

we live through memories of the past

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We Live Through Memories of the Past (English Translation)
By Krikor Hotoyan | Toronto, 2026

Translated by Rupen Janbazian

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The digital versions of Krikor Hotoyan's books are available free of charge at krikorhotoyan.ca

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Dedication

I dedicate this volume of short stories to my father, Ghazar (Kharzo) Hotoyan —born in the village of Spaghank in the Dalvorig district of Sasoun, and a relative and comrade-in-arms of Magar, Kale, and Ake, heroes of the Armenian revolutionary and *fedayee* movement— with love and heartfelt filial devotion.

Krikor Hotoyan

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Foreword

This volume is the fruit of many years of labour. It is authored by a man who is at once humble and visionary—a man who transforms his insights into inspiring, tangible beings. His name is Krikor Hotoyan.

For more than 80 years, this devoted son of the Armenian people has enriched our world with his tireless spirit and good works. His achievements cannot be measured by literature alone; without knowing the man, it is impossible to understand the profound moral truths that shape his Christian life. One cannot appreciate the 'sweet fruits' of his long journey without recognizing that Krikor Hotoyan gives us far more than fiction—he offers real, living, breathing examples of virtue. To see the soul of the characters within these pages, you must first know the author himself.

On this occasion, I want to offer a few reflections so the reader may first understand the man behind this eighty-year journey before walking alongside him. With every step, Krikor Hotoyan brings to life figures that are moving, warm, occasionally cheerful, and often deeply inspiring. They are drawn straight from our own lives—forged in our daily struggles, uplifting us with their victories, and turning life's hardships into wisdom.

The Writer and the Man

Hotoyan cultivated his literature without the pretension of being a 'man of letters.' His life experience, his devotion to his nation, and his pursuit of moral values opened a path for him. Looking back, one sees a period of time dedicated not only to ecclesiastical and national service but to literary activity as well.

Hotoyan writes without pretense, steering clear of flowery or grand prose. His primary aim is simply to express what is in his soul, offering it to anyone willing to listen and feel. His language is straightforward, free from the urge to chase after fancy words just to embellish a line. It is precisely this unforced simplicity that gives his characters such dignity, commanding our total respect.

Born and raised in the rich cultural soil of Aleppo, grounded in deep faith and a proud sense of Armenian heritage, Hotoyan is a man of utter sincerity. Because of this genuine simplicity, his work resonates

deeply with readers, above all with those who know the sting of hardship, loss, rejection, or broken homes. Searching for high-brow literary artifice in his pages misses the point entirely. Hotoyan writes with *derd*— that raw, heartfelt ache of the soul. He has suffered, cried, toiled, failed, rejoiced, and endured every trial beside his characters. No matter how far life took him from home, neither time nor worldly favour could ever let those heroes fade from his heart.

The Patriot

Hotoyan is an honourable, forward-looking, and, above all, selfless Armenian. As a faithful son of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) since his youth, he has been a torchbearer for national identity not only in word but in deed. For long years, through active participation, he has been one who weaves history and turns it into living testimony. Looking only at his work as a correspondent, one quickly realizes that he has essentially authored the modern history of Toronto's Armenian community over the last 35 years. As a faithful 'soldier of the Armenian alphabet,' he has documented our community's social, cultural, and church life with such care and affection that future generations of historians will remain forever in his debt.

> When you speak with him, it is not he who answers, but the primary heroes of his life: from the *Arevelk* in Aleppo to Boston's *Hairenik* and Montreal's *Horizon Weekly*; from Antranig Dzarougian to Hamastegh; from [Hakob] Karapents to [Minas] Tölölyan; from Catholicos Zareh to Catholicos Karekin I; from Aram Haigaz to Robert Haddeciyan.

Furthermore, this remarkably proud man of Sasoun lives as if he is still on his ancestral soil. It is Sasoun that speaks through him, and he speaks with calm, thoughtful deliberation and a proud sense of patriotism. For him, patriotism is not just land, stone, water, Ararat, or Araks; it is a spiritual feeling that welds the past, present, and future together. This is Hotoyan's Armenia. The Armenia of a man who settled in Canada by necessity, yet who loves his homeland more than life itself.

The Faithful Servant

Krikor Hotoyan is a Christian —a believer. When he began contributing to the St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church's *Shoghagat* newsletter, he started writing soul-stirring stories that are, in essence, a search for moral truths.

As a long-time Sunday School teacher and superintendent, he possesses a heart that believes in the power of prayer. Through his writings, he wants people to live joyfully, to do good, to manifest gratitude, and to lead exemplary lives — principled, brave, hardworking, and devoted to the sanctity of the family. As a faithful son of the Armenian Apostolic Church, his witness of faith commands nothing but respect for this tidy, short-statured, smiling, and gentle man.

Today, as this, Hotoyan's sixth volume opens before you, know that this brave man has placed his heart in his palm and offered it to his nation, his homeland, and his sacred faith. Know that for this man, born in 1927 and raised in the Armenian spirit of Aleppo, life has been nothing but devotion. Know that his path has been covered in roses, yet always entwined with thorns.

You, too, will ache with his pain; you, too, will take pride in his heroes; and you will be able to sip from the cup he has filled not only with wine, but with the bitter and the gall.

On this occasion, I pray that this new volume brings not only pleasure but a sense of profound reflection to every reader. May the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and composure of our dear Baron Hotoyan endure forever.

May your rewards be fulfilled, dear Baron Hotoyan. May God's grace, love, and life-giving power be with you, today and always.

And to all our fellow Armenians who cherish the written word — happy reading!

Prayerfully,
Father Meghrig Parikian
August 14, 2010

Author's note

The stories in this volume first appeared over roughly four years in *Shoghagat*, the monthly periodical of St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church of Toronto. The interest and encouragement of many readers made it possible to gather them here in a single book.

As we reach a certain age and begin to lose some of the capacities of our youth, we inevitably come to terms with new realities. The feelings that accompany this stage of life often draw us back to the vitality and experiences of earlier years, offering comfort and a quiet joy. In that spirit, when asked, "How are you?" we may find ourselves answering much like the renowned musicologist and conductor Parsegh Ganatchian[1] once did. I remember seeing him in Aleppo in 1948, seated on a low chair in the courtyard of the *Hokedoun*,[2] near the bakery of Hagop of Sasoun. His eyesight had already weakened, and he relied on a magnifying glass to read his musical scores. When asked how he was doing, he replied, "My boy, how should I be? I live through the memories of the past."

Many of the stories in this book capture moments from Armenian history and from the lives of survivors who settled in cities across the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. Readers from these communities will recognize reflections of their own youth in these pages and may well echo Ganatchian's words: "We live through memories of the past."

These stories convey moral, religious, and national values, while also offering instructive examples. They can help children in newer Armenian generations develop an identity rooted in their heritage. In doing so, they nurture national consciousness and resilience in the face of cultural assimilation.

Krikor Hotoyan

Toronto, 2010

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[1] *Parsegh Ganachian (1885–1967) was an acclaimed Armenian composer, conductor, and musicologist. A direct disciple of Komitas Vardapet in Constantinople, he is best known for arranging the music of Armenia's national anthem, Mer Hayrenik ("Our Fatherland").*

[2] *Aleppo's Hokedoun ("Spiritual House"), established in 1624 for pilgrims, became a vital sanctuary for Armenian Genocide survivors after 1915. It later evolved into a cultural hub.*

Translator's note

Translating this volume has been a labour of love and a deeply personal endeavour. Krikor Hotoyan is a cherished, long-time family friend and someone I have always looked up to as a wealth of knowledge and a selfless servant of our community. His life journey from the Armenian quarters of Aleppo to Toronto serves as a masterclass in resilience. Through his work as a typesetter, educator, and writer, he has spent several decades documenting the nuances of the Armenian experience.

His prose does not rely on flashy metaphors; instead, it draws its power from lived reality and a profound commitment to the Armenian Church and community. In these stories, you will find the 'sweet fruits' the late, great Bishop Meghrig Parikian mentions in the foreword. This collection offers moral truths and historical snapshots alongside the dignity of a generation that refused to be silenced by history.

To preserve the authenticity of his voice, the names of people and places follow Western Armenian transliteration, reflecting the author's own pronunciations.

It was an honour to bring these words into English to ensure that the legacy of a man who has given so much to his people continues to reach new readers.

Rupen Janbazian
Yerevan, 2026



The Power of Prayer

The village of Spaghank, located in the Dalvorig region of Sasoun, was home to 26 families— brave and devout villagers committed to their national traditions and religious values. At the heart of the village stood a historic church known as St. Jknavor (Hermit) of Maroukeh. According to local tradition, the church possessed miraculous powers, and many ailing individuals were healed through their faith in Maroukeh the Hermit.

Spaghank was also known for its valiant *fedayees*[3]— Magar, Kale, and Ake —who defended the villages of Sasoun against Turkish and Kurdish brigands. As freedom fighters, they took refuge in the Mountains of Sasoun, waging battle for a life of honour and liberty. They shed their blood for the freedom and independence of the Armenian people.

Among the villagers was the family of Hayro Der Sarkissian, descendants of Der Sarkis, a renowned priest. Hayro had inherited his grandfather's piety, and for this reason, after raising his only son, Boghos, with a proper Armenian upbringing, he sent him to the St. Garabed Monastery of Moush. His wish was for Boghos to become a clergyman and one day succeed the village's elderly priest. Boghos, having studied at the St. Garabed Monastery, had advanced significantly in his ecclesiastical and religious knowledge. During summer vacations, he would return to the village and serve in the church as a deacon. Singing hymns with his beautiful voice, he would inspire the devout congregation with deep spiritual emotion.

As was his habit in the monastery, Boghos would pray before and after meals. At night, before going to bed, he would kneel and pray with his faithful parents. Around that time, troubling news from the Armenian *fedayees* was reaching Sasoun. Armenians across the provinces were being deported by order of the Ottoman Government. The First World War had broken out, and Turkey, taking advantage of the wartime chaos, had resolved to permanently solve the Armenian Question by deporting the

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[3] *Derived from the Arabic fidā'ī, meaning 'one who sacrifices,' fedayees were Armenian irregular fighters who defended their communities against oppression in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These volunteer guerrillas abandoned their personal lives for the national cause, becoming the legendary symbols of selfless resistance and the liberation struggle.*

population and massacring them along the routes of exile. First, Armenian intellectuals were arrested and deported.

Then, Armenian youth were conscripted into the army and executed in remote gorges, leaving the exiled Armenian women, elderly, and children defenceless. In 1915, despite the self-defence battles waged by the people of Sasoun against the regular Turkish army and Kurdish brigands, the young men and boys of Spaghank could not avoid Turkish military conscription. Among those gathered for service was Boghos of Spaghank. Families were parting from their beloved sons with grief and tears. During the farewell, Boghos's mother embraced him with tear-filled eyes and said, "God, Jesus Christ, I entrust my only son to you. Protect him from all kinds of enemies. Save his life. In case of danger, may the enemies' eyes be veiled, unable to see or harm my son."

She urged Boghos to always live with prayer and hope, never to forget his faith or his church. She reminded him that he was an Armenian Christian, and that in times of danger, he should recite with conviction the *I Confess with Faith*[4] prayer by Nerses Shnorhali, which he had learned at the St. Garabed Monastery.

Along the way, the group of Armenian conscripts grew, joined by young men from nearby villages. After two days of marching, they were herded into a deep gorge, where only the blue sky above was visible. Turkish soldiers had taken position on the surrounding cliffs, crouched behind machine guns and waiting for the order to fire.

Boghos and the other Armenian conscripts understood the terror of the moment. There was no hope of escape; to climb out of the ravine meant certain death. At the Turkish officer's command, machine guns and rifles thundered down on the bewildered Armenian youths, whose numbers exceeded 500. Half an hour later, a deathly silence settled over the blood-soaked gorge. Only the faint groans of the mortally wounded could still be heard—until a few soldiers descended and ended their lives with bayonets.

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[4] *Written by St. Nerses Shnorhali (12th c.), Havadov Khosdovanim (I Confess with Faith) is a celebrated Armenian prayer of 24 stanzas, corresponding to the hours of the day. Renowned for its theological depth, it has been translated into over 30 languages for liturgical and private devotional use.*

And what happened to Boghos? During the shooting, the bullets flying toward him did not hit Boghos, who had collapsed in terror among the dead in that hellish scene. When the gunfire finally stopped, he opened his eyes and examined himself. What did he see? More than 500 bloodied young men from Sasoun were lying motionless, gazing skyward with open eyes, as though their innocent souls had just departed for heaven.

At that moment, he heard shouting in the distance. He wanted to run or hide, but where could he go? One of the soldiers had spotted him. A group of soldiers descended into the gorge, searching for the boy who had survived. They turned over the bodies of the dead but could not find him.

Boghos, seeing the soldiers approaching, had noticed a hollow in the trunk of a large tree in the gorge and quickly hid inside. While crouched there, he remembered his mother and, kneeling, began reciting the 24 verses of I Confess with Faith with all his heart. The soldiers passed by the tree several times, shouting and calling out, but found nothing. The soldier who had first seen him exclaimed in disbelief: "I saw him right here a moment ago. It was a boy. Where did he go? How did he vanish?"

His comrades accused him of imagining things, convinced that what he had seen was just an illusion. When the Turkish soldiers stood right in front of the tree hollow where Boghos was hiding, he had reached the 15th verse of the prayer:

Protector of all, Christ, may your right hand be a shelter over me day and night, when sitting at home, when walking on the road, when sleeping and when rising, so that I may never be shaken, and have mercy on your creation and on me, the manifold sinner.

At last, disheartened, the soldiers gave up and left. According to reports, such massacres were carried out in that gorge daily. Before the next group of conscripts arrived, the dead would be buried in a massive pit so that the new arrivals would not see the corpses or smell the stench of death.

Boghos, having lived through those terrifying moments and witnessed death up close, yet saved by a divine miracle, remained in hiding until late that night. Then, under the cover of darkness, he left that cursed place. After walking a long distance, he followed a faint light in the distance and reached a village inhabited by Kurds. He wandered the streets

until morning before daring to knock on the door of a house, driven by hunger and exhaustion.

The homeowner welcomed him with traditional Kurdish hospitality. After learning of his background and the hardships he had endured, the man offered Boghos shelter and the chance to earn a living through farm and livestock work. Boghos worked for that Kurdish family for 15 years in exchange for a piece of bread. The villagers believed he was Kurdish, as they had given him the Kurdish name Aref.

For 15 years, Boghos did not speak Armenian, but he recited the prayers he had learned at the St. Garabed Monastery every day. While tending the flock, he would think of his village, his parents, and his relatives with bittersweet longing. The villagers had convinced him that the Armenian people had been completely wiped out and no longer existed on earth. Boghos's master, who cared deeply for him and appreciated his loyalty and work, wished for him to marry his daughter. But Boghos managed to postpone the Islamic wedding year after year making various excuses.

In the spring of 1941, Boghos's Kurdish protector decided to leave for Mecca and Medina to become a *hajji*, a pilgrim. He invited Boghos to join him on one condition: Upon their return, Boghos would have to marry his daughter. Boghos thought it over carefully and accepted, hoping that during the pilgrimage, he might find reliable information about his people and the fate of his family.

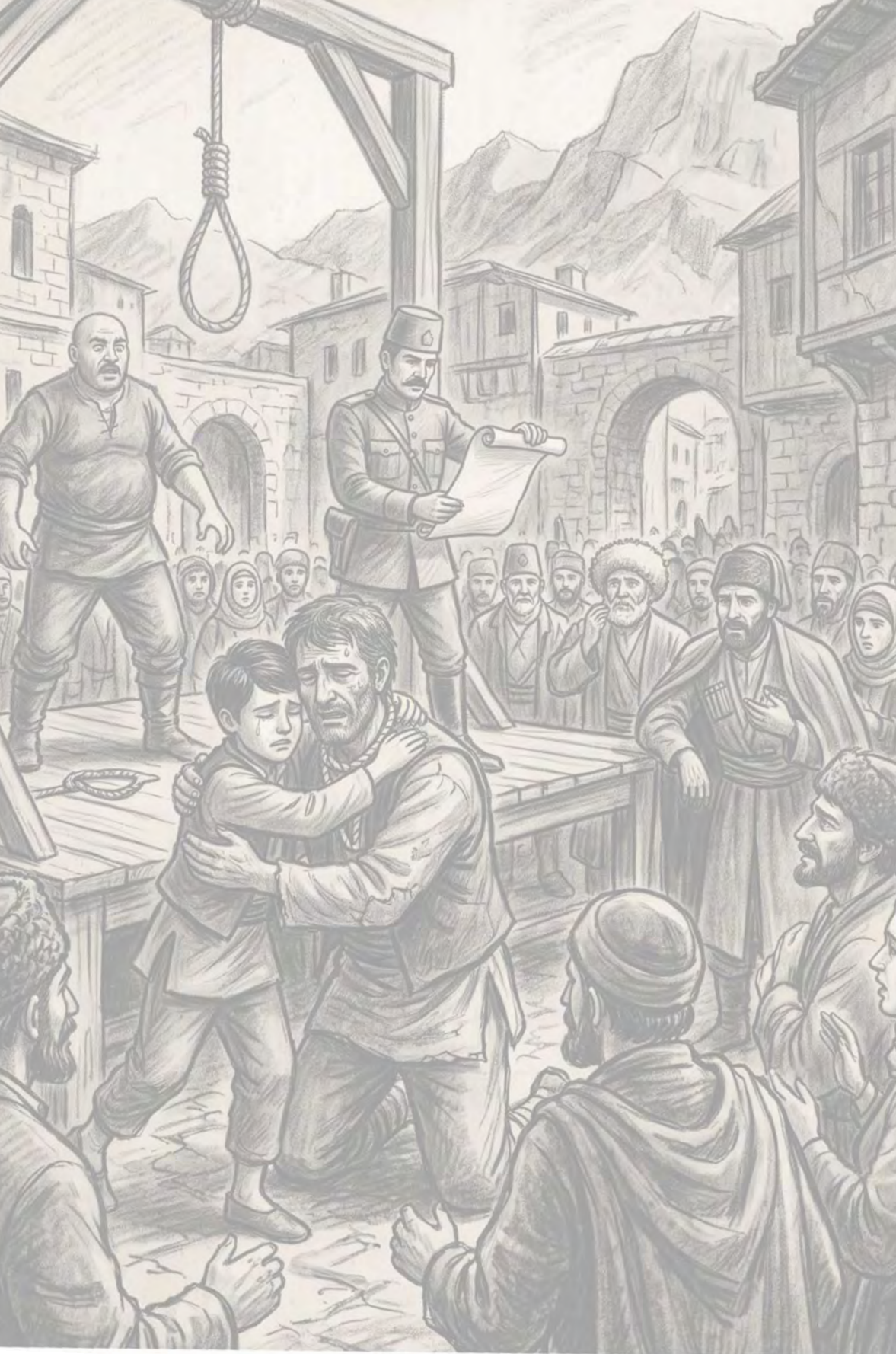
Once preparations were complete, the caravan set off for Arabia. After a long and arduous journey, they arrived in the city of Aleppo. After settling in an inn, Boghos wandered through the markets near Aleppo's historic citadel. Since it was a Friday, he passed through the Friday market, taking interest in the variety of goods and foods for sale.

Suddenly, he heard Armenian being spoken. He approached the speakers, who were selling used American clothing. Hearing Armenian words and conversation brought his past and childhood rushing back, and he began to weep like a child. The Armenian merchants, noticing the tearful young man dressed in Kurdish clothing, approached him and asked, "Are you Armenian?"

Boghos admitted his identity and shared the details of his life during and after the Genocide. One of the merchants, who was from Sasoun and sold used American coats and jackets, took it upon himself to help

Aref-Boghos escape from his Kurdish master's service.

Later, Boghos became a business partner of the Sasoun merchant. He eventually married an Armenian woman and built a traditional Armenian home. He had children, to whom he would occasionally recount his life story, always concluding with these words: *Love your nation, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and pray every day, because I owe my life to the prayers my mother entrusted to me and those I learned at the St. Garabed Monastery.*



To Armenian Fathers

In the old days, kings would often move among their people in disguise to learn about their lives and what they thought of their ruler. One day, while walking through the city streets with his minister, a king came across a school whose students were out for a walk. Some were playing with their friends, others were shouting and chasing each other, having completely forgotten their school duties. The king noticed one student standing apart from the rest. With a textbook in hand, he was quietly preparing for his next lesson.

The king approached the boy with interest and asked, “My son, why aren’t you playing like the other students? Why are you sitting here studying alone?” The boy replied, “Dear Father, why should I waste my time? My father works hard just to earn our daily bread. He’s a simple labourer, and he wants me to study so that I can earn more than he does one day. Do you know how difficult it is for him to pay my school fees and other expenses? If I were to play carelessly like my friends and neglect my lessons, I’d be ungrateful toward my father.”

The king was astonished by the boy’s words and, as a token of appreciation, offered him a gold coin. The boy refused to take it, saying, “If I give this gold coin to my father, he’ll think I stole it, because these days no one gives gold coins as gifts.”

“My son, in that case, tell him the king gave it to you,” said the king, When the boy realized who was speaking to him, he replied with even greater wit. “Then the king’s gift shouldn’t be just one gold coin,” he said. The king, recognizing his mistake, gave the boy 100 gold coins in-stead of one and departed.

That evening, when the boy returned home from school, he handed the gold coins to his father and told him what had happened. Meanwhile, back at the palace, the king spoke with his minister and concluded, “If the son is this intelligent, his father must be even wiser. I need such men in my service, and I can make use of him in a governmental post.” The king sent a policeman to bring the boy’s father to the palace. The man, unfamiliar with court etiquette, boldly entered the room and greeted the king in a coarse and impolite manner. The king, angered by his

behaviour, ordered that he be hanged.

One of the boy's classmates, who had gone home to fetch his tuition money, saw the father being led away by a policeman. He ran back to school and told his friend what he had seen. Terrified, the boy left school, ran home, grabbed the gold coins, and hurried to the palace. He threw the coins before the king and cried out, "Honourable King, I will not sell my father for 100 gold coins!"

"My son, I gave you these gold coins in recognition of your devotion to your father and your eagerness to learn," the king said. "Yes, you gave them to me," the boy replied, "but now you're taking my father. I don't want money that costs my father's life. Thank you, but please return my father to me. With all his flaws and roughness, he's still my father. He's worked hard all his life to provide for us and to give his children a good education."

The king was once again moved by the boy's intelligence and devotion. He immediately issued an order to release the man from his death sentence. When the policeman delivered the king's order to the executioners, they were just about to put the noose around the father's neck. The boy ran to the gallows in the city square and, with tearful steps, embraced his freed father, vowing always to love and respect him and to remain grateful for his sacrifices.

By royal decree, the boy was later sent to the military academy, where he received an excellent education. In time, he became a distinguished commander, serving his homeland with honour and always holding his parents' names in the highest esteem.



Let Us Honour Our Fathers

Centuries ago, the king of a European country noticed that the number of elderly people in his land had grown significantly and that they had become a burden to both their children and the state. He issued a decree, announcing through town criers that all subjects over the age of 60 were 'freeloaders' and must be eliminated by whatever deadly means were available at the time.

This cruel order sowed deep anguish among the people. Bound by love and gratitude, they could not bear to part with the parents who had brought them into the world, raised them with selfless sacrifice, and laboured tirelessly to secure their future. Many sought to resist or voice their outrage before the king, but terror and fractured resolve stifled their cries. In the end, broken and powerless, they were forced to submit to the ruthless monarch's command.

One day, the king and his advisors toured the city's residential quarters at night. In disguise, they visited several homes and witnessed the grief and sorrow that filled them, along with the angry words being spoken against the king. Yet, in some houses, life went on as usual, and there were even signs of joy and celebration.

The state-distributed poison had taken the lives of the city's elderly, causing grief in some families and satisfaction in others. Thousands of old men and women had died, cursing the cruel king who neither feared God nor felt shame before his people. Those who dared to oppose his decree — clergymen and brave young men — were severely punished.

Years passed. The country, now populated mostly by the young, began to weaken. The economy faltered year after year until bankruptcy loomed over the nation. What could be done to save it? The king called his ministers for consultation. After long deliberation, they decided to declare war on a neighbouring country to plunder its wealth. The king ordered conscription and military training, determined to invade quickly and fulfil his ambitions.

After lengthy preparation, the surprise attack began. The army swiftly captured a third of the enemy's territory. Although the opposing forces fought fiercely, they were pushed back. As they retreated, they set

fire to their own villages and towns, leaving only destruction behind. The greedy and autocratic king rejoiced at the sight of his army's progress. But his joy turned to fear when he was told that the supply of firewood used to cook food for the soldiers had run out. The men were starving, and starving soldiers could not fight.

Terrified at the prospect of defeat and the shame that might cost him his throne, the king summoned his generals and advisors, demanding a solution. The unbearable summer heat, along with hunger and thirst, had sapped the army's spirit. Desperation spread among the troops.

What was to be done? One general was a devoted son who had disobeyed the king's original decree. Out of love and pity, he had hidden his elderly father in a secret room at home, caring for him in secret. When the war began, he could not bear to leave his father behind, so he placed him in a chest and brought him to the battlefield, often seeking his advice based on years of experience.

Now, troubled and anxious, the general returned to his tent and told his father about their dire situation, which could soon lead to defeat. The father listened carefully as his son explained the climate of the occupied land, the destruction caused by the retreating enemy, and the shortage of firewood.

After some thought, the father asked, "My son, your army must be sheltered under tents. Can you tell me how many tents there are, and how many wooden poles support each one?" The general replied, "Father, our army has a thousand tents, and each tent is supported by seven poles."

"In that case," said the father, "if you remove one pole from each tent, you will have a thousand poles. That wood will be enough to cook food until the end of the war."

The general followed his father's advice, removing one pole from each tent. Soon, food was cooking again, the soldiers regained their strength, and with renewed energy they launched another attack—this time conquering the entire enemy country.

When the king heard of this unexpected victory and the clever solution that had made it possible, he summoned the general and asked him to reveal the secret behind it. The general, asking the king's forgiveness, admitted that he had not carried out the earlier command. "I spared my father's life," he said. "When I told him about our situation, he gave me

this solution, and his wisdom led us to victory."

The king listened with emotion and remorse. Realizing his terrible mistake, he issued a new decree: The elderly throughout the kingdom were to be honoured and treated with care, and their wisdom and experience were to be valued whenever the nation faced difficulty.



Mgrditch and Sarkis

Mgrditch and Sarkis were good friends. They lived in their wooden-frame houses in the Pera district of Constantinople. Both were born into poor, large families whose fathers could barely make ends meet through hard labour. They were the same age, born in 1896, during the Hamidian Massacres,[5] and were fifth graders at the Tarkmanchats (Holy Translators) School in their neighbourhood.

Mgrditch was exceptionally diligent, consistently standing at the top of his class. Beyond his academic dedication, his character and demeanour were beyond reproach. From the principal to the teaching staff, all held him in the highest regard. Dutiful, modest, and warm-hearted, he stood as a shining example to every student in the school.

Upon returning home from school, often in the company of Sarkis, Mgrditch would never venture back outside until every last lesson and assignment was finished. Whatever spare hours he had were spent visiting an ailing friend or lending a hand in service; his abiding purpose was simply to be of worth to his family and his community. His mother would often speak of him with quiet pride: “May the Lord watch over my Mgrditch. We are so proud of him, and we have faith that one day he will grow into a man of great honour.” Mgrditch was equally devoted to the church, serving faithfully as an altar server in their local parish. Deeply moved by the young man's reverence and service, the head deacon frequently sent letters of gratitude to his parents.

Sarkis was the exact opposite of Mgrditch. Irresponsible and chronically lazy, he was one of the poorest students in the class and faced discipline nearly every day. He routinely skipped school, wasting his time down by the seashore with a gang of troublemakers—swimming or sneaking into orchards to steal fruit. Sick with worry over his behaviour, his parents tried everything to set him on the right path. They begged him to drop his bad influences and act like a respectable student, but their

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[5] *The Hamidian Massacres (1894–1896) were a series of state-sanctioned atrocities against the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Sparked by Armenian demands for civil reforms, the violence resulted in an estimated 80,000 to 300,000 deaths, serving as a grim precursor to the 1915 Armenian Genocide.*

words fell on deaf ears. Sarkis would say he was sorry, promise to show up to class, and behave for a day or two, only to revert to his old tricks. He was so disruptive in class that his clowning around constantly interrupted the lessons. When reprimanded, he held a spiteful grudge, often hiding behind corners later on to pelt rocks at the teacher who had punished him. His teachers and the principal were completely fed up. Sarkis became a regular topic at staff meetings, and his parents received repeated ultimatums: if his behaviour did not improve immediately, the school would expel him.

Troubled by Sarkis's worsening behaviour, Mgrditch decided to intervene. Walking home from school together one afternoon, he stopped his friend and confronted him with uncomfortable truths.

He began with Sarkis's family: his parents were struggling, and his father worked himself to exhaustion just to scrape together the money for his tuition. Their singular dream was to see their only hope grow into a respectable man who would support his household, his community, and his church. Yet here Sarkis was in grade five, on the verge of failing the year.

"You weren't always like this," Mgrditch challenged him. "Who corrupted you? What devil is whispering in your ear? Break these bad habits, Sarkis. If you're falling behind, I'll help you study. Come to church with me. I can guide you so you can serve on the altar too. We can tackle school and faith together."

Mgrditch explained that their survival as a nation was not an accident; while countless ancient peoples had disappeared, Armenians had outlasted empires because the church and school preserved their language and heritage. He urged Sarkis to read the Gospels and follow Christ's teachings to discover how to live as an honest, proud Armenian Christian.

Finally, Mgrditch shared his own experience at the altar—the serene peace of the liturgy and the grandeur of hymns composed by towering figures like Nerses Shnorhali and Krikor Narekatsi, whose genius continues to be revered worldwide.

"Doesn't that heritage mean anything to you as an Armenian?" Mgrditch asked earnestly. "Take my hand before it's too late. If you don't, you will spend the rest of your life regretting it."

Sarkis snapped back. "Look here, Mgrditch, why are you preaching to me like I'm some kind of fool? Keep your advice to yourself. Maybe it'll

help you get rich one day. I don't want your company anymore. Your path is yours, and mine is mine."

"Sarkis! Don't be so stubborn," Mgrditch said. "One day, you'll remember what I said and wish you had listened."

And with that, the two friends parted ways. Before long, Sarkis was expelled from the school. His parents, along with several community members, pleaded on his behalf, but the headmaster stood firm and refused to reverse the verdict. In sheer desperation, his mother and father sent him to learn a trade, praying that he might at least become an honest craftsman. His first apprenticeship was with a goldsmith, but within a mere week, he was cast out — caught stealing a gold ring. Over the months that followed, he drifted through a dozen other workshops. Time after time, he was dismissed for theft, insolence, or sheer misconduct. Eventually, he abandoned work entirely. Driven to his wit's end and consumed by shame, his father finally banished him from the house. No measure of pleading, counsel, or tears could turn the boy around. The broken old man wept bitterly and cursed his lot in life, his heart aching whenever he thought of Mgrditch and the honourable road he had chosen.

After being thrown out, Sarkis joined a gang of bandits that lived in the forested mountains. They slept during the day and committed crimes at night. They robbed travellers, broke into homes, and looted shops.

Mgrditch, meanwhile, graduated from the Tarkmanchats School with excellent grades. At the graduation ceremony, the principal made a point of praising his hard work and exemplary character. He dreamed of continuing his studies at university, but his family couldn't afford it. The school principal searched far and wide until he found a benefactor willing to cover Mgrditch's education. The benefactor, after learning about Mgrditch's achievements and good character, agreed to support him through to graduation. The news brought great joy to Mgrditch and his parents. Filled with gratitude, he personally thanked the principal and the benefactor.

Mgrditch graduated with distinction and became a lawyer. After gaining some experience, he opened his own firm and quickly made a name for himself. He won several difficult cases and became one of

Constantinople's most respected lawyers. Eventually, he was appointed as a judge in the Criminal Court.

Sarkis, now the leader of his gang, had grown rich and notorious. The police tried everything to capture him, but the gang constantly moved, avoiding arrest. Their crimes were often reported in the newspapers, and Sarkis's name became a source of shame for Armenians everywhere. His father had died long ago, heartbroken, and his mother now worked in wealthy homes to support the rest of the family.

"I'm rich," Sarkis would say. "I can do whatever I want. Even the police fear me!"

And indeed, he acted without worry or remorse. His conscience was dead.

One day, while the gang was hiding out in a cave, a local woodcutter spotted them and alerted the authorities. A heavily armed police force surrounded the hideout, capturing every member of the band, including Sarkis. News of the capture travelled fast. All of Constantinople celebrated. The newspapers splashed photographs of Sarkis bound in heavy chains across their front pages, chronicling the dramatic raid. After living in fear for years, the public could finally rest easy, and everyone eagerly awaited the trial.

The trial opened in the Criminal Court of Constantinople before a packed courtroom. People from all walks of life filled the benches; among them sat Sarkis's broken-hearted mother. When the judges filed in, Sarkis looked up from behind the heavy iron bars and froze. Presiding over the court was none other than Mgrditch. In that sudden flash of recognition, the memory of his friend's gentle advice from long ago rushed back, bringing him to tears.

The court sentenced Sarkis to death on the gallows. The moment the words were spoken, his mother collapsed and died of shock on the courtroom floor. Three days later, the execution took place. As Sarkis stood on the scaffold beneath the rope, he saw Mgrditch standing among the assembled officials.

Given permission to make a final statement, he turned toward his childhood friend and spoke in a trembling voice:

"My dear classmate Mgrditch... only now do I truly understand what you tried to tell me. I am consumed by regret. Please forgive me for

the insults I threw at you back then. Let my fate be an example to anyone who disrespects their parents, their homeland, their church, and their heritage. I turned my back on my teachers, my family, and my best friend. I chose greed and crime, and now I must pay for it with my life. Forgive me. Farewell."

A moment later, Sarkis's lifeless body swayed gently in the morning breeze. Off to the side, quietly turning his back on the crowd, Mgrditch wept bitterly.


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A Lesson in Giving

Jack Adamian was a stingy Detroit businessman who owned a large manufacturing plant with hundreds of employees. He was undeniably wealthy, yet he contributed nothing of value to his community. Accumulating more money was his only purpose in life, and he devoted every waking hour to it. He laboured obsessively around the clock and routinely cut legal corners, not just to pad his margins, but to strip his workers of their basic rights.

One day, while seated at his desk at the plant, he picked up an issue of the *Hairenik* daily that one of his workers had purchased. Flipping through, he noticed an announcement about a major charitable gift. Another Armenian living in Detroit, Haig Yeretsian, was donating large sums to various Armenian charities. The article also mentioned that he was looking to sponsor three orphaned students who had just graduated from high school, offering to pay their full way through university.

Jack was stunned. He reread the notice, his astonishment quickly curdling into irritation and bitter indignation. He knew Yeretsian well enough, having crossed paths with him on several business matters. Scanning the lines one last time, he threw his hands up and spat out in disgust: "What an imbecile! What an utter fool!"

Over the next few days, the announcement stayed with him. He felt sorry for Yeretsian, who was spending such large sums for no real purpose, and was even prepared to give more. Yeretsian owned a factory in Detroit that produced electrical equipment. Jack decided he needed to speak with him and convince him to abandon the idea.

After arranging an appointment by phone, he visited Yeretsian the next day. Once the usual formalities and pleasantries were out of the way, Jack, after a long introduction, finally got to the point. He spoke in English, but Yeretsian answered in Armenian, insisting that since they both knew the language, and especially because they were Armenian, they ought to speak it.

Masking his irritation as friendly concern, Jack launched into a long-winded speech about how to build and protect wealth, zeroing in on Haig's donations and his plan to sponsor the three orphans. In a sharp,

patronizing tone, he questioned Haig's common sense, rebuking him for throwing away hard-earned money on lost causes.

Jack readily admitted that while he received those very same appeals, he never gave away a single red cent, maintaining that everyone should fend for themselves. "What is a nation? What is a church? What is a school? Money is the only thing that matters, my friend," he insisted, claiming that wealth is the sole measure of human dignity and that a penniless man is worthless. He pressed Haig to think of his own retirement and show some regard for his own children rather than bankrolling strangers.

Rather than debate him or trade insults, Yeretsian simply paused, then answered with a story:

"It took place during the deportations we all know so well. We lived in Samsun, on the coast of the Black Sea. My father was a wealthy merchant and very well liked among his fellow Armenians. I was only 6 or 7 years old and just starting school when the tragedy unfolded. Along with the rest of the city's Armenian population, we were rounded up. First, they conscripted my father and took him away; later, we learned he had been executed by firing squad. We were forced to abandon our home, our belongings, and our fortune, joining the long column of deportees.

"My mother, my little sister, and I were left to face the march alone. My sister starved to death along the way. After surviving endless trauma and hardship, we finally arrived in Aleppo. I was placed in an Armenian orphanage, while my mother took a job as a live-in maid for an affluent Armenian household.

"Time passed. The year 1918 arrived, and with it, the Armistice. With a small, steady income, my mother pulled me out of the orphanage just before it was moved to Beirut. We rented a small room and settled in. My poor mother, who had once had servants of her own back home, was now cleaning another family's floors. Yet she never uttered a single grievance; she lived only to make me happy. I enrolled in the neighbourhood Armenian school, and we accepted our circumstances, living quietly and modestly. Whenever I stopped by the house where she worked, I found the homeowner to be a courteous, honourable Armenian gentleman.

"The school years flew by. Driven by the knowledge of how hard my mother worked for my sake, I threw myself into my studies and

became the top student in my class. Then, tragedy struck again: my mother fell gravely ill and died within weeks. I was barely 13 or 14. Alone in the world, I had no idea how I would eat, where I would sleep, or how I could ever finish school.

"Fortunately, that same household had a son named Hagop. We were in the same grade, and I had often helped him with his homework. Over time, we had become inseparable. Every single day, he brought me food from his family's kitchen. We spent countless hours talking about where we had come from and what lay ahead. Hagop did everything for me—and eventually, he convinced his father to adopt me into their home. Touched by his son's empathy and moral character, the kind man welcomed me as his own.

"My benefactor often told me, 'My boy, our enemies tried to wipe us off the face of the earth, but they failed.[6] They never understood the resilience of the Armenian soul. Promise me that you will love your heritage, your church, and your culture. That devotion is what has kept us alive until today. Cherish them, and they will preserve our people tomorrow. And whatever you do, never forget your mother tongue.'

"Years later, after finishing high school, I immigrated to the United States to attend university. Thanks to my benefactor's financial support, I earned a degree in electrical engineering. After years of hard labour and persistence, I founded my own factory and achieved the success I have today."

Jack, who had been removed from Armenian community life for decades, had never heard such a personal account of his people's suffering.

"Dear Haig, you are a good and noble Armenian," Jack said. "I admire what you have done, and I ask your forgiveness for insulting you. I promise that, inspired by your example, I will begin to support those in need among our people and contribute to our institutions."

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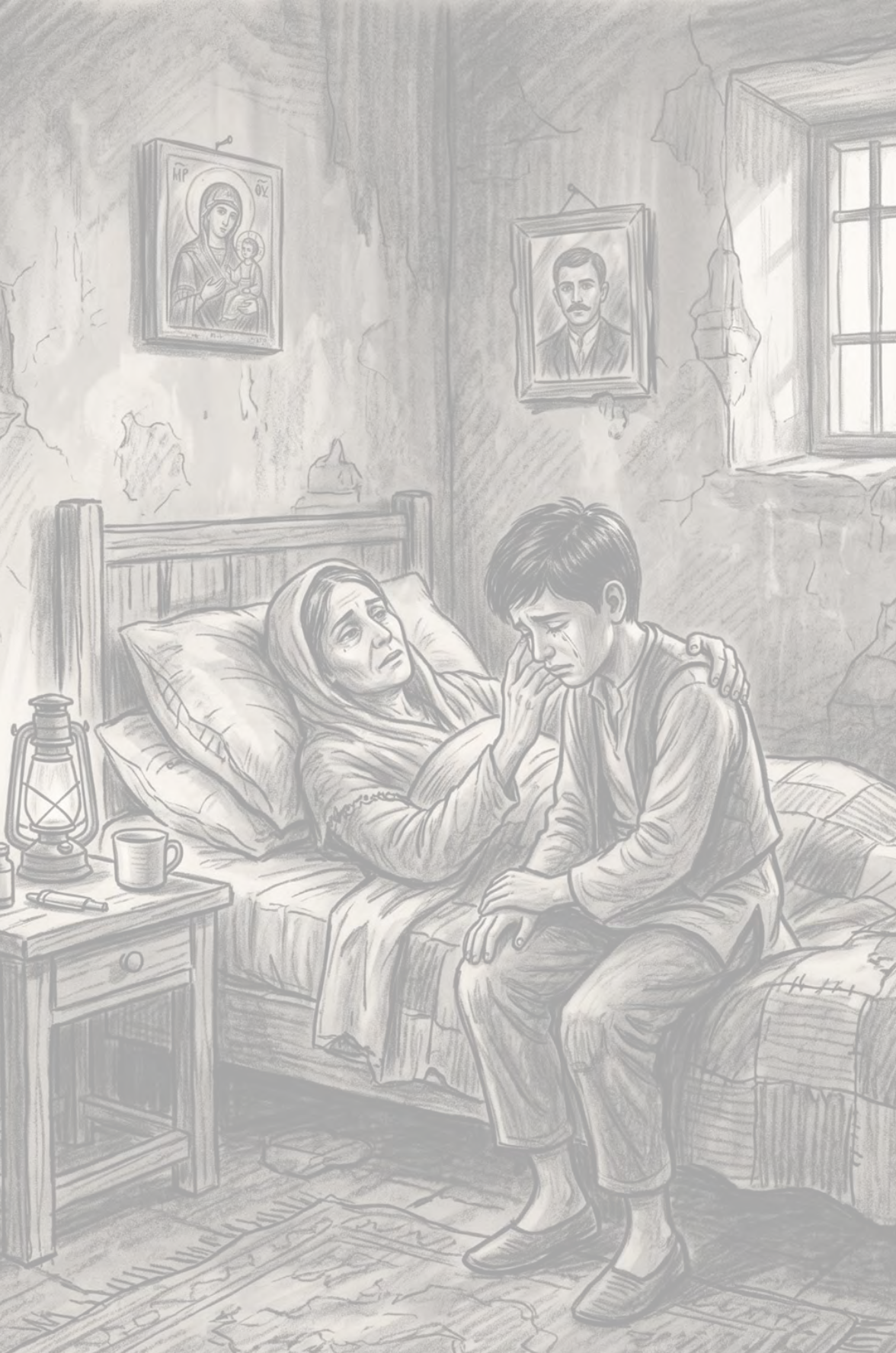
[6] Talaat (Interior Minister), Enver (War Minister), and Djemal Pasha (Fourth Army commander) formed the ruling Young Turk triumvirate, the 'Three Pashas.' During World War I, Talaat and Enver directed the 1915 Armenian Genocide's central planning and massacres, while Djemal controlled the southern Syrian deportation corridors, desert camps, and forced assimilation.



A Thief's End

"My wallet! My wallet! My wallet has been stolen!" shouted a man standing on a busy street in Cairo. Two quick-witted boys had spotted a well-dressed passerby and staged a fight. When the man stopped to separate them and urge them to make peace, they slipped away. Moments later, he reached for his pocket and discovered his wallet was gone. At once, he understood the trick. His cries for help drew only a few passersby. They offered sympathy, then advised him to report the theft to the police.

Meanwhile, Isaac and his companion disappeared into the city's bustle and hurried back to their hideout. It was a den where many street boys were trained in theft. Isaac, the only Armenian among them, had fallen in with an organized Arab gang led by Hassan, a ruthless man of about 50. Hassan made his fortune by training neglected children to steal, keeping most of the spoils and giving the boys only a small share.

Clutching the stolen wallet, Isaac approached Hassan, who snatched it from his hands. After a few words of approval, he opened it and counted the contents with satisfaction: 100 Egyptian pounds. He handed Isaac and his friend five pounds each as their reward. Isaac took the money but asked for five more, explaining that his mother was gravely ill and he had to buy medicine. His plea stirred no compassion. When he persisted, Hassan slapped him angrily, cursed him, and drove him out.

Isaac rushed home, weeping. His mother lay dying, drenched in a feverish, fatal sweat. At the sound of his voice, she opened her eyes and drew him into her arms. "My dear son, I am dying," she said softly. "As my final wish, I plead with you: live your life as a true Christian. Never let yourself forget that you are Armenian. Be a credit to your father's memory, so that our people will respect you and speak well of your name. If you do, I will hear of your good deeds in the next world and my soul will celebrate. If you stray, my bones will turn restlessly in my grave."

With that, she looked at him one last time and closed her eyes forever.

Mrs. Lousin had a humble funeral; only a priest and a few neighbours attended. Isaac wept uncontrollably. Overcome with grief, he threw himself upon the fresh earth of her grave, clutched it to his chest. He remembered his father well, though he had been only 7 when he died. His father had loved him deeply. After long days at work, he would wash, lift Isaac into his lap, and give him sweets, but only if he recited an Armenian poem or sang a song. Then, one day, his father was killed in a workplace accident, leaving his mother alone to provide for them.

For a year, Isaac and his mother survived on his father's savings and by selling his blacksmith tools. When that was gone, Mrs. Lousin took work as a

maid in a hotel. The labour was exhausting, the pay meagre, and some men pursued her with dishonourable intentions. Isaac was soon forced to leave school and apprentice with a barber. The pay was poor. After months of work, he hoped for a raise, but none came. One day, while cleaning the shop, he dropped and broke a pair of clippers. When the barber returned, Isaac admitted what had happened. Instead of forgiving him, the man beat him and threw him out.

What was Isaac to do? He wandered the city aimlessly, lost in thought, until he found himself beyond its streets. There, a group of boys ran past him. Curious, he followed them into the ruins of an old structure, where he found about 25 boys and a commanding man. The man called him over and demanded to know why he had come. Isaac told his story.

"Good," the man said. "Take these five pounds and come back tomorrow. We have work for you. You'll live well soon."

The next day, Isaac returned. He was taught the tricks of theft and sent out with other boys. In time, he became skilled and even a leader among them. Several times, he narrowly escaped arrest.

Five years passed, yet despite his growing skill, he barely managed to survive under Hassan's control. After much thought, he began looking for more profitable work. Through a friend, he met a man involved in drug smuggling, the head of a criminal network. Isaac joined him, attracted by the promise of steady pay and a share of the profits.

