

GURDJIEFF'S SEARCH FOR ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE¹

G.I. Gurdjieff has been described as one of the most fascinating and remarkable men of the 20th century. He possessed immense personal magnetism and profound esoteric knowledge of human transformation, and he brought a spiritual teaching of vast scope and power to the Western world. Yet, throughout his life Gurdjieff was an enigma even to his closest students and was widely misunderstood by observers, critics and the public.

From an early age, Gurdjieff was preoccupied with understanding the meaning and purpose of human life. Thanks to his father and other influential elders, Gurdjieff was educated in religion and modern science and assimilated essential values and ethics. As he matured, Gurdjieff attracted a group of like-minded 'Seekers of the Truth' who studied and travelled with him throughout the East in search of ancient esoteric knowledge. On these arduous journeys, which spanned several continents, Gurdjieff succeeded in finding many fragments of ancient knowledge. However, they were largely disconnected and a good portion was missing. Finally, after a great deal of searching, "the doors of a certain school opened for him, where he came to understand how to bring together all the principles of an esoteric teaching." (1)

This culmination of Gurdjieff's search involved the discovery of an ancient esoteric school or universal brotherhood, called the Sarmoung, which was believed to possess the keys to humanity's spiritual evolution. Although Gurdjieff claimed that the Sarmoung monastery was located somewhere in Central Asia, its existence could not be independently verified and many believe the Sarmoung to be merely allegorical.

Following this discovery, Gurdjieff spent a further period of time preparing for a teaching mission to the West. He began to formally teach in Russia in 1912 with a personal mission to "add the mystical spirit of the East to the scientific spirit of the West." (2) Later, deciding to flee Russia during the Revolution, Gurdjieff and his followers eventually settled in France. Gurdjieff spent the remainder of his life transmitting his 'Fourth Way' teachings and serving as spiritual leader to countless students from around the world.

Validating the Events of Gurdjieff's Life

One of the major problems facing biographers and researchers of G.I. Gurdjieff is the unreliability of much of the information regarding his life. The only available information on the events of Gurdjieff's life before 1912 is contained in scattered references in his own writings and in conversations recorded by his pupils. But Gurdjieff was notorious for spinning fanciful tales about himself, making it difficult for anyone to separate fact from fiction.

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The primary source of information about Gurdjieff's early life and his search for esoteric knowledge is his semi-autobiographical *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Described as a combination of allegory and fact (3), the book is replete with contradictions, logical inconsistencies and confusing chronology. Biographer James Moore asserts that "we possess not one shred of independent evidence to confirm his own extraordinary account – nor indeed to invalidate it." (4) Attempts by biographers to reconstruct the chronology and routes of Gurdjieff's travels have met with little success. Although his family confirmed that Gurdjieff journeyed extensively in the regions he described in his books, independent confirmation of these journeys is non-existent.

By contrast, the second half of Gurdjieff's life, from 1912 until his death in 1949, has been extensively chronicled in the accounts of students, journalists and biographers. Yet, there remain a number of gaps in the history of Gurdjieff's activities during this period. As well, the validity of many of the accounts of Gurdjieff's students has been questioned on the basis of factual errors, fabrication and speculation (5). Although many of the inaccuracies are relatively minor, others represent significant distortions of the actual events of Gurdjieff's life. As a result, the contemporary researcher encounters significant challenges in attempting to establish with certainty the salient events in Gurdjieff's life.

Gurdjieff's Early Life

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff was born in the town of Alexandropol, Russian Armenia, to a Greek father and an Armenian mother. His date of birth is uncertain (6) but thought to be sometime between 1866 and 1877. His father, Giorgias Giorgiades (7), was a successful landowner with large herds of cattle and sheep. He headed a household that was traditional and patriarchal. Giorgias had a profound impact on Gurdjieff, instilling in his son a love of learning and a set of values grounded in traditional spiritual teachings. P.D. Ouspensky met Gurdjieff's father in 1917 and recounts the close, respectful relationship between him and Gurdjieff:

I very much liked his relationship with his father which was full of extraordinary consideration. G.'s father was still a robust old man . . . with G. he used to speak for hours on end and I always liked to watch how G. listened to him, occasionally laughing a little, but evidently never for a second losing the line of the conversation and the whole time sustaining the conversation with questions and comments. (8)

