

IN THE TIME OF THE ASSASSINS: MARTYRED POETS, WRITERS, AND SINGERS

by Henry Rasof

The focus of this article is simple: writers and singers assassinated by their government—usually a dictatorship—or killed during a massacre.

A small selection of victims, whom I think of as martyrs, will be discussed briefly, followed by basic information about one or two of their creative works and links to a few relevant web sites. I will not be doing any sort of analysis or comparative discussion. Just getting the basic facts is challenging enough.

In one of the rooms of my house is a room with several shelves of books, CDs, and memorabilia dedicated to these martyrs.

PERSIAN SUFI WRITER: Attar of Nishapur

Abū Hamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm, better known as Farid ud-Din Attar or Attar of Nishapur, was the Persian author of the Sufi (Islamic mystical) classic *The Conference of the Birds* (English title), dated 1177. The characters in the book are different types of birds. Attar died in a Mongol massacre in Nishapur in about 1221, when he was in his 70s. Dates and numbers vary with the sources.

*Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Sholeh Wolpé. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2017.

*<http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/A/AttarFaridud/index.html>.

*<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/cultural-cross-sections/attar-sufi-poet-and-master-rumi-sholeh-wolpe>.

PAKISTANI SUFI SINGER: Sage-E-Miran Qari Saeed Mohammed Chishti Qawwal

Sage-E-Miran Qari Saeed Mohammed Chishti Qawwal was a well-known Pakistani singer of Sufi songs—*qawwali*. Sufis are Islamic mystics. He was shot to death March 11, 1995, during a performance, either by jealous rivals or by government officials who did not like his politics. I cannot find the year of his birth or his birthplace, and other information about him is sketchy. Working from the date of his death, possibly he was born in India before the 1948 partition into India and Pakistan. From photographs of him, he appears a benign and gentle man, alas.

**Qari Saeed Chishti Qawwal*. Volume 4. Karachi, Pakistan: Rahmat Trading Company. This is the one CD I have of him, but many albums and mp3 songs of his are available.

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0C81uDmhks>.

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ONplvHKkJ8>.

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snu3Pt7SvaI>.

You will notice from some of the photos that Qari Saeed wears green headgear; in Islam, the color green represents paradise.

"In the Time of the Assassins" is a translated line from the poem "Matinée D'Ivresse" ("Morning of Drunkenness"), by the famous French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891, b. Charleville, France).

ARMENIAN-JEWISH-INDIAN SUFI POET: Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed

Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed (1590–1661, b. Armenia) (also called Sarmad Kashani or just Sarmad; Shaheed means "martyr") was a Persian-speaking Armenian Jew who moved to India, converted to Islam, becoming a Sufi (Islamic mystic), and wandered around as a naked holy man (a fakir, or faqir). During an audience with the emperor, Aurangzeb, he began to recite the central Muslim prayer, "There is no God but Allah," but apparently stopped at "There is no God," which led to his beheading by the emperor. He is sometimes called a Jewish Sufi. There is a shrine in his memory in New Delhi.

**Sarmad: Life & Poems*, trans. Paul Smith. Victoria, Australia: New Humanity Books/Book Heaven, 2010, 2014.

*<http://www.armeniapedia.org/wiki/Sarmad>.

*<https://www.dawn.com/news/826780/stories-of-sarmad>.

SPANISH POET: Federico García Lorca

Federico García Lorca (1898–1936, b. Fuente Vaqueros, Spain), one of Spain's greatest poets and one of my favorite poets, was executed by a fascist firing squad probably for being gay and/or holding the wrong (leftist) politics. I say "probably" because from the reading I have done, nothing is clear-cut. His remains have never been found, in spite of various searches. Interestingly—or oddly—Spain was a haven, to various degrees, for Jewish refugees during World War II, which doesn't seem to jibe with its having a fascist government at the time, but the details are complicated.

In addition to writing poetry, Lorca wrote plays and music and created drawings. From photographs, he appears a very handsome man.

He spent time in New York, Vermont, Cuba, and Argentina. One of his books is titled in English *Poet in New York*.