Armed and working with others, Isaac transported narcotics into Cairo by boat along the Nile and by car, distributing them through intermediaries. He grew rich. At times, when alone or visiting his parents' graves, he remembered his mother's words about honour and faith. Yet he dismissed them.

"How can I live in poverty, while others grow rich by exploiting people like me? Who respects the poor?" he asked himself. "Most wealth is built on dishonesty. I am no different, and I am respected. Had I followed my mother's path, I would have lived and died in misery."

With such thoughts, he justified his life and continued to accumulate wealth. But his luck eventually ran out. A member of his group, secretly working with the police, betrayed their plans. As they attempted to bring in another shipment, the police surrounded them. A gunfight broke out. With no escape, Isaac and his companions surrendered. A large quantity of narcotics was seized.

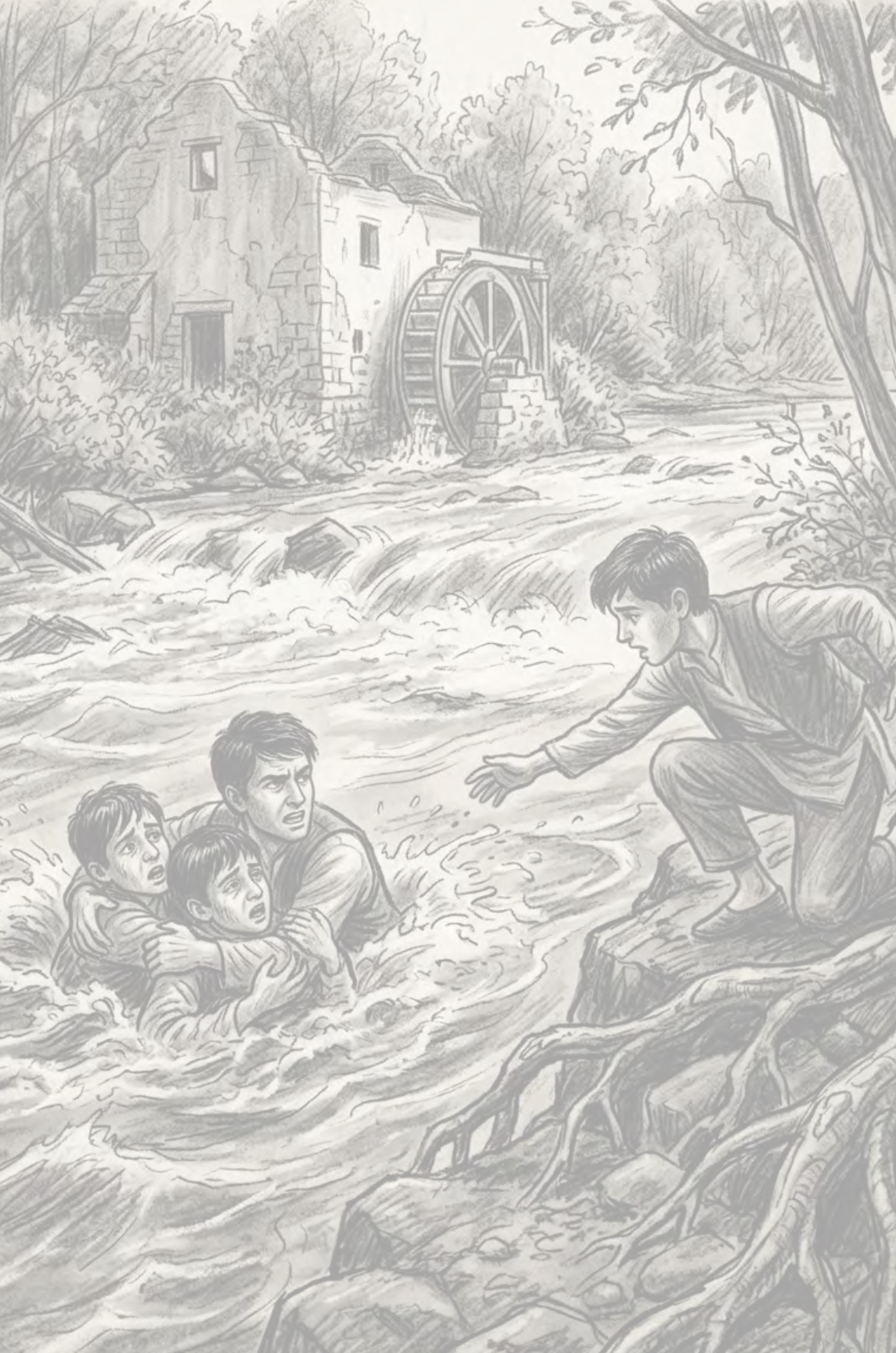
They were brought to trial. All were sentenced to prison. Isaac, as one of the leaders, received 15 years of hard labour. Though he had hidden much of his wealth, it could not save him, despite attempts at bribery. Despair consumed him. Was he to spend his youth behind bars?

In the harsh and unforgiving world of the prison, surrounded by

criminals, he began to regret his life. Often he would say, “If only I had listened to my mother and lived honestly, even in poverty, with a clear conscience.”

But how was he to endure 15 years? One day, he met a prisoner who had attempted escape four times and failed, earning a life sentence. Together, they planned an escape. After days of preparation, they made their move, slipping through difficult passages and reaching the prison roof unseen. As they tried to cross the electrified outer wall, guards spotted them and raised the alarm. Soldiers gave chase, shouting for them to stop. Isaac and his companion refused.

With no other choice, the guards opened fire. Both men fell, lifeless. His mother’s warning had come to pass.



Do Good Every Day

Setrag Mesrobian was a sharp, attentive student with a natural gift for learning. He was enrolled at the National Sahagian Co-ed School in Nor Kyough, an Aleppo neighbourhood home entirely to Armenian families. Because of his hard work and good character, he was a favourite among both the teachers and school administrators. Whenever his friends fell behind in their studies, they knew they could rely on him. Setrag helped without hesitation, winning the genuine respect and appreciation of his classmates.

From childhood, Setrag served on the altar at Nor Kyough's St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, as a candlebearer and choir member. He never missed choir rehearsals, which were held every Monday evening. And every Sunday at 2 p.m., he attended Sunday School. Thus, Setrag had a solid understanding of their church's history. He had also learned the soulful hymns, prayers, and psalms of the Armenian Church. He had won first prize in a competition organized by the Sunday School for reciting the 24 verses of the I Confess with Faith prayer from memory. The teaching staff there also loved him. He had received special appreciation and a gift for regularly attending Sunday School and bringing his Holy Bible every Sunday. In short, his daily life and conduct were exemplary.

Setrag's family lived in the Bostan Pasha district of Nor Kyough, in a house with a yard embraced by trees. One day, after returning from school, Setrag stretched out on his bed by the window to watch them. Dressed in their vibrant spring foliage, the trees seemed to radiate a new beauty into the natural world.

Setrag watched with wonder as the mother swallows darted back and forth, carrying food to the nestlings in the tree. Their arrival sparked a chorus of joyful chirping from the hungry, newly hatched brood. This captivating sight left a profound impression on Setrag; he was struck by the natural order of it all, marvelling at the parents' instinctive devotion to their young as a clear sign of Divine grace.

This beautiful scene, however, was short-lived. The parent swallows began to emit unusual cries, sensing a disaster that was fast approaching. Suddenly, a violent wind arose, lashing the branches of the tree. Setrag watched with growing concern for the safety of the nest; perched as it was between two branches, it had begun to sway precariously. The terrified nestlings chirped for their parents, but their cries went unanswered by the elements. When the wind finally settled, the parents returned only to confirm their worst fears: the nest had tipped over. The babies now dangled in peril, at risk of falling to the ground and becoming prey for the cats below.

Setrag looked on with growing anxiety. Realizing the nestlings were in immediate danger, he decided to take action. Remembering the lesson he had learned in Sunday school— to do a good deed every day —he set out to save the birds. Using pliable twigs, he quickly wove a small basket in the shape of a nest and lined the bottom with soft, fresh leaves. He scrambled up the tree, secured the replacement nest in a much safer spot, and tenderly moved the chicks into it. In the middle of his rescue, the parent swallows returned. Mistaking his help for a threat, they began swooping down on him in fierce, rapid attacks, desperate to protect their offspring.

Satisfied that he had done the right thing, Setrag scrambled down from the tree and kept watch from below. The parent swallows flew back and forth without pause, tending faithfully to the new nest until night finally fell.

When Setrag woke the next morning, his first glance was directed at the tree, but he found the nest deserted. He remembered well that until he had fallen asleep, the parent swallows had been chirping in fear and dread. No longer trusting the repaired nest, they had already built a new one in a different tree and transferred their babies there.

The following day was a state holiday, and the Armenian schools were closed. Following a plan made the day before, Setrag met his classmates to set off on an excursion to the gardens of Bostan Pasha. Their goal was to witness the overflowing waters of the Queiq River, which had swollen to a flood following the recent rains.

It was spring— a season Setrag loved for the way nature revealed its unique beauty. The four friends wandered curiously through the gardens, observing a primitive well where two cows turned the mechanism to fill a massive basin with water. From there, the water was channeled through special pipes to irrigate the various plantings throughout the garden. They watched attentively, identifying the vegetables they had studied in their science books. Eventually, exhausted, they left the gardens and reached a half-ruined mill on the banks of the Queiq River.

The four friends were watching the rapid flow of the river's muddy waters with astonishment when one of them, Zohrab, became dizzy and fell in. Unfortunately, that section of the river was quite deep, and Zohrab was in immediate danger of drowning.

Setrag and his friends screamed in terror, pleading for help, but there was no sign of another soul in that part of the garden. Kevork, unable to stand by, dove into the river to save his close friend from certain death. Though Kevork was a strong swimmer, the moment he reached Zohrab, the drowning boy panicked and clung to his neck. His weight hindered Kevork's movement, and both boys began

to struggle as the current pulled them downstream.

Paralyzed by the danger threatening his friends, Setrag stood frozen in shock. What could he do? How could he possibly rescue both of them? Suddenly, the lessons of Scripture flashed through his mind, especially Jesus's command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Without a moment's hesitation, he gathered his resolve, made the sign of the cross, and dove straight into the water. The strong swimming skills he had developed as a boy proved essential. Reaching his thrashing friends, he positioned himself at their side and, with forceful kicks, hauled them both toward the safety of the shore.

Hagop, their fourth companion, had watched the terrifying life-and-death ordeal in utter shock. Now, snapping into action, he rushed forward to help. Working together, he and Setrag hauled the two waterlogged boys up onto the bank. Without losing a breath, they began emergency first aid to revive their friends. They inverted the boys to drain the water from their mouths, then pumped their arms and chests until Kevork and Zohrab finally sputtered and re-gained consciousness.

The worst was over. Once they had caught their breath and recovered their strength, the four boys headed home around midday.

Never one to conceal the truth, Setrag took a bath, changed out of his soaked clothes, and sat down to tell his mother everything that had happened. He gave her the full story: the fallen swallows' nest in the yard, their detour into the orchards, and the frightening accident at the Queiq River. He explained how Zohrab fell in, how Kevork jumped in to help, and how he had swum out to drag them both ashore, thanking God that he had managed to pull them back from the brink of death. Then, without prompting, he promised never to visit the river again without his parents' permission.

His mother listened to his account with profound emotion. "My dear boy," she said, her voice trembling, "the kindness you showed those young swallows yesterday was the very grace that saved you and your friends today. Never tire of doing good. As the old saying goes: 'Do good and cast it into the sea; one day, it will rise back up to meet you.'"



The Grateful Armenian

Aleppo, May 9, 1945. Spring was everywhere, washing the city in vivid, breathtaking colour. The Second World War had finally ended with the collapse of the German and Japanese armies, forces once thought unstoppable. Around the world, people delivered from years of slaughter and trauma celebrated the war's end, hailing the hard-won victory of the Allied nations.

On that day, Armenians in both the homeland and the diaspora celebrated Victory Day. Hundreds of thousands of their young sons had contributed their fair share to the victorious outcome. By a happy coincidence, Victory Day fell on *Hampartsoum*.[7] As they did every year, the Armenians of Aleppo's Nor Kyough district gathered to celebrate under the shade of the fruit trees in the Bostan Pasha gardens.

Armen, who was born and raised at the very heart of Aleppo's Armenian quarter and nurtured in the warm embrace of traditional values, was then serving with the French Armed Forces. Two years had elapsed since his conscription. Over that span, having distinguished himself through rigorous training within the artillery corps, he had attained the rank of sub-lieutenant and commanded a battery crew operating an American 75-millimetre gun.

Armen was overjoyed that day. The war had finally ended, and wanting to celebrate with his family, relatives, and friends, he pulled up to the *Hampartsoum* picnic in an army jeep with the French flag fluttering overhead. He quickly reunited with his inner circle — especially Marie, the young woman he cared for so deeply. The entire afternoon unfolded in high spirits, filled with warmth and community pride.

All across the grounds, people gathered in circles to sing, dance, and play instruments, while a few mischievous boys wandered off to climb and rough up the apricot trees.

On the Feast of the Ascension, it was customary to draw fortunes through the traditional *vijag*[8] ritual. Wildflowers collected from 40 different

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[7] *The Feast of the Ascension, or Hampartsoum, commemorates Jesus Christ's bodily ascent into heaven forty days after His Resurrection. In the Armenian Apostolic Church, it signifies Christ's glorification at the Father's right hand, marking the completion of His earthly mission and the promised descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.*

[8] *Vijag (meaning 'lot') is a traditional folk ritual practiced on Hampartsoum (Feast of the Ascension). Young women draw personal tokens from a floral water vessel while singing verses to predict their fortunes. This 'giving' of lots blends pre-Christian spring celebrations with the religious solemnity of the Feast of the Ascension.*

homes and fields had been left soaking overnight in a large basin of water. Before drawing each person's small keepsake from the bowl to reveal their fortune, the elders would recite a short poetic verse.

Most of the young people laughed and blushed at the romantic fortunes they received. But when the verse meant for Marie was read, Armen felt an uneasy dread wash over him. Disturbed by the lines, he asked to hear the poem a second time:

The door of my garden is open,
My feet are wet with dew,
I have departed from my beloved,
My eyes are full of weeping.

That day, Armen celebrated the feast with his family and compatriots. In the evening, he returned to his military base — the Turkish barracks situated near the Arghoub district of Aleppo.

The joy brought by the end of the Second World War was short-lived, soon interrupted by the Syrian revolution against the French Mandate. In mid-May, while touring the city in civilian clothes, Armen witnessed the grim reality of urban warfare. Syrian revolutionaries were firing upon French establishments and personnel. Soldiers of various nationalities serving in the French army — who, unlike Armen, had come into the city on leave in their military uniforms — were desperately seeking refuge, trying to save their lives and reach the safety of their barracks.

Walking through the streets, Armen was met with the grim sight of slain soldiers — French, Senegalese, Moroccan, Algerian, and others — their blood-soaked bodies left abandoned where they fell. Realizing there was no time to lose, Armen hurried home to the Arghoup district, changed into his military uniform, and made his way cautiously but quickly to his unit at the Turkish barracks.

The French forces resorted to self-defence in an attempt to crush the rising independence movement, but their efforts were failing. The French artillery regiment stationed at the barracks consisted of two divisions, the 4th and the 11th, each equipped with four cannons. Due to its proximity to the city, the unit was highly vulnerable to Syrian attacks.

For security reasons, and with a new strategy in mind, the French command decided to relocate the cannons to the Red Barracks, situated on the heights at the city's outskirts. To suppress the rebellion, the artillery command issued orders to bombard the entire area stretching from the Turkish barracks to the new city hall — a region primarily inhabited by the Muslim population — using all eight cannons.

The cannons were positioned on the main heights, and Commandant

Michel ordered the crews to stand ready to fire, awaiting the final signal. The commanders of seven of the cannons prepared to carry out the order. However, the crew of the eighth cannon remained silent, ignoring the command entirely. The officer in charge was Sub-Lieutenant Armen Haroutounian.

News of Armen's refusal to obey the supreme command quickly reached the General Commander. He was immediately summoned to account for his inexcusable stance. To justify his actions, Armen first asked for the commander's pardon and then spoke: "*Mon Commandant*, I was born and raised in the city of Aleppo. This country, my birthplace, is my second homeland; I cannot bring myself to bombard my home. I cannot kill the noble Arab people who, in 1915, gave refuge to the Armenian orphans and survivors who miraculously escaped the Genocide perpetrated by Turkey. They stood by our people in brotherly solidarity, allowing us to build our churches, schools, and national institutions. How could I be ungrateful to such a noble and humane nation—one that is today fighting for its own independence and freedom?"

The French command conducted lengthy interrogations. In the meantime, British forces surrounded the French artillery with tanks and prevented any bombardment. This intervention was necessary because, at the start of the war, French and Syrian authorities had agreed that Syria would be granted full independence following a victorious conclusion—an agreement guaranteed by the British government. Since the French authorities had not honoured their promise and had instead caused bloodshed, the British army was compelled to intervene to prevent further violence.

After the French army's departure from Syria, Armen's courageous stance was highly appreciated by the Syrian government and the Armenian Prelacy, particularly by Archbishop Zareh (later Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia[9]), then Prelate of Aleppo.

Archbishop Zareh visited the Armenian soldiers stationed with the French Army and encouraged them to transition into the Syrian Armed Forces. Sub-Lieutenant Armen Haroutounian took the Archbishop's words to heart and enlisted in the Syrian military. By 1948, he was deployed to the front lines of the war against Israel, serving alongside Artillery General Aram Karamanougian. Both officers were awarded Syria's highest honour, the Syrian Order of Merit, as well as multiple campaign medals.

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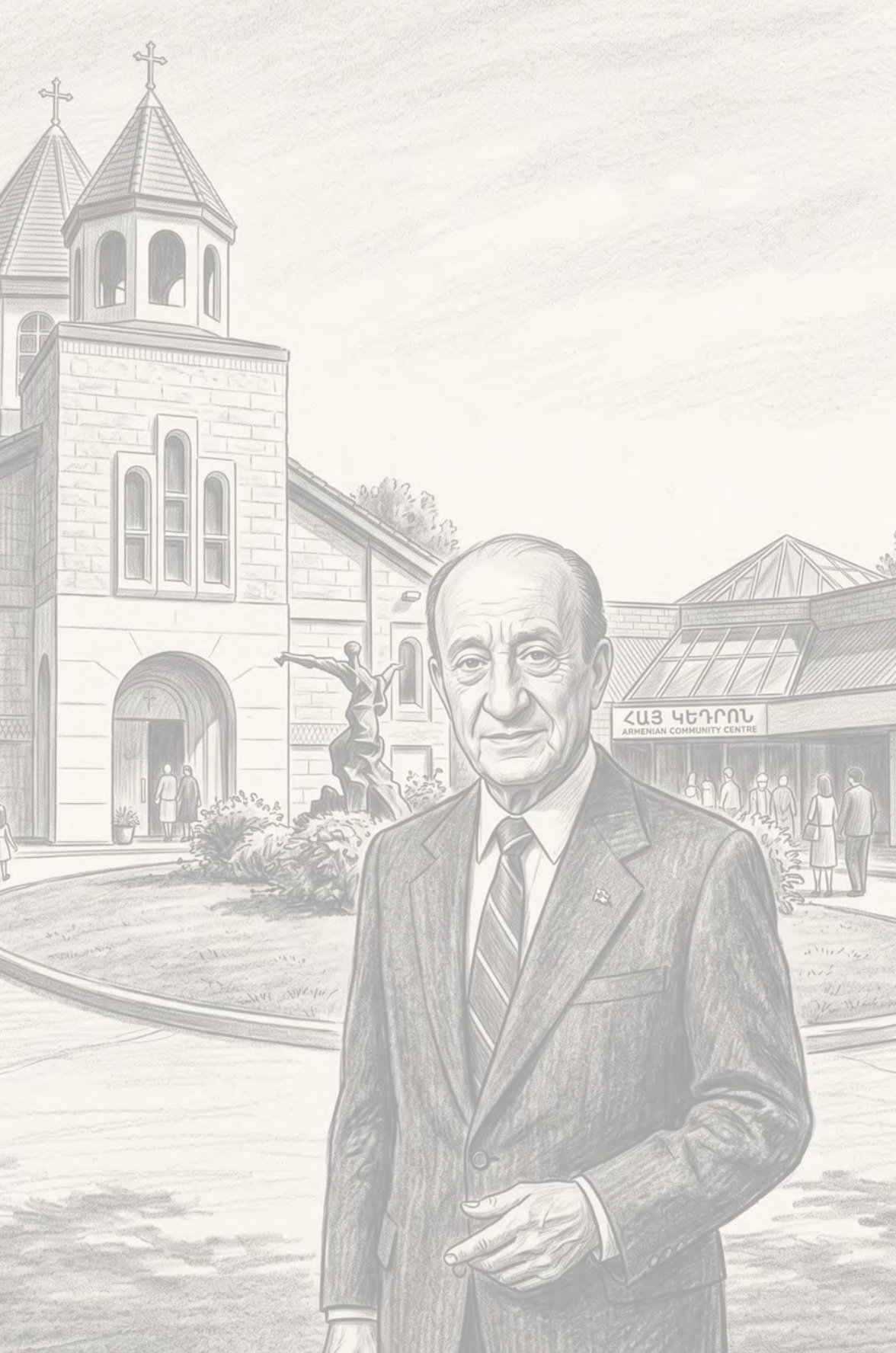
[9] *The Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia is a supreme leader of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Historically based in Sis, the Holy See relocated to Antelias, Lebanon, in 1930 after the Armenian Genocide. Since 1441, it has remained an independent hierarchical see, currently led by His Holiness Aram I.*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ARMENIAN COMMUNITY CENTRE

Kourken Magarian: A Life Steeped in *Muron*[10]

Kourken Magarian was an Armenian survivor who endured the agony of orphanhood and the cruel tragedies of his nation's history. Born on December 24, 1913, in the historic town of Gürün, Western Armenia, Kourken was the son of Dikran and Shoushanig Magarian. His father was an alumnus of the Aramian School in Sebastia, and Kourken took his first steps in education at a kindergarten in Konya. That schooling was brutally cut short by the Genocide orchestrated against the Armenian people by the Ottoman Turkish government. Forcibly uprooted from their ancestral lands and homes, the Armenian population was cast out onto the deportation routes, facing ruthless massacres by Turkish, Kurdish, and Chechen forces along the roads of exile.

While a young student in Konya, Kourken was playing in the street when he witnessed a Turkish crier reading a state decree. The order gave the Armenian residents only five days to prepare for deportation to supposedly 'safer places.' Fortunately, Kourken's grandmother had previously cared for the ailing wife of a Turkish officer; in return, the officer allowed the family to shelter in his cellar for nearly a month. Having miraculously escaped the Genocide, Kourken, his grandmother, and his two sisters travelled through Mersin before departing for Greece in 1922, where they settled in a refugee camp in Corfu.

In 1923, Kourken was among the first 50 Armenian orphans selected from thousands to be brought to Georgetown,[11] a small town west of Toronto. A farm had been purchased there specifically for their arrival. After several years of training, the boys were sent to local farms to work as

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[10] *In the Armenian Apostolic Church, Holy Muron is the sacred chrism consecrated every seven years by the Catholicos. Blended from olive oil, balsam, and over forty herbs and flowers, it is used for baptisms, ordinations, and church consecrations.*

[11] *The Georgetown Boys were 109 Armenian orphans brought to Ontario in 1923, marking Canada's first international humanitarian mission. While predominantly boys, the initiative eventually included nearly 40 girls by 1928. Residing at Cedarvale Farm, these survivors were trained for Canadian life while heroically preserving their Armenian language and cultural identity.*

helpers. Although the farm was originally owned by the Armenian Relief Association, the organization soon dispersed the orphans and transferred the property to the United Church of Canada. Despite the demands of farm labour, Kourken persevered with his education, successfully completing his studies up to the eighth grade.

Tragedy continued to follow his family; his mother, Shoushanig, passed away in Crete, and a few years later, his sister Meliné died following childbirth. Despite these losses, Kourken worked tirelessly to reunite his remaining family, successfully bringing his sister Araxie to Canada in 1929, followed by his grandmother in 1939.

Araxie eventually married and moved to Boston, where Kourken joined her for a time. While there, he operated a shoemaker's shop, unaware that he was living in the country illegally. After being reported to the authorities, he was forced to return to Toronto in 1937. It was there that he met and married a Canadian woman named Margie.

Upon arriving in Toronto, Kourken found employment at a dry-cleaning establishment, where he worked for 40 years. During his final 18 years there, he served as a supervisor, managing a team of 52 people.

His political commitment was equally enduring. Having joined the ranks of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) in 1933, he became a member of General Nzhdeh's *Tzeghagron* movement.[12] After settling in Toronto in 1937, he initiated party activities alongside 12 comrades. For decades, he worked diligently for the Armenian Cause, representing both the Armenian people and the ARF.

Kourken shouldered this sacred mission at a time when the Armenian community of Toronto was minuscule—a mere handful of scattered souls—and the ranks of the ARF could be numbered on the fingers of one hand. In those pioneer years, the Armenian Cause (*Hai Tahd*) had not yet evolved into the disciplined, methodically organized political movement that defines our national advocacy today.

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[12] *Founded in 1933 by Garegin Njdeh, Tzeghagron (meaning 'the religion of the race') was a nationalistic ideology emphasizing devotion to Armenian identity and ancestral strength. Established as a youth organization in the United States to preserve heritage post-genocide, the movement was renamed the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF) in 1941.*

In 1956, Kourken was elected committee chairman. Leveraging his personal charm and extensive network, he and his colleagues successfully purchased the Armenian Centre at 18 Dupont Street for $34,000, investing an additional $30,000 in renovations and expenses. Furthermore, Mr. Magarian's personal acquaintances with high-ranking officials— including Prime Minister John Diefenbaker —greatly benefited the Armenian community in Canada.

In his later years, even after settling in the small community of Campbellford —about 160 kilometres east of Toronto —Kourken regularly travelled back to the city for Armenian community functions. Whenever unavoidable circumstances or ill health kept him away, he made certain that his subsequent visit was accompanied by a generous benefaction to the Armenian Church, our parish schools, and community organizations, offering his support from the depths of a grateful heart.

After retiring from the dry-cleaning business, he served as the manager of the Armenian Centre for several years, where he dedicated himself to accommodating the needs of all its groups and associations. During this period, he became a familiar face at the annual Caravan —a festival organized by Toronto's diverse multicultural communities. For years, he served as the 'Mayor' of the Yerevan Armenian Pavillion where he welcomed visitors draped in mayoral regalia.[13]

Having no children of his own, Kourken decided, together with the local ARF leadership, to leave his home as a lasting legacy to the Armenian Community Centre and the ARS Armenian Private School. To him, bloodline mattered little; he loved and cherished every student who walked through those school doors as his own child.

Once the Toronto community learned about Kourken's generous estate plans, a reporter from *Horizon Weekly* sat down with him in January 1985 to share the story while he was still alive. Kourken hoped his decision would set a powerful example, encouraging other community members

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[13] *The Metro Toronto International Caravan (1969–2003) was a celebrated multicultural festival where ethnic groups hosted 'pavilions' across the city. The Armenian community participated through the Yerevan Pavilion, showcasing traditional music, dance, and cuisine. Using a 'passport' system, the festival provided a vital platform for Armenians to share their heritage, fostering cultural visibility within Toronto's diverse landscape.*

to prepare their own wills. He felt strongly that the assets earned through the honest sweat and hard labour of an Armenian worker should never sit unclaimed or fall into unfamiliar hands, but should instead go directly to support the countless needs of the Armenian community.

Below is the interview in its entirety.

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Horizon Weekly: Mr. Magarian, we were very pleased to hear about your will. We would like to know what motivated you to prepare it now, despite being in such good health.

Kourken Magarian: I have been thinking about my will for years. Our organization's circulars always included a reminder: "Prepare your wills now and allocate them to national organizations." Reading the *Hairenik* daily, which often highlighted the wills of others, also stayed with me. I felt that since I do not have children, it is better for what I have to remain with my nation rather than go to the government.

Horizon: When did you officially decide to move forward with it?

Magarian: I made the decision two years ago to bequeath everything I own to my beloved institutions. The establishment of the Armenian school, and the clear proof of its value to our community, significantly hastened my decision.

As you know, I served as the president of the Armenian Community Centre for 18 months. At that time, the school did not have its own building, so the Centre's meeting halls were used as classrooms. Watching the students often moved me deeply. I felt that without an Armenian school, these children would grow up 'orphaned' — deprived of an Armenian upbringing and eventually assimilated into the local culture. Our future, the future of the Armenian people, lies with the younger generation. If we provide them with an Armenian upbringing, I am confident they will remain Armenian in life and spirit and continue to serve the Armenian Cause.

Today, when I visited the ARS Kololian Elementary School and Babayan Kindergarten and heard the children singing so beautifully in Armenian, I could not restrain my admiration. I saw clear proof of the life-giving role and the vital, Armenian-spirited mission of our school.

Horizon: What arrangements have you made regarding the execution of your will?

Magarian: Throughout my life, I have always tried to serve my nation through the party [ed. ARF]. My beloved institutions have been the Armenian Apostolic Church, the [ed. ARS] Armenian school, and the Armenian Community Centre, along with its many organizations. I have left the final execution of my will to my executors, trusting them to ensure the funds are used where the need is most immediate and vital. I have great faith and confidence in them, knowing full well that they will prioritize the school.

Horizon: Mr. Magarian, do you believe your decision will serve as an example? Do you think others will also remember our national institutions, and specifically the Armenian school, in their own wills?

Magarian: I think it's not just the 'orphan boys' who should think about their will; everyone should prepare one while they are still alive and well, keeping their nation in mind. We must act in a way that gives priority to the Armenian school, because it is the most important factor in ensuring we remain Armenian.

Horizon: As you know, the foundation for the ARS Kololian Elementary School and Babayan Kindergarten was established in Toronto this year. The goal is to raise what seems like an ambitious amount — half a million dollars — the revenue from which will be used annually to balance the school's budget. One of the foundation's tasks will be to collect bequests. Do you think we will be able to find other testators to support this?

Magarian: I am certain it will be possible if the approach is handled correctly. It is not only the Georgetown Boys who should be interested in the Armenian school. In Toronto, as well as in Hamilton, St. Catharines, Brantford, and other cities, there are many Armenian families who could provide great benefit but who, unfortunately, have not yet thought about writing their wills.

Who among us can guarantee their life? Who knows for sure they will wake up tomorrow morning? Every family must prepare their will now, so that the Armenian school and other institutions can be financially strengthened to succeed in their missions. We must all learn how to give; whether the amount is large or small makes no difference. Money is precious, but its sweetness can turn bitter if it is not given with spirit. We must give while there is still time, because we cannot take anything with us. I would like all wealthy Armenians to consider this seriously before it

is too late. The time has come to act, as the nation has myriad needs. Regret at the end is useless.

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A dedicated, lifelong champion of the ARF and the Armenian Cause, Kourken Magarian passed away peacefully on Friday, September 25, 2003, at his home in Campbellford, Ontario.

His wake was held on Monday, September 29, at the St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church in Toronto. The service was officiated by Archbishop Khajag Hagopian, Locum Tenens of the Prelacy of Canada, alongside Archbishop Varoujan Hergelian, Locum Tenens of the Prelacy of Cyprus, the Very Reverend Father Meghrig Parikian, Pastor of St. Mary Church, and the Very Reverend Father Gomidas Panossian, Pastor of St. Nshan Church in Cambridge. During the service, eulogies were delivered by Raffi Sarkissian in English and Hagop Janbazian in Armenian, each reflecting on Kourken's decades of quiet leadership, public service, and communal dedication.

Kourken Magarian's national funeral took place on Tuesday, September 30, 2003, at 11 a.m. The ecumenical service also included prayers led by the Very Reverend Father Zareh Zargarian, Pastor of Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Very Reverend Father Yeghia Kirijian, Pastor of St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Catholic Church. In honour of his tireless patriotism, his casket was draped with the ARF flag. Archbishop Khajag Hagopian offered a heartfelt message of condolence, followed by the official funeral oration delivered by Varoujan Bastajian representing the ARF Soghomon Tehlirian Committee.

So concluded the remarkable, hard-won life of Kourken (Kirk) Magarian — one of the last surviving members of Canada's renowned Georgetown Boys. Having borne witness to the horrors of the 1915 Armenian Genocide as a boy, he rose above the bitter cold of orphanhood to spend his days putting the needs of his nation and community ahead of his own. His was a life lived with unwavering moral purpose — an authentic, blessed Armenian life fragrant with the sacred *Muron* of faith and enduring service.



The Honourable and Brave *Sasountsi*[14]

"Help! Help me, Armenian Christians! Help!" screamed a young Armenian girl, her terrified cries choked with tears. A Turkish police officer had grabbed her off the street and shoved her into a horse-drawn carriage. As the carriage sped away, the girl struggled with all her might, thrashing and clawing to tear herself from her kidnapper's grip.

The incident occurred in Kilis, one of the cities of Cilicia, on June 24, 1920. This was during the period of French military rule, when the Armenian Legionnaires had liberated Cilicia.[15] However, the French high command had given the Kemalist police special authorization to oversee internal security.

The Turkish coachman drove the horses at full speed down the main boulevard of Kilis. Completely indifferent to the young woman's screams, he kept his eyes on the road, driven only by the officer's orders and the promise of a hefty bribe.

The carriage tore past crowds of pedestrians on both sides of the street. Turkish onlookers smiled with approval, pleased to see an officer claiming an Armenian girl as his prize. The Armenians on the sidewalk could only watch in helpless despair, cursing the cruel reality of a people unable to protect their own families and honour in their historical homeland.

Suddenly, a daring Armenian man chased after the carriage and caught up to it. He struck the Turkish officer, knocking him down, and ordered the girl to flee quickly and escape the devil's grip. The struggle continued inside the carriage until a French army police unit arrived. They took the Armenian man who had freed the girl into custody and transported him to the French police station.

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[14] *Sasountsi signifies an Armenian from the region of Sasoun. In Armenian, the suffix -tsi denotes geographic origin, or 'one from' a specific place. The term is famously associated with the legendary epic hero, David of Sasoun (Sasountsi Tavit).*

[15] *The Armenian Legion (Légion d'Orient) was a French Army unit formed in 1916, composed of genocide survivors and volunteers from the diaspora. They played a decisive role in the 1918 Battle of Arara against Ottoman forces. Despite promises of an independent Cilicia, the Legion was disbanded in 1920.*

At the station, the French officer worked through an Armenian translator to draft an official incident report. He fully backed the young Armenian's actions, sharply condemning the Turk's brutal and predatory behaviour. He was especially outraged that the offender was an active police officer—a public servant whose duty was to enforce the law and maintain civil discipline, not abuse his authority.

Clearly impressed by the young man's quick thinking and courage, the officer wanted to add the rescuer's details to the case file and asked for his name. After giving his full name, the young Armenian leaned forward and said:

"I was born in the year 1892 in the mountain hamlet of Spaghank, perched within the rugged district of Dalvorig in Sasoun. Our ancestral village was an unyielding citadel for the defiant *fedayees*—insurgent patriots who took up arms against the brutal yoke of Ottoman misrule to defend the sacred honour of our people and their God-given right to live free upon their own soil.

"My own kinsmen—the legendary *hajduks*[16] Magar, Kale, Aké, and other heroes—haunted the mist-veiled crags of Sasoun, waging relentless battle against Turkish and Kurdish marauders. In modern memory alone, our mountaineers rose in open rebellion twice against Ottoman tyranny, shedding their blood for liberation and the defence of their Christian heritage. Indeed, for three millennia, the chronicles of our nation have recorded the unceasing struggle to preserve the faith, the hearths, and the inviolable honour of the Armenian race.

"In the spring of 1914, on the eve of the Great Catastrophe, I bade farewell to my father's threshold. Threading my way through hardship and peril, I reached Cilicia and found sanctuary among my fellow *Sasountsis*, who had carved out a living as millers in Kilis. I worked faithfully by their side, earning an honest, peaceful bread until the dark clouds of the Great War broke, and the Ottoman Empire cast its lot with Imperial Germany.

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[16] *Hajduks (or Hayduks) were Armenian irregular freedom fighters who emerged in the late 19th century to defend villages against Ottoman oppression. Often called fedayees, these volunteer guerrillas became legendary symbols of national resistance and selfless sacrifice during the Armenian liberation struggle.*

"It was then that the Young Turk regime executed its cold, pre-planned annihilation of the Armenian nation. Western Armenia was drained of its indigenous blood; our ancient communities were uprooted and driven into the abyss, butchered along the deportation tracks or left to perish from starvation, burning fever, and thirst. The ragged remnants of our nation were swallowed by the killing sands of Meskene, Deir ez-Zor, and the boundless Syrian Desert.[17]

"Throughout those harrowing years, the Ottoman police — sniffing out victims like hunting hounds — seized me repeatedly on suspicion of being an army deserter. Yet by God's grace, sheer daring, and quick wits, I managed to slip from their grasp every time. The *Sasountsi* millers had been exempted from immediate deportation to keep the grain mills turning, and I invariably found my way back into Kilis, sheltering in plain sight among my brethren.

"Living as an isolated bachelor, my elders urged me to take a wife and rebuild a family out of the ashes. By early 1917, Ottoman forces were already fracturing and retreating across the Arab provinces, reeling under Allied advances that would soon culminate in the triumph of our Armenian Volunteer Legionnaires at the Battle of Arara. I took to wife a resilient woman named Mariam, an exile from the Cilician town of Behesni. She had been widowed at barely 18 after the Turks conscripted her young husband into the labour battalions and murdered him. Today, through honest toil, I have raised a roof over our heads; I am the proud father of a precious daughter, whom we have blessed with the name Siranoush."

The French officer, having listened with surprising interest and patience, released the patriotic *Sasountsi*. The young man expressed his gratitude, wishing that France would accept the mandate of Cilicia and assist in the reconstruction of an Armenian state in the region. Hardly had the young *Sasountsi* left the station when the Turkish officer, who had been waiting for him, approached and stated that the Turkish police chief wanted to see him. The police station was located on the second floor of

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[17] *During the 1915 Armenian Genocide, the Ottoman government forced deportees into the Syrian desert via transit hubs like Meskene. Lacking food, water, and shelter, hundreds of thousands died from starvation, exposure, and disease along the Euphrates River before reaching Deir ez-Zor, the terminal concentration camp and site of mass killings.*

the same building. Naively, the *Sasountsi* followed the officer up the stairs and presented himself to the chief.

The Turkish police chief, his face twisted with fury, glared at the young man and asked: "Who are you to raise your hand against a Turkish police officer and snatch his favourite girl from his grasp? Do you trust the French? Do you not know that their presence on these lands is temporary, and that the Turkish army, under the leadership of Atatürk,[18] will soon liberate these lands from the Western Allied armies? You miserable Armenians will finally be exiled from Cilicia as well. You have no right to live on these lands."

Snapping in fury, the police chief leaped up from his desk and struck the daring *Sasountsi* hard across the face. He then rounded on the humiliated officer, his voice dripping with disgust:

"Shame on you, call yourself a Turk? When this infidel tore that girl out of your hands, you couldn't even waste a 5-cent bullet to blow his brains out? You should have finished him on the spot, just like the rest of his people were wiped from our lands!"

Turning back to the *Sasountsi*, he snapped: "Get out of here. You had better get on your knees and thank the French— their presence is the only reason I'm not shooting you like a dog where you stand. Leave right now, and never let me see your face again. If you have any sense, get out of this country before your luck runs out."

Shortly after the incident, the French high command— pursuing its own colonial agenda —quietly pulled its forces out of Cilicia, leaving the Armenian population behind to focus on securing its mandate over Syria and Lebanon.

Following the French evacuation, the Armenian population of Cilicia once again took up the wanderer's staff. The hero miller from Sasoun was forced to leave Kilis with his family, living for a time in the Syrian town of Azaz before settling in Aleppo. There, he built a new home and raised children. As a patriotic and brave *Sasountsi*, he recounted this story to his children so they would be inspired by the struggles of Sasoun's

[18] *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) was the founding father and first president of the Republic of Turkey.*

freedom-loving *fedayeen* and live with national pride as pious, nation-loving Armenian Christians.


Hell

The Cross of Salvation

Salwa Tahan lived in a beautiful, grand residence in Aleppo's upscale Azizieh district, cared for by a private cook and maid. Despite her comfortable life, she was haunted by a deep sense of loneliness and sorrow, having lost both her husband and her son in a tragic car accident.

The Tahans had originally come from Sasoun a century earlier, establishing themselves in Aleppo alongside the city's oldest Armenian families. Driven by a sharp entrepreneurial mind, Tofik Tahan had built a substantial fortune. A generous and deeply faithful family, the Tahans donated regularly to Armenian schools and charities, and funded major embellishments at the Holy Forty Martyrs Church.

In Aleppo, local Arabs — both Christian and Muslim — referred to Armenians whose presence predated the 1915 Genocide as *Ermen Qadim*, or 'Old Armenians.' Many of these pre-Genocide families carried traditional Arab-Christian names and spoke Arabic at home. Even so, Salwa spoke good Armenian, kept in close touch with her Armenian-speaking circle, and was a faithful congregant at the Forty Martyrs Cathedral.

The wealth and comfort left by her late husband gave her little peace. Mourning her family constantly, she turned to the Bible for solace and went to church nearly every day. She was a familiar face at evening vespers, holiday services, and Sunday masses.

One Saturday evening, after vespers had ended, Salwa lingered in the quiet sanctuary, taking in its peaceful atmosphere. Weeping softly, she prayed for the strength to endure her personal heartbreak. Although she knew the cathedral's historic icons by heart, she began examining them again with quiet reverence. She stopped in front of the depiction of Hell — a striking painting of sinners suffering in the inferno.

While lost in the image, the sound of muffled crying caught her attention. Following the sound, she found a little girl, around 10 years old, kneeling before the icon of the Virgin Mary. The child was praying through heartbreaking, breathless sobs.

Deeply moved, Salwa approached the girl and asked her why she was crying and who she was.

"My name is Sossi Nshanian," the girl replied, "and I have come to pray at the suggestion of Archpriest Mgrditch Mouradian. I am asking God to make an arrangement for my upkeep because my mother and father have died. I am being forced to leave the house where we lived, as I cannot pay the rent. Der Mgrditch, who was our house priest, knows my situation and promised to arrange for me to be placed in the shelter of the Syrian Armenian Relief Cross.[19] I came to pray so that I may be accepted into the shelter and be able to continue my studies."

Deeply touched, Salwa comforted her gently. "Look, my dear, *Der Hayr*[20] is right. God hears the prayers of orphaned children and He will surely bring aid. I will meet Der Mgrditch tomorrow to talk about your future. You come to church tomorrow morning, too, so we can make an arrangement."

Der Mgrditch, who served as parish priest to the *Sasountsi* community and knew the Tahan family well, received Salwa with great warmth and graciousness. He shared that the young girl came from a respected, upright family with a good name, but had been left completely alone in the world, with no one left to look after her.

"Well," said Mrs. Salwa, "since this girl has no relatives, friends, or means to live, I will adopt her. She will live with me from now on. I will send her to school; she must learn everything a girl should learn to be a good homemaker and mother in the future, or to easily earn a living."

The benevolent Mrs. Salwa took the orphaned girl in and kept her promise. The girl began attending the girls' section of the National Haigazian School where, as a third-grade student, she was always among the

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[19] *Founded in 1910 in New York, the Armenian Relief Society (ARS) is a humanitarian organization led primarily by women. Operating internationally across dozens of chapters, it provides social welfare, educational support, disaster relief, and healthcare to Armenian communities and local populations worldwide.*

[20] *A Der Hayr is a married priest in the Armenian Apostolic Church. The term literally translates to 'Lord Father,' where 'Der' (Lord) signifies his role as a spiritual father and 'Hayr' means father.*

best in her class. After finishing primary school, Sossi continued her education at the Karen Jeppe Jemaran in Aleppo.[21]

Years passed, and Sossi graduated from the Jemaran. However, in a cruel turn of events, her benefactress fell ill and became bedridden. Sossi cared for the lady with sacrifice and dedication until her last breath. Before she died, Salwa called Sossi to her side and said, "My dear daughter, 10 years have passed since I adopted you. You have been a loyal and virtuous girl, and I am very happy that you will soon marry a young Armenian man. Hrach is an honest and hardworking craftsman, and according to his master car mechanic, he is also an excellent tradesman."

When Salwa passed away, she was holding a cross in her hand — the same cross that had hung above her bed and meant the world to her during her life. After the funeral, the heirs gathered at the estate, and the will was opened in front of the lawyer. Salwa had left her adopted daughter 15,000 Syrian gold liras. The will went on to say: "Sossi is as dear to me as my own daughter. In addition to this sum, she has the full right to choose any precious item from the house that pleases her, to keep as a personal heirloom."

The relatives were deeply annoyed when they heard the will. To them, 15,000 gold coins were already an enormous inheritance, and they worried the adopted girl would use the clause to take the most expensive diamond and gold jewellery. When the cook and the other staff quietly advised her to take the pearl necklace, Sossi turned it down.

"No, I don't want the pearls," Sossi said. "Salwa has already given me far more than enough. I don't want to take away what belongs to the family. The smallest item my mother loved means more to me as a memory than any piece of expensive jewellery. Look," she said, "I want that copper cross. She was holding it when she took her last breath, and it was the cross she kept over her bed every night."

The heirs could hardly believe their luck. Terrified that she might change her mind, they quickly drafted a statement on the spot: "As a

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[21] *Founded in 1947 in Aleppo, Syria, the Karen Jeppe Jemaran (college) is a prestigious Armenian high school named after the Danish missionary Karen Jeppe. Known as the 'Mother of Armenians,' Jeppe saved thousands of survivors during the Genocide. The institution serves as a vital cornerstone for Armenian education, language, and cultural preservation within the diaspora.*

keepsake from my benefactress, I have chosen only this cross. It belongs to me, and I formally waive all claims to any other property." They had Sossi sign the paper immediately.

Sossi later married Hrach, a hardworking mechanic. They built a comfortable, happy life together until Hrach suffered a severe injury on the job. Following a long and painful recovery, his right arm remained completely disabled, ending his career as a mechanic. The mounting medical expenses wiped out their savings entirely, leaving the young family struggling just to put food on the table.

One day, on the verge of giving up, Hrach said, "My faithful wife, I can't go back to the garage, but I can still manage lighter work. Why don't we open a small grocery shop in Nor Kyough, if we can access the money Salwa left you in her will?"