The Caucasus region of Russia where Gurdjieff spent his formative years was a mixing bowl of cultures, languages and spiritual influences. The young Gurdjieff was inspired by these influences to look more deeply into the hidden meanings of everyday life:

He had passed his young years in an atmosphere of fairy tales, legends, and traditions. The "miraculous" around him was an actual fact. Predictions of the future which he heard, and which those around him fully believed, were fulfilled and made him believe in many other things. All

these things taken together created in him at a very early age a leaning towards the mysterious, the incomprehensible, and the magical. (9)

Gurdjieff's father was a renowned *ashokh* or bard who recited from memory folk-tales, legends and myths from antiquity. The young Gurdjieff most likely first heard stories from the *Thousand and One Nights* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from his father's lips. Many years later, Gurdjieff was amazed to learn that archeologists had discovered and translated ancient cuneiform tablets inscribing the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in words virtually identical to those recited to him by his father. The accuracy of his father's recitations made a deep impact on Gurdjieff, reinforcing in him the belief that it was possible for knowledge to be accurately preserved by oral transmission for countless succeeding generations.

When Gurdjieff was relatively young a cattle plague decimated his father's herds and dramatically changed life in the Giorgiades household. His father was forced to sell many possessions and to begin working as a carpenter. Eventually the family moved to Kars, where Gurdjieff came under the influence of the highly respected Father Dean Borsh of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Father Borsh and Gurdjieff's father became close friends, linked by their common interests in spirituality and ancient civilizations. The priest and the carpenter spent countless evenings together exchanging ideas and debating philosophy as the rapt young Gurdjieff listened silently nearby.

Gurdjieff was privately tutored by Father Borsh and graduates of the Kars Theological Seminary in religious and scientific subjects. One of Gurdjieff's most influential teachers was Deacon Bogachevsky, a candidate for the priesthood. He instilled in Gurdjieff a desire to penetrate to the heart of religion by introducing the concepts of subjective and objective morality – the former based on cultural convention and the latter based on conscience. As he grew older, Gurdjieff felt increasingly dissatisfied with the conventional approaches of his religious instructors and became convinced of the exist-ence of a more mystical level of esoteric knowledge.

Gurdjieff eventually abandoned his formal religious studies and moved to Tiflis, the capital of Georgia. There he found employment in a rail yard as a labourer. He quickly became friends with co-workers Sarkin Pogossian, an Armenian, and Abram Yelov, an Assyrian. The three friends shared a love of learning and, in the words of Gurdjieff, “an ‘irrepressible striving’ to understand clearly the precise significance, in general, of the life processes on earth of all the outward forms of breathing creatures and, in particular, of the aim of human life.” (10) But they were unable to find satisfactory answers to these fundamental questions in either Western science or traditional religious teachings.

As a young adult, Gurdjieff travelled extensively throughout the Middle East and surrounding regions. In his writings, Gurdjieff described journeys to Mecca and Medina, to Constantinople to study the Mevlevi and Bektashi dervishes, to Jerusalem and the surrounding region investigating the Essene brotherhood, to Mount Athos in Greece, and

to Crete, Egypt and Persia to explore archeological sites. Deeply interested in these ancient civilizations for their esoteric and spiritual knowledge, Gurdjieff found in many places convincing evidence of “the existence of certain knowledge, of certain powers and possibilities exceeding the ordinary possibilities of man, and of people possessing clairvoyance and other miraculous powers.” (11)

Gradually, the focus of Gurdjieff’s investigations shifted toward spiritual transformation and the study of art, music, posture and dance to achieve higher states of consciousness. He became convinced that somewhere in the Middle East or Central Asia there still existed a living school or schools which continued to transmit esoteric knowledge of human spiritual evolution through a chain of initiates, and had done so over countless generations from ancient times to the present.

The Seekers of the Truth

Gurdjieff’s belief in these esoteric schools quickly turned into a determination to locate them. For this very purpose, in 1895, Gurdjieff joined with a number of like-minded individuals who included Sarkin Pogossian and Abram Yelov, to form a group called Seekers of the Truth (12). Bound by a common quest, the group began to travel to remote places in search of ancient esoteric knowledge.