Many of his works have been published in Spanish, English, and bilingual Spanish/English editions, including:

*Federico García Lorca, *Collected Poems*. Revised bilingual edition. Edited by Christopher Maurer with various translators. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

*<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/22/lorcas-bones>.

*<https://poets.org/poet/federico-garcia-lorca>.

*<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/federico-garcia-lorca>.

JEWISH WRITERS: David Bergelson and Der Nister

David (or Dovid) Bergelson (1884–1952, b. Ukraine) was a Jewish-Russian writer who primarily wrote short fiction and novels in Yiddish. He also edited literary magazines, wrote two plays, and was active on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. He traveled widely, including to the U.S. He was jailed in the Soviet Union in 1949 and shot to death August 12, 1952, on what is called the Night of the Murdered Poets, when a group of Yiddish writers were killed on orders of Stalin.

- *David Bergelson, *The End of Everything*, trans. Joseph Sherman. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.
- *David Bergelson, *The Stories of David Bergelson*, trans. Golda Werman. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996.
- *<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/bergelson-david>.
- *<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0187.xml>.
- *https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bergelson_Dovid.

Der Nister (Pinkhas Kahanovich—one of many transliterations of his name), "The hidden one" (1884–1950, b. Ukraine), was a writer, translator, and journalist. His most famous work is a long novel, written in Yiddish, whose English title is *The Family Mashber*. When the Soviet dictator Stalin set out to eradicate Jewish writers and culture, Der Nister was arrested and imprisoned. He apparently died in a prison hospital, two years before the Night of the Murdered Poets, August 12, 1952, when a group of othr Yiddish writers, including David Bergelson, were killed on orders of Stalin.

- *Der Nister, *The Family Mashber*, trans. Leonard Wolf. New York: Summit Books, 1987.
- *http://www.berdichev.org/der_nister_1.html.
- *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Nister.
- *https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Der_Nister.

CAMBODIAN SINGERS: Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea

Sinn Sisamouth (1932– or 1935–1976, b. Cambodia), a singer and a composer of over a thousand Cambodian songs, was billed as the king of Khmer music and compared with Elvis Presley. He was either outright killed by the government or died in a prison. His remains have never been found, and his disappearance remains a mystery to this day. He is still very popular with listeners. The CD cover photos I have show him as an immaculately groomed man, with a short, Western-style haircut and attired in a dinner jacket and bowtie.

- **Sin Si Samouth*, Chlangden Production. Signal Hill, Calif. Video CD.
- *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinn_Sisamouth.
- *<https://www.elvisofcambodia.com>. Documentary film not out as of October 2020. Here is a short trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fF1-788LZxE>.
- *<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/movies/dont-think-ive-forgotten-a-documentary-revives-cambodias-silenced-sounds.html>.

Ros Sereysothea (or Serey Sothea) (1948–1977, b. Cambodia), was the most prominent female Cambodian singer, the counterpart to Sinn Sisamouth, with whom she often performed and recorded. The Cambodian Prince Sihanouk called her the "Queen with the Golden Voice." She was a very beautiful woman, who also dressed in Western clothing and, at least in one photograph, has a Western hairstyle. How her life ended remains a mystery, with various theories, but she died either during the Cambodian genocide or possibly after the Vietnamese invasion that ended the murderous regime.

*<https://cambodianess.com/article/ros-sereysothea-remembering-a-legendary-singer>.

*<https://www.last.fm/music/Ros+Sereysothea/+wiki>.

*<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/may/20/worldmusic.features>.

*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6T8k1OQZf4&list=PL8g_AT0OOG7f56duepB_TJ5Ums0Pg9IWU&app=desktop.

***Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll*. A Film by John Pirozzi. Soundtrack Album. Atlanta, GA: Dust-to-Digital, 2015. Both singers appear in this film, which I highly recommend. Here is a trailer and information on buying or renting the film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWUCIhqQkVo>. Have some handkerchiefs or tissues handy.

I have several other CDs of Cambodian music and dance, but since the information on the CD cases is presumably in Khmer, the Cambodian language, which I don't read, unfortunately I am unable to provide the details. I bought these CDs either when I was in Cambodia or at a store in Long Beach, California, a city with a large Cambodian population.