Sossi agreed with the idea, but their hopes were dashed when the lawyer informed them that Salwa had placed a condition on the bequest: the funds would remain locked in trust until Sossi turned 25.

Heartbroken and desperate, the couple weighed their options. "We can't simply starve for a whole year," Hrach pointed out. "What if we take out a loan for what we need? Once you turn 25 next year and collect the inheritance, we can pay back the debt in one shot."

Sossi agreed it was their only way forward. They found a local moneylender and borrowed the necessary sum with interest. The shop opened and business was going well — until shocking news broke: the notary had vanished overnight, taking all his clients' trust funds with him. It soon came to light that the man was a fraud who had swindled families across the city.

When the moneylender, Yeremian, heard about the notary's escape, he marched straight into Sossi's shop. "If you don't pay back the loan right now," he barked, "I'll have the courts seize your house and inventory and auction everything off to get my money back!"

After Yeremian stormed out, the couple was left shattered.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Hrach broke down. "There is no way we can pay him back on the spot, and he isn't going to give us time. We're going to be evicted onto the street with three young children. With only one working arm, I can't do manual labour. It feels like God has completely abandoned us."

“Don’t say that, Hrach,” Sossi comforted him. “God never forgets His children, just like we would never abandon our own. Let’s pray and put our faith in Him; He will make a way.”

Sossi stepped into the bedroom alone. Holding her benefactress’s cross tightly in her hand, she wept softly: “Dear Salwa, if only you could see the heartbreak and despair we are facing today.”

That evening, Hrach’s childhood friend Bedros came by after hearing about the disaster. He had no money to lend them, but he wanted to offer emotional support. He asked Sossi if they had any leftover jewellery or valuables they could pawn.

“We already sold my gold bracelet and wedding ring,” Sossi replied. “We don't have any gold left. The only keepsake we own is this old copper cross from Salwa, and it isn't worth anything. We truly don't know how we're going to survive.”

Bedros asked to see the piece, which hung above their bed just as it had hung in Salwa’s room. A jeweller and goldsmith by trade, Bedros turned the cross over in his hands, inspected the edges, and suddenly smiled with excitement:

“You’re in luck! You thought this was plain copper, but it’s actually solid gold beneath this dark finish! If you sell this, you'll have more than enough money to clear everything.”

The next morning, Sossi and Bedros sold the gold cross in the market, securing enough funds to pay off Yeremian in full. Their shop flourished over the years, and their family was never in need again. For the rest of her days, Sossi loved sharing the story of the copper cross with her children and grandchildren.

“When you do what is right and keep your faith in God,” she would remind them, “you never have to be afraid. Even when everything looks dark and hopeless, He has a way of turning things around for good.”



A Reward Hard-Won

The year 1940, the second year of the Second World War, was a difficult time for the Armenian community in Aleppo. Under the leadership of Hitler, Nazi Germany had already occupied Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria before advancing into France via Belgium.

Following France's defeat, the collaborating Vichy government was established. However, General de Gaulle took refuge in England, formed the Free French Forces, and established units in territories under French rule. Syria and Lebanon, French colonies at the time, were under the jurisdiction of the Vichy French authorities in 1940. When General de Gaulle issued an ultimatum to the Vichy authorities in Syria and Lebanon to surrender, air and ground battles broke out between the French armies, eventually ending in a De Gaullist victory.

During those years, unemployment was high and a difficult economic situation prevailed. Syria's grain and other produce were transported by car and rail to feed the warring Allied armies, leaving the local people struggling to find bread. To secure food, people queued outside bakeries in the middle of the night, pleading with the bakers to provide enough to sustain their families.

It was under these conditions, often half-fed and hungry, that Kevork Krikorian went to school. As a sixth-grade student at the National Sahagian School, he made every effort to successfully complete the school year and earn his graduation certificate.

Though poor, Kevork was much loved by the school principal, Mr. Garabed Yulubeyian, and his teachers—Napoleon Hazroyan, Yetvart Dasnabedian, Barkev Missirian, and Sarkis Chouljian. He always helped the school's housekeeper, Khmlo *Mayrig* from Sasoun, especially during the winter when he assisted with preparing, lighting, and moving the heating stoves to warm the classrooms. Other teachers also entrusted him with various personal errands.

Despite being the son of a poor family and unable to buy notebooks, pencils, pens, or textbooks, Kevork relied on materials borrowed from his friends. Still, he remained one of the best students in his class. His

father struggled to pay the tuition fees for his three children; if he was late, Kevork would be sent home from school until the debt was settled.

Tragically, in 1940, Kevork's father was imprisoned for helping an Armenian escapee. The family's only food was a bag of bulgur brought from Qamishli. His mother would boil the bulgur, which they ate without oil, and they sometimes relied on meals provided by the orphanage built by Miss Jeppe. The Krikorian family endured these conditions with great suffering, hoping their father would soon be released from prison and their economic situation would improve.

During that time, through the efforts of the school principal, the Sahagian School Alumni Association was formed. This group brought together graduates of the school, which had been founded in 1929, to connect them with its future. One of the inaugural projects of the newly elected Alumni Association board was the construction of a library, intended for the benefit of both graduates and current students. The principal informed the school families of the board's decision through letters, requesting financial assistance for the project's success.

A few days after the letters were sent, many parents showed their appreciation for the idea by sending donations to the principal's office, contributing within the limits of their ability. The project generated great enthusiasm and a willingness to help. In addition to their own contributions, parents urged relatives and friends to support the initiative, which was intended to serve the intellectual development and patriotic spirit of their children.

Kevork witnessed his classmates bringing in donations every day. The principal often reminded those who were delayed to bring their contributions quickly so the library could be built and filled with books before the end-of-year event. Kevork suffered greatly during this time; he did not want to appear inferior to his peers, who were donating even more than the requested amounts. He wondered what he could do and where he might obtain the money. Every morning after prayer, the principal publicly announced the names of the donors.

Kevork stayed awake for many nights, devising various plans to contribute an amount earned by the sweat of his own labour to the library fund.

Hagop, a close classmate, approached him to ask if he had made any arrangements to participate in the fundraising. Surprised by the question, Kevork could not offer an answer. He walked away, covering his face so his friend would not see his tearful eyes.

Hagop, who loved his friend dearly, saw his emotion and promised to speak to his own father to help Kevork, hoping to free him from the embarrassing situation that threatened his dignity. However, upon hearing his friend's offer, Kevork absolutely rejected the idea.

Kevork told his friend, "Even with my father imprisoned and our family's severe financial situation, I cannot accept money given by someone else and present it as my own. I will participate in this fundraiser only with money earned by the sweat of my own labour. That way, I will have the heartfelt satisfaction of knowing my honestly earned money played a role in the library's construction."

After several sleepless nights, Kevork made his final decision. Due to the Second World War and the De Gaullist air raids on Syria, many families in the Nor Kyough district of Aleppo were building underground shelters. Reverend Der Nshan A. K. Markarian and his son, Margar Markarian, had also undertaken the work of building a shelter to protect their family. The Reverend lived across from St. Gregory the Illuminator Church and the Sahagian School.

As a resident of the area, Kevork saw every day that workers were transporting excavated, brittle white stones by cart to a pit 20 metres away from the Markarians' house. He realized that he could do this work himself. He approached the Markarians, who gladly accepted his offer.

Every day after school, Kevork transported four cartloads of stones, earning one Syrian gold coin since each cartload was worth 25 Syrian piastres.[22] By working hard for two weeks, he managed to earn 12 Syrian gold coins. He was happy.

Only his mother was aware of Kevork's work. People passing by viewed the labour of a 14-year-old boy with pity and found it unsuitable,

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[22] *A piastre (or piaster) is a unit of currency, primarily used as a subunit (1/100) of various pounds in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt, Lebanon, Sudan, South Sudan, and Syria.*

as they were unaware of the honourable reason this brave and dignified boy was toiling so hard.

After earning a sufficient amount two weeks later, Kevork informed the Markarians that he would no longer be able to work, stating that he had already secured his donation for the school library. Upon hearing about the Krikorian family's situation and Kevork's purpose, *Der Hayr* and Mr. Margar were deeply impressed. Because he had performed his work meticulously and consistently, they added three more gold coins to the 12 he had already earned.

The following Monday morning, Kevork handed his teacher an envelope containing 15 Syrian gold coins and a brief note explaining how he had earned the money. When the teacher opened it and read the explanation, he decided to read the note aloud to the entire class.

The students—especially his classmates who had previously looked upon him with sympathy—responded with enthusiastic exclamations and words of appreciation. They were moved by their friend's honourable actions, and news of his dedication soon reached the members of the school board.

At the end of the year, the names of the library donors were inscribed in a special display case. The first name listed was that of student Kevork Krikorian, who had provided his donation through the sweat of his labour. Kevork graduated from the Sahagian School with high marks and special recognition in 1941. The following year, the members of the Alumni Association elected him to their board of directors. As chairman of the board, he ensured through his own continuous efforts and those organized by the association that the school prospered and the library was constantly supplied with new books.



The Odyssey of an Armenian Family from Garin

The city and province of Garin, historically known as Erzeroum, were located in the province of Upper Hayk (Bardzr Hayk) in Greater Armenia. Sitting on an expansive mountain plateau 2,070 metres above sea level near the headwaters of the Euphrates and Araks rivers, Garin was famous for its ancient fortress, the Cathedral of the Holy Mother of God, and the prestigious Sanasarian College. The city boasted an impressive network of civic and educational institutions, including the Holy Translators, the Hripsimian Girls' School, and the Msrian, Der Azarian, and Kavafian co-educational academies.

The Russo-Turkish wars of 1829 and 1878 triggered massive migratory shifts. Roughly 90,000 Armenians—out of more than 400,000 residents across Upper Armenia—retreated into the South Caucasus alongside imperial Russian forces. They founded thriving new communities in cities and districts like Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Alexandropol (later Gyumri), and Kars. Although a small number returned to Erzeroum out of homesickness to pick up the pieces of their lives, the vast majority remained in the Caucasus, proudly maintaining their native traditions and cultural identity.

Between 1910 and 1914, Garin became a dynamic hub for Armenia's foremost political and intellectual figures. Leaders such as Simon Zavarian, Rostom (Stepan Zorian), Avetis Aharonian, Karekin Khajak, Nigol Aghpalian, Arshag Jamalian, Hovhannes Kachaznouni, Avetik Isahakian, Roupen Der Minasian, Simon Vratsian, Shavarsh Missakian, Roupen Zartarian, E. Agnouni, Nigol Touman, Murad of Sebastia, Sebouh, and Gaydzag Arakel met and worked in the city, educating and inspiring the youth.

Garin was also home to the *Haratch* printing house, which published the widely read party newspaper *Haratch*. Originally edited by Yeghishe Topchian, the paper later came under the direction of Simon Vratsian and Shavarsh Missakian. Focused heavily on youth and civic mobilization, *Haratch* provided in-depth coverage of regional governance, economic developments, and national political affairs. It was later

followed by the bi-weeklies *Yerkir* and *Arevelk*, alongside literary publications like *Sird*, a 32-page hectographed underground journal.

Garin was also home to many notable monasteries, including the St. Gregory the Illuminator Monastery, the St. Mother of God Monastery, and Khachavank. Among the city's most memorable monuments were its magnificent schools, particularly the Artsnian Mother School, which was founded by Archbishop Garabed Bagratuni in 1811. This school was considered one of the greatest centres of Armenian culture and enlightenment.

Another significant educational institution was the Sanasarian College. Founded in 1881, it provided an education to hundreds of students under the leadership of Rostom. A unique natural advantage of Garin was its abundant water supply. Numerous springs flowed constantly in every street, near the market, and even inside homes, providing the people with plentiful drinking water and ample means for cleanliness. It was estimated that Garin had around 600 of these natural springs.

Despite the Turkish government's anti-Armenian policies, the Armenians of this populous and historic city maintained a vibrant economic, national, cultural, and religious life. This was due to the experienced and dedicated leadership of the local intelligentsia.

The Tokajian family lived in a spacious, two-storey house built to withstand Garin's severely cold climate. Since snow fell for almost six months and closed the roads, making travel impossible, residents would secure half a year's worth of food and supplies during the summer months.

Hagop Tokajian was a tailor whose integrity allowed him to satisfy even the most demanding clients. His wife, Sanam Tokajian, was born an Ikitkhanian and later changed her surname to Kachaznouni. She was a relative of Hovhannes Kachaznouni, one of the prime ministers of the 1918 Republic of Armenia, whose family had migrated from Garin after the 1878 Russo-Turkish War to settle in Gyumri.

Hagop had a daughter named Nvart from his first wife, who had passed away young. With his second wife, he had two sons and four daughters. This family of nine lived a prosperous life thanks to Hagop's diligence. He owned a private tailor shop in the city market and employed five workers.

Like all families in Garin, the Tokajians led a patriarchal life, adhering strictly to Armenian national, cultural, and ecclesiastical traditions.

The home was filled with mutual love and sympathy. Family matters were resolved by the father —or the grandfather if he was still alive— and everyone obeyed their instructions. Men dined separately while the women served at the table. Everyone attended church every Sunday and on feast days, and the boys were diligent students who never missed school. Family sanctity, mutual understanding, and respect for elders defined their lives until 1915, the catastrophic year.

Government criers announced Turkey's entry into the war and ordered all young men to report to military centres. Hagop was forced to present himself and was conscripted. However, a month later, he was released after paying a fee — a customary replacement for service — and dedicated himself to sewing military uniforms.

The exodus of Garin's Armenian population began in April 1915, followed by the mass deportation of Armenian villagers from the Garin plain in May. The villagers were massacred on the roads between Garin and Erzinjan, while the Armenian residents of Garin city were murdered in the mountains near Gamakh and Malatya.

The Tokajians hired three carts, loaded them with essential items, and set off toward an unknown destination, filled with heartbreaking sorrow. The first leg of the journey, from Garin to Bayburt, took two days. After spending the night in tents, they continued toward Agn, Arapgir, Erzinjan, and Gamakh. They stayed one or two days in each location, where the exiles were subjected to barbarity and plunder by the local Kurds. By the time the caravans reached Gamakh, the Turkish gendarmes had already gathered the men from the groups and massacred them, following state instructions. The Garin Armenians' caravan was later joined by another from Sepastia. Near the Gamakh bridge, approximately 250 young men were separated from the exiled caravans and brutally murdered.

Under the supervision of the gendarmes, the caravan continued toward Malatya. They stayed there for two agonizing days, dragging their sorrowful lives through torment and suffering. From Malatya, the survivors —hungry, thirsty, and marching under the scorching sun —walked to Samson. The Tokajians remained there for 30 days among a gathered group of other Armenian survivors.

The Tokajians finally arrived in Adiyaman. There, Hagop resumed his trade and supported his family, now safe from the Kurds. However, the

local Turks frowned upon the presence of Armenians. The *Kaimakam* (Governor) of Adiyaman summoned the four surviving families and delivered an ultimatum: "We know you are Armenians, but if you want to live and be safe, you must become Muslims so that Muslims do not sow enmity against you." The four families convened and decided to feign conversion to Islam in appearance only, hoping to buy time and save their lives from the Turkish and Kurdish criminals.

After the families informed the *Kaimakam* of their decision, a Turkish sheikh performed the conversion ceremony and assigned Islamic names to everyone. Mr. Hagop became Abdülaziz; Mrs. Maritsa became Emine; Nvart became Fidan; Zvart became Feruz; Nazeli became Jamile; Levon became Shawket; Aram became Shukri; and Goharig became Sayide. Sadly, their daughter Knar died after contracting typhus. Mr. Hagop, Aram, and Levon were forcibly circumcised and enrolled in Turkish schools.

The Tokajians lived in Adiyaman, outwardly Islamized, for four years. Hagop worked as a tailor, wearing a *sariq* (turban) wrapped around a Turkish fez, and eventually opened his own shop. Despite this, the family continued to speak Armenian at home. Jirayr Msrlian's mother, a priest's daughter who also lived there, secretly gathered the Tokajians to sing '*Der Voghormia*.'[23] They commemorated Christian feast days, held the *vijag* during *Hampartsoum*, and observed the traditional fasts. Externally, they meticulously maintained the appearance of observing Islamic feast days and prayer hours.

After four years, Hagop heard news that the British had reached Ourfa and decided to move his family there. Upon arrival, Hagop immediately threw his fez and turban into the garbage, cursed his forced disguise, and officially returned to the Armenian nation and Christianity with his entire family.

Armenian volunteers serving in the French army had reached Cilicia and were beginning to liberate Armenian children in Turkish cities and villages who had been forcibly Islamized. The Tokajians were fortunate to

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[23] *Der Voghormia, meaning 'Lord Have Mercy,' is a central hymn of supplication in the Armenian Divine Liturgy. It serves as a solemn communal plea for divine grace, peace, and forgiveness.*

have escaped the horrors and the clutches of death to reach Ourfa. During their agonizing journey from Garin, they had witnessed the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians and countless deaths from hunger, thirst, and illness.

The family stayed in Ourfa from 1920 to 1923. When the French armies retreated, the Tokajians left as well. After a two-day stay in Jarablus, a Syrian town, they set off for Aleppo. Tragically, whatever savings they had accumulated in Ourfa were plundered by Kurds along the road. Upon reaching Aleppo, Aram enrolled in school, while Levon followed his father's footsteps as a tailor. The girls earned a living at home through Aintab-style needlework.[24]

Over time, the members of the Tokajian family married, established households, and raised children in patriotic, church-loving homes. They held firmly to Armenian traditions and ancestral customs, keeping a heartbreaking longing for Erzeroum in their hearts. Today, the Tokajian family is dispersed across various cities in Syria, Lebanon, Canada, and France, all proud of their Erzeroum heritage.

Over 1.5 million Armenians fell victim to the Armenian Genocide, which was planned by the Turkish state and executed in 1915. The cities and villages of the Armenian homeland, built up over thousands of years, were laid waste and emptied of their people. Although Western Armenia and Cilicia were lost, today a free and independent Armenia exists.

Talaat and Enver Pashas sought to annihilate the Armenian people, but they failed. Many died and many were killed, yet families like the Tokajians, Yeghiaiayans, and Yeghoyans from Garin survived. On the roads of exile, they became Muslims in appearance to save their lives, but they secretly maintained their Christian faith and national traditions. When the opportunity arose, they returned to their ancestral faith and mother tongue. They became claimants who continue to demand the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, compensation for the crimes committed, and the reclamation of their territorial and national rights.

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[24] *Aintab-style needlework is a sophisticated Armenian embroidery technique characterized by drawn thread work, cutwork, and delicate satin stitches. Traditionally featuring white-on-white floral and geometric motifs, it was a major craft in historical Aintab. Today, it remains a cherished cultural heirloom, symbolizing the resilience and identity of the Armenian diaspora.*

The descendants of the Tokajian family hold the enduring belief that they will one day return to Garin-Erzeroum and reclaim their properties and their homes.



Kourken the Patriot

The Ishkhanian family of six lived in Aykestan, the garden district of Van populated entirely by Armenians. As one of the area's most respected families, they were widely admired for their business success, community leadership, and strong faith. Garabed and Siranoush Ishkhanian had three sons and a daughter: Hovhannes, 25; Mardiros, 22; Kourken, 19; and Satenik, 16. After graduating from the prestigious Aramian Secondary School, the three brothers had taken charge of their father's commercial shop.

Garabed was a faithful and active member of the church. He served on the parish board of the neighbourhood's Holy Mother of God Church, supporting its programs and maintenance with both moral encouragement and financial backing. His youngest son, Kourken, also served at the altar as an ordained deacon.

Outside his commitments to the church and the Armenian school, Garabed was an active supporter of the Armenian self-defence movement. The aggressive policies and state-backed persecution carried out by the Ottoman government showed that Armenian life was under existential threat throughout the empire. Living alongside hostile Turkish and Kurdish irregulars without weapons had become impossible; these groups regularly raided Armenian farming villages, looting property and murdering civilians with zero legal consequences.

To halt these attacks and protect innocent lives, local revolutionary cells and *fedayee* units organized across Van. These fighters initially struck fear into corrupt Turkish officials and bandit forces, forcing the Ottoman authorities to proceed with greater caution. In response, the authorities shifted their tactics toward deception and entrapment, using false reassurances to hunt down the community leaders responsible for organizing the civilian defence.

The relative calm of daily life in Van evaporated with the outbreak of the First World War and Ottoman Turkey's entry into the conflict. Tensions between the Turkish administration and the Armenian population escalated sharply. Following orders issued directly from the central

government, the Ottoman secret police moved to arrest Armenian political figures, raid community institutions, and locate hidden arms caches.

Around that time, a notorious informant named Tavo was assassinated in the city market by Dajad Terlemezian, an ARF youth member still in his late teens. The traitor had been walking under the protection of Turkish police officers when he was shot. Instantly, an angry Turkish mob rampaged through the market, attacking and ransacking Armenian-owned businesses.

The Ishkhanian brothers hurried to shutter their storefront and get home to safety. On their way through the streets, a bullet tore through their father. Weeping, the three sons carried him back to the house. Garabed clung to life for an hour, using his final breath to leave his boys with a simple charge: "Continue my work."

As Garabed was laid to rest in the cold ground, the brothers vowed over his grave to follow his example and dedicate their lives to protecting their community and homeland.

Fifteen Armenians were killed by stray bullets that afternoon alone, leaving the entire community in deep shock. Clear that an existential threat was looming, the residents of Van began quietly gathering weapons, casting bullets, and stockpiling ammunition for self-defence.

When the First World War broke out, Ottoman Turkey entered the fight on the side of Imperial Germany. By 1915, exploiting the cover of global conflict, the Ottoman government began carrying out its premeditated plan: to deport, exile, and eradicate the Armenian population of Western Armenia.

Hundreds of thousands of families were forcibly uprooted from towns and villages across the country. Marched on foot toward the Syrian deserts with little water and no food, deportees were harassed, assaulted, and systematically murdered by Turkish gendarmes and Kurdish irregulars. In several towns where young men were still present, heroic self-defence efforts flared up. But overwhelmed by heavy artillery, regular military units, and released convicts mobilized into killer squads, those positions eventually fell, and the survivors were forced onto the deportation routes.

Van's turn came soon after. The Ottoman governor dispatched public criers and issued formal decrees ordering the Armenian population

to surrender and evacuate their districts. Coordinated by their civic and revolutionary leaders, the Armenians of Van made the historic decision to stand their ground, barricade their neighbourhoods, and defend their ancestral homes. When the regime attempted to break the city by force, it met disciplined, tenacious resistance from the Armenian defence fighters.

During the intense street-to-street fighting that ensued, Hovhannes and Mardiros Ishkhanian fell in combat, heroically giving their lives to save their community.

Kourken remained on the frontline barricades, winning widespread respect among both Armenian fighters and Ottoman officers as a fearless soldier and a master marksman. As a squad leader, he consistently led from the front, setting an example for his men during assaults on enemy positions.

Armenian resistance forces secured control across the region. With the arrival of Armenian volunteer regiments and Russian imperial units, Ottoman divisions were pushed back, and an Armenian provincial administration took shape in Van.

Under the protection of Russian and Armenian forces, the people of Van experienced two years of stability. Kourken took the opportunity to reopen the family shop in the marketplace, and business quickly recovered. At the same time, he stayed active in organizing local civil defense units, ensuring the city was prepared to counter any sudden incursions.

That stability ended abruptly in late 1917, when the Russian army withdrew from the Caucasian front following the Bolshevik revolution. Left to hold the line alone against heavily reinforced Ottoman armies, the Armenian volunteer regiments were forced to coordinate a fighting retreat alongside the civilian population.

While one group of refugees fought through Kurdish territory toward Persia and Iraq, the main body of survivors — escorted by Armenian soldiers — headed northeast toward the Ararat plain.

Kourken put his uniform back on, determined to ensure his people made it to safety. He urged his fellow soldiers never to outpace or abandon the exhausted civilians in their care. For months through heavy snow and freezing winter conditions, the rear guard fought continuous defensive actions, protecting the retreating columns step by step.

Arriving in Yerevan, Kourken secured housing for his mother and sister before returning to active duty. Before heading to the front, however, he fulfilled a lifelong dream by visiting the monastery of Holy Etchmiadzin.[25] As a student, he had read about the ancient cathedral and promised himself that he would visit the spiritual center of his nation when he grew up.

The visit took place amidst overwhelming sorrow. Thousands of sick and starving refugees from Western Armenia were sheltering across the monastery grounds in desperate conditions. Seeing their suffering firsthand, Kourken was deeply shaken. He looked at the crowds and asked himself how an ancient Christian people could be brought to the brink of total annihilation.

He entered the Mother Cathedral, knelt before the central altar, and renewed his commitment to his people:

"Lord, my father and brothers gave their lives to protect our people. I am ready to do the same once I have carried out my duty to my nation. Give me the strength to fight in the coming battles. The enemy is advancing toward the very cathedral where Jesus Christ descended—the spiritual anchor of the Armenian nation. They plan to destroy it just as they destroyed our churches in the homeland. This is the Battle of Etchmiadzin—the battle to defend our identity and our right to exist."

Leaving the cathedral, he reported directly to the frontline in Yerevan. Critical battles were breaking out across all sectors. Having devastated the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish command pushed to finish off the remaining population in Eastern Armenia and erase Holy Etchmiadzin.

Across the region, society mobilized completely. Civilians of all ages joined regular units and volunteer detachments, determined to defend their homeland by any means possible. Every fighter was resolved to make a final stand outside the gates of Etchmiadzin rather than let the sanctuary fall.

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[25] *Located in Vagharshapat, Armenia, the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin is the spiritual headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church and seat of the Catholicos of All Armenians. Built between 301 and 303 AD by Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the cathedral—meaning 'Descent of the Only Begotten"—is widely regarded as the world's oldest Christian cathedral.*

The battles of Bash-Abaran, Sardarabad, and Gharakilisa decided the fate of the Armenian people.[26] Fighting on the Gharakilisa front, Kourken and his fellow veterans from Van held off enemy advances with incredible resolve. For his leadership under fire, Kourken received multi-ple military citations and was promoted to the rank of Captain.

During a chaotic artillery bombardment, a shell detonated near his position, mortally wounding him. He was transported to a nearby field hospital where his sister Satenik was working as a nurse. Despite everything the medical team did, his wounds proved fatal. Shortly before he passed away, his mother arrived at the hospital, breaking down in tears at the sight of her third son dying.

Kourken turned to his mother and shared his final thoughts:

"Mother, please don't cry. I die at peace because I lived to see our people stand tall and rebuild. I did my duty to my homeland, my people, and my faith, following the example my father set for us. Hold your head high and walk proudly in our free country. You raised three sons and, together with our father, gave them to the cause of Armenian independence. Without mothers like you, there would be no soldiers to defend our nation. Farewell..."

Exhausted by the pain of his injuries, Kourken took his final breath.

He was laid to rest in a formal state funeral with full military honours. Senior officers and government leaders from the newly declared Republic of Armenia attended the service, paying tribute to his courage, his deep faith, and his selfless sacrifice on the battlefield.

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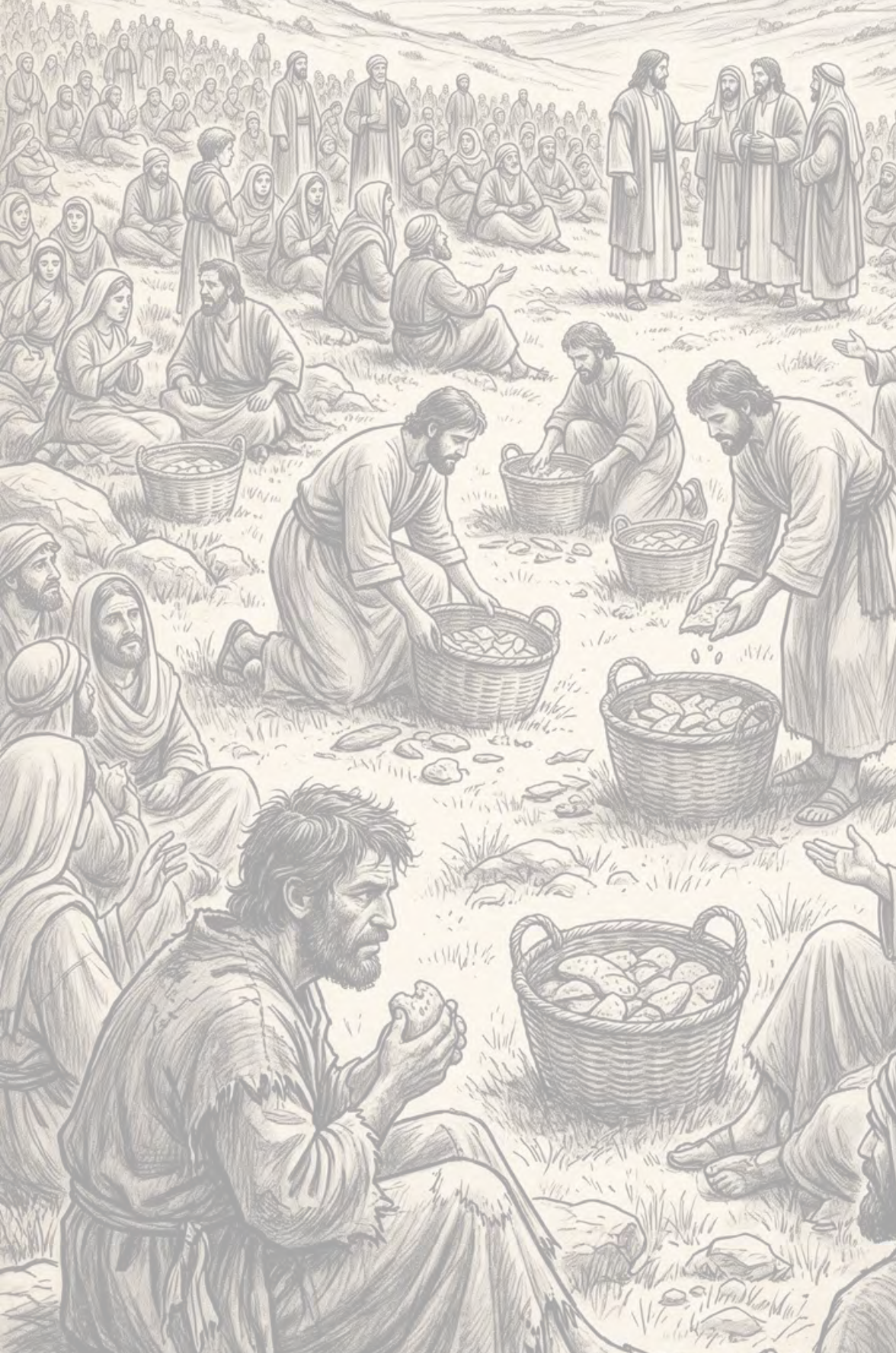
[26] *Fought in late May 1918, the battles of Sardarabad, Bash-Abaran, and Gharakilisa saw Armenian forces and civilian volunteers halt advancing Ottoman armies invading Eastern Armenia. By repelling total conquest, these decisive stands averted national annihilation and directly enabled the declaration of the First Republic of Armenia on May 28, 1918.*



Kamaghiel: The Thief Who Found Faith in Jesus's Divinity

When Jesus crossed the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee, His disciples noticed a large crowd following Him, drawn by the miracles He was performing for the sick. Jesus went up a mountain and sat down there with His disciples. Looking up and seeing the great multitude trailing after Him, Jesus asked Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"

"Two hundred pennies worth of bread is not enough for everyone to even have a little bit," Philip answered.

One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "There is a young boy here who has five barley loaves and two small fish. But what is that among so many people?"

"Have the people sit down," Jesus said.

The men sat down; there were about 5,000 of them.

Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to the disciples, who in turn distributed them to the seated crowd. He did the same with the fish. When everyone had eaten their fill, He told His disciples, "Gather the leftover fragments so that nothing is wasted."

They collected the leftovers and filled 12 baskets with the fragments from the five barley loaves. When the men saw the miracle Jesus had performed, they declared, "This is truly the prophet who is to come into the world."

Among the crowd was a Jewish thief named Kamaghiel, about 35 years old, who was infamous throughout Palestine for his robberies and thefts. After being satisfied by the bread and fish, he decided to follow Jesus constantly so he could always benefit from the free food.

Kamaghiel trailed Jesus everywhere: through Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and across the Jordan, listening to His sermons. However, he disliked the teachings and grew angry.

Seeing the crowd following Him, Jesus went up a mountain and delivered this sermon:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and

thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you, persecute you, and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven."

After listening carefully to Jesus's Beatitudes, Kamaghiel understood nothing; more accurately, he saw no benefit for his life. In fact, viewing the words as contrary to his own principles, he walked away with his head bowed.

Kamaghiel continued to follow Jesus's travels and sermons. His attention was drawn to Jesus's later words: "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

This declaration inspired a certain hope in Kamaghiel. Considering himself weary and heavy laden, he thought perhaps Jesus could give him rest by securing his livelihood.

However, his hopes were dashed when he witnessed the following event. A man ran up to Jesus, knelt down, and asked him, "Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not kill,' 'Honour your father and your mother,'" Jesus answered him.

The man replied, "Master, I have kept all these since my youth."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell everything you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

The man, who was very wealthy, frowned and walked away sorrowful.

For Kamaghiel, these words were unacceptable. Although he had no wealth, even if he did, he would never want to sell it, distribute it to the poor, and follow Jesus to be worthy of the Kingdom of God, which he did not believe in anyway.

Months passed, and Kamaghiel continued to steal precious

objects, jewellery, and hidden money from unprotected homes. As a thief, his reputation had spread across all regions of Palestine, and the Roman authorities mobilized to capture, judge, and imprison this notorious criminal.

Kamaghiel, hearing of the death of Lazarus, a wealthy resident of Bethany, decided to rob his house. He knew Lazarus's two sisters, Martha and Mary, lived there, but figured they would be busy with funeral arrangements, leaving the house empty.

With this conviction, Kamaghiel set off from Jericho. Arriving in Bethany, he asked the first person he met for the location of the deceased Lazarus's residence. The man, assuming he was a relative arriving from out of town, kindly provided a detailed explanation.

Kamaghiel easily found the house. Circling the building, he approached the main door, where he was met with the barking of a large mastiff. The house featured a spacious courtyard surrounded by high walls, which were topped with sharp pieces of broken glass to deter intruders.

Following his scouting, Kamaghiel found a butcher in the Bethany market, bought half a kilogram of meat, and mixed it with the poison he carried. He waited until night fell and Mary and Martha had fallen asleep. Around midnight, he climbed the wall and threw the poisoned meat into the courtyard. The guard dog caught the scent, approached, and after taking only a few bites, lay down lifeless.

While leaning over the outer side of the wall to jump into the courtyard, Kamaghiel caught his foot on the sharp glass and was seriously wounded. Once he threw himself into the courtyard, he found he was unable to walk; however, it was impossible to remain there in that state. He crawled toward the house, entered the kitchen, cleaned his wounds with water, and bandaged them to stop the bleeding. After resting for two hours, he entered the rooms and filled his bag with valuable objects. When he prepared to leave with his plunder, he could barely move his foot due to the unbearable pain, yet he did not dare stay.

Lazarus's sisters loved Jesus deeply and believed He was the Son of God. Before Lazarus died, they had sent a messenger to Jesus to say that Lazarus, whom He loved very much, was sick. Upon learning of the illness, Jesus said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified through it."

Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. After hearing of the illness, Jesus stayed two more days where He was. After those two days, He told His disciples, "Let us go into Judea again."

The disciples protested: "Rabbi, the Jews recently tried to stone You; are You going there again?"

"Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going so that I may wake him out of sleep," Jesus answered.

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he is asleep, he will recover."

However, Jesus was speaking of Lazarus's death, while they thought He meant natural sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the grave for four days. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet Him, while Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now, whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again. I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha answered, "Yes, Lord, I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

After she said this, Martha went and secretly called her sister Mary, telling her that Jesus wanted to see her. When Mary rose quickly and went out, the Jews who had come to the house to comfort her followed.

Kamaghiel, sheltered in the dark room, listened to these conversations. Hearing the others leave the house, he slowly, limping, went out and followed Mary and the Jews who had joined her.

When Mary arrived where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet, saying, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was troubled in spirit and asked, "Where have you laid him?"

They said, "Lord, come and see."

Jesus wept. The Jews remarked, “See how He loved him!”

Some of them asked, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind, have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus came to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay against the entrance. “Take away the stone,” Jesus said.

“Lord, by this time there will be a bad odour, for he has been dead four days,” Martha, the dead man’s sister, said to Him.

“Did I not tell you that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?” Jesus replied.

Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was laid. Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I know that You always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing by, that they may believe that You sent Me.”

After He had spoken, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!”

And he who was dead came out, his feet and hands bound with grave cloths and his face wrapped with a cloth. “Loose him, and let him go,” Jesus said to them.

Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, upon seeing what Jesus had done, believed in Him. However, some of them went their way to the Pharisees and told them what things Jesus had done.

Kamaghiel, who had followed Jesus and Mary and was present for the resurrection of Lazarus, approached Jesus weeping. Kneeling before Him, he said:

“Lord, I am Kamaghiel, the notorious thief. Hearing of Lazarus’s death, I came from Jericho to Bethany to steal the valuables in his house. While carrying out my plan, I was wounded, and now I can barely walk with a limp. Following Your travels, I have heard all Your sermons, through which You showed the divine way to live humanely and to be worthy of the heavenly kingdom. Listening to You, I could not accept the divine truth. However, today, seeing Your divine miracle — the resurrection of Lazarus, a man dead for four days — I believe that You are the Son of God, and only he who believes in You can be worthy of the kingdom. I repent for the inhumane acts I have committed: causing misery to many families by stealing, robbing, and sometimes murdering. Lord, forgive my sins; their weight has begun to choke me,” he said.

Jesus, after hearing Kamaghiel's sincere repentance, forgave him, advising him to live a life pleasing to God from now on by doing good every day and observing all the divine commandments.



Arabian Virtue

Ourfa, known since antiquity as Urhai, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the Near East. Following Alexander the Great's campaigns around 300 BC, the city was refounded as Edessa, before later taking the name Urfa under Ottoman rule. Across centuries, Ourfa served as a major crossroads of culture, trade, and learning. By 1915, it boasted a vibrant Armenian community numbering roughly 30,000. Despite a history scored by siege, fire, and tragic devastation, this ancient crossroads remains indelibly marked by its profound Armenian spirit and cultural memory.

The region of Ourfa is considered the first cradle of Christianity. Following the traditions of Abgar V and St. Dastarak, historical accounts present the visit of the Apostle St. Thaddeus and his establishment of the world's most ancient church as a historical reality. The greatest figures of the Armenian Church, from Khorenatsi to Nerses Shnorhali, drew essential material for their works from this city. Furthermore, the link between Ourfa and the invention of the Armenian alphabet is a proven fact.

The early saints, ascetics, visionaries, and pioneers of the Eastern churches lived in Ourfa, paving the way for Christian ideology through their martyrdom. The city was regularly ruled by Armenian sovereigns, from Dickran the Great to King Ardashes. From the Middle Ages until the appearance of the Ottomans, numerous Armenian princes and generals established dominion over its strong fortresses. Notable landmarks include the St. Astvatsatsin Church, built by the Apostle Thaddeus, and the St. Sarkis Monastery, situated at the foot of a mountain.

For centuries, the Armenian people of Ourfa lived in harmony while adhering to their traditions and customs. Though subjected to Turkish domination, peace eventually prevailed in a city exhausted by continuous fighting. During this period, up until 1850, many Armenians settled in Ourfa, arriving primarily from Sasoun, Van, and Malatia, with a few originating from Persia.

Following the Hamidian massacres of 1895, the Armenians of Ourfa experienced a national awakening that lasted until 1915. During

these years, the city's future heroes grew up as the seeds were sown for the 1915 harvest.

In 1915, the Ottoman Turkish government launched the planned annihilation of the Armenian people. Western Armenia was systematically cleared of its native population, who were driven onto forced deportation marches and targeted for extermination along the way. Starving, dehydrated, and exposed to the elements, convoys were forced toward the Syrian deserts of Meskene, Raqqa, Markada, and Deir ez-Zor, enduring endless robbery and violence from Turkish troops, Kurdish irregulars, and armed Chechen bands.

In several key cities and towns, Armenian communities organized armed self-defence. Defiant resistance efforts in Van, Sasoun, Shabin-Karahisar, Ourfa, Aintab, and Hadjin repelled enemy assaults, tying down Ottoman troops and saving tens of thousands of lives from certain slaughter.

In the fall of 1915, the Armenians of Ourfa wrote one of the most remarkable chapters of resistance in the city's history. Led by Mgrditch Yotneghpayrian and his brother Sako, alongside Haroutioun Rastkelenian, Levon Cherchian, Kevork Alahaydoyan, Missak Ketenjian, and many other fighters, our compatriots organized a tenacious defence to safeguard the honour and lives of their community. Their stand remains one of the proudest moments in the Armenian liberation struggle.

Following the 1918 Armistice, survivors who had scattered across the Ottoman Empire and miraculously survived the Genocide gathered in Aleppo. When British and French troops took control of Ourfa, Armenian families followed closely behind, eager to return to their homes and rebuild.

However, Mustafa Kemal's nationalist forces quickly mobilized, exploiting political divisions among the Western powers and placing the returning survivors in immediate peril. In February 1920, heavy fighting erupted between French units and Kemalist forces in Ourfa. The Armenian population quickly mobilized, fortifying their neighbourhoods and holding off Turkish attacks for two months.

When French troops ultimately retreated from Cilicia, the remaining Armenian community had no choice but to leave Ourfa permanently,

finding refuge in Syria and Lebanon. For thousands of families, a long chapter of life in the diaspora had begun.

Among the 30,000 Armenians of Ourfa, the Sarkisian family stood as a tragic example of this devastating history. Sarkis and Lusia Sarkisian had eight children: six sons and two daughters — Yeghia, Garbis, Hovhannes, Krikor, Mgrditch, Hagop, Mariam, and Khanum.

During the heroic battle of Ourfa, the father, Sarkis, and his sons Garbis, Hovhannes, and Krikor were martyred while fighting bravely. The eldest son, Yeghia, was not in the city at the time, as he was a conscript.

The Sarkisian brothers had a very wealthy maternal aunt. She employed Armenian women to produce Aintab needlework, which she exported abroad. When the deportation began, Aunt Shamel, who lived with the Sarkisian family, sewed her gold pieces into the clothes of the surviving Hagop. Hiring a special carriage, she followed the exiles. Sadly, the Sarkisian sisters were unable to withstand the hardships of the road; they fell ill and died.

When the exiles reached Raqqa under the supervision of Turkish soldiers and officers, Aunt Shamel also passed away. The youngest child, 5-year-old Hagop, was left entirely alone. A Turkish officer, having heard that the deceased was a rich woman, began a search. Finding nothing among her possessions, he examined Hagop's clothes and seized the gold pieces sewn inside.

During this time, the chief of the local Sultan Arab tribe saw the helpless Hagop and took charge of him. He led the boy home by the hand and presented him to his wife, saying, "Khanum, here I have brought your son, Ahmad Sultan." The Sultan family had previously lost one of their own children; while shooting a bird with a slingshot, the stone had instantly killed his younger brother, Ahmad.

The Sultan family treated Hagop, whom they renamed Ahmad Sultan, like their own son. For about a year and a half, they provided him with special, nutritious food — especially lights (sheep lungs) — so that he could regain his health.

Following the self-defence battles of Ourfa, the condition of the children was particularly painful. While newborns and children up to 10 years old were left to their fate, the older ones took the road of exile with their mothers. The Millet Khan and the Chalonts Khan were filled with

countless children. The executioners intended to gather these children to prepare a new generation of Janissaries.

In those days, Mgrditch Sarkisian, Hagop's older brother, had escaped the massacre and was left orphaned, sick, and exhausted. A relative in the Khan took him and handed him over to a Turkish official who had arrived to gather the unsupervised children.

Mgrditch was placed in the Kulahian house, which was supervised by a bloodthirsty man named Razmik Beg. Under his watch, children were routinely beaten to death; after only two weeks, a mere four boys remained out of 40. Soon, however, a new director was appointed with the task of relocating the surviving orphans to former American institutions and the St. Sarkis Monastery.

The Turkish government employed every possible method to Turkify these children. In time, a group of orphans was loaded into carriages and sent to Suruch, then to Islahiye, and finally to the former French orphanage of Shilkh. There, the arriving Armenian orphans were mixed with more than 500 Turkish and Kurdish children. While at Shilkh, Mgrditch became seriously ill. Following his recovery, he was transferred to the Adana orphanage, which was named Enver Pasha *Dar-el-Yetim*.

One day, Enver Pasha himself visited the institution. As he walked past the orphans standing in line, he approached Mgrditch to ask for his name and surname. Mgrditch saluted and replied that his name was Mohammad Nuri. Despite this, a Turkish official informed the Pasha that the boy was actually a Turkified orphan from Ourfa. Upon hearing this, the Pasha told the official: "Send this boy to Istanbul; I will adopt him."

Two days later, with the help of a soldier, Mgrditch was sent to Istanbul and delivered to Enver Pasha's palace by an officer. A few days later, the Pasha returned home and said to Mgrditch: "My son, I singled out only you from the orphanage to be my foster son. Today, you will be taken to a military school. You must work hard to get a good education and serve your Turkish homeland in the future."

That same day, the Turkish officer took Mgrditch to the Harbiye School,[27] where he stayed for some time. He had already forgotten the Armenian language; he would have been lost as an Armenian had the armistice not arrived. A few months later, he passed from Istanbul to Aleppo, then Aintab, and finally Ourfa. There, he found his older brother, Yeghia.

Hearing that his younger brother was in Hamra, a village in Raqqa, Mgrditch left for the region. He travelled from Raqqa to Hamra, where considerable time was spent proving Hagop's identity. Finally, Hagop's new father, Shaykh Hiusēyn Sultan, confirmed the truth of the facts and willingly handed Hagop — who had become completely 'Arabized' — over to Mgrditch.

Mgrditch's older brother, Yeghia, settled in Arab Punar, where he opened a shop and took care of his livelihood. Meanwhile, Mgrditch opened a shop with Hagop in Raqqa, and the business was quite successful. After working together for a few years, Hagop opened his own shop. In his youth, he married Miss Mari Zabunian from Aleppo and was blessed with five children: three sons and two daughters.

Hagop's commercial business recorded great success. In addition to his personal work, he took Armenian language lessons from Father Oshagan's son, Garo Sayeyan, and from the teachers of the Raqqa school. Eventually, he undertook the office of chairman for the Raqqa National School and the church parish council, which he administered with great competence.