Within a short period of time there were fifteen members of the group, each an expert in a particular branch of knowledge including religion, science, archeology, linguistics, astronomy and engineering. Each studied along the lines of their particular specialty and shared their findings with the group. At certain times members studied individually at spiritual centers in order to penetrate more deeply the particular spiritual teaching.

The Seekers travelled singly, in twos and threes, or as a group in major expeditions that over the years ranged across three continents, including the following locations:

- Egypt and the Holy Land to investigate sacred temples, the pyramids and the Sphinx
- Ethiopia and the Sudan to study Coptic traditions that predated the Orthodox and Catholic branches of Christianity
- Mesopotamia to explore the Babylonian civilization
- Central Asia to study the spiritual wisdom of dervishes and Sufi communities
- The Gobi Desert to look for the remnants of an ancient civilization rumoured to be buried under the sands
- Northern Siberia to study ancient shamanic traditions

- India and Ceylon
- Australia and the Solomon Islands.

During their travels the Seekers studied literature, oral tradition, music, dance, sacred art, architecture and esoteric monuments, and they conducted their own experiments and archeological excavations. Their investigations led to many exciting discoveries related to the science of human transformation, including ancient methods of music composition, architecture, and dance choreography which produced exact and predictable alterations in consciousness in the listener, observer or practitioner.

From their journeys and research the Seekers concluded that knowledge of human spiritual potential once existed as a complete teaching, but that only widely scattered fragments remained. John Bennett, a student of Gurdjieff, carefully examined the locations of the group's expeditions and identified a significant pattern:

I conclude that the Seekers of the Truth had, by 1899, satisfied themselves that there had been schools of wisdom in northeast Africa, the Levant, Central Asia and the northern valleys of Siberia. This agrees with the evidence that I have pieced together . . . that there were four independent sources of human language and culture that came together to produce the modern world. (13)

By 1900, the Seekers formally disbanded, many of the members having died, withdrawn from ordinary life or left to pursue other activities.

The Sarmoung Brotherhood

Gurdjieff's discovery of the Sarmoung brotherhood and subsequent journey to its chief monastery forms the centerpiece of *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. The existence of the Sarmoung has been questioned by literalists and debated by Gurdjieff's pupils and biographers for decades. In *Meetings* Gurdjieff wrote that while exploring ruins in the city of Ani in the Caucasus, he and Sarkin Pogossian discovered a collection of ancient Armenian texts which mentioned a society of adepts known as the Sarmoung Brotherhood. Gurdjieff had previously come across references to the Sarmoung in an Armenian book called *Merkhavat*. (14) The title of the book referred to a famous esoteric school believed to have been founded in 2500 B.C. in Babylon and which "was said to have possessed great knowledge, containing the keys to many secret mysteries." (15) Although the school was traced to Mesopotamia up to the sixth or seventh century A.D., its evolution and existence after that time remained a mystery.

Gurdjieff later met an initiate of the Sarmoung in Bokhara who arranged for Gurdjieff to travel to a Sarmoung monastery in Central Asia. Following an arduous twelve-day journey, he arrived at the sanctuary situated in a hidden valley surrounded by towering

mountain peaks. During his three-month stay at the monastery Gurdjieff studied sacred dances, physical techniques for self-transformation and the symbolism of the enneagram. (16)

Gurdjieff did not disclose the precise location, nature or activities of the Sarmoung monastery and left only a tantalizing promise: “The details of everything in this monastery, what it represented, and what was done there and how, I shall perhaps recount at some time in a special book.” (17) In typical fashion, he never followed up on his promise. Whether Gurdjieff’s account of the monastery is fact or allegory is an open question to this day.

