshman retired in 1967, but it was not the end of the work of this tireless excavator, because at the request of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co., he went on exploring two sites in the Bakhtiari mountains, on the west of the Iranian plateau. During three seasons to Bard-è Nerchandeh and six seasons to Masjid-i Solaiman, and thanks to the care of the oil company, Roman and Tania enjoyed relatively comfortable housing at the Guest-house so as to proceed until 1972 to the clearing of two Parthian terraces, being the only two members of the field staff, helped during the three last years by the architect Hermann Gasche who had been part of the French Delegations since 1962.

It is from Roman that the most beautiful homage was paid to his wife, when in 1954, he ends his preface in volume 45 of the *Memoirs of the archaeological Delegation in Iran*<sup>2</sup> by the words: "To more than anyone, my feelings of gratitude go to my wife who took upon herself mostly during the five last years, to do the work generally done by several members of an archeological mission. Because all the restorations of the found artifacts, their drawings on the cards, their filing and the actual carrying out of dozens of plates drawn and published here, without mentioning the typing of the manuscript, are her work. Her labor and her effort were immeasurable." She was then 74 and yet it was not the end of her labor because she continued in Paris to be her husband's collaborator and secretary until his death in 1979 during a convention in Budapest she had begged him not to attend.

She went on fighting in order to publish a manuscript of Roman Ghirshman on *The Cimmerians and their Amazons*, published in 1983 with the collaboration of Thérèse de Sonnevile-David. Deprived of her reason for living, her strength declined and she passed away less than a year later, leaving a testimony of indomitable courage in the service of a cause she had embraced with her husband. For this reason, one cannot separate the names Roman and Tania Ghirshman: yes, "her labor and her effort were immeasurable".

Agnès Spycket

Paris, 1996

(Traduction Sylvie Marshall)

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<sup>2</sup> P. Ghirshman, *Terrasses sacrées de Bard-e Nechandeh et Masjid-i Salsirman*, Paris, 1975.