However, life in Raqqa was disturbed by the Syrian rebellion against the French mandate, which resulted in the killing of many French soldiers in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. During that time, the Raqqa market was looted. However, Hagop Sarkissian's (Ahmad Sultan's) Arab brothers arrived in Raqqa armed; they protected their 'brother's' shop and house with weapons, demonstrating the virtue and nobility of the Arabs toward their Armenian brother.

Hagop Sarkissian lived in Raqqa until 1972. Apart from his commercial business, he engaged in cotton cultivation with his Arab brothers,

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[27] *Founded in 1834 by Sultan Mahmud II, the Turkish Military Academy (Harbiye) is Turkey's oldest military academy. Now part of the National Defense University in Ankara, it provides five-year officer training.*

establishing water pumps to supply the cotton fields with water from the Euphrates River.

In 1972, he was forced to move to Aleppo. His children had grown up, and there was no scope for them to remain and work in Raqqa. Eventually, the family settled in Toronto, where some of his children had already moved. A few years after they settled in Toronto, two of his Arab brothers, missing their 'brother,' travelled to Canada. With deep feelings of kinship, they spent several days with their Armenian 'brother's' family.

A few years ago, upon hearing of Hagop's youngest daughter's visit to Aleppo, the Sultan brothers invited her to their village and organized an exceptional reception. With precious gifts, they escorted her back to Aleppo where she was staying, showcasing Arab hospitality and sincere kinship. To this day, they continue to maintain their close bond with the Sarkissian family.



Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Have Believed

After graduating from the Karen Jeppe Jemaran in Aleppo, Ara Abrilian decided against continuing higher education. He had just started an apprenticeship learning mechanics under Master Diran in the Bostan-Kulab district when he was called up for mandatory military service in the Syrian army.

With a high school baccalaureate and strong fluency in Arabic from his Jemaran schooling, Ara handled his military coursework without difficulty. Before his first year was out, he earned a promotion to *Naqib*—serving as a corporal and squad leader. His quick rise sparked jealousy among several recruits who had failed their own tests. As a young non-commissioned officer, Ara felt a personal responsibility to excel and present a positive image of the Armenian community to his commanders. He oversaw recruit training, instructing new enlistees in basic weapons handling, theory, drill formation, and military protocol.

Routine military service continued smoothly until the day an anti-Armenian faction ambushed him. Several soldiers attacked Ara with heavy clubs, leaving him severely beaten and hospitalized. Although the attackers were court-martialled and punished, the assault left an indelible mark on Ara's morale.

Once his physical injuries healed, Ara was fundamentally changed. Demoralized and alienated, he kept his distance from the unit, grew to despise the army, and did only the bare minimum—a sudden shift in attitude that his commanding officers quickly picked up on.

His parents, Kegham and Keghouhi Abrilian, were deeply worried by his withdrawal and exhaustion. They tried to reassure him, emphasizing that the mandatory two-year draft was almost over and that he would soon be able to start over on his own terms. But Ara had reached his breaking point and laid out his reality:

"Father, Mother, the only reason I survived that day was luck and a few conscientious soldiers who stepped in. I came within inches of being killed. If I stay and try to finish my service as a faithful soldier, I will spend every single day watching my back, waiting for the next ambush. If you

want me to have a future, you need to make peace with the fact that I have to leave Syria. There is no other way for me to stay safe."

Ara's parents reluctantly gave their blessing to his dangerous plan. They knew that if he was stopped or suspected at the border, he would face immediate court-martial and bring severe trouble to the Armenian community.

With their consent, Ara paid a high fee to an underground fixer to obtain a passport through unofficial channels. Taking advantage of his scheduled annual leave, he changed into civilian clothes and crossed into Lebanon. Through more bribes and connections in Beirut, he managed to secure a flight to Amsterdam.

Once he landed in the Netherlands, he asked around until he found the local Armenian community centre. With the support of local Armenian groups and community members, he rented a small room. Shortly after, he found a job in an auto repair shop owned by an Armenian mechanic, while friends helped him submit an application for refugee status.

For the first time, Ara was living thousands of miles away from everything he had ever known. Every day, homesickness hit him hard as he thought of his parents, his brothers and sisters, his relatives, and the friends he had grown up with in day school and Sunday school.

His roots in the Aleppo community were deep. He had finished his primary schooling at the Armenian National Sahagian School before moving on to the Karen Jeppe Jemaran. Alongside his regular classes, he had spent 12 consecutive years in the central Sunday school system— from age 5 until 17 —eventually graduating with an official diploma bearing the seal of the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia.

In the quiet of his room at night, memories played back in his mind like a movie reel. Thinking of his family brought constant tears to his eyes. Even though he had fled to save his own life, he often second-guessed his choice, worried sick about the pressure and interrogation his parents were facing from the Syrian military police. He did not dare send a single letter home, knowing their house was likely under police watch and that any mail would be intercepted.

Over time, Ara built close ties with several Armenian families who had settled in the Netherlands as refugees. Many were *Sasountsis* who had

emigrated from Turkey; while some still spoke their regional Sasoun dialect, the majority could speak only Kurdish.

Thanks to his strong command of standard Armenian, Ara took on the secretarial duties at the Armenian Centre, quickly earning the trust and respect of the community. After putting in long hours of heavy mechanical work during the day, he spent his evenings gladly assisting local organizations and helping fellow newcomers navigate everyday paperwork.

As a graduate and deacon of the Sunday school of the Holy Forty Martyrs Armenian Apostolic Church, he had learned their inspiring hymns, prayers, and ceremonies. When a visiting *Vartabed*[28] came to Amsterdam to celebrate the Holy Liturgy,[29] he willingly performed the duty of the chief deacon, causing deep satisfaction to the Armenian faithful and the officiating clergyman.

Days turned into weeks, and Ara was still unable to contact home. In Aleppo, his parents frantically searched for any news of their son, terrified of what might have happened to him. The long silence was finally broken when Hovhannes Keleshian, an acquaintance who had emigrated to the Netherlands, arrived back in Aleppo. He delivered a letter and money directly to Ara's mother, giving the family a firsthand account of how their son was managing in Europe.

Amsterdam was a world apart from Aleppo. It was an open, modern European city where lifestyles and social norms differed vastly from the close-knit, conservative Armenian community in which Ara had been raised. Behaviours considered taboo in Aleppo were completely standard in Dutch society. While the cultural gap took getting used to, Ara adapted to his environment while staying true to his family's values.

For two years, life in Amsterdam remained stable and secure. Then, a sudden crisis hit: Armenian militants carried out an assassination attempt against the Turkish ambassador. In response, Dutch immigration

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[28] *A Vartabed (or Vardapet) is a scholarly rank in the Armenian Apostolic Church, conferred upon celibate priests who have attained a doctorate in theology. Granted the 'staff of authority' to preach and teach, they serve as intellectual leaders.*

authorities issued an immediate expulsion order, giving all Armenians without legal residence permits just seven days to leave the country.

The announcement hit Ara like a shockwave. He was trapped: returning to Syria was impossible, and he lacked the travel documents and visas to enter any other country legally. He stayed awake all night, searching for a way out. The local Armenian community was overwhelmed and unable to shield the more than a hundred refugees facing immediate deportation.

After the American Embassy rejected his application, Ara decided to try the Canadian Embassy, handing in his immigration paperwork in person. The Canadian ambassador found the young man's application compelling and called him in for an interview the very next day. Ara arrived early, clean-shaven, and neatly dressed. The ambassador was struck by his fluency, maturity, and sincere demeanour:

"Ara, you want to build a life in Canada. Why are you so determined to go there specifically?"

"Canada is a free, prosperous, and democratic country," Ara answered directly. "It is a society built on fairness and good character."

"That sounds wonderful," the ambassador noted, "but how can you know that so confidently when you've never actually been there?"

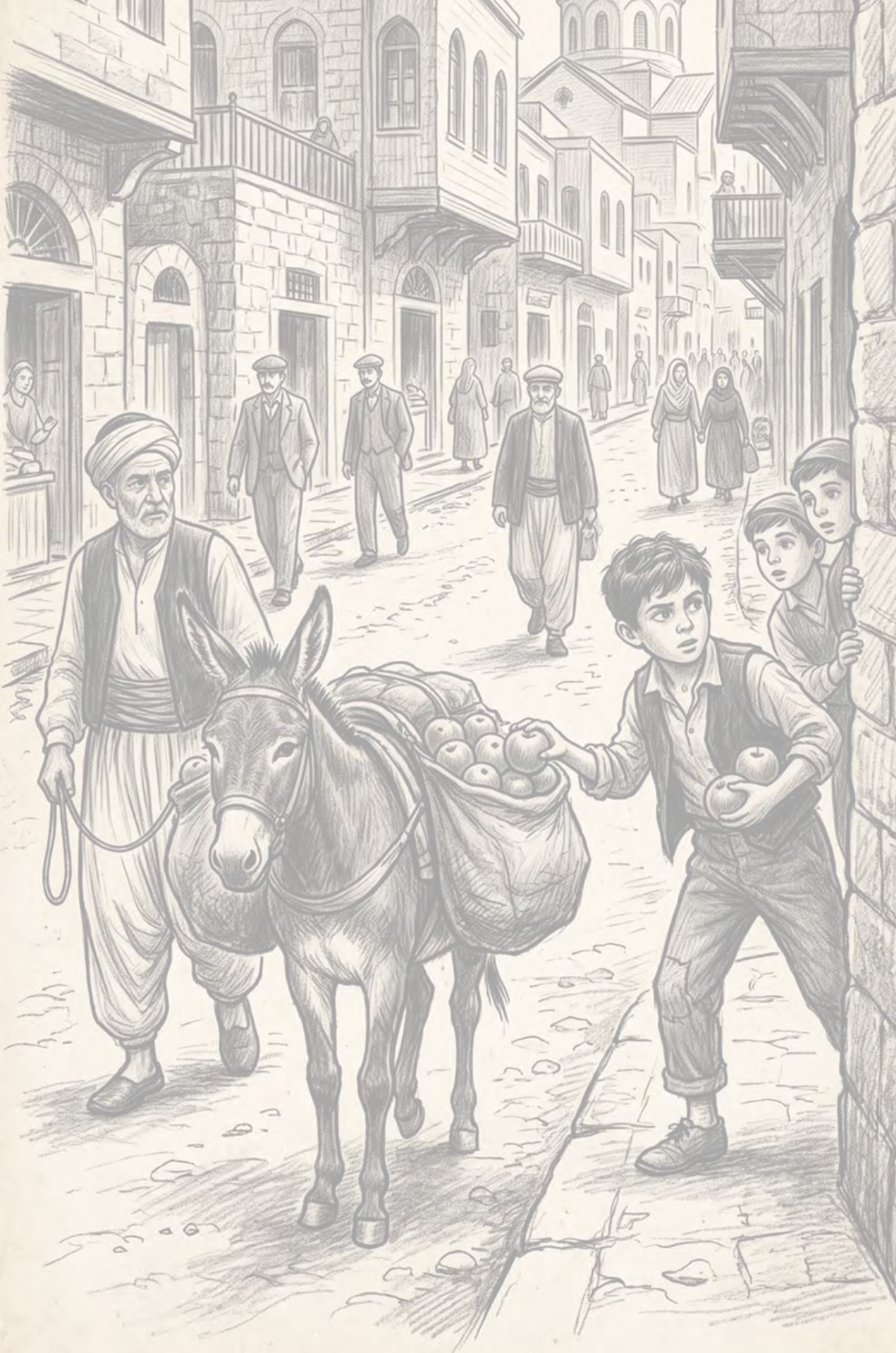
"It's true, I haven't," Ara replied. "But as Jesus said: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

The ambassador, a man of faith himself, was genuinely moved by the answer. He approved Ara on the spot, handing him the medical forms required to finalize his permanent resident papers. Within days, Ara had his visa in hand. He boarded a flight to Montreal, where Father Armen Ishkhanian, parish priest of St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church, met him and helped him settle into a small rental apartment.

Two weeks after landing in Montreal, Ara learned that his former Sunday school director from Aleppo was living in Toronto. He looked up the number in the phone directory and called him right away. After reconnecting, Ara asked if he could travel to Toronto to visit him.

Ara spent two days with his former teacher, reminiscing about their years in Aleppo and recounting his journey from Syria to Amsterdam and finally to Canada.

"I owe my landing in Canada to you," Ara told him warmly. "You taught us the Gospel, Christian values, and how to live with faith. It was a single verse you taught us in class — 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' — that opened the doors of Canada for me. I had to come see you in person to thank you."



The Making of a Noble Man

"Egmshu, harami, aqrut!" ("Catch the impudent thief!") shouted the street vendor, running after a 10-year-old boy who slipped away like lightning. Out of breath and well past 50, the peddler gave up and turned back to his apple-laden donkey, resuming his daily route through the Armenian streets of Aleppo's Nor Kyough quarter.

As the vendor held the reins and crossed the street opposite Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church without looking back, Mher — the middle son of the Krikorian family — stepped quietly from around the corner. Known throughout the district as an adventurous prankster and the archrival of every donkey driver in town, Mher had earned the neighbourhood nickname '*chete*' for his rebellious streak and quick payback. He snatched two large apples from the saddlebags and disappeared in a flash, handing the fresh fruit to his downcast friends, who ate it gratefully. In Nor Kyough's First District, nearly every Arab fruit merchant ended up paying an informal tax from their load to the local child ringleader.

Despite his troublemaking on the streets, Mher served faithfully as an altar server and deacon at Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church under the guidance of senior deacons Armen Bedrosian and Vartan Seraydarian. The church sexton, Varteres, had a soft spot for the boy because Mher was always ready to step up and toll the heavy church bell whenever a funeral procession approached the gates.

Academically, Mher was just as sharp. He walked to the Sahagian School every day, carefully avoiding the thick mud that filled the unpaved roads after heavy rain. He stayed on top of his lessons and finished the school year at the top of his class. His excellent report cards brought immense satisfaction to his teachers and his parents, who happily looked the other way when it came to his street antics. Like many children of Genocide survivors living in hardship in Aleppo, Mher carried a fierce, deeply ingrained resentment toward the Turkish regime, holding it squarely accountable for his family's poverty and displacement.

One night, after lengthy planning, Mher convinced Sarkis, who was two years his senior, to help him. Securing a large sack, they entered the Bostan Pasha garden and began picking eggplants. Hearing approaching footsteps, they waited in dead silence for the gardener to pass. Mher

prayed they would not be caught. The gardener passed quickly and actu-ally stepped on Mher's right arm, but because the garden soil was soft, it did not cause him excessive pain.

Five minutes after the gardener left, Mher and Sarkis reached home trembling with fear, shouldering their eggplant-filled burdens. Mher's parents sternly scolded them, condemning the act as theft. They warned Mher that if the directors of the Karen Jeppe Jemaran heard of such deeds, they might withdraw their support. In that case, he would grow up uneducated and spend his life as a thief, a robber, or a porter.

The garden trespassing ceased following his father's threats. By then, he was 12 years old and belonged to a group of unruly friends who held a grudge against their school teachers, claiming that the faculty prac-tised favouritism and failed to give the students fair grades.

Mher and his friends eventually secured cap guns and raided Miss Mari Orchanian's apartment. Using the explosive plugs, they created a ter-rible commotion that echoed throughout the neighbourhood. When the incident reached the director via Miss Orchanian's complaint, the boys were summoned for questioning. They attempted to justify their actions by claiming that Miss Orchanian would place the heater directly under her desk during the cold winter while they froze, noting that the young lady's shins would turn red from the heat. Unswayed, the director punished the unruly students and threatened to expel them if such behaviour ever hap-pened again.

Several eccentric and troubled souls lived in Nor Kyough. The most notorious was Agosh, who roamed the streets making foul noises, muttering to himself, and spitting at everyone who passed. He naturally became a regular target for neighbourhood boys like Mher.

But the most painful incident of all involved Khosrov, a blind man. One day, as Khosrov made his way through the quarter with the help of his walking cane, passing *Sasountsi* Krikor's bakery near the Karen Jeppe Orphanage, a gang of kids singled him out. They started har-assing the defenseless man, pelting him with watermelon rinds, melon peelings, and kitchen scraps, before graduating to small rocks.

Unable to see where the missiles were coming from, blind Khosrov spun in circles, swinging his cane blindly through the air to protect

his face. He shouted curses and begged them to stop, but the boys only laughed harder, treating his distress like a game.

Mher was right in the middle of it. Looking to get an even bigger reaction, he stepped in close to taunt Khosrov to his face. In that split second, Khosrov's cane connected hard across Mher's head. The blow knocked Mher flat on the pavement. Snapping in fury, the blind man dropped to his knees, grabbed Mher's arm in an iron grip, and began pummeling him relentlessly. It was only when shocked adult onlookers stepped in and pulled Khosrov away that Mher was finally freed.

Mher had finally suffered the penalty for his heartless mischief. While his various adventures and acts of malice continued for a time, he eventually followed the advice of his father and brother and joined the Homenetmen[30] scouts. Every Sunday and Wednesday, he immersed himself in the scouting discipline and education. The knowledge he gained through Homenetmen, combined with a burgeoning Armenian national consciousness, gradually began to distance him from his anarchic past.

While in the fifth grade at the Sahagian School, Mher was seized with indignation upon discovering an Arab merchant setting up a commercial pitch directly within the open courtyard of the Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church. With a pack animal laden with sacks of pungent onions, the hawker stood unperturbed, extolling the sweetness of his crop to every Armenian parishioner who passed.

To Mher, this was the perfect excuse for a prank. During the lunch break, he talked two of his closest friends into joining him. Squeezing onto the vendor's donkey, they rode it triumphantly through the streets of Nor Kyough, waving to onlookers like conquerors.

Eventually, the donkey grew weary of the erratic riding, and the boys, having had their fill of the stunt, returned to the church courtyard. The onion vendor, who had despaired of ever finding his animal, spotted the three boys still mounted. Enraged, he approached them, shouting curses.

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[30] *Founded in 1918, Homenetmen (the Armenian General Athletic Union and Scouts) fosters physical and intellectual growth among Armenian youth. Guided by the motto 'Rise and Raise,' it blends scouting and athletics to preserve national identity*

To avoid being caught, the boys made a series of sudden movements that caused the donkey's saddle to slip. Mher, who was driving the animal, was the first to tumble onto the medium-sized stones of the courtyard, with the other boys falling directly on top of him. Mher's left arm was dislocated at the elbow, causing him excruciating pain.

Running home in agony, Mher explained the incident to his parents. They immediately took him to Sarkis the baker, a man on the main avenue of Nor Kyough who had earned a reputation as a local bone-setter.[31] Sarkis prepared a poultice of egg, soap, and flour, rubbed the mixture onto the arm, and bandaged it after popping the elbow back into place. Having received his fee, he wished the boy a speedy recovery.

However, when the bandages were removed a month later, Mher's arm would not bend; it was as stiff as a piece of wood. Sarkis's excuses offered no logical path to healing, so Mher's father was forced to take him to Apreh, a *Sasountsi* bone-setter. The *Sasountsi* man instructed them to find tiny fish sold in the Jideydie district of Aleppo, crush them, and bandage them to the elbow until they began to smell. Only then were they to bring him back.

When Mher finally appeared before Abré, reeking of fish, the man unbandaged the arm and washed the elbow thoroughly with hot water and soap. Then, with a sudden, swift movement of his hand, he forced the elbow to bend.

Subsequently, through daily exercise and rubbing with hot water and soap, Mher regained the natural position of his arm.

Following these incidents and adventures, Mher joined the ranks of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation's (ARF) Vartanian Youth Union in Nor Kyough. There, he received a national and ideological education, vowing to serve his nation, his homeland, and his church. He graduated from the National Sahagian School with honours. However, much to the sorrow of both Mher and his parents, he had to appear on stage and take the group graduation photo wearing the uniform of a compatriot's son; his father simply did not have the money to buy him a new one.

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[31] *A bone-setter is a traditional healer specializing in the manual manipulation of fractures and dislocations. Predating modern orthopedics, these practitioners, often called 'folk surgeons,' relied on anatomical intuition and hereditary techniques.*

Over the years, that naughty boy — that adventurous and unruly child — transformed into an honest, hardworking, and conscientious young man. His patriotism and devotion to the church brought great honour to his parents and his nation.

Whenever his acquaintances expressed worry over their own mischievous offspring, his father would tell them: "Don't worry about your naughty children. When a naughty child grows up, he becomes the exact opposite: very wise and noble."



Lieutenant Hagop

Lieutenant— a French military rank equivalent to a company commander in the Armenian army — was a title that Hagop Tatoyan, a native of Kilis, unlawfully acquired for a few hours in Aleppo under extraordinary circumstances.

In 1922, after the French armies withdrew from Cilicia, the Armenians of Kilis once again fled their ancestral lands. They found refuge in Aleppo, Syria, where they were welcomed by the noble Arab people. Tavit and Vartouhi Tatoyan reached the city with their children: Hagop, *Hampartsoum*, and Garpis. Using the financial means they possessed, they managed to rent a house in the Trab El Ghourabeh neighbourhood. David found work with a baker to ensure the family's livelihood, leaving only the matter of the children's education. This issue was resolved through the intercession of Reverend Der Mgrditch A. Father Mouradian, the spiritual pastor of the Holy Forty Martyrs Church. The three children, aged 5, 7, and 10, began attending Haigazian College, much to their parents' satisfaction.

As the school years passed, it became apparent that the eldest son, Hagop, had begun to neglect his lessons. Through formal letters of observation, the school administration expressed dissatisfaction regarding his laziness and lack of discipline. Despite his father's reprimands, threats, and beatings, Hagop's rebellious behaviour persisted. Having exhausted all means to set the boy on the right path, the director of the college finally expelled him, causing the Tatoyan family great distress.

Hagop's desperate father turned to a blacksmith friend, asking him to take the boy on as an apprentice to learn a trade. Unfortunately, Hagop did not settle there either. At the age of 18, he ran away from home and enlisted in the French army for a three-year term. During his service, he learned to speak French well and became proficient with weaponry.

Upon leaving the army, he formed a gang with two friends, Iskender and Movses, who had served alongside him. They began robbing houses and shops, amassing a great deal of wealth. Tragically, during these raids, they heartlessly committed murders to eliminate the risk of arrest. Despite the efforts of the police, their pursuits yielded no results. Using incredible cunning and their military training, the thieves consistently

broke through police cordons and vanished without a trace.

One day, Hagop decided to organize a major daylight robbery. He donned a French lieutenant's uniform, complete with insignia and decorations. On his way to a large jewellery store on Boulevard de France, he encountered a French officer wearing the exact same uniform and rank. The officer saluted, intending to get acquainted with a colleague who displayed such professional decorations, as he knew no such officer existed in his garrison.

When the officer approached to ask his name and station, Hagop sensed the deception would be revealed. To avoid arrest, he drew his pistol and ordered the officer to strip off his uniform and run toward Baghdad Station without looking back. To save his life, the officer obeyed; nearly naked, he fled toward the station as commanded. Following this incident, the public attached the title to Hagop's name, calling him Lieutenant Hagop.

Years passed as the gang continued their banditry. However, on an unfortunate day for the trio, they were finally surrounded and arrested. After a trial, they were sentenced to 15 years in prison.

In prison, Hagop and his companions spent sad, gloomy days. They obsessed over a way to escape and live freely again, hoping to continue their ruinous adventures once they had crossed the Syrian border.

Lieutenant Hagop, having entered his 32nd year, was becoming pessimistic as he noticed the first white hairs appearing on his head. He and his companions asked visiting friends to procure digging tools and hand them over to a military guard. Having been successfully bribed, the guard secretly delivered the tools to the cell. A few weeks later, the prisoners began to dig into the wall of their shared room. Every night, during the quiet hours when the prison was asleep, they worked away at the stone. With the help of their friendly soldier, they dumped the excavated dirt into a well in the courtyard.

After a year of painstaking work, they managed to open a passage the width of a person. Hagop slipped through the opening and, navigating a surprising series of passageways, reached another well. He climbed out and found himself in the courtyard of a house quite far from the prison. Without a sound, he opened the outer gate and disappeared into the night. However, he was soon haunted by a desperate question: where could he

hide once morning came and his escape was exposed?

He considered going to his father's house but decided to avoid the old man's merciless gaze and certain curse. Instead, he sought out his cousin, Hovhannes, who lived in the fourth district of Nor Kyough. Hovhannes welcomed his relative with love; however, his house was crowded with three children and deemed unsuitable for a fugitive. He suggested that Hagop take shelter at his mother-in-law's house, as her husband had recently died and the home was quiet.

Months passed, and despite intensive police searches and interrogations, Hagop remained at large. In an attempt to find his trail, the police released his two friends, Iskender and Movses, who had lacked the audacity to use the tunnel and had remained in prison. Through their own clandestine channels, the pair eventually located the Lieutenant's hiding place. They suggested he leave Aleppo entirely and take refuge in the 'Kurdish Mountain' (Jebel Kurd), within the territory of a local tribal chief.

Armed with daggers and 10-shot Colt pistols, Lieutenant Hagop and his two friends finally left the widow's house. They moved to the Kurdish Mountain, where they remained for some time, finally enjoying the life of freedom they had long craved.

The Kurdish tribal chief, under whose protection the three fugitives lived, eventually ordered them to assassinate the Sheikh of the Mourid tribe in exchange for a substantial sum of money. Although the mission was difficult and fraught with danger, they could not refuse, given their precarious status as refugees. They armed themselves with more modern weapons and travelled to the Mourid area to track the Sheikh's movements. However, after weeks of searching and inquiries, they failed to locate him. Forced to abandon their mission, they left the Kurdish Mountain without meeting the chief and returned to their former hiding place.

Following this turn of events, the body of Hagop's friend Iskender was discovered under the bridge leading to the Armenian cemetery. When the news reached Lieutenant Hagop, he sensed the mounting danger and asked his cousin to find a way for him to flee the country. The cousin's father-in-law, who owned the house where Hagop was sheltering, devised a plan to smuggle him to Baghdad. To begin the journey, he moved Hagop to *Sasountsi* Hayrabed's bakery near Baghdad Station, promising to return

the next morning with professionals who could get him across the border.

Yet, as the old adage warns, Saturday came before Friday — disaster struck ahead of schedule. The fugitive Movses, having murdered Iskender during a sordid dispute over money, sought to save his own neck by betraying Hagop's hiding place to the gendarmerie.

At dawn, the police surrounded the homes of both Hagop's cousin and the father-in-law. When they failed to find Hagop, they arrested the father-in-law and his son. At the station, the detainees were subjected to beatings. While the father endured the agony of rubber batons against his feet without speaking, his 15-year-old son could not bear the torture. He eventually told the police that his father had taken Lieutenant Hagop to the bakery near the station.

The police quickly surrounded the building and, finding Hagop asleep, arrested him with ease — an achievement that became a great source of pride for the Aleppo police. In June 1939, the story was splashed across the front pages of the local Arabic newspapers in bold lettering.

The Supreme Court of Aleppo sentenced 'Lieutenant' Hagop to life behind bars. His schemes had brought nothing but embarrassment to the Armenian community, which openly disowned his actions and warned against such recklessness among its youth. From the altar, parish priests used their Sunday sermons to urge the younger generation toward modesty, self-discipline, and genuine patriotism, reminding them to live upright Christian lives that reflected well on their families and their people.



Stronger than Fire

From the seventh to the tenth century, Armenia was subject to Arab invasions and domination, serving as a bitter bone of contention between the Byzantine and Arab empires. During this era, the notable Arab Emir Aghpugha entered the land of Korduk with a large army, establishing a massive camp on the banks of a mountain river. His forces launched repeated assaults to conquer the region, but Prince Argavan, sheltered behind the walls of Anggh Fortress, resisted the attacks with his loyal and brave men. After suffering numerous casualties, the attackers were forced to retreat from the battlefield time and again.

News of these failures stirred a storm within the Emir's tent, even as the rest of the world lay in the tranquility of the night. Emir Aghpughan shouted uncontrollably, sparks flying from his eyes as the scar that split his right cheek twitched uneasily in ugly contortions. For 30 years, he had besieged countless principalities, towns, villages, and strongholds; he had encountered fierce resistance and suffered many losses, yet he had always secured victory. Now, after so many triumphs, he had arrived in the Armenian land of Korduk, but—curse the devil—his victorious sword was blunted against the cliffs of the Armenian mountains. Despite his numerous casualties, it had become impossible to crush the Armenian resistance and move toward Ayrarat.

"Before the glorious sword of the Arab Caliph, the mountains and seas must retreat, and the Armenians must kneel," roared Emir Aghpughan with insane fury. However, the Armenian Anggh Fortress remained unshakeable and unconquered, thanks to the courage and patriotism of the faithful Armenian soldiers. Following the failed assaults, Aghpughan summoned his aides, the generals Omar, Yusuf, and Nasib, for a night council. The famous generals stood struck dumb, and in the nocturnal quiet, only the roar of the mountain river could be heard. Having lost his patience, Aghpughan roared directly into General Nasib's face, "Why are you standing silent like a hedgehog, son of a devil!"

General Nasib arose with momentary tremors, humbly raised his hands to the sky, and implored aid from Allah through his thick, blue lips before addressing Emir Aghpughan. "Sun of the Faith, I swear by the name

of Muhammad, I will subdue Anggh Fortress by sunrise and place the head of the infidel fortress commander before your feet," he declared. Omar and Yusuf remained silent and thoughtful. Directing his fiery gaze upon them, Aghpughan burst out, "And why are you silent, you cowardly cats?" Fawning before the Emir, Omar and Yusuf placed their hands on their chests and bowed reverently, saying, "Sun of the Faith, we swear by the Prophet's name to carry out all your commands."

At daybreak, the assault resumed. From the heights, Armenian peasants rolled boulders onto the Arabs, causing panic among the ranks. General Nasib, however, quelled the chaos, drew his sword, and went forward to encourage his soldiers. "*Ya Allah! Ya Allah!*" he exclaimed, leading them through the shower of arrows falling from above. Suddenly, a brave man sprang from behind the rocks like a leopard. He rushed upon Nasib and instantly crushed the general's head with a mace before vanishing like a vision, striking terror into the attackers. This brave man was Artsvin, the son of Argavan, the Prince of Korduk.

The assault continued until nightfall as Arab blood flowed profusely, mixing with the river waters. With the furious roar of the Armenian mountains, the river carried away the blood of the tyrants to ensure the peasants' tilled earth might remain pure. Emir Aghpughan, dejected by the death of General Nasib, called Omar and Yusuf to his tent for another night council. "If Prince Argavan does not join us and guide our troops, we will not succeed in passing through the unknown paths winding through the mountains and gorges. There is an enemy ambusher under every rock," said the disheartened General Omar.

"But how can we make the land of Korduk submit to the will of Is-lam and the Caliph?" Aghpughan asked, suddenly hopeful.

"We must bribe; we must promise lands; we must deceive the old man. And if he does not agree, we must threaten. The Prince has a son whom he loves madly, and he is currently our captive. Either his father joins us and leads our troops, or we will kill his son," General Omar spoke, animated by cunning. When Argavan, the Prince of Korduk, heard that the Arabs had treacherously captured his brave heir, the world collapsed around him. The patriarch raised his head, which had been bowed to the ground, wiped the tears from his eyes, and walked step by step toward the Emir's tent.

Aghpughan flatteringly welcomed the Prince, who had arrived on his own feet. He praised Artsvin's beauty and courage, promising to annex new lands to Korduk and restore Argavan's princely rights if he and his son would guide the Arab army toward the land of Ayrarat. Old Argavan grew intensely gloomy, his eyebrows knitting together over misty eyes. "Let it be known to the Arab commander that the lineage of the Princes of Korduk descends from the Arshakunis. Our women have never given birth to traitors, nor have they nurtured informers. Let it be known to Aghpughan that my arms are still strong enough today to cast the enemy out of the homeland, but they are utterly powerless to show that enemy the path into it," he burst out.

"But I will annihilate that lineage! I will torture and kill the last man of that family," boasted Aghpughan, reaching for his curved sword. Argavan remained silent, his gaze like a blade aimed directly at the executioner's merciless eyes.

"Think, old man, think. Either you lose your only son, or you carry out the Caliph's will. You have no other choice," Aghpughan said, softening his voice. A disdainful smile crossed Argavan's distressed face. "You entered my land like a thief in the night, and we could not measure the strength of our arms and swords. Now you force me to betray my homeland. Do not scare me with death; our ancestors taught us that a conscious death is immortality," the old patriarch answered him to his face.

"Bring the brazier with the blazing fire! I will now speak to you with a tongue of flame," Aghpughan exploded in a mad frenzy. The servants immediately carried out the command, bringing a brazier in which a hot fire roared. The old patriarch looked at the flames, then at his only son, and understood what awaited them. His heart tightened, but he held his white head high. Turning to his son, he said, "My son, show the executioners that you are not afraid of death, and that I am not afraid to sacrifice you in the name of my homeland."

Artsvin did not let them approach; he pushed the executioners aside, calmly stepped toward the brazier, and plunged his hands into the blazing fire. Old Argavan moved to do the same, desperate to share his son's fate, but the young man resolutely prevented him. "These hands are still needed, Father," he said. Artsvin's hands began to burn and his pupils widened from the agony, yet, remarkably, the smile did not fade from his

face.

The Emir saw it all. He watched, trembled, and for a moment froze. Then, exhausted, he rose from his silk couch and turned to his soldiers, crying out in alarm, “Ya Allah! Ya Allah! Save us! Behold, a people that can be utterly destroyed, but can never be brought to its knees.” Defeated, he waved his hand and muttered, “Take them away.”

Then he issued an order: “Remove all the tents from the camp.” Emir Aghpughan, having failed in his mission, returned to his country with a defeated heart after sacrificing numerous soldiers.

As the last Arab soldier retreated from the Armenian highlands beside the mountain river, he cast a fearful glance back over his shoulder. He saw Prince Argavan of Korduk embracing his brave son, Artsvin, and wetting the young man’s burned hands with his tears. As a result of this encounter, the Arab imperialists did not dare to invade the lands of the sacred Armenian homeland for a long time.



Kindness Comes Full Circle

As a correspondent for *Horizon Weekly*, I received an invitation from the talented baritone Krikor Jangeozian to attend a musical performance at the Markham Theatre on Sunday, May 9, 2004, which fell on Mother's Day that year.

My wife and I reached the venue well ahead of time, before the theatre doors had even opened. Once inside, we found our assigned seats. The concert was engaging from start to finish, offering a beautiful selection of Armenian songs that left the audience energized in a warm, welcoming community setting. We thoroughly enjoyed the performances by Jangeozian and guest vocalist Sh*oghi*k Koushaktchian from Los Angeles, accompanied on piano by the celebrated composer Armen Aharonian.

About 30 minutes into the programme, a young community worker we knew took the vacant seat next to me. During the first intermission, my wife asked why she was running late. She explained that she had left home quite early by public transit, but had ended up stranded for over half an hour waiting in the cold for a connecting bus.

When I returned to my seat before the second half began, my wife told me about her frustrating commute and suggested we drive her home after the show. Knowing how generous my wife is, and always glad to help out a friend, I agreed without hesitation. Once the concert wrapped up, my wife offered her a ride. True to her considerate nature, she hesitated at first, not wanting to put us out of our way. But the thought of standing around for buses late into the night convinced her to take us up on the offer.

We dropped her off near her apartment around 11 p.m. She thanked us warmly and headed inside, while my wife and I continued west on Sheppard Avenue. We had just crossed Warden Avenue when, for reasons I still can't explain, the car slammed hard into the curb barrier. The vehicle lurched, scraping along the right side as a horrible grinding noise broke out from the front wheel. Luckily, the brightly lit lot of an auto dealership was open right beside us, and I was able to steer the car in.

The front right tire was completely flat. It was late at night, and I had left my phone behind, which meant I couldn't call CAA for roadside assistance. Anxiety quickly set in — I had never changed a tire in my life and certainly didn't have the strength to tackle it on the spot. But we had no choice. Even if it took until morning, the spare had to go on before we could make it home.

Forced by the circumstances, I gathered my strength and started the job. With considerable effort, I dragged the spare tire out of the trunk and began loosening the bolts. At first, I placed the jack under the wrong section of the frame, but after taking a closer look, I found the proper notch and began lifting the car. Before long, my whole body was shaking from exhaustion.

My wife walked back out to Sheppard Avenue to look for help. She flagged down a taxi, but the driver refused to stop and assist. She asked a passerby, who claimed he didn't know how to change a tire; others offered the same excuse and walked on. Desperate, my wife later told me: "I opened my palms and prayed to God and Jesus to send us help through His angels and rescue us from this midnight ordeal."

She returned to me in tears, watching my struggle with deep worry. Then, in what felt like a quiet miracle, two young men walked up and offered a hand. They told us they lived in the apartment building across the street and had seen me struggling from their window. Arriving like angels in the dark, they immediately took over and swapped the flat for the spare. They were so insistent that they wouldn't even let me lift the damaged tire back into the trunk.

When I asked if they were Iranian, they told me they were Pakistani. They asked about our background, and I told them we were Armenian. Satisfied that the car was roadworthy, the two youths wished us a good night and started to leave. "Wait, just a moment," I called out. After thanking them from the bottom of my heart, I offered them some cash: "Please, take this and get yourselves a coffee."

"We could never accept money for doing a good deed," they replied firmly. "God sees everything, and He will reward us." With that, they walked back across the street.

I wanted to share this story with Armenian readers to reaffirm the timeless truth that those who sow goodness will reap goodness. It

reminded me that compassionate, decent people— true human beings who live out God's message regardless of race, nationality, or faith —are still very much alive in this world.



The Dangers of Alcohol

Baker David's large family lived in the Sookat Arpine quarter of Aleppo, a predominantly Muslim district, until 1965. For nearly a decade, they were the only Armenian household in the area, largely because the rent was much cheaper than in the traditional Christian neighbourhoods. Married in 1939, David and Azniv Arshagian had six sons and two daughters. David worked exhausting 12-hour shifts as a baker and cook just to keep food on the table, often bringing home lahmajoun and leftover meals given to him by sympathetic customers to feed his eight children. While he was a hard worker, David was also an alcoholic, addicted to drinking *oghi*. He spent a major part of his daily wages on cheap liquor, drinking it straight on an empty stomach—a habit that continued for the rest of his life. Azniv, a devoted, religious mother who sacrificed everything for her children, suffered routine physical beatings and verbal abuse whenever she confronted him about his drinking.

The Arshagian children attended the nearby Usumnasirats School, but the turmoil at home made it hard to keep up, and several repeated grades. The eldest son, Abraham, dropped out of his own accord to take up odd apprenticeships. The second son, Sahag, did the same, finding a job, marrying early, and starting his own family. The third son, Khachig, followed suit and entered a trade, while Zohrab, Zaven, Sarkis, Vehanoush, and Makrouhi stayed in school. David's wages could not cover rent, food, and basic school supplies, and the working sons refused to contribute to the household. Facing constant threats of eviction from their landlord, the family lived in deep poverty and uncertainty. Through it all, David remained hooked on his bottle of liquor, relying on it as if it were mother's milk.

Desperate, Azniv turned to her brothers for financial help. She asked them to cover four months of unpaid rent and lend her money so the family could celebrate Christmas and New Year according to Armenian custom. Though they were not wealthy, her brothers felt a strong duty to help their sister and her children, quickly sending funds and gifts. Still, life could not go on this way; her brothers could not bail them out forever. The family needed a lasting way out. A lifeline appeared in 1965, when around

a hundred Armenian families in Aleppo were approved for repatriation to Soviet Armenia, and the Arshagians were selected.[32]

Once in Armenia, the family was settled first in Hrazdan and later in Charentsavan, where they were given an apartment and jobs. David worked in a local bakery, earning a reputation as a master baker and even receiving positive write-ups in the local papers for his hard work. Azniv found employment as an administrator at a local school. The older boys took factory jobs, and the younger children continued their education. They were glad to be living in the homeland with steady employment, staying clear of political factions. However, their combined incomes still fell short of basic expenses, and like many others during that era, they turned to black-market schemes and petty theft to get by. David also kept drinking heavily. His bad habits rubbed off on his teenage sons, who picked up smoking and heavy drinking, burning through their wages just like their father.

Years passed in the same difficult rut. The family struggled financially, and David's health took a predictable turn for the worse. His liver failed from decades of alcohol abuse, and medical treatments could not save him. His death left the household in even worse financial shape. Once again, Azniv reached out to her brothers in Canada and the United States. Two years after Armenia regained its independence, her eldest brother visited the country. Shocked by the conditions his sister and her children were living in; he returned to North America and coordinated with his siblings to sponsor the family to Los Angeles. With funding from Azniv's brothers and their children, she relocated to Southern California alongside three of her sons, her eldest daughter Vehanoush, and their families.

In Los Angeles, her brother rented and furnished a home for them, covering their rent and living costs until the sons— Sahag, Khachig, and Abraham — could find employment. Vehanoush and her husband quickly found jobs and became self-sufficient. The sons, however, made excuses about their lack of English and spent months wandering the streets

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[32] *Organized by the Soviet government after World War II, the Nerkaght (Great Repatriation) brought over 100,000 diaspora Armenians from the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas to Soviet Armenia. While initially greeted with patriotic fervor, many newcomers faced severe shortages, cultural alienation, and Soviet state persecution.*

unemployed. Eventually, their wives found work with local Armenian businesses, earning enough to buy groceries and giving their husbands money for cigarettes and drinks. When the money ran out, the men turned to physical abuse, carrying on the domestic violence they had learned from their father. Azniv lived with Khachig's family, while the other brothers rented nearby apartments. The sons' destructive behaviour—idleness, theft, heavy drinking, and domestic violence—only grew worse in America.

Azniv's pleas and moral advice were ignored. A deeply religious woman, she constantly prayed that God would help her sons break their addictions and become responsible fathers. She would bring them together and plead: "Look at how we lived because of your father's drinking and recklessness. We moved all the way to Armenia, and our lives were still miserable. Stop following his example. Break these habits you inherited from him and give me some peace in my old age." Her words had no effect. Even when they landed jobs, they were repeatedly fired for skipping shifts.

After getting his driver's license, Khachig crashed his car while drunk and had his license suspended. In his intoxicated state, he claimed he did not need one. Ignoring his wife's warnings, he kept visiting his brothers to drink. Driving illegally on his way home one night, he was pulled over and jailed for driving with a suspended license. After being released, he stayed sober for a brief period and promised to change. But a few months later, drunk and unlicensed again, he lost control of his car and crashed into a house. He received a much longer jail sentence. Even from behind bars, he pressured his wife for cigarette money, completely ignoring the fact that she was working day and night as a seamstress to feed their three children and pay the rent.

His older brothers were no different. Sahag worked occasionally, but stopped as soon as he had enough money to get by. Whenever his wife spoke up, he beat her, prompting neighbours to call the police after hearing her cries. Abraham lived the same way. Before long, all three brothers were serving regular time in the Los Angeles County jail system, caught up in the same cycle as thousands of other young men who had immigrated from the former Soviet Union. Of the six brothers, Zohrab remained in Armenia; Sarkis stayed in Aleppo after getting married; and Zaven lived

in Russia, repeating the family pattern.

Instead of following the upright example of their mother and uncles, David Arshagian's sons copied their father's worst traits and ended up behind bars. Watching Abraham, Sahag, and Khachig ruin their lives and bring dishonour to the community, Azniv's health deteriorated under the stress. She suffered a fatal stroke and passed away, carrying the heartbreak of a deeply troubled life to the grave.



Indelible Memories of His Holiness Catholicos Zareh I

In 1940, during the agonizing days of the Second World War, I was a student in the graduating class of the National Sahagian School in the Nor Kyough quarter of Aleppo. At the same time, I attended the Armenian Apostolic Church's Sunday School, which was held in the halls of the Sahagian School. I also served as an acolyte at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church under the choirmaster, Mr. Armen Bedrossian, a graduate of the Armenian Theological Seminary of the Holy See of Cilicia (*Tbrevank*).

At that time, the Prelate of Peria (Aleppo)[33] was His Eminence Archbishop Ardavazd Sourmelian. One Sunday in 1940, during the *Badarak*,[34] the Prelate took the floor and, at the conclusion of his moving sermon, announced with emotion that after 16 years of service as the Prelate of Peria, he was being transferred to the Mother See to assume a new duty.

Following his departure, Very Reverend Father Zareh Payaslian was elected Locum Tenens (Vicar) of the Prelacy of Peria. Owing to his competence and ability, he was subsequently elected as Prelate in 1940.

During Father Zareh's tenure as Prelate, anti-French resistance movements began in Syria in 1945. Working closely with Syrian leaders and the Prelacy's political council, he called upon Armenian soldiers serving in the French army to join the Syrian forces. For his service to the Syrian homeland, Prelate Zareh was awarded the Syrian Order of Merit, First Class, and received the nation's sincere appreciation.

While leading the Prelacy of Peria, Prelate Zareh also had the

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[33] *The Armenian Prelacy of Peria (or Beroea) in Aleppo is a historic prelacy of the Holy See of Cilicia. As a primary sanctuary for Armenian Genocide survivors, it evolved into a vital cultural and religious hub. Based at the Forty Martyrs Cathedral, it manages schools and churches, sustaining the community's resilient identity.*

[34] *The Armenian Divine Liturgy (Sourp Badarak) is the central eucharistic service of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Codified by the 5th century and celebrated in Classical Armenian (Grabar), it comprises four parts: Preparation, Synaxis, Eucharist, and Blessing.*

foresight to found the Karen Jeppe Jemaran, a vital and historic institution. Thousands of young Armenians received, and continue to receive, a national education and upbringing within its walls.

In 1946, my period of service in the French army came to an end, and I returned to Aleppo. I first learned typesetting at the press of the Armenian-Aleppo Teachers' Union, led by my compatriot, Mr. Simon Simonian. When the *Arevelk*, a daily newspaper, began publication, I was hired at its printing house as a typesetter. Its editors were the novelist Antranig Dzarougian and Minas Tölölyan.

After some time, the *Arevelk* editorial office and press relocated, but I remained at the *Nayiri* Press in the *Hokedoun*, which was owned and managed by Antranig Dzarougian. In addition to commercial work, the press published the *Nayiri* magazine and Dzarougian's own writings.

Prelate Zareh frequently visited Dzarougian at *Nayiri* while passing through the *Hokedoun*. Naturally, he saw me there and knew that I contributed articles, correspondence, and creative writing to *Arevelk*. He was also aware of my teaching role in the Nor Kyough branch of the Armenian Apostolic Church's Sunday Schools, where his brother, Hagop, and his future brother-in-law, Garabed Nagashian, also served.