In an attempt to establish a historical basis for the Sarmoung, some researchers have tried to trace the origin and derivation of the name but have met with limited success. (18) Despite our limited information about the Sarmoung, Gurdjieff made clear in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* that his stay in the Sarmoung monastery was a crucial event in his spiritual development: “It leaves the reader in no doubt that this contact was of the greatest importance to him and that he learned secrets of a different order of significance than those he found in the various Sufi communities he visited.” (19)

Teaching Mission in the West

Very little is known of Gurdjieff’s life from 1905, when he settled in Tashkent, Turkestan to 1912, when he began to teach in Russia. Biographer James Moore speculates that Gurdjieff spent this period experimenting with spiritual techniques and closely observing the effect of his teachings on the local population, activities which served as preparation for his teaching mission in the West. He also amassed considerable resources to finance his impending teaching venture by trading in commodities and acquiring a large collection of rare carpets and Chinese cloisonné. By 1908 Gurdjieff felt he was in a position to attract potential students for preparatory work:

He had acquired and crystallized, over a period of twenty years, a formidable repertoire of powers, techniques, and ideas. He had made a unique study of Sacred Dances; his entire being had evolved; and not least, he felt that he finally understood -- as far as that is granted to man -- the unsuspected significance of organic and human life. (20)

Gurdjieff began formally teaching in Moscow in 1912 and quickly attracted a circle of students that included artists, musicians, scientists, physicians and lawyers. In 1915, he met his most famous pupil, philosopher and mathematician P.D. Ouspensky. Ouspensky documented the Russian phase of Gurdjieff’s teaching in his book *In Search of the Miraculous*, which is highly regarded for its objectivity and accuracy.

Gurdjieff decided to leave Russia during the ensuing Revolution and took with him a number of dedicated followers to Tiflis. The group eventually relocated to Constantinople, where Gurdjieff founded the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. Gurdjieff's Institute was established with the mission to awaken each student to his higher potential, through being "continually reminded of the sense and aim of his existence by the unavoidable friction between his conscience and the automatic manifestations of his nature." (21)

Sensing that conditions were more favourable in Western Europe for his work, Gurdjieff and his students eventually relocated to France in 1922 and re-established his Institute at the Château du Prieuré in Fontainebleau. There, Gurdjieff entered a period of intense individual and group work with his students. In 1922, he visited England where P.D. Ouspensky was teaching Gurdjieff's ideas. Ouspensky had made many important contacts there, including noted editor and writer A.R. Orage. In 1924, Gurdjieff brought a large group of followers to America for public performances of his sacred dances. In New York Gurdjieff established more groups under the direction of Orage.

Following a serious automobile accident in July 1924, Gurdjieff began a new phase of work during which he endeavoured to transmit his teachings in written form as a legacy for future generations. For the next decade, he worked on his writings while scaling back personal and group work with students. In the early 1930s, financial constraints forced Gurdjieff to close his Institute at the Prieuré and move to Paris. In the mid-1930s, he resumed group work and continued quietly teaching in Paris throughout the Second World War. At the end of the war former students from many countries joined Gurdjieff in Paris, ushering in a final phase of teaching which lasted until his death in November 1949.

Following his death, senior students created the Gurdjieff Foundation to preserve and transmit his teachings in their original form. Interest in Gurdjieff and his Fourth Way teachings has grown dramatically in the last three decades, and today Gurdjieff is regarded as one of the most important spiritual teachers of the twentieth century.

NOTES

- (1) G.I. Gurdjieff "Foreword" *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. viii.
- (2) Denis Saurat "An Account of a Visit to Gurdjieff in 1923" in Louis Pauwels *Gurdjieff* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975), p. 177.
- (3) John Bennett argues in *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 106) that *Meetings* was not intended as a strictly factual description of Gurdjieff's life:

Meetings with Remarkable Men is written not as a narrative but as a series of pictures of people and isolated events. It does not follow that it is all fantasy or that the events described do not fit into a coherent account of Gurdjieff's search.

(4) James Moore *Gurdjieff: Anatomy of a Myth* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), p. 24.

(5) For example, Professor Paul Beekman Taylor identifies a distorting element colouring the recollections of many of Gurdjieff's students in a web document, "Inventors of Gurdjieff":

The factual accuracy of recollections by Gurdjieff's pupils are always suspect, since each pupil sees his relationship to the man subjectively. With rare exceptions, those who write from a pupil's point of view either invent a privileged relationship with Gurdjieff or exaggerate the actual one.

(6) Gurdjieff's date of birth has been a source of mystery, conjecture and argument since his earliest teaching days in Russia. Biographer James Moore (*Gurdjieff: Anatomy of a Myth*, Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991, pp. 339-340) concludes that Gurdjieff was born in 1866, citing as evidence his own statements to students in the 1940s, historical records which correlate with accounts of his early life related in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and the assessments of some of his pupils. However, William Patrick Patterson (*Struggle of the Magicians*, Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 1996, pp. 216-217) argues that 1872 is a more plausible date of birth, drawing evidence from events in Gurdjieff's life recounted in *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and the conclusions of a number of his students. In his definitive biography *Georgi Ivanovitcvh Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* (Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 574), Patterson ultimately concludes that there can be no definitive answer to this question: "Like so many things concerning him, we are left in wonderful, lasting question."

(7) Gurdjieff is a Russian variant of the Greek surname "Giorgiades."

(8) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 342.

(9) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 36.

(10) G.I. Gurdjieff *The Herald of Coming Good* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974), p. 13.

(11) P.D. Ouspensky *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), p. 36.

- (12) The prospectus for the opening in 1922 of Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at the Prieuré in France places the founding of the Seekers of the Truth in 1895. Earlier, in 1918 in Essentuki, Gurdjieff revealed to his students some details of the origin and composition of the Seekers of the Truth (William Patrick Patterson *Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff: The Man, The Teaching, His Mission* Fairfax, California: Arete Communications, 2014, p. 70):

Gurdjieff tells them that twenty-five years before, working as a guide at the pyramids at the Giza Plateau in Egypt, he accidentally met a Russian prince and a professor of archeology. Each had nearly the same world outlook and understanding of the meaning and aim of life. Each had been searching for that 'something' absolute which existed, but they did not have enough knowledge to come to an understanding of it. They needed a knowledge that encompassed all sides of life. To gain this they agreed to draw to themselves people having different sets of knowledge who had a like desire for this 'something.' Ultimately, some fifteen people, both men and women, joined together; they were Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish or Buddhist and specialized in fields such as the mechanical sciences, chemistry, horticulture, astronomy, archeology and philosophy. They went first to Persia and then in 1899 fanned out in small groups, some going to India through Kashmir, Tibet and Ceylon; others going to Palestine through Turkey and Arabia. After many years, they met in Kabul. Now there were only twelve as three had died. They decided to travel to Chitral, but after some time only four, all men, met there. Three years later they returned to Kabul. This was the beginning of the Institute. Five years later they transferred their activity to Russia.

- (13) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 94.

- (14) Scholars have speculated that the word Merkhavat may be derived from the Judaic *Merkhabah*, a central mystical text of Kabbalah.

- (15) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 90.

- (16) Gurdjieff's description of the Sarmoung monastery in *Meetings* is replete with symbolism. The central temple consisted of three courts: an outer one for visitors, a secondary court for intermediate pupils and an inner court for the initiated. This structure corresponds to the three levels of spiritual teachings: the exoteric, mesoteric and esoteric. Gurdjieff observed young priestesses learning sacred dances with the aid of apparatuses of exquisite craftsmanship made of ebony inlaid with ivory. The apparatuses were designed like trees with a central column and seven main branches which in turn were divided into seven sections of varying dimensions, an obvious reference to the law of octaves.

- (17) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 161.
- (18) Some Buddhist scholars have noted the similarity between *Sarmoung* and a Tibetan Buddhist monastery of the Kagyu sect called the *Surmang*, which is still in existence in Tibet. Gurdjieff's student John Bennett suggests a correspondence with the Persian word *Sarman* and proposes two possible interpretations: (1) a reference to the perennial knowledge transmitted by initiates, or (2) a synonym for the bee which since ancient times has been a symbol of those who collect the precious 'honey' of traditional wisdom and preserve it for future generations. Bolivian esotericist Oscar Ichazo claims that Gurdjieff studied at a 'School of the Bees' located somewhere in Afghanistan. And writer Desmond Martin, who claimed to have visited a Sarmoun Brotherhood in Afghanistan in the 1960s, refers to the 'bee hypothesis' in an article "Account of the Sarmoun Brotherhood" in Roy Weaver Davidson (ed.) *Documents on Contemporary Dervish Communities* (London: Octagon Press, 1982, p. 23).
- (19) John Bennett *Gurdjieff: Making a New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 64.
- (20) James Moore *Gurdjieff: Anatomy of a Myth* (Rockport, Massachusetts: Element Books, 1991), p. 36.
- (21) G.I. Gurdjieff *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 270.