When Dzarougian moved to Beirut in 1949, he transferred the master printer, George Makarian, and me to the new owner of the press. The new owner, a government employee, visited for only a few hours each day to supervise operations. After I had worked under his patronage for about a year, in the summer of 1950, Hagop, the *ghavvas* (warden) of the Prelacy, arrived at the press to inform me that the Prelate wished to see me.

After arranging an appointment by telephone, I met with the Prelate. He first asked about my work and then presented an unexpected proposal that greatly moved me. He offered me the position of Director of the National School of Raqqa for the 1950–1951 academic year. I gladly accepted, and by the time the school reopened, I was already in Raqqa, having assumed my responsibilities. That year, the school had about 100 students, from kindergarten to the fifth grade, with a teaching staff of four.

Sunday School had always been close to my heart. I had been a student at the Sahagian National School's Sunday School and, after returning from military service in March 1946, had been called to serve at the St.

Kevork Church Sunday School in Nor Kyough. Since Raqqa did not have a Sunday School, I decided to take the initiative to open one. I wrote to Prelate Zareh, who, after consulting the responsible individuals, expressed great appreciation for my proposal. I also received a letter of thanks from the General Director of the Cilician Catholicosate's Sunday Schools, Very Reverend Levon A. Deacon Zenian, and from the secretary, George Nersoyan.

The official opening of the Raqqa Sunday School took place in the presence of Mr. Nersoyan, who travelled from Aleppo for the occasion. He addressed the gathering, offering detailed explanations about the mission and importance of Sunday Schools. The Raqqa community was deeply moved by the ceremony. They expressed special gratitude to the supervisor, Krikor Hotoyan, and to the volunteer teachers who sacrificed their Sundays to support the moral and religious upbringing of Armenian students.

I am proud to note that the Sunday School, founded during my tenure in Raqqa in 1950, continues to operate today, providing students with national, religious, and moral education.

That year, Prelate Zareh visited Raqqa accompanied by the pharmacist Sarkis Selian, a member of the Prelacy's National Administrative Council. They visited the national school, toured Raqqa's historical sites, and met with Armenian students, residents, and government officials. I still recall the memorable dinner held at the home of the Community Council Chairman, Hagop Sarkissian, where he expressed his joy and satisfaction with my efforts to support the progress of the Raqqa National School and my initiative to open the Sunday School.

The following year, the Community Council faced great difficulty. They had been very pleased with my work because I had promised that students graduating from the fifth grade would be able to enroll in the sixth grade at the Haigazian School. Indeed, two of our students were admitted to the Haigazian School after an examination. However, I had decided to resign for financial reasons and returned to my typesetting profession at the *Arevelk* printing house, hoping to contribute to Armenian journalism and literature while earning a higher wage.

Around that time, I brought a proofreading sample to the Prelacy, where Hrach Papazian, Onnik Meliksetian, Mihran Herardian, and others

were in a meeting. After presenting a corrected version of Mr. Herardian's article, I turned to leave. Prelate Zareh called after me. When I approached him, he said, "Krikor, what do you say? I want to ordain you as a priest for America."

The proposal was so sudden that I hesitated. How could I respond to such a life-changing offer? I said, "Prelate, I must think about this and consult my family and wife... I imagine a priest as tall, with a beautiful voice. I lack those qualities and may not appear to people as a successful priest." The Prelate replied: "You have other important advantages that many tall priests do not. Do not forget that Catholicos Karekin I of Cilicia was your height, yet he became a worthy clergyman, serving from Armenia to America and eventually becoming Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia."

My relationship with Prelate Zareh continued through our work with the Sunday Schools. I served as a teacher, then as supervisor of the central branch, and later as a member of the Prelacy's Religious Council, while he remained a respected Prelate, loved by both the people and the government. Years passed, and on February 20, 1956, Prelate Zareh was elected Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. It is painful to look back on the relentless sabotage and betrayal directed against the historic Cilician See and its legitimately elected leader during those years, driven largely by pro-Soviet and communist factions within the diaspora. On February 18, 1963, this devoted and saintly clergyman passed away. His gentle heart, defined by Christian humility and grace, was worn down by the continuous, hostile attacks aimed at undermining his leadership.

Whether by coincidence or Divine Providence, His Holiness Catholicos Zareh Payaslian was born on February 14, 1915, was elected Catholicos on February 20, 1956, and passed away on February 18, 1963. He left indelible memories in the hearts of the Armenian people and in mine, near his 48th birthday and the 28th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

May eternal light shine upon the devout and patriotic soul of this Pontiff.



Shattered Love

Mgrditch woke with a heavy heart. He had gone to bed late, and even after finally falling asleep, he had tossed and turned for hours, caught between restless anxieties, runaway thoughts, and a nagging sense of dread. Pulling the curtain back, he was shocked to find the sun already high in the sky. His body felt stiff and drained. Was he too late? Panicked that the train had already left the platform, he hurried out the front door without touching breakfast.

The streets were packed, especially through the old quarters. Streams of people were moving in waves toward the station, and Mgrditch had to break into a sprint just to push through the crowd. He didn't even wait for a streetcar; every second counted. He had to see Mari. He needed to look into her face one last time and hear her farewell before the tracks pulled them apart. Everything else faded away—he just had to reach the station in time.

It was the final caravan to depart in 1947. Exiled Armenians who had received permission to repatriate—a process that had begun in 1946—were hurrying to the Aleppo station. The train and the ship waiting ahead of them would cover roughly 200 miles.

Mgrditch arrived 30 minutes before departure. Without looking left or right, he cut through the crowd of well-wishers gathered to send off their relatives. He moved along the windows of the long train, searching for the one he loved. The simple coaches had been arranged specifically for the repatriating families. Their eyes, and the eyes of those standing on the platform, were filled with tears—tears born of both joy and profound sorrow.

Mari and her family were seated in the fifth carriage. When she saw Mgrditch's distraught face, she was visibly shaken. Making a quick excuse to her parents, she stepped off the train. She embraced him the moment she reached him, and, swept up by their overpowering emotions, they drifted away from the crowd. In those moments, the world around them vanished. They looked at each other as if for the first time, held together by an invisible force. They walked as if drawn by a magnet, understanding one another in a strange and wonderful way.

Mari spoke first. "Mgrditch, I felt like the happiest person on earth when I met you. Despite all the obstacles, I loved you without ever losing heart. But today, a barrier has risen between us that makes our happiness impossible. I have endured so much, yet I never despaired because your generous heart sheltered me and your love lit my way. I suffered, but I never thought of retreating; without you, the world is empty. But today... all our shared experiences, our dreams, and the ideals on which we built our future have become mere memories. A thousand times over, I would rather die in your arms than face this day. I have thought and thought, but I cannot find an answer."

"You are going to extremes, Mari," Mgrditch said. "We gain nothing by dwelling on the past. Let us look at the present. You will be leaving in a few moments, leaving me here alone. I want to hear your sweet and comforting words. But yes, sometimes recalling the past is justified. I tried so many times to convince your parents not to go, but it was impossible. Your father is stubborn. I could not make him understand that this is not a real repatriation — that they should not believe the empty rhetoric of the committees. Armenia cannot take in such a large number of immigrants. If this were truly about returning Armenians to their homeland, why force them to resign from our national unions and organizations?"

"You tell me not to dwell on the past," Mari said, "yet here you are, at the last moment, talking about all of this. Let us just accept reality."

"What I am telling you is not history," Mgrditch replied. "It is the truth. Ninety per cent of those going to Armenia are doing it for a slice of bread and some peace, and your father is one of them. Many will be disillusioned. You will see it and feel it in your bones, and when you step onto the soil of the homeland with my words etched in your mind, you will see the truth in them. You will remember me and the political party I belong to; remembering its selfless patriotism, you will tell the new generation of our land. Those who call us 'anti-Armenian,' 'traitors,' and 'bourgeois' know very well that we exist to serve the Armenian people. We have an ideal for which we are ready to sacrifice our very lives: a Free, Independent, and United Armenia. Today's Armenia is barely a tenth of our historic homeland; the rest is occupied by enemies. We will create a homeland that opens its doors to all Armenians. Do you see our patriotism now?"

The conversation might have continued, but a sharp blast from the

train whistle broke the moment. Mari was jolted back to reality; the time of separation had arrived. She wanted to say goodbye, but her feet felt rooted to the spot. Mgrditch wrapped his arms around her waist. Their lips met again and again in wordless moments that would become her final memories of him.

Their racing hearts spoke more clearly than words. Nearby, two birds perched on an electric pole watched the heartbreaking farewell with envious eyes. Far away, behind a white cloud, the sun watched silently, casting a warm, fading light. The train's second bell rang. Separation. Mari reached her parents breathless; they had been searching for her. She took her seat, went to the window, and looked out. Mgrditch stood alone at a distance, watching the final act of his love story. The train wheels began to turn. White handkerchiefs waved in the air. The wheels gathered speed, and the train eventually disappeared be-yond the horizon, taking Mgrditch's heart with it.

After the train left, Mgrditch held back his tears and, carried by invisible waves of emotion, walked home. Exhausted, he threw himself onto his bed. The morning's conversation, the farewell kiss, and Mari's tears burned through his mind. He closed his eyes, and scenes from the past rolled before him like a film. He had been barely 18 when he met Mari. He had served in the Free French Army, completed a one-year course, graduated as a corporal, and was eventually promoted to brigadier. He had also taken a driving course and earned his licence. As a diligent soldier, he had earned the apprecia-tion of his officers and was given the opportunity to take technical courses for the artillery corps.

He met Mari through a friend who lived with his mother in a room within the large house owned by Mari's family in the fourth quarter of Nor Kyough. Mgrditch and his friend were close. He entered their home freely, especially since his friend, a tailor, was always working there. He would arrive in military vehicles, showing off just a little, and park for hours in front of Mari's door under the neighbours' envious eyes.

One day, while Mari was at the tailor's, Mgrditch entered in uni-form. Mari was surprised to see him and could only whisper, "Welcome." Their glances lingered, searching one another, before stopping, speaking,

embracing, and finally parting. A spiritual connection had formed. Love took root in both their hearts.

Wanting to know more about her, Mgrditch asked his friend, "Kevork, I do not know the young lady. Would you introduce us?"

"Of course," Kevork said. "Miss Mari Palian, our landlord's daughter." Then, to Mari: "This is my best friend, Mgrditch Sahagian, who is serving in the French Army." Their hands met gently with a trembling squeeze, both expressing joy at the encounter.

Mgrditch's visits became more frequent, and Mari's parents soon noticed the relationship had purpose. Mari confessed to her mother that she liked him. Her mother, wanting a worthy husband for her daughter, hesitated briefly, but seeing Mari's sincerity, she accepted him. When Mgrditch visited again, she invited him over under the pretext of writing a letter. He agreed, wrote the letter, and met the entire family.

He stayed for more than an hour and prepared to leave around noon, but Mari and her mother insisted he stay for lunch. He made excuses at first but eventually gave in, happy to remain. They ate Aintab-style *chi kofte* (beef tartare) and salad in a cheerful atmosphere, exchanging secret glances. After thanking them, he left, arriving back at the barracks past two o'clock.

He continued visiting Kevork's house, though he did not yet dare enter Mari's home directly. But Mari, sensing his arrival, would stand by the door and invite him in.

One day, as he stepped outside, Mari pulled him into her home. Her mother was there but soon left to take dough to the bakery, leaving them alone. They looked at each other in admiration, neither wanting to speak. Finally, Mari asked, "Mgrditch, can I put your military cap on? Does it suit me?"

"Of course it does," he said, handing it over. "Anything you wear suits you. You are beautiful in your simplicity; I loved you that way. Do you remember the first day I saw you? You were wearing a simple dress."

"Do you love me, Mgrditch?"

"Yes. And you?"

"My answer is unnecessary."

"Can I trust that you love no one else?"

"Never. You are my first love."

"I must go now. I am late, and your mother may return."

"When will you take us for a drive in your car?"

"This evening."

"Should we get ready?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

"Eight o'clock."

"See you later."

"See you later."

That evening, Mgrditch arrived in a military vehicle. Mari sat beside him while her mother stayed home. The car left the neighbourhood and joined the highway. Mari, who had a beautiful voice, began to sing. Both their hearts trembled. Their hands were clasped, and Mgrditch steered with his free hand, only letting go to shift gears.

"You are an expert driver," Mari said.

"Are you laughing at me? Can you not see how the car swerves like a drunk?"

Absorbed in each other, they hadn't noticed the speedometer. The car was racing when it suddenly veered off the road, cut through roadside water like a wild bull, dropped into a ditch, and jolted out again. They sat in stunned silence until Mgrditch spoke.

"Oh, Mari, we narrowly escaped death. Imagine what this would have meant for our parents and for us."

"It is true, Mgrditch. Let us thank God, and in His name, may our love be eternal. We will face every difficulty together."

He was moved and could not speak. He brought his lips to hers, and they remained like that for a long time. The air was cold, but they did not feel it; their hearts burned. Time passed. The undamaged car stood over them like a silent guardian. The sky was clear; there was no moon, but countless stars watched over them.

"Let us go, Mari," he said. "We cannot continue like this."

"Yes, let us go. Mother will worry, even though she knows about the drive."

At home, Mari remained shaken for hours.

Years passed, and their love grew deeper. They were always together, often joined by Mari's family. One day, they visited Hagop's

garden. A summer breeze cooled the air under the trees, and everything was a lush, vibrant green. The garden felt like a vast sea. Captivated by nature's beauty, they walked freely; no gardener dared challenge a soldier.

"How beautiful you are today, Mari," he said.

"He is starting again, Mother. Mgrditch always laughs at me."

"No, my daughter," her mother said. "He is speaking the truth. That is the impression you give him. Someone else might find you plain, but to him, you are wondrous. I speak from experience." To Mgrditch, she asked, "Should Mari curl her hair or keep it like this?"

"No. Let her stay simple, without makeup. I care more for inner beauty."

They were talking like this when the gardeners released water to irrigate the fields. As the pool emptied, Mgrditch and Mari walked arm in arm, taking advantage of the deserted garden to share frequent kisses.

Mgrditch awoke from this throbbing dream, a mixture of joy and sadness. His mother called him for lunch, and he walked to the table with her help, but he could not eat. His mind was with Mari. By now, the train was nearing Beirut, where the Russian ship *Pobeda* waited to take the new Soviet citizens.

After Mari arrived in Armenia, she found ways to contact him, but the connection did not last. His letters eventually went unanswered. Mgrditch later learned that Mari, unable to resist the pressure of her parents and friends and believing he could never reach Armenia, had agreed to marry a young man named Hagop Tashjian, a fellow immigrant from Beirut.

Six years after her marriage, Mgrditch married in Aleppo. He and his wife had two children, a boy and a girl. Decades passed. The Soviet regime collapsed, and on September 21, 1991, Armenia declared independence to the joy of Armenians worldwide. Despite difficult conditions, thousands visited the homeland to see their country and relatives. Mgrditch, who had never forgotten his first love even after 50 years, travelled to Armenia in 1997. Searching for his roots, he visited villagers and townspeople alike.

By chance, he met a woman from Aleppo in the marketplace who had immigrated in 1947. He asked if she knew a girl named Mari Palian who had married in Armenia in 1948. She said she knew her well and that

Mari's family lived nearby. The woman's name was Mrs. Hermine. Mgrditch gratefully followed her, discussing Aleppo's Armenian community along the way.

At the Nor Malatia district, Hermine pointed out the house but prepared to leave. Mgrditch asked her to check if Mari was home; he did not dare knock himself. She confirmed Mari was there. They were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Hagop and Mari Tashjian, who did not recognize Mgrditch. He, however, knew Mari immediately. Though she was over 68, she had kept her vigour and beauty. She recognized him as well, her face changing colour and her eyes brightening.

He introduced himself, explaining his connection to the family through Mari's brothers. Meeting Hermine had allowed him to reconnect with a family he had once been close to, renewing a friendship severed for 50 years and easing the pain of his lost love.

Using tiredness as an excuse, he left, promising to visit again. Hagop, ever hospitable, insisted he return for lunch on the weekend so their children could be present. Mgrditch accepted. On the appointed day, he arrived and was greeted cheerfully by their grandchildren. Hagop and Mari had three boys and a girl, all now married with children of their own

During lunch, Mgrditch shared stories from the past 50 years and asked the couple about their lives. Mari described their journey from Batumi and her marriage in 1948. Hagop, an educated master mechanic, had found work quickly and impressed his managers. However, his success sparked envy. A month later, he was arrested by the secret police on charges of gold and currency speculation.

He recounted his defence in court: "Citizen Judge, Citizen Prosecutor, '*valyutchik*' or currency speculation — these words describe the crime that has brought many families to tragedy. Who was a *valyutchik*? No, Citizen Judge. I have never been involved in speculation. No one can say that I bought something and sold it at an exorbitant profit. Look at the real profiteers — those who chased gold and committed crimes for easy wealth. I do not belong to them. While they accumulated gold, I spent my own. Actors, writers, singers, painters — they are born with their gifts. Professional *valyutchiks* have theirs too. If I shared their nature, the title would suit me. But as baldness does not suit my face, neither does speculation suit me. Call me what you want, but I will remain myself. Let me end with

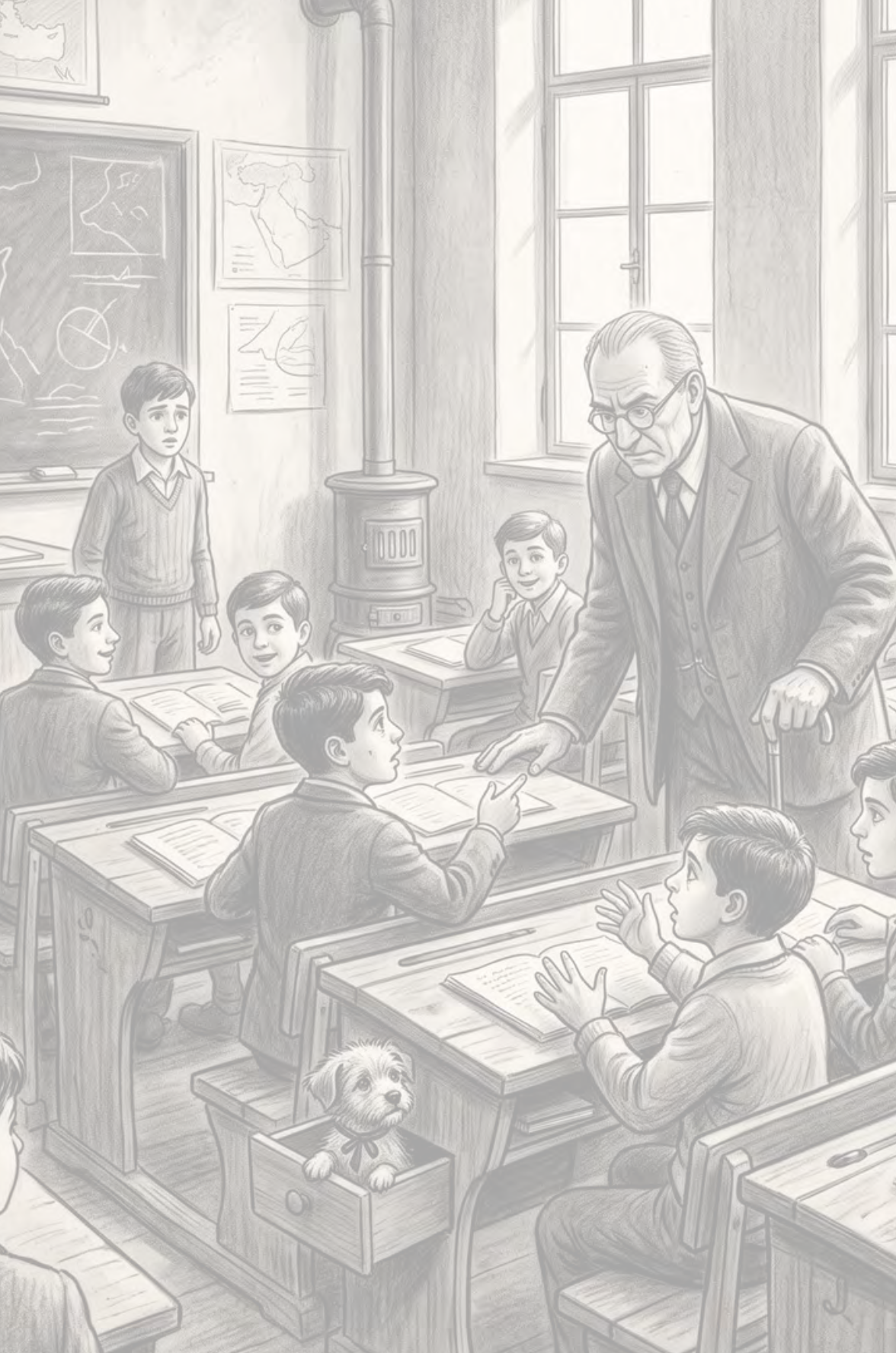
the words of a Latin poet: *Fiat Justitia Ruat Caelum*. Let justice be done, though the world perish."

Justice was not done. Hagop and Mari were exiled to Siberia.

They recounted the journey by train on June 13, 1949. "They told us we would travel 20 kilometres, but it lasted 20 days until we reached Sarskin in Siberia. From there, the elderly and children were put in carts, while the young walked 24 kilometres to Alambaysk, where we were given axes and saws to cut trees. We stayed there for two years. Forty per cent of those who came with us died from the cold and hard labour. There were 50,000 Armenians in that region. At the end of every month, a *Chekist* commandant came to count us. One time, Commandant Markerov arrived. A 95-year-old exiled man approached him and said, 'Shame on Stalin, shame on the Russian people, shame on the Russian army. They exiled my 8-year-old grandson and me.' Markerov listened, then said quietly, 'Grandfather, how is Stalin guilty? They know nothing about what happens in Armenia. If I had the right, I would send you home. The government is guilty. It exiled the innocent here to work and die.'"

"In 1956, Malenkov freed us," Hagop continued. "We went to Uzbekistan. I found work and saved 500 roubles in a year. Then we returned to Armenia. I could find work in my profession, but whenever they saw the mark in my passport, I was rejected. Finally, an honest director of a machine factory dared to hire me. Mari found work as a seamstress. We survived. Our four children married and had families. Now we receive a pension, and our children help us. The house is ours. We live happily in independent Armenia, seeing our dream come true: a free Armenia with its flag flying at home and abroad. We are proud to have seen the Independent Republic of Armenia with its flag, coat of arms, anthem, army, and embassies. We are confident that Artsakh and Western Armenia will join Armenia one day. We are glad to welcome you into our home. May our friendship continue, this time on our homeland's soil."

Mgrditch returned to Aleppo with a renewed affection — this time for the entire Tashjian family.



A Dog's Tale

During the First World War, in the midst of the Armenian Genocide, Sahag II Khabayan, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, was forced into exile in Jerusalem. Toward the end of the war, after Allied forces defeated the Ottoman army and took control of Syria and Lebanon, the exiled pontiff moved to Syria to be close to the survivors of the death marches. He planned to establish the headquarters of the Cilician See in Aleppo's Nor Kyough district. After securing a suitable tract of land — the site where the National Sahagian School and Saint Gregory the Illuminator Church are located today — Sahag began building the initial facilities for the Catholicosate.

One of these buildings, shaped like the lowercase Armenian letter *"ա"* (ayp) consisted of about 24 rooms, while the next structure was built in the shape of a cross with eight rooms. Later, when the opportunity arose to establish the Catholicosate in Antelias, Lebanon, the buildings in Aleppo were handed over to the Sahagian School, founded in 1929.

As a resident of Nor Kyough, I had the good fortune to attend the Sahagian kindergarten at the age of 5. We were in the cross-shaped building, one room of which had been converted into a church at the time, also named St. Gregory the Illuminator.

Later, in 1934, through the efforts and initiative of Archbishop Artavazd Sourmelian, the newly elected Prelate of Aleppo, a magnificent stone church was built on the land between the two sections of the Sahagian School. It was also named St. Gregory the Illuminator. Its thick stone pillars were harshly criticized by several architects and builders, especially by *Paloutsi* Dada, who had worked on the construction of the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul. By then, his eyesight had failed significantly due to old age.

After finishing the four years of kindergarten, I moved to the "ա-shaped" building at age 9 to start first grade. Years slipped by, and at 12, I moved to the third grade in that same building, located in the first square corner of the letter *"ա."*

From kindergarten on, I breezed through school without difficulty. I wasn't particularly bookish, and I had no interest in being known

as a star pupil or bragging about high marks. Still, my teachers would often say, "Krikor, if you just put your mind to it, you could easily be first in the class." But I didn't see the point in overworking myself. My grades consistently stayed above 80 per cent without much effort, and I never had any trouble passing to the next grade. That effortless balance left me with plenty of time for recess pranks and street adventures with my friends.

In 1938, as a fourth grader, I started taking my schoolwork more seriously. My teachers were all quite fond of me, especially since I never passed up a chance to do them a favour, running small errands for them outside school hours — always handled quietly and reliably.

The autumn cold and rains had arrived in Aleppo, and the trees were shaking off the last of their leaves. The summer days of jumping orchard fences, snatching ripe fruit on wild adventures, and dodging angry caretakers were over for the season. Finally, the fruit growers of Bostan Pasha and Ayntel Goz could enjoy some peace and quiet.

During the lunch break, I always went home to eat, since our house was in Nor Kyough's Fourth District, only about 300 metres from the school. When the lunch bell sounded, I hurried off immediately — I was starving after skipping breakfast that morning.

I had barely walked past the school gates when I noticed a small stray dog trailing me. I tried shooing him away a couple of times, but he refused to leave, stubbornly matching my pace step for step. Since I was little, I had always loved dogs — especially small ones — while never caring much for cats, having often heard that they were selfish and ungrateful pets.

Seeing how cold it was outside and realizing the poor dog was likely freezing, I decided not to be too rough with him. Since he wasn't going anywhere, I let him follow along. Encouraged by my change in mood, he began wagging his tail happily as we walked up to our front gate. He leaned against my legs, whining softly as if trying to tell me something. He was probably hungry.

I felt sorry for him and took him inside. I fed him, gave him a bath, and tied a blue ribbon around his neck. I spent almost my entire lunch break with this unknown but loyal pup and decided to give him a name. I wrote several names on slips of paper, put them in a cup, and shook them up. I drew one: Poto.

I started calling him Poto and talking to him. Within half an hour, he was accustomed to the name; whenever I called him, he would come running into my arms. Despite my mother's objections, I decided to keep Poto, accepting him as a gift sent from God to satisfy my love for dogs. After finishing lunch, I headed back to school, instructing my mother to make sure Poto didn't get out. However, barely 50 paces from the house, I realized Poto was behind me. I got angry and threatened him, telling him to go home, but it was useless. Having sensed my kind nature, he stubbornly kept following.

I reached the classroom before the break was over, wondering how to get rid of Poto. He continued to follow me, making endearing movements to stay in my good graces. The fateful moment was approaching. The bell could ring at any second, and I still hadn't found a way to deal with this 'trouble.'

My two desk-mates, Krikor Pashayan and Bedros Kahvejian, had arrived early. I turned to them for an idea to help me out of this dangerous situation. After a long consultation, Pashayan found a solution. He suggested putting the dog inside the desk drawer with a piece of bread to keep him quiet until the next break. We agreed and did just that. Poto settled into the drawer quietly without making a sound, much to our relief.

The first period of the afternoon was Geography. Mr. Sarkis Chouljian walked into the room with heavy steps and, according to his usual habit, called me up to recite the lesson, knowing well that I always came prepared and was a model student.

I had barely started my recitation when a dog's bark suddenly rang out. My teacher adjusted his glasses on his nose and scanned the students, hoping to find the culprit. It was useless. Suspecting no one in particular, he asked, "Who disrupted our lesson with that barking?"

There was no answer. Though annoyed, Mr. Chouljian said with diplomatic calmness, "Whoever made that sound, let him stand up and repeat it. I promise to forgive him, provided he doesn't try such mischief again or disrupt the class.

Bedros Kahvejian stood up and claimed Pashayan was the guilty one. Mr. Chouljian turned to Pashayan and ordered him to bark again as he had before. Pashayan stood up and said, tearfully, "Sir, it wasn't me who barked; it was the dog."

"What dog?" Mr. Chouljian asked, surprised. "Sir, it's Krikor's dog. It's in the desk drawer."

As it turned out, while I was reciting the lesson, Krikor Pashayan had tried to move the dog from my drawer to his. When he reached in to move him, the dog got angry and started barking, refusing to be moved from his master's desk.

Mr. Chouljian approached the desk and told Pashayan to take the dog outside. Turning to me, he said, "This dog is much smarter than you. Look, Pashayan put him out, but because it's cold, he came back in and asked with a pleading look to stay in the classroom."

Then, he approached me with his cane and let me have it — striking my hands, my shins, and my feet. Under the sting of the blows, I cursed the hour I had met the loyal but untrained Poto, who was the cause of my pain. That evening, when the final bell rang, I checked my legs; the cane had left angry red welts across my shins.

From then on, I held a grudge against the heartless Mr. Chouljian. Every evening after school, he would usually give me his daily walking cane to take to his house and bring back his other one. A devilish thought entered my mind. I wanted to solve the mystery of why he swapped his canes. As I studied the cane with curiosity, I noticed a copper ring about 15 centimetres below the handle. Holding it from the top and bottom, I tried to unscrew it. To my shock, I found a hidden blade inside the cane.

Days passed, years passed, and I kept that secret in my heart until Chouljian and his family immigrated to Soviet Armenia. Later, I heard that Chouljian and his eldest son, Souin — an Arab studies specialist who also taught at Sahagian — had been exiled with their family to Siberia. Unable to endure the harsh conditions there, Sarkis died and was buried in Siberia.

I felt deep sorrow for the suffering Mr. Chouljian — a graduate of the Gevorkian Seminary of Etchmiadzin— endured in Armenia and Siberia. However, I never forgot the beating I received because of my love for dogs back in 1938, when I was a 12-year-old fourth-grader.

As for my classmates: Krikor Pashayan immigrated to Armenia in 1947. Bedros Kahvejian, whose surname had been changed to Bedrosian, I met a few years ago in Toronto. He had settled there with his family, but shortly after arriving, he unexpectedly departed this earthly life, leaving us no time to reminisce about the story of the dog.



How We Found My Long-Lost Aunt

Behesni, a city in Cilicia, is situated between Malatya, Ourfa, Marash, and Aintab. It occupies a prime position connecting Armenia, Cilicia, and Syria. These four major cities are located at roughly equal distances from Behesni —about 150 kilometres away.

Behesni is a city of deep historical significance. According to the historian Adontz, the name Behesni appears as 'Yauvan' in the ancient inscriptions of Boghazkoy near Yozgat. He identifies Behesni as one of the frontier military stations of Van, located on the borders of Cilicia and Syria. On a surviving wall of Behesni's historic fortress, there is an inscription which, according to the Englishman Lynch, resembles the Behistun Inscriptions; it is carved into granite rocks at the centre of the fortress's towering walls.

It is clear that the ancient architects of Behesni designed it as a military city, focusing solely on strategic defense. Otherwise, they would not have been compelled to build it in such an inaccessible location— nestled within barren, dry mountain ranges and surrounded by easily defensible valleys and gorges.

The Armenian quarters of Behesni were home to 5,000-6,000 Armenians. The community was served by the St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church with three priests— Father Hovhannes, Father Soukias, and Father Abraham; the Armenian Catholic Church, led by Father Klemens Singerian; and the Armenian Evangelical Church, led by Reverend Garabed Hasesian.

When Turkey joined the war alongside Germany on August 3, 1914, the news was officially announced in Behesni through sealed envelopes sent to the district headmen (*mukhtars*). Hundreds of copies of these documents were posted in the neighbourhoods, the markets, and on the walls and corners of public buildings. Simultaneously, government criers, with fierce and thunderous shouts, called all young men between 18 and 45 to arms; those who attempted to flee were to be handed over to the newly formed military tribunals.

The mobilized Armenian youths were organized into separate battalions and sent toward the Caucasus front via the road to Malatya. They

marched under the scorching August sun along roads lost in thorns and dust. The departure of these loved ones from the city was a tragic, heart-wrenching scene. With the departure of husbands and fathers, a great number of families were left unprotected and condemned to misery. By government decree, those who could pay a ransom of 41 gold coins were exempt from the draft

Soon, confiscations began; the state seized all goods found in the shops. Then, by further decree, the Armenians were ordered to surrender any weapons in their possession. At the same time, the homes of prominent Armenians were searched with a determined effort to find hidden arms. Although the Armenians of Behesni had heard that their sons sent to the front were being slaughtered like flocks of sheep, they did not yet realize that the enemy's blow was aimed at the heart of the entire Armenian nation

Following the searches, the Armenian leaders were arrested. This group included all the local notables, Armenian officials from the state and municipality, the wealthy, renowned craftsmen, and political party members. The *Kaimakam* of Behesni offered the Armenians and their wives the chance to convert to Islam, but these virtuous Armenian mothers, having already made peace with the idea of death, absolutely refused

After the women rejected the offer to apostatize, the Governor gave the local Armenians a three-day deadline to prepare for exile. At the end of that period, the Armenians of Behesni were sent off in caravans under the guard of gendarmerie and caravan leaders. It was a march toward torture, suffering, and death — from Behesni to Deir ez-Zor — marked by the atrocities, robberies, rapes, and murders committed by savage mobs and the guards themselves.

Among the arrested notables and political figures were my maternal grandfather, the goldsmith Ohan Kouyoumjian, and his son, Roupen. As members of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), they never returned home; they were killed under unimaginable torture in the Devej Khan, where all the detainees had been imprisoned

My grandfather had two daughters. The elder, Mariam, had married at 15 and had a 2-month-old son named Haroutioun. The second daughter, Zarouhi, was barely 5 years old when the deportations began. My grandmother and Zarouhi were sent with the first caravan, while my

mother, Mariam, followed in the second

After the remnants of the caravans from Behesni had been decimated along the way and rested briefly under the historic groves of the village of Surfaz, they reached their first stop, Kara-Keochek, toward evening. They were robbed again before reaching the village of Kuylef-Onu, then continued to the banks of the Göksu river. After resting there for a while, the first part of the caravan crossed in the twilight, and the second in the morning.

As the caravans moved away from the riverbank, they were attacked by a mob of butchers who used axes and swords to slaughter innocent, defenseless Armenian women and girls. Finally, the survivors of the first caravan reached the banks of the Euphrates, where countless corpses floated on the surface. Those who survived from the first caravan, including my grandmother and my aunt Zarouhi, crossed to the other side by boat.

The gendarmes, having heard that my grandmother's husband was a goldsmith, searched her and found her hidden gold. With a single sword blow, they killed my defenseless grandmother and threw her into the Euphrates. My mother, carrying her son Haroutioun, crossed the river on a second ferry. With tearful eyes and mournful cries, she saw her mother's terrified face and golden hair floating down the current of the Euphrates.

Upon reaching land, my mother searched for her 5-year-old sister, Zarouhi, but could not find her. Eyewitnesses said that local Arabs, seeing the little girl wandering alone and crying for her mother, took her into their homes.

All further searches proved futile. The caravan continued through Birejik. My mother and a few other women used what gold they had left to bribe the caravan leader, eventually reaching Kilis with the help of muleteers. However, during the journey, my mother's firstborn, Haroutioun, died, unable to endure the hunger and thirst.

Reaching Kilis at barely 18, my mother— a blooming beauty — met my father in a refugee shelter. They married, as her first husband had been killed after being forcibly conscripted into the Turkish army in Behesni. My father, a man from Sasoun who had settled in Kilis, supported the family by working as a miller, often fleeing to escape Turkish military pursuit.

My eldest sister, Siranoush, was born in Kilis in 1918. Later, my father moved to Syria and settled in the town of Azaz, where my brother Haroutioun was born in 1922. After we moved to Aleppo, I was born in 1927, followed by my brother Hovhannes in 1929 and my sister Arshalouys in 1932.

I remember well the years of my childhood — my mother's weeping for her parents murdered by Turkish savages and for the loss of her sister, Zarouhi. Searches conducted through various people and means yielded no results. Neither mendicants nor fortune-tellers could discover my aunt's whereabouts. The years of mourning, the suffering endured on the roads of exile, the deaths of her loved ones, and the disappearance of her sister wore down my poor mother's resilience.

The marriage of my eldest sister, Siranoush, and the birth of her child brought my mother some solace. However, under tragic circumstances, the death of my sister's first child, Vartouhi, added a new layer of grief to her existing pain.

I was 11 years old when my mother, weakened by several illnesses and with my father unable to afford the necessary medicine, passed away on November 2, 1938. She was only 38. She left behind five orphans and a curse upon the bloodthirsty Turkish government that had destroyed her home, tortured her parents and husband to death, and forced her into a life of agonizing exile. My mother died without ever seeing her sister again.

The year was 1953. My father, a patriotic *Sasountsi*, frequently visited the homes of his compatriots. One day, while visiting a fellow countryman in the fourth district of Nor Kyough, they began chatting in their local dialect. They reminisced about the past — the insurgent battles of Sasoun — priding themselves on the bravery of Kevork Chavoush, Kale, Magar, Andranik, Serop Aghpyour, and the hundreds of *fedayees* who had struck terror into the Turkish state and Kurdish tribal leaders.

As the finely brewed coffee was served, my father noticed a woman passing through the courtyard toward the kitchen. After watching her closely, he asked his host if the woman was Arab or Armenian, despite the Arabic tattoos on her hands and feet. The man from Sasoun replied that she was Armenian but had lived among the Arabs, married one, and had a son named Isa.

Sensing a resemblance between this woman and my late mother,

my father asked his friend to call the woman so he could ask her a few questions. The woman came. She did not know Armenian; like many from Behesni, she spoke Arabic and Turkish. My father asked where she was from, what her father's name was, how many were in her family, what their house looked like, and so on.

My aunt answered exactly as my mother used to describe. Overjoyed, my father revealed that she was his late wife's sister, lost during the years of deportation while crossing the Euphrates.

Zarouhi shared her odyssey. When she lost her mother, she searched for her while weeping but could not find her. Arab women came, took her, and brought her to their village. She was adopted by a noble Arab man, and when she turned 15, he married her to his young son. After marrying, they lived in the village for a time. After having a son, her husband took a job on the railway, and they lived in a village near Birejik. Eventually, tired of the job and rural life, the family moved to Aleppo and bought a house in Nor Kyough.

My aunt had been found.

Our relationship as kin continued. Her husband died in 1965, leaving just mother and son. Her son, after graduating from an Arabic secondary school in Aleppo, went to Germany. Working and studying with Armenian willpower and intellect, he studied medicine. He married a German woman and had three children —one daughter and two sons. A German citizen, he remains in Germany to this day. Despite being 68 years old, he continues to work. He has patented an invention of his own, treating fatal diseases and strengthening the senses of the elderly.

As for my aunt Zarouhi, who had been given the Arabic name Nouriye, she visited her son in Germany several times. Under the medical care of her only child, she lived to be 93. She died and was reunited with her martyred parents and her sister Mariam, who had searched for her until her final breath.

My aunt's son, Isa, often calls from Germany. He asks me to visit so I can be treated with the vaccines he invented, ensuring I live a healthy and happy life while always remembering my Arab-Armenian aunt and her son.



The Armenian Destiny

The Lebanese Civil War began on April 13, 1975, and lasted for about 20 years. It resulted in thousands of casualties, immense economic loss, property damage, and widespread looting and destruction. Because of this inhumane conflict, Lebanon's capital, Beirut, was split in two: West Beirut became the Muslim sector and East Beirut the Christian sector. Consequently, many people lost their homes and properties, forced to move from one area to another based on their religion.

The warring factions — religious, political, and communal leaders — were often backed by foreign powers that provided financial and moral support to further their own agendas through local proxies. Leaders such as Camille Chamoun, Pierre Gemayel, Suleiman Frangieh, Kamal Jumblatt, Rashid Karami, and Saeb Salam, as well as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, directed these inter-communal battles. They utilized modern weaponry and even resorted to abductions and assassinations carried out by snipers, who were paid by their organizations according to the number of people they killed.

The weapons came from abroad through specialized agents. Pistols, rifles, machine guns, grenades, rockets, and 155- and 210-millimetre cannons performed their destructive work incessantly. They caused immeasurable damage everywhere and inflicted inhumane suffering on the people, who lived in basements and shelters to protect themselves from the terrifying bombardment. Due to the anarchy and chaos, millions of dollars' worth of goods in the city's port, as well as warehouses and shops belonging to large companies, were looted. Some grew rich while others were impoverished. Amidst the unemployment and the atmosphere of war, thousands of families — at great expense and through bribes and unimaginable travel difficulties — left Lebanon via Cyprus. They sought safety by settling in European countries and America.

The Armenian community of Lebanon also suffered immense losses in this senseless war. It is a credit to the healthy and far-sighted policies of Armenian ministers, members of parliament, and community leaders that they refused to join the fighting sides. By remaining loyal to the Lebanese state and its independence through a stance of 'positive neutrality,' they spared the Armenian people from even greater, irreparable

disasters.[35]

This policy of positive neutrality was welcomed by the leaders of the main forces involved in the civil strife. It allowed the Armenian leadership, as a community committed to Lebanese sovereignty, to mediate between the warring parties in hopes of creating national reconciliation and ending the war. To ensure the safety of Armenian neighbourhoods, an Inter-Party Committee established youth units that stood guard day and night, preventing further human and material losses.

However, it must be admitted that those living far from Armenian enclaves suffered significantly, especially those who had to move from Muslim neighbourhoods to Christian ones, leaving their homes, properties, and businesses behind. Because of the war, thousands of Armenian families emigrated. They left Lebanon— which had served as a 'Second Armenia' in the diaspora — with heavy hearts. Lebanon was the seat of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, home to an Armenian university, secondary and primary schools, and printing houses that produced numerous Armenian monthlies, periodicals, and books that spread light to readers across the diaspora.

Hagop Simonian, born and raised in Aleppo, was captivated by the charm and beauty of Lebanon. At age 25, he moved there to join his older brother, Zaven, who had settled in Lebanon five years earlier, in 1965, to work as a carpenter. After working in his brother's workshop for a few years, Hagop followed his brother's advice and married Hripsime Kouyoumjian, who lived in the Achrafieh district. To be close to the Kouyoumjian family, he bought an apartment in a building near St. James Armenian Apostolic Church in Achrafieh.

Hagop and Hripsime were blessed with two children, Kourken and Talar, who eventually attended the National Chatalsbashian School. Meanwhile, Hagop opened a grocery store in the same neighbourhood. He became well-loved by his neighbours as a decent man who respected and served his customers.

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[35] *During the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), Lebanon's major Armenian political parties adopted a joint policy of 'positive neutrality.' Refusing to take up arms for either Christian or Muslim coalitions, the community focused exclusively on self-defense, safeguarding Armenian neighborhoods, and mediating humanitarian initiatives among warring factions.*

The Simonian family's happiness was shattered by the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. Beirut began to burn under the fire of shells launched madly by opposing forces. These conditions forced residents to take refuge in building basements, living in damp, inhumane conditions and struggling to find basic necessities. Seeing that the war showed no signs of ending and facing a future of hunger and thirst, everyone began thinking of leaving Lebanon.

Then, the unforeseen happened: a shell struck and destroyed Hagop's grocery store, his family's source of livelihood, deepening the fear and suffering they had endured for years. Hagop and his wife agonized over how to survive when they could no longer work or provide for the neighbourhood. After much deliberation, they decided to sell their home and use the money to move to the United States.

Hagop's older brother had moved to Los Angeles five years earlier and lived in Hollywood, and his sister was in Orange County. Both had overcome many difficulties to settle in the United States to escape the war. Hagop sent word to his brother to find a way to secure entry visas for his family. After a year of applications, the Simonian family was granted permission to immigrate. They sold their remaining possessions and, in 1984, left the Armenian hub of Lebanon to settle in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles.

A few days after arriving, with his brother's help, Hagop rented a house nearby. They went to the market to buy essential household items and furniture. Zaven offered Hagop a job in his woodworking shop, as Hagop had originally learned the trade in Aleppo. The two brothers became renowned in the area for their expertise and earned the high regard of their customers.

Hagop's sister, who lived in Orange County, often visited with her family. The three families spent many happy hours together, though their conversations often drifted back to their lives in Syria and Lebanon. They reminisced about their relatives and friends, the prosperous life of the Lebanese-Armenian community before the war, and the bloodshed and destruction that had forced thousands of families to flee.

On one occasion, the brothers and their families were invited to their sister's home in Orange County. Driving from Hollywood at the legal speed limit, they arrived in less than an hour, much to the excitement of

the children. Since it was Sunday, the three women and their children first went to the local Holy Forty Martyrs Armenian Apostolic Church to attend the Divine Liturgy celebrated by Very Reverend Father Moushegh Mardirossian.

After the service, led by Hagop, Zaven, and their sister, the group headed to the coast to see the sights of the Pacific Ocean. They walked along a pier that stretched deep into the water, protected on both sides by iron railings about 150 centimetres high. The children walked happily toward the end of the pier, watching the ebb and flow of the waves.

In the crowd on the pier, a tall Black youth caught their eye as he passed cheerfully in front of the children. Hagop's 12-year-old daughter, Araksi, having never seen a Black person before in her young life, shrank back in sudden fright. She clung to her mother, crying and begging to step away from the unfamiliar man. The group continued further out. The children kept watching the horizon, pointing out the boats passing in the distance.

Araksi leaned against the railing to get a closer look at a passing boat. She leaned too far, and because her head was heavier than her body, the curious girl fell 5 metres down into the ocean. Her mother, aunt, and grandmother cried out in terror, pleading with the passersby for help as they watched the girl struggle in the water.

At that moment, the young man Araksi had feared jumped into the ocean without a second's hesitation. A skilled swimmer, he dove under and pulled Araksi to the surface. Once they reached the shore, he performed resuscitation to clear the water from her lungs. Miraculously, Araksi opened her eyes and looked around, coughing.

Araksi's mother, aunt, and grandmother expressed their deep gratitude and offered the young man a sum of money. The young man refused the reward. He asked them instead to simply love and respect one another as fellow human beings and to help those in need, following the commandments of Christ. Deeply moved, Araksi's mother, Hripsime, embraced her daughter and said, "Do you see, my child? Many people heard our cries for help, but only this young man — the one you spoke of with such fear — risked his life to save you from the ocean. All people are equal, regardless of colour or race. The mysteries of the human heart are known only to God, and only He can judge them."



The Consequences of Materialism

The *Hokedoun* of Aleppo was a place defined by its sprawling courtyard. At its centre sat a well that served all the residents. Surrounding the yard were various offices, the Araks and *Nayiri* Press, and an Armenian bakery. On the second floor were private residences and the Danish establishment of a man named Khachig. There, Armenian women would bring their handmade embroideries to Mr. Haroutioun Chagerian, who would pay them before shipping the crafts to Denmark to be sold. The Tigris Li-brary was also located on that second level.

The *Hokedoun* had two entrances: one from Telal Avenue, which was locked at night, and another from the Salibe district. The entire neighbourhood was Armenian, home to the National Prelacy as well as the Holy Forty Martyrs and St. Mary churches.

The property belonged to the Armenian Patriarchate of St. James in Jerusalem. Traditionally, pilgrims travelling from Armenia or Cilicia to Jerusalem would stop in Aleppo and stay at the *Hokedoun* before continuing their journey. However, by 1946, the pilgrims were gone. The building was now inhabited by families who had survived the Genocide and various local tradesmen.

For me, the most interesting part of the *Hokedoun* was the bakery. It belonged to my compatriots from Sasoun, Hageh and Setrag Giragosian. I often had the chance to chat with them, listening to stories of their lives and the battles of the revolutionaries of Sasoun — men like Arapo, Serop Aghpyour, Kevork Chavoush, Magar of Spaghanats, Kaleh, Andranik, and other *fedayees*.

Over the years, many of the residents and shopkeepers changed. One of the permanent fixtures, however, was Crazy Krikor. Through some unknown arrangement, he had taken up residence in the nook under the stairs leading to the second floor, a spot left vacant after the death of another local eccentric, Crazy Mikael.

No one knew who he was, where he came from, or why he had lost his mind. Yet, his worn uniform and faded tie suggested that his mental decline was a relatively recent chapter in his life. Krikor appeared to be about 40 years old. He was of medium height, broad-shouldered, with a

distinct Armenian nose and a pair of brown eyes that always seemed to plead for kindness. The mental and physical suffering he had endured had left deep furrows across his brow.

Every morning, upon waking in his corner, he would watch the people passing through the *Hokedoun*. He would draw water from the well to wash his face, return to his home, and sing the *'Aravod Louso'* ('Morning of Light') hymn in a beautiful voice. He never worried about food; the baker from Sasoun and other kind-hearted residents and passersby would share their leftovers with him. Some gave him old shoes or clothes as charity, and others gave him small change.

Krikor was a hardworking soul. Several times a day, he would draw water from the well and carry buckets to his benefactors. He often brought cold water to the typesetters at the *Arevelk* daily newspaper on the second floor. Since their workshop had no windows and became stiflingly hot, he would try to cool the room by waving a cardboard fan hanging from the ceiling. He did what he could; if he had enough wits left to hold a regular trade, he certainly wouldn't have been living under a staircase in the heat and cold of Aleppo.

Word on the street was that Krikor had once driven freight trucks between Aleppo and Mosul. People said he came from a well-off family in Mosul and had lost his sanity after being torn away from the woman he loved.

Sometime later, a visitor from Mosul passing through the *Hokedoun* spotted poor Krikor in his corner. Stunned by the encounter, he walked into the offices of *Arevelk* to explain the tragedy. He recounted how Krikor — a well-educated, respectful young man devoted to his family — had been engaged to a woman he adored. The wedding was just around the corner when the bride's mother, chasing wealth, broke off the betrothal and forced her daughter to marry a richer suitor against her will.

The shock shattered Krikor completely. He suffered a total mental breakdown and vanished from Mosul without a trace, leaving his frantic family to scour the city for months in vain. The heartbreak turned fatal when the young woman, devastated by news of his madness, ended her own life with poison.

Shaken by the sight of him in the stairwell, the visitor lamented: "If his brothers had any idea he was here, they would rush to Aleppo

instantly to bring him home." He recalled how Krikor had grown up in the church, eventually becoming an ordained deacon gifted with an unforgettable tenor voice. During Holy Week, his solo of '*Oor Es Mayr Eem*' ('Mother, Where Art Thou?') during the *Khavaroum*[36] darkness service had routinely moved the entire congregation to tears.

Krikor truly did have a remarkable tenor voice. Every now and then, sparked by a quiet memory, he would burst into passionate song. I loved his melodies. Passersby would stop to listen to his soulful hymns and national songs. During the Feast of *Vartanantz*,[37] he sang patriotic anthems; at Christmas, he sang '*Khorhourt Medz*' ('Great Mystery'). He also sang many love songs, including one he repeated often:

Beautiful and fragrant,
You mountain flower,
For whom did you sprout?
For whom did you bloom?

You grew in the cold,
Neglected and alone,
You saw no good days,
Grieving like an orphan.

...

Daughters of Armenia, I would sacrifice my soul for yours,
When you come to my mind, I utter a deep "ah."
I am melting, melting away in foreign lands,
Oh, my heart is scorched, and there is no end to my pain.

Every morning after waking up, Krikor would begin a strange sort

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[36] *The Khavaroum is the solemn Tenebrae service observed in the Armenian Apostolic Church on Holy Thursday evening. Commemorating the betrayal, arrest, and suffering of Jesus Christ, the service features the gradual extinguishing of twelve candles until the sanctuary is plunged into total darkness, traditionally accompanied by mournful hymns such as Oor Es Mayr Eem.*

[37] *The Feast of Vartanantz commemorates the Battle of Avarayr (451 AD), where St. Vartan Mamikonian and 1,036 martyrs fought the Sassanid Persians. Though a military defeat, their sacrifice ensured the survival of Armenian Christianity. It remains a cornerstone of Armenian national identity, celebrated annually on the Thursday preceding Great Lent.*

of hunt. He would take off his clothes and patiently search for the lice that had multiplied in the seams. He would crush them between his thumbs with a sense of vengeance, for they were the pests that kept him from a peaceful night's sleep.

To Krikor, the *Hokedoun* was his whole world—or rather, his new world. His past was forgotten, and how he had travelled from Mosul to Aleppo remained a mystery. Who had guided him to that specific corner under the stairs was another secret altogether.

"The mother of the one who stole it... the sister... the whole bloodline! I am a poor man! What do you want from me? My passport, my ID, my letters, my photos— all gone! Oh, woe is me! May God take the soul of the one who took them!"

On an August morning in 1947, Krikor met us at the entrance of the *Nayiri* Press with these words. He was absolutely livid. His eyes were bloodshot with rage, and he was weeping with fury.

What had happened? Some street hoodlums, seeing poor Krikor asleep early in the morning, had stolen his wallet. Inside were his identification papers, his passport, and—most importantly—his mementos. These were the only things that still tied him to his life. He was frantically tossing his lice-ridden bedding, searching every nook and cranny. "It's gone, it's gone! Woe is me!" he cried.

We tried to approach and calm him, but it was no use. All day, the residents of the *Hokedoun* listened to Krikor's curses and lamentations. Any word of comfort was met with hostility. He even refused to eat, as if on a hunger strike, though against whom, even he didn't know.

The next day, I approached him as a friend and asked what was so valuable in that wallet that it had caused such a breakdown. He thought for a moment, cried again, cursed the thieves once more, and whispered, "Ankineh's photo and her letters were in there."

It all became clear. I realized then that the ID and passport weren't the reason for his despair. He had no use for those anymore. There was something else, something close to his heart, that had shattered his already fragile mind. There was likely no money in the wallet at all.

"The man had already lost his beloved. He lost his mind and his past," I told my friends as I walked away. "Now, heartless people have even taken the few letters he had left from Ankineh. Those memories were the

only things that kept him alive. I doubt the poor man will last much longer."

Indeed, Krikor grew more melancholic by the day. He sang very little and ate even less. At first, he hoped the thieves would realize there was no money in the wallet and return it, but the days passed with no news. He used to shave occasionally and tidy himself up to look presentable, but after that dark day, he never touched a razor or washed his face again. He wasted away, refusing to leave his spot under the stairs.

One cold winter day, word reached the residents: Krikor had been found dead on the road to the Armenian cemetery. No official identification could be made because he had no papers on him. The only thing the authorities could do was grant permission for his burial as an 'unidentified and unstable stranger.'

Krikor's weary body was placed in a church coffin. The funeral service was held at the Holy Forty Martyrs Church by Archpriest Mgrditch Mouradian, attended by a few mourning residents of the *Hokedoun*. He was buried in the Armenian cemetery, far from his loved ones and his home.

One can only wonder if, in the world beyond, he was finally reunited with his adored Ankineh.



We, Too, Had No Childhood

As a result of Turkey's genocidal policies and the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, the first generation born to survivors also lacked a childhood, just like the orphans who lost their parents during those dark years.

They grew up without a normal childhood because their parents had endured unimaginable cruelty on the death marches. Driven from their ancestral homes into the Syrian deserts, they had faced massacres, starvation, looting, and sexual violence. The few who survived— cheating death through pure luck or sheer determination — found shelter in Syria, Lebanon, and across the Arab world. They eventually started families, but their grinding poverty meant their children grew up in hardship. Lacking basic care and the simple joys of growing up, they were forced to mature far too quickly.

Our parents, survivors exiled from Western Armenia and Cilicia, generally lacked formal trades and were unfamiliar with Arabic. It was a monumental struggle for them to provide for their families or pay to send their children to Armenian schools.

It is true that some of those born in the homeland before the Genocide were 'fortunate' enough to be saved from death by certain Turks, Kurds, or Arabs after the murder of their families. At the end of the war, Armenian organizations 'liberated' these orphans by paying a gold piece for each child and placing them in orphanages. These children truly had no childhood, growing up without the warmth of a mother or father.

But as I said, life was not easy for the children of the many families who survived the massacres and married in the lands where they found refuge. Their childhood was non-existent because their parents lacked the means to provide the stability and joy essential for a young life.

As one of thousands who had parents but still lacked a childhood, I have spent my conscious life cursing the Ottoman Turkish government that exiled and annihilated our people. I curse the savagery of the Turkish, Kurdish, and Chechen mobs who, with government encouragement, slaughtered nearly two million Armenians. They were the reason the survivors of the Genocide and their children grew up without ever truly being

young.

Because of this, throughout my own married life, I have always strived to raise my children with the affection and environment they need, within the limits of my ability.

My father, Ghazar (Kharzo) Hotoyan, miraculously survived the Genocide. He was from the village of Spaghank in the Dalvorig district of Sasoun. He moved from Sasoun to Cilicia and worked as a miller for fellow *Sasountsis* in the Kilis region. He was 22 years old in 1914, just before the First World War.

During the Genocide years, in 1917, he married Mariam Kouyoumjian in Kilis. She was from the city of Behesni in the Malatya region; her father, mother, brothers, and relatives had all been killed by the Turks.

The family grew over the following years: my sister Siranoush was born in Kilis in 1918; my brother Zakar was born there in 1920 but died in infancy; my brother Haroutioun was born in Azaz, Syria, in 1922; another brother, Krikor, was born in 1925 but also died young; I (Krikor) was born in Aleppo in 1927; my brother Hovhannes followed in 1929; and my youngest sister, Arshalouys, was born in 1932.

The burden of this family rested on the shoulders of my father, a simple villager from Spaghank. He tried dozens of different trades and jobs to secure a living and create some semblance of a tolerable childhood for his children.

In 1938, our mother passed away after 22 years of marriage. She was only 38. She left us orphaned and helpless, largely because we lacked the money for doctors or medicine.

At that time, we lived in the Nor Kyough Armenian district of Aleppo, in the fourth neighbourhood. We rented a single room in a house with a courtyard belonging to a Christian Arab family. The landlord's wife was a hunchback, but she took wonderful care of her family and even looked after us a little until my father brought us a stepmother to care for us.

In 1940, my father and my uncle were sentenced to six months in prison for providing a bed and shelter in our home to a man named Sevenan Hagop, who had escaped from jail. To avoid imprisonment, they fled from the police and took refuge in the town of Qamishli, where many people from Sasoun lived.

My uncle, Arshag, was a baker. He found work as an oven-tender in the bakery of Arush, another *Sasountsi*. He immediately sent word to my sister in Aleppo to come to Qamishli with her firstborn son.

On June 24, 1940, my sister Siranoush and I set out for Qamishli by car. We passed through Raqqa, Ras al-Ayn, and Deir ez-Zor — places that had become collective graves for our people. Our car pushed through the desert dust until we reached Qamishli, where my father and uncle met us. I was finally able to hand over little Arshag, who had been sleeping and waking in my arms throughout the journey.

Two weeks after we arrived, my stepmother, my older brother Haroutioun, my younger brother Hovhannes, and my little sister Arshalouys joined us. My older brother had worked as a tailor for a few years in Aleppo and knew how to sew jackets and trousers. My father would buy used American-imported jackets and bring them home. My younger brother and I would spend our time unpicking the seams, and my older brother would turn the fabric inside out and reseat them to make them look new. On market days, my father would sell them at a stall.

Still, that business wasn't enough to cover the family's expenses. Out of necessity, my younger brother and I began selling *kahke* (traditional Middle Eastern baked goods). We wandered the streets of Qamishli with large wooden trays of *kahke* balanced on our heads, shouting through the neighbourhoods: "*Kahke-ath!*"

I remember a time when a scorpion bit my older brother while he was sleeping outdoors. My father had to cauterize the wound, and my brother was unable to work for a long time.

That was our 'childhood.' After being arrested and briefly jailed in Qamishli, we eventually returned to Aleppo. We had no money for bread or food, so my stepmother cooked the cracked wheat we had brought from Qamishli every single day— without any oil —until the entire 100-kilogram sack was gone. Those were the war years; even bread was hard to come by.

My father was a heavy smoker. Sometimes, during periods of unemployment or business failure, he wouldn't even have the money for a cigarette. It was very difficult for him to go without. My brothers and I would roam the streets of Nor Kyough, picking up discarded cigarette butts from the ground. My father would tear the paper off these scraps, collect the tobacco in his tin, and roll new ones using special rolling

papers.

From kindergarten onward, I never owned a proper school bag. I went to school with bags, shirts, and trousers sewn by my mother. I couldn't afford pencils, pens, or ink; I often relied on the leftovers given to me by wealthier classmates.

I never wore shoes during my childhood. Summer or winter, I had to make do with sandals. I have a watercolour of myself in those famous sandals, wearing the shirt and pants my mother made. I'm standing with my friend Yervant Hovhannesian, who died young. The photo was taken at the entrance to the alley across from the Efendi ice cream shop in Aleppo, on the road to Salibe. Armenian artists used to set up their watercolour kits there to earn their daily bread by painting portraits.

I never had toys. Our games were played in the streets and fields. In the streets, we played *chalik, bazdanbaj, pich*, and 'steal the hat.' In the fields, we played soccer with a ball made of rags, barely able to reach the goal.

As for New Year's gifts, I never received one. My only memory of a gift was receiving a single orange at the New Year's celebration for the Sunday School students of the Sahagian School.

I will never forget one particular way I earned money to help support the family during my childhood. In Aleppo, on the day after major church feasts—the *Merelots* (Day of the Dead)—crowds of people would cross the wooden bridge over the Queiq River to visit the Armenian cemeteries. They would go to have the priests bless the graves of their loved ones. Everyone wanted their turn at once, and it often turned into a tug-of-war, with people pulling at the priest's sleeves or cloak to draw him toward their family plot.

A boy or young man would always accompany the priest to serve as an incense bearer. We used homemade metal censers fashioned with wire handles to create a prayerful atmosphere during the blessing. We kept the coals inside burning bright, ready for the incense. After the blessing, the priest would receive a gift, and the boy swinging the incense

would be given, at most, 25 *ghirsh*.[38]

Seeing how profitable this was, after having our own mother's grave blessed, we decided to make our own censers and start working the next *Merelots*. My oldest brother would follow me and my brother Hovhannes with supplies of coal and incense. Each of us would pair up with a priest and assist in the blessings.

The grave blessings lasted until two or three in the afternoon. As the crowds slowly headed home, we three brothers would return home and count our earnings for the day, lightening the heavy burden of survival that weighed on our father's shoulders.

When we grew a bit older, during our school holidays, my brothers and I would take turns helping my father sell used American jackets. These had been refurbished by the Armenian wholesalers in the Khan Haji Mousa. We sold them in the Bab al-Faraj square and the inner markets of Aleppo. We would balance five or six jackets on our left shoulders and wander from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, trying to sell them for a small profit.

On a successful day, if we sold a few jackets, my father would treat me to some delicious grilled lamb from one of the vendors in the market. Because I spent hours carrying those heavy jackets on my left shoulder to help my father, my left shoulder ended up slightly lower than my right — a physical reminder I can still feel to this day.

I felt the absence of a childhood even as a student, when I would be sent home from school because my tuition hadn't been paid. Fortunately, that issue was eventually resolved when I was accepted as a ward of the institution founded by the Danish humanitarian Miss Karen Jeppe, and later by the Sasoun Compatriotic Union.

The Armenian Genocide turned children into orphans without a childhood. But for us — the first generation born after the massacres — we, too, unfortunately, never had a childhood of our own.

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[38] *Ghirsh is a subunit of currency historically used in Syria during the Ottoman era and the subsequent French Mandate. While the Syrian Pound became the primary unit, the ghirsh remained a functional decimal division.*


BIBLE

The Power of Faith

Beginning on June 24, 1943, Armen Krikorian served in the artillery division of the Free French Army stationed in Syria and Lebanon. Over three years, he studied the science of gunnery, specializing in American 75mm and French 105mm cannons. As a sub-lieutenant, he handled every role in the battery, from aiming to selecting shell types and detonation ranges.

In 1945, as the struggle for Syrian independence and liberation from the French Mandate began, the French and Syrian governments reached an agreement under British guarantee. Consequently, French forces in Syria were relocated to Lebanon to eventually be transported back to France. Armen's artillery battalion was stationed at the military barracks located at the Rayag airfield in Lebanon.

Life at the Rayag airfield proceeded calmly. In the evenings, Armen and his comrades would head into the city to visit the cafes and restaurants in its scenic areas. Occasionally, they met local Armenians living in Rayag. They became friends, and Armen often accepted their invitations to visit their homes, where he enjoyed the warmth and hospitality of an Armenian family.

In June 1945, due to an artillery accident, Armen was rushed to the large, three-storey military hospital at the Rayag airfield. He underwent surgery by military surgeons of the French army, which saved his left hand from the risk of amputation at the wrist.

At that time, the Rayag military hospital treated French soldiers and their families. Armen was taken to his assigned bed in agonizing pain. The flesh on the inside of his left wrist had been painfully crushed, and the bone was visible. To the credit of the military physician Dr. Yeghnan Georges, every skill was employed to carefully debride the damaged tissue and clean the wound. The doctor gave strict orders that the bandages were never to be removed.

Later that afternoon, the pain grew more intense by the hour. Blood continued to seep through, staining the bandages red. Under the weight of this unbearable agony, Armen pleaded with the nurses to find a way to dull the pain and stop the bleeding. It was in vain; the nurses

refused to touch the dressings, as they were following the head doctor's orders.

Driven by necessity, he resisted the pain through prayer and analgesics, though he remained awake the entire night. In the morning, the nurses finally changed his dressings. The bleeding had stopped. They cleaned the wound and rebound it with fresh bandages, reassuring him that the pain would subside day by day.

Then, a miracle occurred. The soldier, who had been at death's door, was awakened by the power of his newly found Christian faith. He sat up in bed, giving glory to God for granting him a new life. He vowed to follow the faith of his parents and the Armenian nation, believing fully in the existence of God and that Christ is the Son of God.

Weeks passed, and as Armen's treatment progressed, his pain lessened and his spirits lifted. He began smiling again, which brought relief to his doctor, the nurses, and the other patients he had befriended — especially the families of wounded Armenian soldiers who came regularly to visit.

During his hospital stay, particularly through bouts of severe pain, Armen found the strength to keep going by reading his Bible, which he had carried everywhere for years. Its passages brought him deep comfort. He was especially inspired by Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 12, verses 12 and 13: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, continue steadfastly in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

These words shaped Armen's outlook, calming his anxieties and giving him confidence that he would make a full recovery.

After more than a month of care, Armen was on his feet again, though his wound was still healing. Remembering the biblical call to serve others, he volunteered to help the nursing staff carry meals to bedridden patients. The hospital accepted his offer gladly, and his circle of friends grew even larger.

Around that time, a new patient arrived in critical condition: an Armenian soldier severely wounded during the Syrian independence clashes in Deir ez-Zor. As a member of the French military police, he had been singled out and attacked by Arab nationalists. He had survived only because a local Armenian resident stepped in, recognizing him as a soldier

who had often protected the community.

The soldier, whose father had served in the French Foreign Legion, was so badly injured he could barely whisper. Through muffled groans of pain, he managed only three words: "*Mayrig, okné indzi*..." ("Mother, help me...").

Armen walked over to the bed and heard the Armenian phrase distinctly. Certain the wounded man was a fellow Armenian, Armen felt an immediate urge to do whatever he could for him.

A week later, after around-the-clock medical care, Jean—whose name Armen had verified from his chart—slowly opened his eyes. Looking around in confusion and seeing Armen watching over him, he asked in French who he was. Armen replied in Armenian, introducing himself and offering to help ease his pain. He also encouraged Jean to pray for a quick recovery.

Jean's reaction was cold and defensive. He claimed he was an atheist, insisting that while his parents belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church, he had never believed in God or Christ. He added that he had never once prayed or stepped inside a church in his life.

Armen was shaken by his words. He could hardly comprehend how an Armenian could turn his back on faith and the teachings of Christ. He stepped away from the bedside, deeply troubled, but resolved to help Jean reflect on his life and find faith before it was too late.

A week later, Jean's condition took a sharp turn for the worse. As his vital signs dropped and death grew near, the reality of dying suddenly terrified him. He was overcome with grief—not just because his life was ending, but because his soul was completely unprepared. He realized the weight of his own neglect, and the prospect of dying without faith filled him with panic.

He asked a nurse to bring Armen to his bedside. In tears, he pleaded with Armen to help save his soul so he wouldn't die in sin.

Armen opened his Bible and read John 3:16 to him: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not

believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

Armen then read John 5:24: "Truly, truly, I say unto you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

The words hit home. A profound change came over Jean. He looked up at Armen and asked him to bring an Armenian priest right away so he could confess his sins and receive Holy Communion.

Through an Armenian acquaintance in Rayak, Armen sent an urgent message to Father Mashdots Vosgeritchian, the parish priest in nearby Zahle, asking him to fulfill the dying wish of an Armenian serviceman.

Father Mashdots arrived at the hospital shortly after. With the nursing staff and Armen gathered near, he held a solemn service, praying for divine mercy and the forgiveness of sins. Weeping openly, Jean confessed his transgressions and begged for forgiveness for a life spent denying God.



My Father, the Benefactor

My father, Ghazar (Kharzo) Hotoyan, son of Krikor, was born in 1892 in the village of Spaghank, in the Dalvorig region of Sasoun.

Spaghank consisted of 26 related families who were primary figures in the Armenian ethnographic movement. Among them were famous *fedayees* like *Spaghantsi* Magar, *Spaghantsi* Kale, and the group leader *Spaghantsi* Ake, along with others who fought regular Turkish troops and Kurdish brigand tribes to protect their people's economy, honour, dignity, and right to live freely.

The village served as a stronghold and gathering place for the *fedayees*; renowned leaders would convene there to hold meetings and plan future activities. Leaders such as Andranik, Kevork Chavoush, and Roupen Der Minassian were frequent visitors, directing the *fedayee* movement from the village. My father, though only a youth at the time, attended these meetings with great interest. Under Andranik's tutelage, he learned to swim and served the *fedayees*.

Driven by a thirst for knowledge, he studied at the Monastery of St. Garabed in Moush and later served as a teacher at the village school. Simultaneously, he acted as a clerk and deacon at the village church, St. Marouke the Hermit. This church was later besieged by the archenemy of the Armenian people, the tribal chief Bishara Khalil, who set it ablaze. Those who had sought refuge inside — including the family of the veteran *fedayee* Magar — suffocated. Later, Bishara Khalil was captured and beheaded by Andranik, Magar, Kale, and other *fedayees* for his unforgivable crimes.

After claiming the flintlock rifle of a Kurd killed during an attack, my father joined the Sasoun uprisings as a teenager alongside his *fedayee* relatives. Tono Magar was my father's relative and godfather, while Kale and Ake were his cousins. He grew up in their shadow, ready to sacrifice himself in the battles to defend the homeland.

In 1914, escaping the pursuit of Turkish police, he left Sasoun. After a long and arduous journey, he reached Cilicia. There, he connected with compatriots from Kilis who worked as millers; he took refuge with them and eventually became a miller himself.

A year after his arrival in Kilis, Turkey allied with Germany and entered the war against France, England, and Russia. Mandatory conscription began for all citizens of military age. It was during this time that the deportation and massacre of all Armenians living in Turkey commenced. By special decree, every Armenian town and village was emptied. Under unbearable conditions of hunger and thirst, the people were driven toward the Arabian deserts, subjected to robbery, rape, and torture along the way.

In the eastern provinces — specifically Sasoun, Van, Shabin-Karahisar, and Erzeroum— self-defence battles broke out. These ended in defeat due to a lack of weapons and ammunition. Similar resistance took place in Cilician cities like Aintab, Ourfa, Marash, Hadjin, and Zeitoun, but they too succumbed to defeat and exile.

When conscription reached Cilicia, the millers and military deserters in the Kilis region were hunted down. My father was arrested along with others, but he repeatedly found ways to escape and hide in the mills of elderly *Sasountsis*. While arrests were frequent, he always managed to slip away. He could not avoid his 12th arrest, however. They transferred him to Aleppo and imprisoned him in a large, two-storey building in the Bab al-Jinan district, where he met many Armenian and Arab deserters.

Among the prisoners, he met a fellow countryman named Mkro from Sasoun. They became close and decided to escape before being sent to the front, knowing full well that being sent to the army meant certain death. After much deliberation and scouting the building, they noticed the latrines were on the second floor. One evening after dark, the two young men got permission to go. They hung their belts on the door so the guards would be certain they were still inside; instead, they climbed onto the roof and jumped into the street below. Fortunately, they landed in a pile of soft refuse and escaped unharmed.

As I mentioned, my father was arrested 12 times during the three years of the war, and being a defiant *Sasountsi*, he escaped every single time. To satisfy my curiosity years later, he took me to that building in Aleppo's Bab al-Jinan district and showed me the spot where he had jumped from the second floor.

After that final escape, he returned to Kilis and resumed work as a miller. It was there he married my mother, Mariam, from the city of

Behesni in Cilicia. My eldest sister, Siranoush, was born in Kilis in 1918.

Following the armistice and Turkey's defeat, my father moved to the town of Azaz in Syria. My brother Haroutioun was born there in 1922. When Syria came under the French Mandate, the family moved to Aleppo. In the Hamidieh neighbourhood, he built a house out of tin and wood; I was born there in 1927. Years later, by government order, the tin shelters of the refugees were demolished, and residents were given the chance to build proper homes in the Nor Kyough district. Working day and night and casting their own bricks, my parents built a three-room house with a courtyard. My brother Hovhannes was born there in 1929, followed by my sister Arshalouys in 1932.

Turning one room of the new house into a shop, my father tried several trades to support us. He was a butcher, a grocer, and he even sold *tahn* (a yogurt drink) in Aleppo's central market. Eventually, he sold the house, and with a tidy sum of money, he opened a second-hand American clothing store in Azaz. By selling to Turkish smugglers coming across the border, he secured a comfortable life for the family and rented a stone apartment in a two-storey building in the first section of Nor Kyough.

As a former teacher, deacon, and a man who valued education, my father struggled financially but ensured all five of his children (three boys and two girls) attended the Sahagian School in Nor Kyough. After losing his shop in Azaz through naivety, he turned to selling second-hand American jackets and coats in Aleppo. He rented stalls at the Sunday and Friday bazaars. Later, he would walk through the Aleppo markets with jackets draped over his shoulder, sometimes taking my older brother or me along.

Among his many trades, he also partnered with my brother-in-law as a baker, but his primary business remained the sale of jackets. It was common for *Sasountsis* to come to Aleppo to work as bakers, save enough money, and return to Sasoun. Even the famous leader Kevork Chavoush once worked as a baker in Aleppo to save for a rifle before returning to the mountains. Since the year 1300, many *Sasountsis* have settled in Aleppo, building the Church of the Holy Forty Martyrs in the Salibe neighbourhood. In those days, 90 percent of the bakeries in Aleppo belonged to *Sasountsis*, consequently, local Arabs would say they were going to the '*Sousani*'.

The *Sasountsis* in Aleppo formed the Sasoun Patriotic Union, which

aided families and organized cultural events. Aside from the intellectual Simon Simonian, my father was the only person born in Sasoun who could read and write, so he served on the Union's board. If a compatriot needed financial or medical aid, the board had to approve it.

One time, the board refused to help a *Sasountsi* woman with the cost of a surgery at the Altounian Hospital because it required five Ottoman gold pounds. The woman came to our house crying and pleading with my father to find a way, lest she die and leave her children orphaned. Feeling a deep sense of pity for her, my father stamped the official Union document as an authorization for payment. He begged the woman not to tell anyone he had given her the paper until after the surgery.

The woman had the operation and returned home safely, expressing her deep gratitude to my father for his daring help. When the bill arrived from Altounian Hospital, the board was stunned and demanded to know who had authorized the expenditure. My father spoke up boldly: "We saved the life of a *Sasountsi* mother for five gold pounds. We fulfilled the duty for which this Union was founded." Until the day she died, that woman spoke of my father's kindness.

My father's good deeds were many, but I want to highlight the most significant ones. A relative of my brother-in-law, a man known as Yotnan Hagop, had escaped from prison where he was serving a long sentence for various thefts. My angelic mother had recently passed away. My brother-in-law suggested that Hagop stay at our house for a few days while we stayed at my sister's. My father collected money from friends to bribe someone to smuggle Hagop to Baghdad. However, following an anonymous tip, the police surrounded both our house and my sister's. Not finding Hagop, they took my father and older brother to the station. Under the pressure of a beating, my brother blurted out that our father had moved Hagop elsewhere.

Unable to withstand the punishment, my father confessed the location where smugglers were supposed to take Hagop across the Iraqi border the next day. The police caught Hagop while he was sleeping; otherwise, there would have been bloodshed. The following day, the police arrested my father and brother-in-law, though they were eventually released on bail. To pay for lawyers, my father had to sell his entire stock of American clothing. Even then, they were not acquitted; both were

sentenced to six months each in prison for harbouring a fugitive. My brother-in-law surrendered, but my father — the defiant *Sasountsi* — fled to Qamishli. Our family moved there for a time before returning to Aleppo, but my father was eventually arrested in Qamishli and served his sentence there.

My father sold refurbished American jackets at the Aleppo bazaars. He noticed a young Kurd listening intently whenever he spoke Armenian. Since my father knew Kurdish, he approached the man and discovered he was actually Armenian, having been adopted by Kurds during the Genocide. My father closed his stall and took the man — Aref — to the Armenian Prelacy. Aref cast off his Kurdish clothing, reclaimed his Armenian identity, and lived and married in Aleppo.

One summer day, my father brought home an Arab youth covered in tattoos. It turned out this young man had been a 6 or 7-year-old child during the Genocide when he was adopted by the Anaza tribe. He never forgot his roots and eventually fled to Aleppo. The 'Arabized' Armenian stayed at our house for several days. He eventually remembered his name, Sarkis, and the region in Turkey where his home had been. My father took him to the St. Gregory the Illuminator Church in Nor Kyough. The people there concluded Sarkis was the son of parents from Aintab. He found his relatives, married, and lived as an honourable Armenian. I will never forget Sarkis — first in his Arab robes and tattoos, and later in European clothes, though the tattoos remained as a reminder of his past suffering.

Whether by luck or curiosity, those in need always seemed to find my father. During the Second World War, he brought home a young man named Hagop Karagoz, a deserter from the Turkish army. At the time, all six of us were living in a single-room house. My father secured funds from friends and found someone to smuggle Hagop into Lebanon. Hagop later sent a letter of gratitude from Beirut.

Our godfather, Mele Kasparian, had spent many years as a miller in the mountains of northern Syria. In his old age, he asked my father for advice. My father suggested he move to Aleppo so his children could find work. The godfather agreed and sold his house in Azaz for a modest price; his family stayed at our house for two weeks until they found a rental. Until his death, he remembered my father's kindness with gratitude.

During the Second World War, Syria faced a dire economic crisis

and an unbearable bread shortage. People stood in line at bakeries from midnight hoping for a few kilos of bread. Sugar, butter, and rice were impossible to find. My older brother Haroutioun, who knew English, worked in the British Army kitchen in Aleppo. He met Sergeant Charlie, an Australian-Armenian translator, and secured a contract to dispose of the kitchen leftovers. My father, then unemployed, hired a carriage and several times a week brought back leftover bread, meat, and sweets. He sent word to the Armenian residents of Zeitoun Khan and the surrounding areas to come and buy what they needed at a low price. For several years, he kept our family and the local Armenian community fed. Those who remember those difficult days still bless 'Kharzo from Sasoun' for ensuring that many families did not go hungry.

During our time in Aleppo, we lived in various neighbourhoods as renters. I had already begun writing articles, correspondence, and poems for the *Arevelk* daily; I was also a member of the ARF and other organizations. Additionally, I served as a teacher in the Armenian Apostolic Sunday schools and had earned a certain reputation within community circles.

Sometimes, returning home in the evening exhausted from my work as a typesetter, I would find a stranger — a man or a woman — waiting in our house. My father, noticing my curiosity, would explain: "This lady is the mother of a large family. She has three children in school but cannot afford their tuition. My soul, do a good deed for this woman and write a letter to the Syrian Armenian Relief Cross (Armenian Relief Society - ARS) or the Patriotic Union so they might help with the children's fees."

This happened frequently. One day, quite annoyed, I said, "Father, what is this? Are you a charitable institution and am I your secretary?"

He laughed and replied, "My son, helping the weak, the helpless, and the poor is the greatest human virtue. Throughout your entire life, never stop doing good; do good and cast it into the sea."

My father never ceased performing these acts of kindness until the day he died. He never cared for wealth, for he had been raised in the village of Spaghank in Sasoun under the influence of the *fedayees*. They loved only their nation and homeland, and they fought for the realization of the dream of a free and independent Armenia. My father was one of them, and he passed those traditional values on to us.



Beneath Every Evil, there is Good

In 1941, I graduated from the Sahagian School in Aleppo. That summer, as was the custom during our three-month breaks from school, my father took me to Khan Haji Mousa. The compound featured two floors of shops surrounding a massive courtyard, all rented out to Armenian merchants and tailors. The merchants imported large quantities of used jackets, coats, and trousers from America. After some repairs, they would sell them — primarily to smugglers known as *ghachakhjis* coming from Turkey — who would take the goods across the border to sell at a premium. Meanwhile, the tailors would take slightly worn garments, dismantle them, and sew them back together inside out. This made the clothing look almost brand new to the customers.

My father took me to the second-floor shop of a tailor named Ajoyan. Working there as a master tailor was a compatriot of mine, *Sasountsi* Mourad, whose mother, Khmlo, had been like a mother to us at the Sahagian School.

Having apprenticed for Mr. Ajoyan over several summers, I had become quite proficient with both hand-sewing and machines. Years earlier, the middle finger of my right hand had been bandaged from the nail upward because it had become curved. This allowed my thimble to rest on the tip of my finger, which helped me sew while protecting me from being pricked by the dull end of the needle.

A year later, I found a job as a dishwasher through my brother, who worked in the kitchen of the British Army's mess. While my brother served the soldiers during breakfast, lunch, tea, and dinner, I was brought on to handle the plates. After working there for a while, I grew tired of it. Even though we received a fair share of the rich food served to the officers, I felt that washing dishes was beneath me.

"Father, I want to continue my education," I would say.

He would always reply, "I don't have the financial means to send you to the American or French colleges. Work a little longer, let's save some money, and then we can manage your school expenses."

But who had the patience to wait for that 'blessed' day? I decided to join the British Army instead. I went to the recruitment centre, but it

was in vain; they took one look at my face and build and decided I was unfit for service.

Though my identity papers said I was 18, I was actually 16. My brother, Krikor, had been born in 1925 and died young, but his record had never been cancelled. When I was born in 1927, I wasn't registered with the municipality. Carrying myself with the confidence of an 18-year-old, I tried the French recruitment centre. There, I met many other young men looking to enlist.

Many applicants were rejected for various reasons, but only 22 Armenian youths were accepted — I was among them. During my examination by two officers — a doctor and a recording officer — the doctor told his colleague that I was just a lad and unfit to be a soldier. However, the second officer argued that while I was young, I knew French and could be very useful. They eventually agreed.

On June 24, 1943, the 22 of us set off by train to join the ranks of the French Army. We arrived at the barracks in the coastal Mar Elias district of Beirut. In the days that followed, we new Armenian recruits received our uniforms, and our hair was shorn by the barracks' Armenian barber, who was also a soldier.

Then the formal military drills began: learning how to march in formation, salute, follow orders, and master every regulation in the service manual. After three months of daily training and practice, we were transformed into proper soldiers of the Free French Forces. As an artilleryman, I was first trained on standard service rifles and rapid-fire carbines before learning how to operate American 75-mm cannons. In addition to daily drills, we stood 24-hour guard duty on a strict shift rotation: two hours at our posts followed by four hours off, working out to eight hours on watch every day.

We ran dry drills with the cannons at the barracks and out in the uninhabited mountain regions of Lebanon, occasionally firing live shells at distant hillside targets. It was around mid-August when our eight-gun battery was deployed to the heights above the Lebanese village of Hammana. The crews got straight to work digging in the guns and unloading heavy artillery shells from the trucks, while the officers calculated the firing coordinates.

The soldiers and NCOs clambered down from the curved, canvas-

backed 'turtle-back' trucks and took their positions without delay. Because of my slight build— I still looked like a 16-year-old boy —I was spared the heaviest manual labour on the gun line. Instead, I was assigned to accompany the officers, carrying and setting up the optical rangefinders that supplied our gunners with accurate target distances and bearings.

That day, while I was unloading equipment from the vehicle, a heavy table slipped from my hands and fell. The commander of the artillery squad, Commandant Michalet, saw what happened. Enraged, he ordered a subordinate officer to make me dig a hole the size of my own height and stay in it for 24 hours as punishment.

The night on the mountain was freezing, and I spent it shivering until dawn. Once the sun rose, the air slowly warmed, and eventually, my head and face began to burn. Throughout this ordeal, I prayed constantly that God would give me the strength and patience to endure the physical pain, all while cursing that godless officer.

A while later, our squad was moved to Aleppo and stationed at the Turkish barracks in the Arghoup district. There, all personnel continued their daily military courses and drills. However, my punishment in the mountains of Hammana and the suffering I endured from sleepless nights on guard duty woke a desire in me to find a way out of the army.

I tried to fake various illnesses, specifically claiming I had rheumatism in my knees and couldn't walk. I was sent to the military hospital for special care. I stayed there for a week, but the medications and treatments they gave me yielded no results. I continued to limp and grimace in pain whenever I walked.

Then came the day of the examination by the Chief Medical Officer. All the patients were either lying in their beds or standing beside them to answer the Chief's questions. When it was my turn, he asked how I was and what was wrong. I told him my knee hurt terribly and I couldn't walk.

"Fine," he said. "Let me see you walk."

I tried to limp along. Suddenly, the Chief Medical Officer gave me a violent shove in the direction I was walking. Instead of falling to the ground as a truly injured person might, I instinctively started running with a limp. I had fallen into the very pit I had dug for myself.

The experienced doctor pulled me aside and said, "Young soldier,

you're planning to get out of the service by making up these illnesses. Now, you can either go to prison, or you can get your act together and rejoin your squad."

Naturally, I didn't want to go to prison, so I told him I would rejoin my unit.

Returning from the hospital, I thought long and hard. I decided to stay in the army, but I resolved to excel in the military courses, earn a rank, and thus free myself from sentry duty and other hardships.

First, I took a course in motorcycle riding and got my license. Then I applied for the truck driving course, passed the exam, and received my driver's license. I studied the types of artillery shells and fuses, then took a course to become a gunner.

The squad's officers eventually saw fit to send me to the courses for the rank of brigadier, and then for the rank of *Maréchal-des-logis*. Having successfully completed these and holding a respectable position, I led a comfortable life until I gave in to my father's pleas to resign from the army so that we could immigrate to Armenia in 1946. However, we were not granted that opportunity because of our affiliation with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF).

Commandant Michalet's unjust punishment and the hardships of my early military service were 'evils' that, by divine providence, pushed me to rise from a simple private to a non-commissioned officer. I served the French Army well and earned the respect of the French people, eventually receiving an official certificate of appreciation from the French Ministry of Veterans.


BEER
بيرة
الشرق
AL.CHARK
11.5%
شركة الشرق للمنتجات الغذائية، حلب ١٩٥٤
ALEPPO

Abu Sayit El-Barri

The Al-Chark (The East) brewery in Aleppo was located about 10 kilometres from the Armenian suburb of Nor Kyough. It sat on an expansive plot of land near the village of Avejha, just before reaching Muslimiyeh. At the time, Muslim citizens in Syria were not permitted to manufacture or sell alcoholic beverages. Consequently, the production of *arak* (a spirit) and beer was undertaken by Christians, who also held a monopoly on the retail market

Since no brewery existed in Aleppo at the time, several Christian businessmen — Bitlisi, Rabbat, Antaki, and others— planned to establish a joint-stock company. They purchased specialized brewing machinery from West German firms and invited experts from Germany to oversee the construction of the plant. Once the machinery was installed, production began in early 1958.

The company was managed by a five-member board of directors elected by the shareholders and headed by an appointed general manager. The brewing process used roasted barley (malt) and a specific German herb known in Arabic as *hashish al-dinar* (hops), which gave the beer its signature bitterness. The imported malt and rice were professionally brewed in large vats before being moved to the fermentation department. After seven days of fermentation and carbonation, the liquid was transferred to large tanks in refrigerated rooms. Following a 40-day aging period, it passed through filtration systems and was pumped to the bottling line. After being pasteurized, the bottles were crated and sent to market.

My brother-in-law, Hagop Asadourian, was in charge of the generators, compressors, and general machinery. When he heard that the German electrician was soon to return to Germany for good, he recommended me to the general manager as a suitable candidate. He took it upon himself to introduce me, and after a successful interview, I was hired as the head of the electrical department. I started my job on April 25, 1961.

The labourers were transported to the factory by bus, while the staff were driven in a van. Our workday began at 7 a.m. and ended at 3 p.m. During the summer, when demand for beer peaked, the bottling department workers and certain supervisors worked overtime and were paid

time-and-a-half.

By the time I started, the malt production building was already built and the machinery had arrived. Alongside the workers assigned to installation, I took charge of the electrical lighting, the motors, the control panels, and the wiring layouts, aided by a team of assistants. After testing all the machines, I worked with a German specialist to install the boiler. Shortly after, we began producing malt using local barley.

Operations at the Al-Chark brewery were going wonderfully. Many of the key departments were headed by Armenians: Hagop Asadourian in the mechanical department; me in the electrical department; Sarkis Hindoyan in bottling and repairs; and Krikor Jamgochian in fermentation. There were about 20 Armenians working throughout the var-ious departments.

For several years, the brewery and the malt department produced high-quality beer that became highly sought after, competing even with German imports. Then, suddenly, the rumours that had been circulating became reality: Aleppo's major factories were nationalized, including the brewery. The general manager was dismissed and the board of directors was dissolved. A few days after the nationalization, a new state-appointed director arrived. He gathered all the employees and delivered a nationalist, socialist speech, calling on us to work with honour, maintain quality, and help increase consumption.

The director concluded his speech by introducing the man who would take charge of security: Mohamed Said Barri, also known as Abu Sayit. Among the workers, some whispered that Abu Sayit had been a militant leader for the Arab National Party (*Hizb al-Watani*) and had been sentenced to 15 years in prison for acts of terrorism during parliamentary elections.

Abu Sayit performed his duties with a mix of conscience and wisdom. The guards became more vigilant, intimidated by his piercing gaze and the sight of one — or sometimes two — pistols tucked into his belt. As factory directors changed over time, Abu Sayit's influence only grew. One day, a notice appeared on the bulletin board: Abu Sayit had been promoted to General Supervisor.

Following the nationalization, the Al-Chark biscuit and chocolate factory, originally located in the Arghoub district, was moved to a newly

constructed, professionally designed building within the brewery compound. I was put in charge of all electrical work for this expansion, making me the head of the electrical departments for the brewery, malt, biscuit, and chocolate plants.

Abu Sayit now had his own offices in both the brewery and the biscuit factory. In my professional capacity, I visited every department and established a rapport with all the employees and labourers. I also worked closely with the government tax officials who recorded the quantity of beer leaving for the market to collect state duties.

I often visited Abu Sayit's office, where I was always received with warmth and respect. He would immediately order coffee, place a box of Al-Chark biscuits on the table, and offer me a tin of smuggled tobacco, inviting me to roll a cigarette. During these visits, he would recount his past exploits. He spoke of the cooperation between the Arab National Party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) during elections. He often mentioned the collaboration between the Arab nationalist leader Dr. Kayyali and Hrach Papazian, always emphasizing the integrity and loyalty of the Armenian leadership. He noted that they remained faithful to their alliance even when it meant losing an election.

He also told me stories of his time in prison, including a mass hunger strike he organized to secure rights for prisoners. What I found most moving was his account of how he protected Armenian prisoners; he had threatened anyone who dared to harass the Armenian boys in the crowded cells. This was later confirmed to me by two acquaintances who had been in prison during that same period.

During the final five or six years of my long career at these factories, a new director was appointed: Mahmoud Hassan, a young agricultural engineer from President Hafez al-Assad's home village of Qardaha and a leading member of the Ba'ath Party. My friendship with the new director led him to suggest that I join the Ba'ath Party. After consulting with my own party, the ARF, I agreed. As a party member holding a key position in the plant, I was elected president of the factory union. This role subsequently made me a member of the board of directors, where I participated in meetings and cast my vote on company decisions.

Because of my position, I frequently met with the general secretary of the factories, Afif Arnouk, who had moved to Aleppo from the

Latakia region. I often had to order electrical components through him from Germany, as he handled all company procurement. We developed a close friendship and discussed work, family, and social issues over coffee.

I had a similar relationship with Abu Sayit, with whom I consulted on labour issues and various minor disputes. During one of our talks, we touched upon the rising cost of living and my own financial difficulties. Without hesitation, Abu Sayit reached into his pocket, pulled out a stack of 100 and 50-pound notes, and laid them on the table. "Master Karkour," he said, "take what you need and pay me back whenever you can." Deeply moved, I kissed him on the forehead like a brother, thanking him for his sincere and selfless offer.

One day, Abu Sayit and Afif Arnouk had a falling out and stopped speaking to each other. Since my relationship with both was fraternal, I was put in an awkward position. When I sat with Abu Sayit, he would speak disparagingly of Afif; Afif would do the same regarding Abu Sayit. Whenever they vented to me, I would tell each of them, "But they speak of you with such regret, saying that what happened was just the result of a bad moment."

Eventually, the two friends reconciled in my presence. Abu Sayit admitted, "I used to say very harsh things about you to Master Krikor." Afif admitted the same. After Abu Sayit heard about the role I had played in their reconciliation, he turned to me and said, "Bless the milk that raised you. You are a man nourished by noble human feelings. Your friendship is truly worth keeping."

Abu Sayit loved me and the Armenian people so much that if any fault was found with an Armenian worker, he would call me before the news reached the director, suggesting we resolve the matter ourselves. High-ranking civilian and military officials often visited the general manager, and Abu Sayit and I would be present. We would treat the guests to beer and biscuits, and when they left, we would gift them special beer mugs inscribed with '*Bira Al-Chark*' in Arabic and English. Through these visits and my Ba'ath Party connections, I was able to be of great service to my community, fostering ties between the Armenian leadership and state officials that continue to this day.

Abu Sayit was an impartial and just man. Once, I spoke to him about giving a raise to a worker in the malt department who was diligent

and conscientious. During my next visit, Abu Sayit said, "Master Karkour, you came the other day and asked for a raise for so-and-so. After you left, that man came to me and slandered you. I told him, 'Are you not ashamed to slander the man who was just here asking for a raise for you?' The man was ashamed and left. You see the malice and jealousy of some people."

In the summers, when the demand for beer was high, Abu Sayit and several workers would put in extra hours. A subsequent director, Tareq Zayat, heard about this and ordered that overtime be strictly prohibited unless personally authorized by him. When I visited Abu Sayit, he met me with a barrage of curses and threats directed at the director. I tried to calm him, suggesting the restriction might be temporary. He snapped back, "I know this ban was meant for me. The director doesn't know who he's dealing with yet." I looked at Abu Sayit; he had a pistol on each hip and a submachine gun behind his desk.

Later that afternoon, I saw him again and he told me what happened. "As usual, the director came to my office. I placed my submachine gun on the edge of the desk so he could see it. After some small talk, he left. Half an hour later, I went upstairs, knocked, and walked into his office. He was busy talking to someone. I walked up to him, pressed my pistol to his temple, and said, 'Who do you think you are to stop my overtime? I'll blow your brains out right now. Let's see who wins — you or me.' The man softened immediately. 'Abu Sayit, this restriction wasn't for you. There's been a mistake. You are free to work as much as you like.' And that was the end of that."

Over the years, as beer consumption grew in Syria, the board decided to import a faster bottling machine from East Germany. The machines arrived along with two German technicians. I managed the wiring for the motors and the control panels. However, when I went to connect the main electrical panel— the one with the gauges, switches, and buttons —I realized it was the wrong panel; it didn't belong to these new machines. I told Abu Sayit and we went to the general manager. The manager was distraught; summer was approaching, demand was soaring, and the company wouldn't be able to satisfy its customers.

Abu Sayit turned to me and asked if I could find a solution, as it would take three months for a new panel to arrive from Germany. I said, "I believe I can save the situation, provided you allow me to make the

necessary modifications." The director was thrilled. "If you succeed, you will be rewarded both financially and with a formal commendation." Abu Sayit added, "You solve the problem; leave the rest to me."

Within a few weeks, the line was running at five times its previous speed. I received a gift of 300 Syrian pounds and a written commendation from the state, as well as a letter of appreciation from Germany.

Abu Sayit had three sons: Sayit, Ismail, and Ahmad. Two of them, Sayit and Ismail, were appointed to positions within the brewery and biscuit factories and worked there until I immigrated to Canada in 1975.

Abu Sayit belonged to the Barri family of the Bab al-Nairab district in Aleppo, a clan of about 500 members. The Arab tribes of Bab al-Nairab were often involved in feuds and conflicts. Seeking a more peaceful life after spending 15 years of his youth in prison, Abu Sayit bought a house in the Christian neighbourhood near the Baghdad station in 1970 and moved his family there.

In 1975, through the mediation of Abu Sayit, the general manager, and several high-ranking officers, I finally managed to have my resignation accepted by the ministry. It had been rejected several times because, at that time, specialists were forbidden from leaving their jobs or the country. In my case, it was especially difficult because my photograph had been displayed for years as a 'Hero of Labour' on the sidewalk across from the Aleppo post office.

I will never forget Abu Sayit's words when I once teased him, "Abu Sayit, you have three or four pens in your pocket; anyone seeing you would think you've at least finished high school." He sighed and replied, "Ah, if only I could have had that much education. If I had, you would see how far I could have gone." On another occasion, he said, "My temperament should have been different. I truly envy you. I would take on a debt of 100,000 Syrian pounds just to have your character and your diplomacy. I have loved the Armenian people because they are hardworking, noble, loyal, and they know the value of friendship."



‘You Are a Wonderful People’

In 1968, Tareq Zayat, the Director General of the nationalized Al-Sharq beer, biscuit, chocolate, and yogurt factories in Aleppo, received a promotion. He moved to the capital city of Damascus to assume the role of Director General of Food Industries for all of Syria.

During Zayat’s tenure, our daily meetings typically focused on improving production quality, specialization, and worker welfare. Given my role as the president of the labour union, a certain closeness developed between us. He eventually felt comfortable enough to ask me to repair his household electrical appliances — tasks I was always happy to perform. Our personal friendship endured even after he took over the national directorate in Damascus.

While Zayat was in charge, the government decided to expand the nationalized Rayan Arak factory in Suwayda, located in the Jabal al-Druze region. An agreement was signed with a Bulgarian firm, and work commenced under the supervision of Bulgarian specialists once the equipment arrived.

As an agricultural engineer by trade, Zayat was not well-versed in the mechanical, electrical, or structural aspects of factory construction. Consequently, he asked the director of food production in Aleppo, Mahmoud Hassan, to send a team of trusted specialists on a mission to Suwayda to inspect the quality of the work. The team included Krikor Hotoyan (an electrician), Hagop Asadourian (a mechanic), and Sarkis Hindoyan (a specialist in piping and installations).

Hassan summoned the three of us to his office to relay Zayat’s instructions and explain the details of our assignment.

Responding to the Director General’s orders, we three Armenian masters from the Aleppo food factories set out for Damascus the following morning in a company car. As we drove, we recited the Lord’s Prayer and sang the six verses of the hymn *‘Aravod Louso’.*

Along the way, Sarkis suggested we stop at the Mezzeh Military Airport. His eldest son, Khachig, was performing his mandatory military service there in the Syrian Army, and Sarkis hoped for a chance to see him. However, when we arrived at the airport, the chaos and congestion of

military vehicles made it impossible to get near the entrance. We decided to head into Damascus and try again on our way back.

In Damascus, we visited the head office of the Food Industries Directorate. After welcoming us, Zayat provided the necessary directions and handed us an official instruction document to be delivered to the director of the Rayan Arak Company.

Ascending through the lush green slopes and vineyards of Jabal al-Druze, we reached the outskirts of Suwayda by 3 p.m., where the distillery was located. For several days, each of us conducted our professional inspections. When we eventually met with the director, he was delighted to learn we were Armenian. He noticed immediately from our accents that we were not native Arabs

The Druze director invited us to his home and honoured us with a spread of delicious dishes and fruits. Upon our departure, he gifted each of us two bottles of the strongest Rayan Arak — a 90 per cent spirit. To drink it, one had to mix it with an equal amount of water to bring the alcohol content down to 40 percent.

After thanking and embracing the director and his family, we returned to Damascus. We submitted our inspection report to Zayat and then spent some time touring the local markets. That evening, we enjoyed a meal at a famous kebab restaurant. After some more sightseeing and souvenir shopping, we found a modest, second-class hotel and spent a quiet night there.

We woke up early the next morning and headed straight for the Mezzeh Military Airport. After parking about 100 metres from the main entrance, we waited for the buses carrying the soldiers and officers who lived off-base to pass so we could approach the gate. From our vantage point, we watched as the soldiers got off the buses, saluted the guard commander, and entered the barracks.

With the military training I had received in the French Army, I found it strange to see a warrant officer — the guard commander — reprimanding a superior officer, telling him to cut his long hair because it violated military regulations.

After about half an hour, the traffic died down. The guard commander took off his military shirt and began walking across the width of the entrance, performing calisthenics despite the 38-degree heat.

"Sarkis," I said, "the traffic has stopped. Go tell the guard commander what you want. Perhaps he'll help you. Give it a try."

Sarkis approached the officer, greeted him, and explained in his best Arabic that he wanted to see his son. Sarkis later told us what happened: "When the commander asked for my son's name and heard my Arabic, he asked, 'Are you Armenian?' I said yes. He asked, 'Are your two friends out there Armenian too?' I said yes again. He told me, 'Call them over here.'

The three of us approached the main gate. The warrant officer led us into the guardhouse, where we engaged in a general conversation about Syrian political life.

I took the opportunity to tell the commander that I was surprised to see him reprimanding officers. "I understand military discipline," I said, "having served in the French Army. Can you explain how this is possible?"

"Well," the commander replied, "I am the General Secretary of the Ba'ath Party for these barracks. Because of that rank, the military hierarchy respects my position."

Hearing this, Sarkis whispered, "Krikor, it's time to introduce yourself as a party member.

Seeing the logic in Sarkis's suggestion, I pulled my party membership card from my pocket and showed it to the commander. When he saw my credentials, he immediately embraced me. After a few questions, he said: "I am indeed the Ba'ath Secretary here. Previously, I operated undercover; by joining the Muslim Brotherhood, I was able to expose their secret activities and turn over the names of officers involved in that group to the state security services. They were all arrested and expelled from the army. I carried out similar operations with other parties by infiltrating them. Now, every officer in these barracks knows my party role, and they are terrified of me."

The commander introduced himself as Raghib Awwal Abu Mousa, an Alawite who had served in the Syrian Army for about 10 years. "Now that we have a national, political, and brotherly bond," he said, "give me the name of Sarkis's boy."

We gave him the name and asked for a chance to see him. Commander Rafiq Abu Mousa called a soldier and said, "Go fetch Private Khachig. Tell his commanding officer, in my name, to give him a completely

new set of clothes." He ordered a second soldier to pick tomatoes and cucumbers from their garden, wash them, and serve them to his guests. In return, we gave the commander a bottle of the *arak* we had received from the Rayan factory and a box of sweets we had bought in Damascus.

Private Khachig Hindoyan arrived in brand-new fatigues and boots. He saluted Abu Mousa and the rest of us, then shared an emotional embrace with his father, whom he had not seen since being drafted.

After Khachig left, Abu Mousa declared: "You Armenians are a wonderful people. I admire your multi-faceted talents and your wisdom. Brother, the versatility of the Armenian soldiers in this barracks amazes me. As craftsmen, they are mechanics, tailors, and carpenters all at once; they have a grasp of every trade. They are also athletes, winning championships in football, basketball, and other sports. I feel honoured to have such soldiers, and just as honoured to meet friends like you. Whenever you come to Damascus, you must stop by; I will be happy to welcome you."

Abu Mousa, having already learned about our professional roles, asked for my address so that we could maintain our bond as party comrades.

A month after our mission, I received a letter from Abu Mousa filled with ideological and brotherly sentiments, to which I replied appropriately. My friendship with Abu Mousa continued until I moved to Canada. He was always ready to help me. He proved particularly helpful when my resignations from my positions at the beer and confectionery factories in Aleppo were repeatedly rejected by the ministry. I was forced to turn to my dear friend Abu Mousa, who by then had risen to the rank of high-ranking officer in command of the Syrian Army's Special Forces. Through his intervention, my resignation was finally accepted.

I remember my friend Abu Mousa with great fondness and gratitude, and I will never forget the kindness and affection he showed me.



The Armenian Book: The Lifeblood of the Armenian People

Timur, also known as Tamerlane, was a 14th-century conqueror born in Transoxiana, near Kesh (now Shahrisabz), 50 miles south of Samarkand in present-day Uzbekistan. A descendant of Genghis Khan, his father, Taraqay, was the chief of the Barlas tribe. A Muslim, Tamerlane was a ruthless adventurer and tyrant who went on to establish the Timurid Empire (1370–1405).

Through military might and relentless conquest, he established his empire, subjugating vast regions, including Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, and Eastern Turkey. His iron rule extended over Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and India, reaching as far as Kashgar in China and even the gates of Moscow. To this day, he is celebrated as a hero in Central Asia, and in parts of Western Asia, children are still named in his honour.

During his campaigns, Tamerlane and his thousands of Mongol horsemen spread terror wherever they went. In Syria, stories still circulate about his brutal conquest of Damascus, where he reportedly ordered his armies to pillage the city's riches and violate its women. Even today, cruel and savage individuals in Damascus are sometimes referred to as 'Tamerlane's outcasts.'

After subjugating Iran, Tamerlane turned his sights on Eastern Armenia. His fearsome army razed villages, slaughtered resisters, and plundered towns until they reached Goshavank (Nor Getik) in Armenia's Tavush region. The conqueror, struck by the monastery's grandeur, greedily ordered its destruction. When his men attempted to tear it down, they found the structure too solid to demolish. Instead, they filled the monastery with wood and set it ablaze. Yet, the fire failed to consume it, merely blackening its walls.

Goshavank housed the churches of St. Gregory the Illuminator and Holy Mother of God, built in the 12th and 13th centuries. It was a center of Armenian learning, home to a renowned school and university-seminary where scholars like Kirakos Gandzaketsi studied and worked. The monastery possessed vast estates, villages, and farmland. Its foundation

attributed to Mkhitar Gosh between 1237 and 1241.

When Tamerlane seized Goshavank, he demanded the monks and villagers reveal the location of its hidden treasures. Despite relentless torture, no one spoke.

One of his advisors, well aware of the Armenians' cultural devotion, offered a suggestion: "Commander, if you wish to succeed, burn their books. You will see how quickly their tongues loosen."

His men gathered the monastery's precious manuscripts into a pile, ready to set them ablaze. Just as they were about to ignite the flames, the villagers blocked their path.

"Do not burn them! We will tell you," they pleaded.

And so, they revealed the location of the monastery's gold and hidden riches.

The avaricious conqueror watched as heaps of gold, gemstones, and priceless artifacts were brought before him. Curious, he picked up a manuscript, leafing through its beautifully illuminated pages. But the gold, woven into the parchment, could not be extracted.

"Read it. What does it say?" Tamerlane demanded, extending the book to a villager.

The man took the manuscript as if cradling a sleeping child, turned the pages carefully, and then shook his head. "I cannot read, commander," he admitted.

Tamerlane passed the book to another, then another. None could read it.

"Ask the monks," they murmured.

The abbot stepped forward. "This is our history, commander," he said solemnly. "These are our prayers."

Tamerlane looked from the gathered crowd to the manuscripts, then to the mounds of gold and jewels. A frown creased his forehead.

Did he understand which was the true treasure?

Today, many of those saved manuscripts are preserved in

Armenia's Matenadaran.[39] But what became of Tamerlane's plundered gold and stolen jewels—the wealth looted from the Armenian people?

Our ancestors valued Armenian books above all material riches. Yet during the 1915 Genocide, Ottoman Turkish authorities and allied Kurdish bands systematically plundered our literary and spiritual treasures. Countless churches and historic monasteries were leveled, bringing our history perilously close to total destruction.

Hovhannes Toumanian, Armenia's beloved national poet, captured this deep, unbreakable bond with the written word:

The whole earth bears witness, however,
That we still live through our wounds;
And wherever Armenian writing and books reach,
The Armenian spirit is still alive.

Reflecting on this heritage in 1985 on the occasion of the eighth Armenian Book Exhibition in Antelias, Catholicos Karekin II of the Great House of Cilicia (later Karekin I, Catholicos of All Armenians) wrote:

After the Genocide, the survival of the Armenian people owes much to the Armenian book. I want the illuminated letters traced by an Armenian mother's trembling fingers in the desert sands to become the lifeblood of our Church and our mother tongue—for our nourishment, our growth, and our victory. As the spirit of revival flows anew in our lives, I want the Armenian book to shine brightly, especially in our fading diaspora. If an Armenian mother, taking her last breath in the desert, entrusted her final hope to the Armenian script, it was the wisdom of the nation of St. Mesrob[40] that guided her hand. Without the Armenian book, we perish, just as we might have perished in the fifth century if Mesrob had not given us our letters, the foundation of our national identity and our centuries-old resilience.

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[39] Located in Yerevan, the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (the Matenadaran) is one of the world's richest depositories of medieval manuscripts and books. Holding over 23,000 manuscripts and fragments, it preserves illuminated texts across theology, philosophy, history, and science in Armenian and other ancient languages.

[40] Saint Mesrob Mashtots (c. 362–440 AD) was an Armenian linguist, monk, and theologian best known for inventing the Armenian alphabet around 405 AD. Supported by King Vramshapuh and Catholicos Sahak Partev, his invention ignited Armenia's Golden Age of literature, enabling Bible translation and securing Armenian cultural identity across millennia.

From the moment St. Mesrob Mashdots created the Armenian alphabet and Armenian translators and authors began publishing books, the Armenian people endured —choosing their literary heritage over gold and earthly riches. Meanwhile, conquerors like Genghis Khan and Tamerlane disappeared, leaving no lasting legacy.

Many once-mighty nations, having failed to cherish books, literature, and culture, have faded from history.

A nation's strength is not measured by its armies or population. Without writing and literature, no civilization can survive —just as many conquering empires have crumbled into obscurity.

Let us love, cherish, and value Armenian books above gold and material wealth. For while material riches vanish, the Armenian book remains eternal, breathing life into the Armenian spirit.



Miss Karen Jeppe: The Great Humanitarian Who Became Armenian

The life of Danish humanitarian Karen Jeppe was an enduring testament to her total dedication to the Armenian people. For 32 years, she shared in their struggles and made their grief and suffering her own. She became a mother to thousands of orphans, a protector of widowed survivors, and a reliable guardian to the most vulnerable, committing every moral and material resource at her disposal to save and rebuild shattered lives.

Miss Karen Jeppe was born in 1876 in Denmark to the well-to-do family of a state teacher. Her family belonged to the Evangelical Church. After completing her primary education in her birthplace, she pursued further studies at the University of Copenhagen.

Toward the end of the 19th century, various missionary organizations began operating within the Ottoman Empire. In Ourfa, these groups collaborated to establish a hospital, an orphanage, and workshops. The young Karen began corresponding with them, expressing a deep desire to join their humanitarian mission. Seeing their daughter's steadfast resolve, her parents granted her their blessing. They even secured a generous sum of money from wealthy friends in their circle to send her on her way to Ourfa.

Karen Jeppe arrived in Ourfa in 1903 at the age of 27. As an intelligent and visionary worker, her first priority was to master the language of the people to whom she wished to dedicate her life.

In Ourfa, 'Sister Karen' found 300 orphans waiting for her. Moved by their lamentable condition, she immediately set to work, corresponding with various centres across Europe to request aid. Finding that direct aid was not enough, she opened vocational workshops for those under her care, including tailoring, leatherworking, and carpentry. These allowed orphans and widows to earn a living through their own labour and improve their circumstances.

Sister Karen was a tireless advocate for her orphans, encouraging them to marry one another and form families so they might preserve their Armenian identity. Though she never had biological children, she adopted

several orphans throughout her life. One such child was Misak Melkonian, a noble young man who eventually became her closest collaborator. A heroic figure, Misak travelled from village to village at Sister Karen's direction to search for kidnapped Armenian children. He paid a ransom of one gold piece for each child he rescued. Many of these children grew up and married within their community, including Misak himself, who married an orphan named Lucia and built a happy home.

In 1915, the first caravan of deportees from Zeytun reached Ourfa. Sister Karen provided them with shelter and food at great personal sacrifice. More caravans followed from Erzeroum, Sepastia, Diarbekir, Severek, and other Armenian regions.

In 1920, Karen Jeppe settled in Aleppo to join her adopted children. Through her own individual efforts, she immediately began assisting her beloved, exiled Armenian people. Her mission provided direct aid and employment to 1,800 refugees who might otherwise have perished in misery. She performed an enormous service as a 'gatherer of orphans' through the help of her adopted assistants.

During this period, Sister Karen sought out a Polish man in Aleppo named Leopold Gaschik for a partnership. Gaschik was a driver by trade, so she purchased a vehicle and he became her driver. She eventually arranged for Leopold to marry a widow from her workshop named Horom, who was a master of Armenian lace-making. Over time, the workshop expanded, creating a movement of hope that sustained hundreds of families.

Providing profitable work for Armenian refugees was a sound economic move. Sister Karen spared no effort in finding international markets for the lace in Germany and Scandinavia. Leopold, who was fluent in German, assisted with her correspondence and supported her commitments. As foreign orders grew, Gaschik and another adopted son, Haroutioun Chagarian, collaborated to establish a shop on the third floor of the western courtyard of the *Hokedoun* in Aleppo, which operated until the years of the mass repatriation to Armenia.

In 1924, Sister Karen purchased a large plot of land in the Nor Kyough district of Aleppo. She oversaw the construction of nine large pavilions with 80 rooms, providing housing for 200 families, mostly widows with orphaned children. Nearly 1,000 children attended school there. Mihran Herardian and Kevork Monofarian, both originally from Ourfa, were

appointed as Kaschik's colleagues to manage the orphanage's responsibilities.

In 1927, Sister Karen conceived the idea of building a school on her land. She shared her intention with the local Prelate, Bishop Artavazd. Consequently, with the approval of Sahag Khabayan, Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, a kindergarten was established. She also secured sponsors from Europe for the orphans; she would send each sponsor the child's biography, a photograph, and a thank-you note written by the child, which was translated and attached to her reports.

In 1927, she also founded a village for adult orphans in the Raqqa region near Tel Abyad, known as Khirbet-er-Riz.

In Aleppo, Sister Karen never attempted to force her wards to change their religious denomination. On the contrary, she did everything in her power to ensure that Armenian children remained rooted in the traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Mother Church. For herself, she left a will requesting that, upon her death, she be buried in the Armenian Apostolic cemetery.

Karen Jeppe passed away on July 7, 1935. She was given a national funeral attended by thousands of her former orphans and the grateful children of the Armenian nation. She enjoyed great popularity in Denmark and remains a source of national pride there for the care she provided to Armenian orphans in Ourfa and Aleppo.

Years after her death, as the orphans she housed grew up and moved into their own homes, the orphanage buildings became vacant. The Karen Jeppe Society in Denmark decided to sell the land and sent two women to Aleppo to handle the sale. However, through the efforts of Bishop Zareh and other community leaders, the society was convinced to immortalize Karen Jeppe's name by founding an Armenian academy on that very plot.

The Karen Jeppe Jemaran opened on October 15, 1947, with a single classroom and 22 male and female students. The official opening took place on Sunday, October 26, 1947. During the liturgy at St. Gregory the Illuminator Church, Bishop Zareh reflected on her life:

She came from distant Denmark during the dark days of our history, when fate and the murderous Turk were persecuting us. She came when our remnants, wandering and abandoned, were reaching the gates of this hospitable land

to protect their shivering physical existence. For 30 years, Miss Karen Jeppe merged her life with ours. She became Armenian, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. She was kneaded into our public works, and day by day, she felt a deeper and more genuine kinship with us. I can say she sacrificed her life for the Armenian people, whom she regarded as superior to all those nations who spread death and murder under the mask of 'civilization.'

After the opening ceremonies, the Bishop, community leaders, students, and faculty visited the national cemetery to place wreaths on Miss Karen Jeppe's grave. On this occasion, Bishop Zareh sent a telegram to her relatives: "The opening of the Karen Jeppe Jemaran took place today, following a special requiem service for her soul. The Armenian people participated in both religious and secular celebrations. Classes began on October 15. I convey the deep gratitude of the Armenian people. Bishop Zareh."

Recently, while looking through some old photographs, I found a forgotten picture that reflected my own distant past. Until my teenage years, I had very few significant photos of myself. I have one of me as a 1-year-old, completely naked with my older brother, another of me at 12 or 13 with a classmate, and then this one, taken when I was barely 11.

When I first saw this photo, it took a long time for the memory behind it to return to me. My father, Ghazar (Kharzo), was from Sasoun, and my mother, Mariam, was from Behesni. They married during the terrifying days of the Genocide in the city of Kilis, Cilicia. During their 22 years together (my mother passed away on November 2, 1938), they had seven children: five boys and two girls. Two of the boys, Zakhar and Krikor, died in infancy. The surviving children—Siranush, Haroutioun, Krikor, Hovhannes, and Arshalouys—attended the Haigazian and Sahagian schools in Aleppo when they reached school age.

My father, a villager from Spaghank in the Dalvorig region of Sasoun, tried his hand at many jobs to support us: miller, baker, and seller of *tahn* (a yogurt drink) or used American jackets. He did everything he could to feed his family and cover our educational expenses. However, for a time, due to illness and misfortune, he was unable to pay the school fees, especially for me and my younger siblings.

To ensure his children were not deprived of an Armenian education, my father turned to the Karen Jeppe Foundation, requesting that

they cover the school expenses for his three children. The officials, Mr. Mihran Herardian and Kevork Montofian, accepted his request, and we became wards of the Karen Jeppe Foundation.

I remember very well how, once a year, they would take us to the orphanage office. We would write letters to our sponsors in Europe and send them our photographs. This old photo I found was one of those taken to be sent to my sponsor. I don't recall exactly how it came back into my possession; perhaps after the foundation closed, one of Mr. Monofarian's children found it in the archives and gave it to me.

While I was a ward of the foundation, my sponsor did more than just cover my tuition. They would occasionally send clothing as well. The wool sweater I am wearing in that photo was a gift from my sponsor. I also remember going to the orphanage office once a year for medical checkups. Dr. Haroutioun Der Ghazarian would examine us and inevitably give us 'worm medicine,' because the lack of clean food at the time meant our intestines were often swarming with parasites.

I also remember the various charities of Karen Jeppe, including a special kitchen that distributed meals to the poor of Nor Kyough. Miss Karen Jeppe dedicated 30 years of her life to serving the Armenian people in Ourfa and Aleppo, caring for thousands of orphans, widows, and the poor like a true mother. After her passing, her Danish friends and family donated the orphanage land to the Armenian people. On that site today stands the Karen Jeppe Jemaran, which has provided an Armenian education and spirit to the new generations of Syrian-Armenians since 1947.

Looking at my old photograph, my school years and my life march across the screen of my mind. It prompts me once again to remember with gratitude the noble Miss Karen Jeppe—this 'Armenianized' Danish woman of virtuous character—and her nation.

May the memory of the righteous be blessed...



The Benefits of a Sunday School Education

Serop Kaprielian, his wife Zabel, and their son Zaven lived in the coastal Mina district of Tripoli, Lebanon. Serop earned his living as a fisherman, working primarily at night. He would take his small boat into the deep sea, using specialized lights to attract his catch, and toil until dawn to bring a haul to the morning market. While he worked hard to provide for his family, he often struggled to compete with the local Arab fishermen. They were more assertive, loudly praising their catch to win over customers and often making sales before Serop had a chance to speak.

However, Serop had a loyal Armenian clientele who traveled from both downtown Tripoli and the Mina area specifically to buy from him. His only real regret was that he was not fluent in Arabic; he felt that if he were, he could have competed more effectively with the locals.

Before settling in Tripoli, Serop had lived in the city of Alexandretta within the Sanjak of Alexandretta (now Hatay). He had been a fisherman there as well, supporting his parents until 1938. That was the year the French ceded the Sanjak to the Turks, triggering a mass exodus of Armenians toward Syria and Lebanon.[41] This led to the displacement of Armenian populations from Alexandretta and Kirikhan, as well as the villages of Mousa Dagh.[42]

As an experienced fisherman, Serop eventually found his way to the Mina district. He purchased a small boat and, through sheer grit, managed to find success in his new environment.

Years later, once his financial situation had improved, Serop married a fellow compatriot, Zabel Yesayan. A year after their wedding, they

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[41] Administered under the French Mandate of Syria, the multi-ethnic Sanjak of Alexandretta was ceded by France to the Republic of Turkey between 1938 and 1939 as a diplomatic concession. Fearing persecution, the region's Armenian population—including the survivors of Mousa Dagh—fled en masse to Lebanon and Syria.

[42] In 1915, Armenian residents of the villages of Mousa Dagh (Mousa Ler) defied Ottoman deportation orders, mounting an armed defense on the mountain. For 53 days, over 4,000 villagers held off Ottoman forces until rescued by French naval warships and evacuated to Egypt. Franz Werfel immortalized their struggle in a famous 1933 novel.

were blessed with a son. He was baptized at the Holy Pentecost Armenian Apostolic Church in Tripoli and named Zaven, after Sero's father.

The Kaprielian family lived happily within the Armenian community of Mina, where they were well-respected and surrounded by a close circle of friends. When Zaven turned 5, he was enrolled in the National Khrimian School. Raised with his parents' love and care, he progressed steadily from kindergarten to elementary school. Every Sunday, he attended church with his parents and, as a devoted student, participated in the local Sunday school.

It was there that Zaven first absorbed the living message of the Gospel. Learning about Jesus's teachings, miracles, passion, crucifixion, and resurrection gave him a whole new appreciation for his Christian faith. He was especially inspired by a story shared by the Sunday school superintendent about Catholicos Nerses the Great. The superintendent described how this ancient patriarch, despite his high office, showed immense personal humility—even sitting on the roofs of modest village huts to dress the wounds of the sick. After the destruction of Arshakavan, Nerses rounded up the surviving orphans and established orphanages, hospitals, and shelters across the country.

Moved by these Bible lessons and the superintendent's storytelling, Zaven chose to follow Nerses's example. He made a personal vow to live charitably and dedicate his life to supporting those in need.

The family's happy life was cut short by Zabel's sudden illness. Despite every medical effort, she could not be saved. Her death left Serop in unbearable grief and young Zaven an orphan.

The tragedy took a heavy toll on Sero. Having grown old and lacking the strength required for the demanding life of a fisherman, he sold their home in Mina and his boat. He built a small house on a hill between Tripoli and Chekka. There, father and son lived close to nature, enjoying the fresh air and the soothing sounds of the Mediterranean tides.

Serop often warned Zaven to be careful when going down to the sea to swim. He explained that the waters facing their home were filled with jagged rocks and reefs that could be treacherous for both people and ships.

These warnings, combined with the stories of St. Nerses's compassion, left a deep impression on Zaven. Using a small amount of money his

father gave him, Zaven bought a lantern. He painted the glass red and placed it in the window of their house facing the sea. It was meant to serve as a 'danger signal' for ships that might lose their way, especially during stormy weather.

Days passed until one cloudy and turbulent winter night, when a ship laden with passengers and cargo lost its way in the darkness. As it drifted toward the dangerous coastline, the crew spotted the red light in the distance. Taking it as a warning, they dropped anchor in the open sea, narrowly avoiding certain destruction.

The next morning, the sea grew calm. The captain realized the light that had saved them did not come from a lighthouse or a port, but from a small house on the hill. He went ashore to investigate, and when he discovered it was simply an act of service by a fisherman's son, he reported the incident to his shipping company's headquarters in Paris.

The captain visited Sero's home to express his gratitude, explaining that the lantern had saved the lives of everyone on board. He then shared the company's decision: they wanted to take the Kaprielian family under their protection and offered to send Zaven to Paris to study at a maritime academy.

Serop enthusiastically accepted. He knew that by studying in Paris, his son could become a person of great distinction and serve both his nation and his homeland.

Through a translator, the French captain asked Zaven who had inspired him to place such a small but vital light in his window.

"When I was a child, I attended Armenian school and Sunday school," Zaven replied. "In Sunday school, we were taught religious history, the prayers of the Armenian Church, and the lives of our great patriarchs. We learned that the Armenian people were the first nation to officially adopt Christianity in the year 301, through St. Gregory the Illuminator."

He continued, "They told us about the charities of St. Nerses the Great. Inspired by his life and following Christ's commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself,' I decided to use my savings to buy a lantern. I put it in our window so that ships losing their way would see the light and avoid the rocks and reefs along this shore."

Zaven eventually moved to Paris with his elderly father and enrolled in maritime academy. Over the years, he became fluent in French and thoroughly mastered the science of navigation. After serving for several years as an officer in the French commercial fleet, he was invited to take the helm as captain of a merchant cargo vessel. Guided by the Christian values and Armenian identity nurtured in Sunday school, he spent his life serving both the wider public and the Armenian community.



How Raqqa's Armenian Sunday School was Founded

In the summer of 1950, the Prelate of Peria, His Eminence Archbishop Zareh Payaslian— the future Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia —summoned me to the Prelacy through his messenger, Hagop. According to Hagop, the Archbishop wished to speak with me regarding an important matter.

Anxious and wondering what His Eminence could possibly want, I waited nervously for our meeting. I arrived at the Prelacy well ahead of time, waiting for Hagop's permission to head upstairs to the office, which was located in the first room on the right of the second floor.

"God be your helper, Your Eminence," I said. After kissing his right hand, I stood and waited for him to speak. He invited me to sit and, after a few pleasantries, came to the point.

"Krikor, I have followed your life for years and have a clear idea of your ecclesiastical, teaching, and literary abilities. I know that since child-hood you have served the Armenian Church as a clerk, that you were a student at the Sunday School, and that you currently serve as a teacher at the St. Kevork Church in Nor Kyough. I have read your poems, articles, and correspondence in the *Arevelk* daily newspaper, and I appreciate your writing ability and poetic gift. Knowing all this, I consider you worthy to assume the principalship of the National Noubarian School in the town of Raqqa for the 1950-1951 academic year."

I was overjoyed by this offer and the immense trust placed in me. Since it had long been my dream to become a teacher and serve in the ed-ucation of Armenian children, I felt a deep spiritual fulfillment. I asked His Eminence for a three-day deadline to give my final answer, as I needed to wrap up my typesetting and printing work at the *Nayiri* Press.

The three days passed quickly, and I gave Archbishop Zareh a pos-itive response. A week before the school's official reopening, I was already in Raqqa. Accompanied by the chairman of the parish council, Mr. Hagop Sarkissian, I was shown to a one-room apartment rented for me. It was fur-nished with a bed, a table, a chair, and a few basic household necessities like dishes and cutlery.

On my second day in town, I toured Raqqa with the council chairman, visiting the shops and workplaces of the parish council members to introduce myself. Student registration began on the third day, and by the end of the week, our numbers had reached 90.

The official reopening was attended by the council members and many parents. The ceremony took place in the school courtyard, where Mr. Hagop Sarkissian introduced me as the new principal before inviting me to address the students.

The Noubarian School of Raqqa consisted of three kindergarten levels and elementary grades one through five. Our staff included me, Mr. Hagop Toghramadjian, the kindergarten teacher Miss Toghramadjian, and an Arab teacher for Arabic language instruction.

Before the start of term, I had prepared the schedules for all classes and distributed them to the staff. Lessons began immediately following the opening ceremony. We started the school year with a sense of harmony, working with dedication to implement the educational program. However, despite our focus on religious education, I noticed the students lacked the specific national-ecclesiastical training needed to learn the prayers, psalms, and hymns of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Having been both a student and a teacher in the Sunday Schools of Aleppo, I decided to establish a Sunday School in Raqqa. I applied to Archbishop Zareh Payaslian for permission to move forward.

The Archbishop responded with great enthusiasm. After securing the agreement of Mr. Levon Zenian, the Director of Sunday Schools for the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, and the Religious Education Council of the Prelacy of Peria, he asked me to notify him of the official opening date.

The newly founded Sunday School of Raqqa opened in early December 1950. In attendance were Mr. Kevork Nersoyan, the secretary-director of Sunday Schools for the Syria region; the Reverend Father Yeghishe Toghramadjian, the spiritual pastor for the Armenian Apostolic children of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa; parish council members; many locals; and approximately 90 students.

Mr. Kevork Nersoyan spoke on the mission and value of Sunday schools. The Father welcomed the new establishment, blessing this 'God-pleasing step' and wishing us success. When it was my turn to speak, I

expressed my gratitude to the Prelate, Mr. Levon N. Zenian, the Religious Education Council, our pastor, the council members, and the parents. It was through their collective efforts that we were able to provide this for the new generation of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Following the opening, more than 10 men and women joined our mission as teachers and assistants. I later received several letters from the Director of Sunday Schools of the Great House of Cilicia, two of which I have recorded here for their historical importance:

No. 3871 — January 12, 1951, Antelias, Lebanon

Honourable Mr. Krikor Hotoyan

Superintendent of the Armenian Church Sunday School

Raqqa, Syria

Dear Colleague,

We were pleased to learn from our colleague Mr. Kevork Nersoyan that, despite your busy schedule, you have been kind enough to assume the superintendency of the newly founded Sunday school in your community.

We will, of course, officially confirm your appointment soon, following the decision of the Religious Education Council of Aleppo and Mr. Nersoyan's recommendation. In the meantime, we hasten to congratulate you on the eve of the New Year; you have given the best Christmas gift to the Armenian Church Sunday Schools by taking on this role in the Raqqa branch. We pray the Lord grants you strength, ability, and heavenly wisdom to lead this church-dedicated work. From now on, we consider you one of our volunteers in that distant community.

We received your correspondence with thanks, and it will be published in January. We have sent copies of the 'Our Life' *newsletter to your address. If picture cards have not been supplied from Aleppo, please write to us with the number of students, and we will send them directly by mail.*

We hope one day to have the fortune of greeting you and the dear pupils of the school in person. Until then, please accept our cordial greetings and best wishes.

Respectfully,

Levon N. Zenian, Director

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No. 4187 — April 5, 1951, Antelias, Lebanon

Honourable Mr. Krikor Hotoyan

Superintendent of the Armenian Church Sunday School

Raqqa, Syria

Dear Colleague,

We were pleased to learn from the honourable Religious Education Council of Peria and its environs that, according to Article 31 of the basic bylaws of Sunday Schools, you have been unanimously appointed Superintendent of the Raqqa Sunday School for the year 1951.

We have the pleasure of officially communicating this decision to you and ask for your indulgence regarding the delay. The Council and we sincerely appreciate your past dedicated service to the Sunday School. We pray the Lord grants you strength to conscientiously continue this difficult and responsible office.

Our superintendents are expected to:

a) Oversee the implementation of the basic and internal bylaws;

b) Carefully maintain a curriculum notebook for each year;

c) Use only textbooks, pictures, and other publications authorized by the Catholicosate of Cilicia;

d) Remain faithful to the confession, doctrine, and traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Superintendents are expected not only to be present at the Holy Liturgy every Sunday but also to ensure that teachers and students attend church, especially on Sundays and feast days.

Congratulating you at the start of a new term, we pray to God for a productive year for your school. Awaiting your positive response, please accept our advance congratulations.

With brotherly love and respect,

Levon N. Zenian, Director

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The new Sunday School became an exceptional success thanks to the dedication of the teachers and the encouragement of the parents, earning constant praise from the central directorate. I am proud to record that the Raqqa Sunday School, founded in 1950 on my initiative, continues its mission to this day, providing religious and moral education to the children of the Raqqa community.

When I first took on the principalship of the Noubarian Elementary School, I promised the parish council that I would do my best to ensure any student graduating from our fifth grade could pass the entrance exams for the sixth grade at the Sahagian and Haigazian schools in Aleppo.

We finished the 1950-1951 school year successfully. In the 1951-1952 term, two of our graduates were admitted to the Haigazian School, a result that brought great satisfaction to the entire Armenian community of Raqqa.



The Eastern Bathhouse

During my childhood, the Armenian families living in the Nor Kyough suburb of Aleppo didn't have bathrooms in their homes and lacked proper facilities for washing. It was incredibly difficult to heat enough water in the kitchen for a large family. Even in the biting cold of winter, we had to make do with makeshift arrangements, usually bathing one by one in a large tub while sitting or standing — the children first, then the adults.

The primary solution to this grueling situation was visiting public bathhouses. Fortunately, over time, industrious people had built two public baths. The first was in a neighbourhood near the Verjin Gulbenkian Maternity Hospital, and the second, known as the Keyvanian bathhouse, was near the *Zeytuntsi* quarter.

In Aleppo, all public baths were reserved for women during the day and for men at night. The only exception, in my opinion, was the Ghawas bath located in the city's central market; it was always clean and presentable, and it was reserved for men 24 hours a day.

The Armenian population of Aleppo was mostly composed of remnants of the Genocide who had survived through miracles and sheer ingenuity. Many had rented rooms with large courtyards in Arabic neighbourhoods, shared by several families. However, the majority lived in wooden and tin-roofed shacks they had built in the Hamidieh and Suleimaniyeh districts. According to my parents, I was born on August 5, 1927, in the Hamidieh district, in the hut my father built.

Later, when I was old enough to understand the world around me, I witnessed the suffering of the Armenians in those two districts, especially during the bitter winter cold. I remember St. Kevork Armenian Apostolic Church and the Mesrobian National School, both built by the Armenians of Marash in the Hamidieh area. My father eventually showed me exactly where I was born; he had been among the first to tear down the shack in Hamidieh to build a new home in Nor Kyough. It had several rooms and a courtyard, and he built it mostly out of mud bricks with the help of my mother and some of his compatriots from Sasoun.

On land purchased through the mediation of the Armenian

Prelacy and under government pressure, the residents of the tin shacks in Hamidieh and Suleimaniyeh built new homes. To meet the needs of a population that grew every year, churches like St. Gregory the Illuminator and St. Kevork were established, alongside schools like Sahagian, Mesrobian, Zavarian, and Armenian, and later, the Karen Jeppe Jemaran. In the city centre, the Holy Forty Martyrs and St. Mary churches already existed, along with the Haigazian, Grtasirats, and Ousoumnasirats schools.

Through hard work, the Armenians of Nor Kyough eventually formed various compatriotic, national, political, cultural, and charitable unions, always keeping in their hearts the relatives lost during the Genocide and the homes they were forced to leave behind.

Visiting the public bathhouse was a regular family ritual that took place once or twice a month, or sometimes every week, depending on what the household could afford. Mothers typically brought their young sons along until they reached a certain age, even though the more traditional women often complained about having boys around.

My brother, who was three years younger than me, and I regularly went with our mother. In 1934, when I was 7, those trips made a lasting impression, and to this day I vividly recall the steam, the voices, and the lively atmosphere inside. I remember the women's naked bodies and their movements. What stood out most were the gatherings of the women from Dikranagerd; they would gather on the warm marble to knead and eat *chi kofte*, drink *oghi*, share sweet desserts, and break into song and dance. They turned a routine trip to the *hammam* into a full-blown wedding celebration.

One day, while I was watching the festivities from a few steps away, a woman marched over, pinched my ear, and snapped at me for staring. Hearing me burst into tears, my mother rushed over to confront her.

"Why did you bring such a grown boy into the baths?" the woman argued angrily. "He's been watching us the entire time!"

My mother immediately defended me: "What's the harm in a young child watching? He's just enjoying your singing and dancing."

Annoyed, the woman shot back: "Sister, you think your son is still a baby? If you found him a wife today, he wouldn't think twice!"

The heated exchange caused a scene, and other women stepped in

to calm things down. That day marked the end of my trips to the women's bath. My mother handed the responsibility over to my father. From then on, I went to the bathhouse at night with him during the men's hours, or my mother bathed me at home — especially during the summer so I wouldn't catch a cold.

My father was born and raised in the village of Spaghank in the Dalvorig region of Sasoun. He was the cousin of the famous *fedayees* Kale and Commander Ake, and the relative and godson of Magar of Spaghank. Growing up under their influence, he participated in several battles and was even taught to swim by the *fedayee* Andranik, who later became General Andranik. During the years of the Genocide, my father was arrested by Turkish soldiers many times, but he always managed to escape and lived as a fugitive until the armistice.

As a married man and a father of five, he practiced many trades to provide for us and cover our school expenses. However, as the proverb goes, 'If you don't understand the trade, you will surely go bankrupt.' He tried making a sweet called moushabak, selling *tahn*, and working as a butcher, but each attempt resulted in bankruptcy. Eventually, he thought about trading secondhand or refurbished clothes imported from America. Realizing he needed significant capital, he turned to friends for help, but it was in vain.

In despair, my father sold the house he and my mother had built at the edge of the first neighbourhood of Nor Kyough. He rented a house three blocks away so we would be close to the Sahagian School and St. Gregory the Illuminator Church. Unable to find a suitable shop in the Khan Haji Mousa of Aleppo, he decided to move to Azaz, a small town about 45 kilometres north of Aleppo near the Turkish border. Our godfather's family lived there, along with many *Sasountsi* families and, in those days, about 10,000 Armenians. There were also many Arabs and Kurds who had their own districts. The houses were generally made of mud bricks, though stone buildings existed for government offices. Azaz also had an Armenian school and an Armenian Apostolic church, led by the Very Reverend Father Sahag Palian.

My father managed to rent a shop in the busiest market in Azaz. He brought products from Aleppo and sold the items to local customers, especially to Turkish and Kurdish smugglers who would buy their goods,

cross the border illegally, and sell them back in Turkey. He rented a house near our godfather's family, staying there all week and returning to Aleppo on weekends to see us and bring back orders.

In the summer of 1935, during our school holidays, my father decided to bring the family to Azaz for a change of scenery. Houses there didn't have bathrooms either, so family members took turns bathing in the kitchen or the main room using water heated by wood, coal, or kerosene. To avoid the hassle, they would sometimes head to the bathhouse — men at night and women during the day.

Just as I used to go to the bathhouse in Aleppo holding my mother's hand, I did the same in Azaz, sometimes carrying a bundle with a change of clothes. We would sit on the heated central marble stones and sweat so our pores would open; after being rubbed down with a *kessa*,[43] we underwent a thorough cleaning. Then, we would sit around the stone basins and bathe with hot and lukewarm water, washing our heads with clay and laurel soap and our bodies with various other soaps. During the summer, our visits were generally pleasant, and we would return home with flushed cheeks, which always made my father happy.

One of those days, the bathhouse was exceptionally crowded. Everyone was trying to gather around a basin with their relatives to help each other wash. Because they couldn't find an empty basin, things turned ugly. The strong tried to impose their will on the weak.

My mother and godmother had finished bathing me and had started to wash themselves. I stepped out of the bathing area to watch the different faces and the nudity. Suddenly, two women, one Arab and one Kurd, both nearly naked, began to argue with shouts and screams. This quickly turned into a wrestling match and hair-pulling. No one present had the courage to separate them. The fight had started over who got to use the water basin first.

In a fit of rage, one of the women threw a thick metal bucket at her opponent. The other woman nimbly stepped aside, and the bucket struck my right leg instead. It opened a deep wound about 10 to 12 centimetres

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[43] *The kessa (or kīs) is a coarse exfoliating mitt woven from goat hair or plant fibers, central to hammam hygiene. Bath attendants (mukayyis) vigorously scrubbed bathers after steam exposure to slough off dead skin.*

below my knee, causing unbearable pain and bleeding. My mother, godmother, and the other Armenian women were horrified.

Hearing the commotion, the female bathkeepers rushed to help. Using traditional Arabic home remedies, they tried to stop the bleeding while comforting my mother and me. We knew that going to the police would be useless. Crying, my mother carried me home on her back. The next day, we saw a doctor and bought medication. I spent the entire summer in excruciating pain.

Fortunately, Armenian families today have modern bathrooms at home and no longer depend on public bathhouses. Even now, more than 70 years later, whenever I look down at the faint scar still visible on my leg, I am reminded of that scuffle in the Azaz bathhouse and the pain I went through back then. Despite having all the comforts of a modern home, I still look back on my childhood with deep nostalgia. I often catch myself longing for Aleppo, my birthplace, with its old *hammams*, their familiar herbal scents, and the attentive care they always offered.



A Painful Break

At the invitation of the Educational Council of the Armenian Prelacy of Peria (Aleppo) and with the confirmation of Bishop Zareh, I stepped into the role of principal at the National Noubarian School in Raqqa for the 1950–1951 academic year. Raqqa sits in northeastern Syria, perched almost directly on the banks of the Euphrates River.

After resigning from my position as a typesetter at the *Arevelk* daily newspaper—the official organ of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) in Aleppo, where I had worked since 1947—I arrived in Raqqa by car in early October 1950. I was greeted by the chairman of the board of trustees, Hagop Sarkissian, along with secretary Khatchadour Krikorian, accountant Hovhannes Derderian, treasurer Stepan Mgrditchian, and advisors Khoren Basmajian and Garouj Ouzounian. Weeks earlier, they had rented a room for me in a multi-room house owned by a local Armenian family. They had already furnished it with a bed, a table, chairs, and basic kitchenware so I could settle in and manage my own meals.

The school was located on the edge of the Euphrates, about a 10-minute walk from my lodgings via Raqqa's central boulevard. The morning after I arrived, Mr. Sarkissian came by to find me already awake and ready. We walked to the school together to meet the rest of the board. After inspecting the grounds and classrooms, I headed back home, taking the time to observe the various shops lining the main street.

Once back in my room, I felt a deep sense of joy. My dream of becoming a teacher had finally come true. While the Armenian press and typesetting had been a trade close to my heart—especially when the poet Antranig Dzarougian, owner of the *Nayiri* literary monthly and printing house, scouted me from *Arevelk* for his own shop— it was here that I truly felt my calling. I had thrived in a rich literary atmosphere until *Nayiri* moved to Beirut in 1949, honing my skills in Armenian literature and contributing poems and articles to the *Arevelk* daily.

My dear friend and comrade, the poet Manoug Najarian, was then teaching at the National Khorenian Co-ed School in the village of Ain Arus. He often wrote to me about his life as an educator, describing the pride he

felt in instilling a love for the Armenian language, religion, and national spirit in his students. He always urged me to commit to teaching full-time, feeling my role as a Sunday school teacher just wasn't enough.

Alone in my room that second day, I imagined how happy Manoug would be to hear my news. Sitting at my new desk for the first time, I wrote him an emotional letter to share the milestone. He and I, along with a few other bookish friends, used to walk the streets late into the night, debating the works of Armenian writers while forgetting our parents were waiting up for us well past midnight.

When student registration began, I noticed parents were a bit slow to sign up. I sent out formal letters to the families, and within two days, enrollment jumped to 90 students.

The institution comprised a kindergarten of three classes and an elementary department spanning grades one through five. Alongside instruction in Armenian grammar, sacred history, national history, and geography —all conducted in the mother tongue — the academic program encompassed both Arabic and French. The state ministry appointed our Arabic instructor, an affable and unassuming young man who harboured an authentic affection for the Armenian people. Throughout the academic year, we worked alongside him in an atmosphere of genuine, fraternal harmony.

We carried out the year's educational program without a hitch. I built strong professional and personal ties with the parents and the wider Armenian community, including the Armenian Relief Society (ARS), Homenetmen, Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU),[44] and Antranik Youth Association (AYA) circles. I earned the support of every group, and they were always ready to step up for the school's needs.

The local affection for me grew even more after I established a Sun-day school for the Armenian Apostolic Church. After getting the green light from the director of Sunday schools, Mr. Levon Zenian, and to the board's delight, I recruited volunteer teachers from the local educated

[44] *Founded in 1906 in Cairo by Boghos Nubar Pasha and prominent community leaders, the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) is the world's largest non-profit Armenian organization. Headquartered in New York, it preserves and promotes Armenian identity and heritage through global educational, cultural, and humanitarian programs.*

class. Using textbooks from the central office and a bit of my own coaching, they won over the students, who genuinely started looking forward to their Sunday classes.

A visit from the Prelate of Peria, His Grace Bishop Zareh, caused a massive stir in town. Accompanied by Mr. Sarkis Selian, a well-known pharmacist and member of the Educational Council, he was given a magnificent public reception by the community and the students.

The Bishop and Mr. Selian toured the school with the board, visiting several classrooms. The Bishop quizzed the students on their lessons and, pleased with their progress, offered them his fatherly blessing. Later, at a banquet in his honour at Mr. Sarkissian's home, the Prelate praised the school's high educational standards.

While I travelled home to Aleppo once a month to see my family and eat my mother's cooking, I have to say the people of Raqqa treated me with incredible respect. Board members, parents, and even the local shopkeepers — some the children of Arab fathers and Armenian mothers — called me '*Khali*' (Uncle) and invited me for dinner. I'll never forget the kindness of families like the Sarkissians, Mgrditchians, and the many others who looked after a young teacher living far from home on a modest salary.

During my time off, my favourite spot was the bridge over the Euphrates. It had been built by the British during World War II to guard against a potential Turkish invasion, should Turkey have joined the Axis powers.

Standing on that modern bridge, I would watch the river flow with heavy eyes. These waters originate in the mountains of Armenia, soaking occupied lands before reaching Syria and Iraq. I would picture the 1915 Armenian Genocide, the destroyed cities, and the 1.5 million lives lost. They were once driven under the old bridge of the Euphrates, and I imagined the hundreds of thousands of souls passing through the deserts of Meskene and Raqqa toward unmarked graves in the sands of Deir ez-Zor.

The 1950–1951 school year was a mixture of good times and hardship. I made lifelong friends, especially Nshan, the son of Stepan Mgrditchian, who was a constant companion and always made sure my weekends were enjoyable.

In April 1951, with Easter approaching, the school prepared for an

eight-day spring break. To show their appreciation to the faculty, the school board organized an Easter Sunday picnic right after church services. We headed out to a scenic meadow north of the ruins of Harun al-Rashid's palace, where the fields were green and in full bloom.

The whole community came along. There was an enormous spread of food, fresh fruit, and plenty of Raqqa sheep's cheese and flatbread, brought out on donkey-back by a local farmer. The board members were busy laying out the appetizers, making sure everything was just right.

By noon, the 'table' — spread out on blankets across the grass — was set. Garouj Ouzounian, a board member originally from Aintab, had hand-kneaded the *chi kofte* and brought out bottles of potent, 140 proof arak. After a grace and several rounds of toasts, the feast was underway, filled with lively Armenian songs.

As the food ran down and the *arak* kicked in, everyone grew more playful. Banter and laughter filled the air, and before long the grown men were playing playground games. We eventually decided on a match of 'steal the hat.'

We split into two teams, with the losers on the hook to treat the winners to a future dinner. I ended up matched against Garouj, the biggest man on the board. I managed to grab the hat and took off running. I had barely cleared 20 metres when my foot caught a hidden hole. My ankle gave way with an awful pop, and a flash of intense pain instantly put an end to my holiday.

The board members scrambled in a panic. Fortunately, the donkey was still grazing nearby. They lifted me onto the animal and led me back to my lodgings. They called for the local barber, Danielian, who— like most barbers back then — acted as the neighbourhood paramedic. He bound my swollen ankle in a wrap of goat hair and sheep tallow, wished me well, and left.

I was bedridden for three days. With the help of a walking stick, I eventually managed to limp around, though the pain stayed with me. I carried out my teaching duties until the end of the term, but I always looked back on that holiday mishap with a bit of regret.

The school year wrapped up on a high note with a proper year-end ceremony that left both the parents and the board thrilled. A committee

from the board even visited my house to ask me to stay on as principal for another term. I had to turn them down; I knew full well that on a salary of 150 Syrian pounds a month, getting married and building a proper home was out of the question.

And so, I went back to typesetting in the printing shops. For years afterward, however, every time I stepped awkwardly into a ditch or rut, that same ankle would buckle, bringing back all the old agony. I visited every traditional bone-setter across Aleppo, from Abu Ali to the sons of Ghazar, but the sprain kept returning. Finally, a knowledgeable friend offered some practical advice: "Slap a herbal adhesive plaster — a *laskha* — on both sides of the ankle, and leave it alone until it peels off by itself."

That simple plaster finally strengthened the damaged ligaments. For 57 years now, I haven't felt a trace of that pain.

It just goes to show: Sometimes practical folk wisdom does more for you than a whole clinic of doctors.



Luke 12:15–16: ‘A Person’s Life Does Not Consist in the Abundance of Their Possessions’

Ever since my younger brother, Hovhannes, moved from Lebanon to Los Angeles, I have had several chances to visit him and enjoy time with his family and grandchildren. From 1985 until his untimely and painful passing at the age of 71, he was a pillar of affection for his family, his brother, his sisters, and all our relatives scattered across Syria, Lebanon, France, the United States, Canada, and Armenia. The last of these visits began on July 13, 1996, following his invitation. It was a wonderful opportunity to reunite with him, my two sisters, and their children to finally satisfy the longing we felt for one another.

The Air Canada flight soared above the clouds for four and a half hours, crossing Canadian and American airspace before touching down at LAX. I was met there by my brother’s youngest son, Vahe. We set off in his Mercedes sports car, and I became so caught up in catching up on family news that I didn’t even notice the distance between the airport and 2624 Arma St. in Pico Rivera — a drive that took over half an hour. Guided by the Lord's blessing, we arrived at my brother’s home, where he and his family welcomed me with heartfelt, emotional hugs. His wife, Madeleine, was quick to prepare and serve traditional Armenian ‘welcome’ coffee. Savoring our coffee, we caught up on news of our relatives scattered across Toronto and Los Angeles while dinner was getting ready. We soon sat down to a wonderful, hearty meal of homemade dishes and fruit, accompanied by fine drinks and lively music.

The next morning, my brother’s eldest son and two daughters came over for breakfast with their spouses and children. The house was full of life and warmth, especially with the little ones playing together. Over the next couple of days, we visited my sisters and their families, who insisted I come over for dinner so we could finally make up for our long years of separation.

Taking advantage of being in the city, I felt it was my duty to visit the editorial offices of *Asbarez* and *Nor Gyank*. Comrade Vatche Proudian,

the editor of *Asbarez*, received my brother and me warmly. We then moved on to the offices of the *Nor Gyank* weekly, where we were welcomed by the publisher and editor, Mr. Krikor Shenian. Noting that I had contributed articles and correspondence to his paper, Mr. Shenian kept us for quite a while and invited us to lunch. We thanked him but had to decline, as we were headed to the home of my childhood friend, the poet Nshan Shahen (Tekkelian).

Nshan Shahen —a poet, playwright, and publicist— had moved to Armenia as a newlywed fueled by progressive ideals. He studied there, graduating from the Philology Department of Yerevan University, and dedicated himself to teaching. However, his poems and writings published in Armenia eventually revealed his disillusionment. His progressive ideology withered, and after facing significant hardships, he left the Soviet Union and settled in Los Angeles.

His family consisted of two beautiful daughters and their devoted mother, Zarouhi, who had been a typesetter at *Nayiri* Press in Aleppo and a former colleague of mine. My brother and I enjoyed a delicious meal of Armenian dolma made with peppers, eggplant, and tomatoes at Nshan's home. After coffee, my brother started to feel unwell. Fortunately, Nshan's younger daughter, who was a doctor, brought a pill and a large basin of warm water. She asked my brother to soak his feet for a bit, assuring him his blood pressure would soon drop.

We spent three emotional, cheerful hours with Nshan Shahen and his family, reminiscing about our lives as neighbours and friends in the Ajour Tarla district of Aleppo. He spoke of the agonizing life he and his family led in Armenia until his departure, and how he had miraculously escaped death following a criminal attempt to kill him in a staged accident —a fate intended to mirror that of Paruyr Sevak.

We got back to the house tired and sweating. After savoring some hot Armenian coffee, we rested and switched on the TV to catch up on the day's political news.

I had previously become close friends in Toronto with Hrant Simonian, a writer, author, publicist, and 'soldier of the Armenian Cause.' He had visited Toronto as a representative of the California Armenian Educational Foundation to provide financial and moral support to the ARS Armenian Private School during its opening ceremonies in 1979. Since I

was in Los Angeles, I called him to let him know I was in town and that I wanted to see him. Simonian was very happy to hear from me and promised to meet me on Wednesday afternoon for lunch.

On Tuesday, my brother's wife prepared a magnificent meal which we enjoyed with the whole family, even though it was a workday. Because the weather was so hot, the cool allure of the swimming pool prompted us to go for a dip. While the decision to swim was pleasant at first, I began to feel some discomfort and was forced to get out and lie down. I spent the rest of the day and night in a state of semi-sleep, struggling with chest and stomach distress. My brother suggested calling an ambulance, but I refused. Due to a sleepless night, I finally fell asleep in the morning and didn't wake up until near noon. By then, my friend Hrant Simonian had already come by to take me to lunch; upon hearing from my brother that I was unwell, he had sadly departed.

Although my pain had eased through home remedies, I asked my brother to take me to the medical centre where my poet friend's daughter, Dr. Dzovinar Tekkelian, worked, so she could examine me with a familiar eye.

We arrived at her clinic in Glendale after 2 p.m. After introducing myself to the secretary, we sat in the waiting room. A lady about 50 years old, elegantly dressed, was sitting to my right. Hearing my brother and me speaking Armenian, she ventured to ask about my health and introduced herself as Dikranouhi Sarkissian, originally from Tehran, Iran.

I introduced myself as well, mentioning that I was visiting from Toronto to see my family. I explained that after a heavy meal the previous day, I had felt some stomach discomfort and had come to see Dr. Dzovinar for an examination and treatment.

After hearing my story, Mrs. Dikranouhi said that my ailment was nothing and would soon pass. "But as for me..." she said. "Brother, my husband and I came from Tehran with significant financial means. Unfortunately, I never had children. My husband never complained and always worked to keep me happy. He was involved in construction and real estate, and his business was highly successful and well-known. However, our joy did not last. My husband died in an accident. As his beneficiary, the money in the bank and the life insurance payouts totalled four million dollars. Now, I have come to see the doctor. After undergoing medical tests

last month, I was told I have at most six months to live. Dear brother, I would gladly give you the four million I have in the bank if God would give me your health instead. What will I do with that money if I am to die in six months?"

Mrs. Dikranouhi could not hold back her tears after this declaration. She apologized for causing me sadness by speaking of her personal health. I was deeply moved by the details of this lady's life and wanted to offer her some words of comfort.

"My dear sister," I replied, "I am so sorry you are facing this illness and that the doctors have given you so little time. But there is a Physician above all physicians, and I hope you will look to Him. That doctor is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who offers healing and life to everyone who believes in Him. Turn to Him every day in prayer. Read the Scriptures daily—especially the New Testament, where you can read about the miracles Christ performed for those who came to Him in faith. I suggest you read the First Epistle of Paul to Timothy, specifically the exhortation to the wealthy in Chapter six, verses 17–19, which says:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

"Now, if you believe in the miracles of Jesus, ask Him in faithful prayer to grant you healing. At the same time, take a portion of your millions and give it to national institutions, church structures, orphans, and the poor, so that you may lay a good foundation for the hereafter. If you pass away, you cannot take that money with you. Your charitable acts will immortalize you and make you worthy of the heavenly kingdom.

I concluded by saying, "Ask Jesus Christ, the Saviour of us all, to heal your illness. Pray with full faith, every single day."

After this, we exchanged addresses and promised to stay in touch. When it was my turn, I went in to see Dr. Dzovinar. She examined me with the care of a relative and then said, "From now on, do not go into a swimming pool after eating a heavy meal."

About eight months after my visit, I received a letter. The sender's

name and address were on the envelope. I was surprised; this lady should have passed away two months prior. I opened the letter anxiously. In it, Mrs. Dikranouhi reflected on our meeting and the advice I had given her. She wrote:

Dear friend, the words of the Apostle Paul spoke deeply to my heart. I distributed and donated the majority of my wealth to national institutions, churches, schools, orphans, and the poor. Every day, I prayed with faith that our Saviour, through His miraculous power, would extend my life by healing my illness.

Six months passed. I had not died. I went to the doctor. After examining me, the doctor found no trace of cancer in my body. He asked in amazement how I had been cured. I told him: I prayed with faith to our Saviour and all the Saints.

A divine miracle had taken place, and the Devil was defeated.



The Consequences of a Good Deed

Sarkis was enjoying his meal at the Crazy Horse, a casino-restaurant in Beirut's Hamra district, when a commotion broke out at a nearby table. A likable, dark-haired gentleman who had just finished dinner was trying to convince his waiter that he was an honest man and that his current predicament could happen to anyone.

"Please, listen to me, and for God's sake, don't shout," he said softly. "I told you I'm not a swindler. I simply lost my wallet."

The waiter, however, was in no mood for the customer's pleading or his modest demeanor. "We know those stories, sir. We've seen plenty of this," he shouted. "Mr. Youssef!"

A large man with a thick mustache, sat at the counter and acted as though he hadn't heard. This time, the waiter yelled even louder, "Mr. Youssef, the customer at Table four isn't paying!"

At those words, Youssef stood up and left the counter. Twirling his mustache, he approached with a hostile air. "What's going on?" he asked, eyeing the customer.

"He won't pay."

"I'm so sorry," the distressed customer said. "I've had a bit of bad luck. I either left my wallet at home or lost it on the way here. My name is Ilias Jamous, and I am well known to many."

"What's that to me?" the manager replied. "Samir, call a police officer."

The manager's behaviour infuriated Sarkis. How could someone humiliate a gentleman like this over a simple misfortune? He stood up, deciding then and there to pay the stranger's bill.

"Please, manager," he said. "Don't make such a fuss over nothing. If the gentleman permits, I will pay his bill, and he can pay me back later."

The customer turned toward his unknown saviour, his eyes filled with gratitude. "Oh, sir," he said. "You are very kind. You're saving me from a completely unfair and foolish humiliation."

"Please, sir, it's no big deal," Sarkis replied, then turned to the waiter. "Could you bring the gentleman's bill, please?"

Feeling the need to justify himself, the embarrassed manager offered an explanation. “Forgive my attitude,” he said. “But these things happen often, and because of that, we’ve lost our trust.”

“But can’t you see?” Sarkis replied, annoyed. “Can’t you tell just by looking at him that he is an honourable person?”

“It’s exactly these kinds of ‘gentlemen’ who become a headache for us,” the manager said. “I don’t know who this man is, but swindlers are generally well-dressed.”

Once the manager and waiter had moved away, the stranger struggled to find the words to express his thanks. “What can I even say to you?” he asked. “Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. I was on the verge of being disgraced. I am so very grateful.”

“Please, sir, it’s not worth mentioning.”

“What do you mean? Do you know what it’s like to be disgraced out of nowhere?”

“You seem like a very noble person,” Sarkis said. “If I were in your shoes, I would have smashed that idiot’s face in. Then I would have called a policeman myself, taken him to my house, and paid the money there. Honestly, would I allow myself to be disgraced over such a stroke of bad luck?”

The more Sarkis spoke, the more worked up he became. “On my honour, I’m telling you, I would have broken his nose and mouth. Like you said, would I let that scoundrel disgrace me?”

The man promised to stop by in the afternoon to settle the debt and then departed. Sarkis went back to his meal. He drank a beer, but the moment he reached into his pocket for his own wallet, he realized it was empty. “Oh no!” he whispered in horror. “Good Lord, what a coincidence! What a disaster!” Anxiously, he began to search to his right, his left, in front, and behind, but the wallet was nowhere to be found. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as his courage collapsed.

“What am I going to do now?” he thought. He couldn’t call home; his wife was away on a trip, which was the only reason he was eating at a restaurant in the first place. Should he call a friend? Yes, that was the best solution. He stood up and called the waiter over.

“Where is your telephone?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, it’s broken, sir,” the waiter said.

"Is there another phone nearby?"

"Of course. Outside, just a little further down... Would you like your bill now?"

Sarkis shivered. "No, bring me another beer."

"Right away, sir."

The waiter left, and Sarkis used the time to try and think of a way out. The beer arrived and he drank it, but he remained stuck. The waiter kept circling back.

"Shall I prepare your bill, sir?"

"No, bring another beer."

"Right away, sir."

Sarkis was at a total deadlock. To hell with it — where could he have lost his wallet, and how was it possible to lose it at the exact same time as the other man? What would he say to the mustachioed Mr. Youssef? His dignity was about to be dragged through the mud. Not only would he be unable to smash the manager's face in, as he had so indignantly threatened earlier, he wouldn't even have the heart to find the right words to defend himself.

"What a mess I've gotten into," he thought. "What a terrible thing it is to have no money. You're nothing without it. How can you defend your dignity when your pockets are empty? My, my, what power money holds."

The waiter returned. "Would you like your bill?"

"No, bring me another beer."

"Yes, sir."

This time, however, the waiter gave him a suspicious, sideways glance that made Sarkis shudder. By now, his head was starting to spin from the beers. He couldn't think straight and had fallen into a state of total despair.

"Would you like your bill, sir?"

"No, bring one more beer."

The waiter didn't say 'right away' this time. "I'm handing my shift over to someone else, sir," he said. "Pay your bill now, and then you can continue." As he spoke, he looked Sarkis over from head to toe. His gaze travelled all the way down to the legs of the table.

"Your wallet fell down, sir," he said, leaning over to pick it up from the floor.

If someone had handed Sarkis paradise on a silver platter, he wouldn't have been any happier. He grabbed the wallet —which had clearly just slipped out of his pocket — paid the bill, tipped the waiter generously, and muttered under his breath, "A man has no dignity without money... to hell with it."

He walked out of that fateful restaurant feeling victorious, even if he was a little wobbly on his feet.

Sarkis often shared the story of that close call with his friends, always reminding them never to stop doing good, because helping others is a divine duty.



A Heroic Love for Their Mother

King Gagik Artsruni of Vaspurakan reigned from 908 to 943. He and his brother, Gurgen, divided the province's territory, with Gagik taking control of the northern and western districts. He later annexed Mogk and other Armenian lands. Aiming to partition and weaken Armenia, Yusuf, the Governor of Atropatene, proclaimed Gagik Artsruni 'King of the Armenians' in 908, which established the Artsruni Kingdom of Vaspurakan. Gagik became famous for his ambitious construction projects; he renovated Ostan and Van and developed Akhtamar.

During his reign, Gagik built the fortress-city of Akhtamar on an island of the same name in Lake Van. Its crowning achievement was the Holy Cross Church, a masterpiece constructed between 915 and 921. The architect was Manuel.[45] Scenes from the Old and New Testaments, members of the Artsruni dynasty, and apostles preaching the Christian faith are carved into the walls of this ingenious temple, creating scenes often described as the 'stony breath of Armenia.' The walls feature 42 sculptures of birds, hunting trophies, vineyard feasts, fleeing deer and gazelles, and leopards in pursuit. On the temple wall, King Gagik is depicted holding a model of the church. The king's mother, Princess Sophie, and his wife, Queen Mlk'e, are also sculpted there.

Some kings leave behind nothing but their names. Others pass down magnificent wonders to future generations, injecting the nation with the vital sap needed to endure. The Holy Cross Church of Akhtamar is one such wonder.

It is said that during King Gagik's reign in Vaspurakan, a poor family lived in the Aygestan district of Van. A mother lived there with her three sons; their father had died in an accident, leaving the family in deep misery. To make matters worse, the widowed mother fell ill. The boys called a doctor who, after examining her, wrote a prescription and warned

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[45] Constructed between 915 and 921 AD by architect-monk Manuel under King Gagik I Artsruni, the Holy Cross Cathedral on Akhtamar Island in Lake Van is celebrated for its exterior bas-relief stone carvings. The sculptures weave together Old and New Testament narratives, hunting motifs, and portraits of the Artsruni royal house.

them to get the medicine from the pharmacy immediately. If they delayed, their mother's life would be at risk.

The boys ran to the city pharmacy and, describing their mother's condition to the pharmacist, begged him to prepare the medicine quickly. After taking the prescription, the pharmacist told the boys it would be ready soon if they made a cash payment of 5,000 drams. The boys asked to buy the medicine on credit so their mother could recover, but the pharmacist refused. The brothers went to other pharmacies, but no one would provide the medicine on credit, regardless of their pleas. The brothers grew desperate. How could they find 5,000 drams to save their mother's life? Having already lost their father, they couldn't bear the thought of being orphaned entirely.

In those days, robberies had become frequent in Van, creating an atmosphere of fear. To ensure their safety, the people turned to the ministry and the king. Furious, the king promised a reward of 10,000 drams to whoever captured one of the bandits.

Khosrov, the eldest son, spoke to his two brothers, Diran and Aram. "Brothers, so we can get the 10,000 dram reward and buy our mother's medicine, tie me up and hand me over to the court as the leader of the bandits."

The youngest brother disagreed. Each son wanted to take the eldest brother's place. "It is for Mother; tie me up instead," said the middle and youngest sons. Finally, they agreed to draw lots. The lot fell to the youngest, Aram.

The two brothers tied Aram up and handed him over to the court. After a long interrogation, the court ordered him to be chained and thrown into a prison reserved for the most serious criminals, and the two brothers were given the promised reward.

The pair left quickly, paid the pharmacy, bought chicken, eggs, greens, and fruit, and rushed to their mother's side, certain they could save her.

"All of this is quite expensive, my sons; where did it come from? Where did you get the money for the prescription and this food?" the mother asked.

The boys struggled to find an answer. "You didn't steal them, did you?" she asked.

"No, we would never," the boys said.

"I don't believe you. Tell me, where did you get the money? And where is your brother, Aram? "

Unable to hide the truth any longer, the two brothers told their mother everything. She was devastated. She refused to take the medicine or the food, saying, "I prefer to die of hunger and thirst than to be cured by the blood of my innocent child."

The boys explained in vain that each of them had been ready to sacrifice himself. The mother continued to demand her son's freedom. Khosrov and Diran were deeply pained that they could not free their brother or even see him.

In those days in Van, money could open any door. The two brothers bribed the old jailer and went inside to see Aram. They embraced him and, with eyes filled with tears, told him their mother had refused the medicine. His sacrifice was not only useless but had made her condition worse.

At these words, Aram wept. The old jailer, who had overheard the entire conversation, was unable to hold back his own tears. He went to the judge and told him what had happened.

This heroic love for their mother shook the judge. He ordered the prisoner to be brought before him. At first, he said nothing to Aram, but once the judge revealed he knew about the conversation in the prison, Aram confessed everything. He explained why the three brothers had decided to hand the youngest over to the court so they could use the reward money to save their mother's life.

The judge explained the matter to the governor, and Aram was released.

King Gagik also learned of the incident. Deeply moved, he ordered that the three brothers be rewarded with the highest medal of the Kingdom of Vaspurakan and granted each of them high-ranking state positions. The boys' mother was cured at the state's expense, and the king granted her a pension for life.

And so, the sons' devotion was recognized and rewarded by the Armenian king, who honoured the spirit of sacrifice they had shown toward their mother.


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Teaching Armenian on a Plane

A fierce patriotism, a lifelong love for my nation, and the core ideals of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) were passed down to me directly through my father's rebel spirit and his firsthand recollections. I inherited these values from the day I was born, raised on his stories of the Sasoun resistance and the battles of the *fedayee* freedom fighters. I grew up hearing about the courage of heroic figures from my father's own clan, including Kale of Spaghank, Magar, and the commander Hako. He described the desperate fight for honour, freedom, and self-defence waged by the mountain folk of Sasoun against Ottoman imperial troops and hostile local tribes operating with government blessing. Those stories inspired in me an unshakeable, lifelong commitment to serve the Armenian people through the ARF.

From my days at the Sahagian National School in Aleppo until my graduation in 1941, this spirit took a more tangible form. I was educated by teachers and principals dedicated to the Armenian upbringing of children whose parents had miraculously survived the Armenian Genocide. Under the influence of educators such as Shavarsh Makarian, Garabed Oulyubeyian, Edward Yervart Dasnabedian, Napoleon (Sisak) Hazroyian, Onnik Sarkissian, Sarkis Chouljian, Barkev Msrian, and Sarkis and Azad Yapoujian, I decided to honour my father's patriotic ideals by serving the Armenian Apostolic Church and various national unions.

After nearly three years of service in the French military, I resigned and received my discharge in 1946. Encouraged by my father, we hoped to repatriate to Armenia, but our family was denied that privilege due to ideological differences. Once out of uniform, I went back to working as a typesetter — first at the Armenian Teachers' Union's Sevan press under the direction of Simon Simonian, then at the daily *Arevelk*, and finally at Antranig Dzarougian's *Nayiri* press until 1949.

Following a term as the principal of the Noubarian School in Raqqa, Syria, during 1950–1951, I returned to typesetting for the *Arevelk* daily. From 1951 to 1961, I held various positions at the paper while contributing poems, articles, and correspondence. Through lectures by our leaders and articles in books and newspapers, I became fully aware of the genocide committed by Turkish states against the Armenian people. I

learned of the battles of Sardarabad, Gharakilisa, and Bash-Abaran; the creation of the Republic of Armenia on May 28, 1918; the overthrow of Armenian independence by Russian Communist forces; and the transfer of the government to Armenian Communists on December 2, 1920. I learned of the popular Armenian uprising against the Communist regime on February 18, 1921, the eventual re-occupation of Armenia by Communist forces, the exile of state and military figures, the persecution of the clergy, and the general suffering of the Armenian people under Communism.

A sense of struggle grew within me against the Turkish state and the Communist authorities who trampled on the Armenian people's right to live freely and independently on the soil of a United Armenia. In Aleppo's *Arevelk*, I frequently wrote critical articles and studies against the atheist and anti-national Communist regime.

After the death of the tyrant Stalin, reforms were gradually introduced in the Soviet Union, and individual immigration and tourism were permitted. Starting in the 1970s, many compatriots from Armenian colonies began travelling to Armenia. Many went at their own expense to see their relatives. Others funded their trips by taking valuable items to sell in Armenia, sometimes even making a profit. A few 'patriots' made large sums of money by bringing back prohibited goods, metals, and jewellery. Some who tried to bypass customs were arrested and imprisoned, losing their confiscated valuables.

While many relatives and friends made substantial money through the lucrative but risky 'suitcase trade,' my only wish was to visit Armenia and meet my father's cousins— survivors who had miraculously made it out of Sasoun —with honour and without any commercial motives. For a long time, however, money was tight, and I could only dream of seeing the homeland. At the same time, I worried that Soviet authorities, aware of my vocal opposition to the communist regime, might use a customs search as an excuse to detain me, turning a personal pilgrimage into a nightmare.

Then the Soviet Union collapsed after 70 years of totalitarian rule, and Armenia declared its independence on September 21, 1991. In the difficult years that followed, thousands of families left the country in search of work, settling across Russia, the United States, Canada, and Europe. Others, inspired by deep patriotism and answering the ARF's call of *'Tebi*

Yergir' ('To the Homeland'), moved directly to Armenia, contributing their skills, education, and savings to help rebuild the country.

Armenia's independence, combined with my own improved financial stability, finally made it possible for me to search out my roots and visit the land I had dreamed of since childhood. Although I had exchanged letters with my relatives for years, I had never had the chance to meet them in person.

On September 5, 1997, after weeks of preparation, we took off from Toronto at 6:40 p.m. aboard a KLM Boeing 747, landing in Amsterdam at 7:45 the next morning. Schiphol Airport was packed with travellers. After a nine-hour layover, at 5:30 in the afternoon, the Armenian plane pulled up to the gate, displaying the red, blue, and orange national flag alongside the words ARMENIAN AIRLINES.

I could hardly believe my eyes. I thanked God that after holding onto a love for the homeland since my early youth, we were finally blessed with a free, independent country. It gave me the freedom to travel as a pilgrim and reunite with my father's relatives. They were from the mountain hamlet of Spaghank in the Dalvorig region of Sasoun. They had miraculously survived the 1915 Genocide, fought off Ottoman troops and armed bands, and eventually retreated alongside the Russian army and Armenian volunteer units to Eastern Armenia. Operating under the direction of Roupen and the frontline leadership of Moushegh of Sasoun, they had defended and cleared the slopes of Mount Aragats of the hostile Tatar-Azeri settlements that had taken over those pastures years earlier.

I crossed myself as I stepped aboard the Tupolev Tu-154B-2, grateful for the privilege of flying from Amsterdam to Yerevan on an Armenian airliner. The plane was half-full, mostly with Armenian passengers. Some, like me, were pilgrims; others were diaspora Armenians from across North America visiting family, along with a few foreign travellers heading over for business or tourism.

I was seated next to a pleasant young woman, and we struck up a conversation when the flight attendants came around with dinner and drinks. Since she didn't drink wine, she offered me her bottle. In a mix of English and French, I asked about her background and the purpose of her trip.

She told me she was Dutch and worked with Doctors Without Borders. A midwife by trade, she was heading out to the Tavush border villages — Berkaber, Aygehovit, Ditavan, Movses, and Aknaghbyur — basing herself out of the town of Berd. Her purpose was to provide maternal health care and ensure safe deliveries for local mothers as part of the organization's humanitarian aid. She gave me her card, which listed her contact addresses in the Netherlands and Belgium. Her name was Jisemarysol Ferket. As we talked, she described past assignments in countries like Guinea in West Africa before taking on this post in Armenia. Realizing how difficult it would be to find English or French speakers in the remote villages of Tavush, she asked if I could give her a brief introduction to Armenian history, culture, and basic vocabulary.

Enthusiastic about her request, I spoke briefly about the origins of the Armenian people up to the present day. I emphasized that Armenians were the first people to officially adopt Christianity in 301 and that St. Mesrob Mashdots created the Armenian alphabet in 404, consisting of 38 letters that can express all the sounds of the language. We began our Armenian lesson by introducing the alphabet, writing simple and capital letters, and then moving on to common nouns, adjectives, and verbs. I began pronouncing and translating words like father, mother, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, bread, water, meal, and breakfast, as well as phrases like "please," "good morning," "good afternoon," "good evening," "good night," "come," "go," "my dear," and "what is your name?" We continued this until we reached Zvartnots Airport in Yerevan. For the four-hour duration of the flight from Amsterdam to Yerevan, I taught Armenian on that Armenian aircraft. We arrived at midnight on September 6, 1997.

During the 3,600 km journey, my Dutch student and I became friends. We promised to keep in touch through letters. Having obtained my entry visa from the Armenian Embassy in Ottawa, I passed through customs very easily, without even having my bags searched. Outside, among those waiting, I saw a young man holding a sign with the Dutch lady's name. I had enjoyed a pleasant journey with her and had not even noticed the discomfort of the old airplane seats or the vibrations of the aircraft.

I stayed in Armenia for 28 days, enjoying the hospitality of my relatives in Yerevan and in villages inhabited by people from Sasoun, such as

Nor Artagers, Verin Bardzraberd, Nerkin Sasnashen, Katnaghbyur, Ashnak, and Talin. I visited all the major sites: Etchmiadzin, where I met Catholicos Karekin I, the Matenadaran, the National Gallery, Tsitsernakaberd, Lake Sevan, and in Artsakh, Gandzasar Monastery, Stepanakert, Shushi, and several liberated territories.

Back home in Toronto, I lived for months bathed in the luminous afterglow of Armenia, my mind captive to its landscapes and sacred memories. I had scarcely forgotten my Dutch pupil, Jisemarysol Ferket, yet despite her polite parting assurance, I had little expectation of ever hearing from her again. Life, however, reserves its own quiet wonders. Toward the close of 1997, an envelope arrived bearing Armenian postmarks. Judging by the unfamiliar hand, I assumed it had been dispatched by kinfolk in the republic, yet upon reading the return address, I was astonished. The letter, composed carefully in Armenian script, unfolded thus:

To my first Armenian teacher, Dear Mr. Krikor Hotoyan,

I am writing to you in Armenian to keep the promise I made, wishing you and your family a wonderful New Year and a Merry Christmas, along with good health and a long life.

When we met on the plane, you introduced me to the history of the Armenian people, the letters of the Armenian alphabet, and everyday conversational words, which I carefully jotted down in my notebook during our flight.

In between my rounds in Tavush province, I found local Armenian textbooks and taught myself how to read and write. Before long, I began speaking Armenian with the locals. My growing appreciation for the language and culture led me to the principal of the high school in Berd, who became my second teacher. Our lessons soon turned into something deeper; we fell in love and got married.

Today, I have an Armenian home of my own. I have wrapped up my contract with Doctors Without Borders and continue to practise as a midwife for the mothers of the Tavush region. I owe this incredible turn in my life to good fortune, and especially to your generosity in teaching me Armenian during that flight. That lesson made me fall in love with the language and its people, and by marrying an Armenian teacher, I have become Armenian in heart and spirit.

I truly hope that on your next trip to Armenia, you will come visit us at our home in Berd.

With love,
Jisemarysol Ferket Manoukian

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I wrote back right away to congratulate her on her marriage, send warm wishes for New Year's and Christmas, and wish her and her family a bright and joyful future.



The Just Judge

King Hethum I of Cilician Armenia reigned from 1226 to 1270. In 1226, he married Zabel, the daughter of Leo the Magnificent, and was officially proclaimed King of the Armenians.

His accession to the throne established the Hethumid dynasty. Until Hethum and Zabel reached maturity, however, the state was governed by Hethum's father, Constantine the *Payl*.

During the reign of Hethum I, Cilician Armenia experienced a significant economic and cultural resurgence. In 1254, Hethum I travelled to Karakorum, the capital of Mongolia, where he signed a friendship treaty with the Mongol Empire. Thanks to this alliance, Cilician Armenia was not only spared from Mongol invasions but also bolstered its international standing through military cooperation with the Mongols.

King Hethum I ruled his kingdom with great wisdom. Once, a philosopher asked him, "Your Majesty, they say that you and Queen Zabel are a happy couple; is this true?"

"Yes," replied King Hethum.

"What is the secret to your happiness?" the philosopher asked.

"Mutual love," the King replied. "When you love selflessly, God supports you."

It was the King's habit to travel through the various cities of his land in disguise to see how his people lived. One day, Hethum decided to find out if the reports about a certain just judge in the city of Adana were true. It was said that this judge could discern the truth instantly and that no deceiver could escape him.

Dressing as a merchant, the King mounted his horse and rode to Adana. He entered calmly through the great city gate and, by asking around, eventually found the courthouse.

Near the building, a disabled man approached the disguised King and asked for alms. The King granted the poor man's request and prepared to leave, but the man clung to his clothing.

"Did I not give you alms?" asked the King. "What more do you want?"

"You gave me alms," said the man, "but do me one more kindness: take me to the square on your horse."

King Hethum placed the man on the back of his horse and carried him to the square. Once they arrived, however, the beggar refused to get off. The King said, "Why won't you get off? I brought you where you wanted to go. Get down. What more do you want?"

"I will not get down," the man said. "This horse is mine. If you do not want to give it to me of your own will, let us go before the judge."

Hearing this argument, a crowd gathered. Those present shouted in unison, "Go to the judge; he will give a fair verdict."

They went before the judge. The courtroom was crowded, and the judge was calling people in order. Before the King's turn, the judge heard other complaints. He listened, fell silent for a moment, and then said to a scholar and a peasant, "Leave the woman here and return tomorrow morning."

After they left, a butcher and an oil merchant entered. The butcher was covered in blood and the merchant in oil. The butcher held money in his hand, while the oil merchant gripped the butcher's arm tightly. The butcher said, "I bought oil from this man. I took money from my pouch to pay, but he grabbed my hand and tried to steal my money. That is why we are here. I am holding my money, and he is holding my hand. The money is mine; this man is a thief."

The oil merchant replied, "The butcher is lying. He came to buy oil. When I had filled a jug for him, he asked me to change a gold coin. I took my money out and placed it on the counter, but he quickly snatched it and tried to run. I grabbed his hand and brought him here."

The judge listened for a moment and said, "Leave the money here and come back tomorrow."

When it was the turn of the disguised King Hethum and the beggar, the King explained what had happened. After listening to the King, the judge gave the floor to the beggar. The man said, "His story is a lie. I was riding through the city on my horse when I saw him sitting on the ground. He asked me for a ride. I put him on my horse and took him where he wanted to go, but when we arrived, he refused to get off and claimed the horse was his."

The judge thought for a moment and said, “Leave the horse with me and return tomorrow.”

The next day, a large crowd gathered to hear the judge’s verdicts. First, the scholar and the peasant approached.

“Take your wife,” the judge said to the scholar. He then ordered 50 lashes for the peasant. The scholar took his wife and went home, while the peasant was punished on the spot.

Next, the judge called the butcher. “The money is yours,” he said. Pointing to the oil merchant, he added, “And for him, 50 lashes of the whip.”

Then the judge called the disguised King and the beggar. “Would you recognize your horse among 20 others?” he asked Hethum.

“I would,” King Hethum replied.

“And you?” the judge asked the beggar.

“I would as well,” the man said.

“Follow me,” the judge told King Hethum.

They went to the stable. Among 20 other horses, the disguised King pointed out his own. Then the judge called the beggar and asked him to do the same. He also recognized and pointed to the same horse. The judge returned to his seat and said to the King, “The horse is yours; take it.” He then ordered the beggar to be given 50 lashes.

After the trial, the judge went home, and King Hethum followed him.

“Are you not satisfied with my decision?” the judge asked.

“I am satisfied,” King Hethum said, “but I want to know how you realized the woman belonged to the scholar and not the peasant, that the money belonged to the butcher and not the oil merchant, and that the horse was mine and not the beggar’s.”

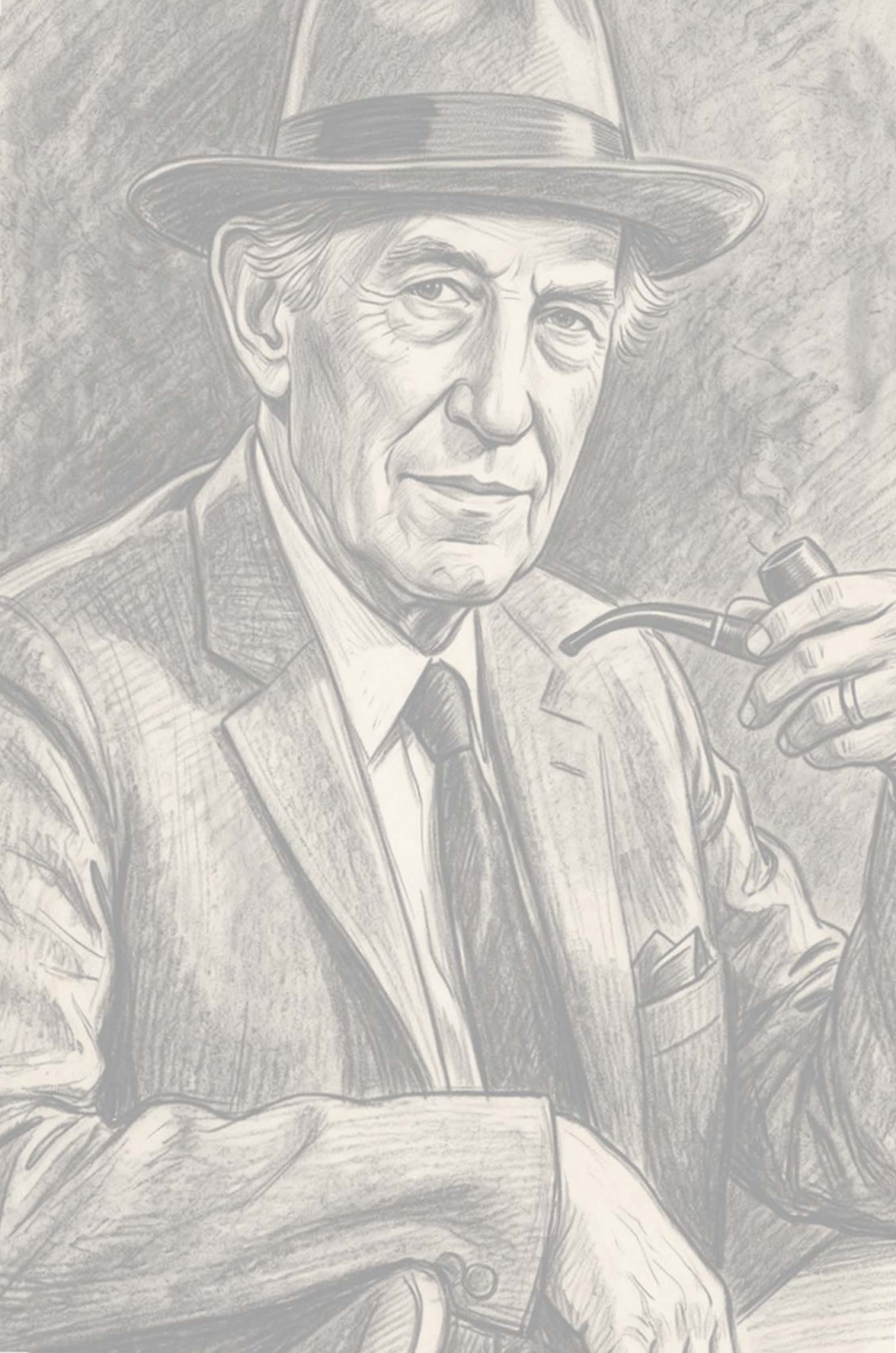
“I figured out the woman’s identity like this: in the morning, I called her to me and asked her to fill my inkwell. She took it and cleaned and filled it quickly and skillfully. It was clear she was used to the task. If she were a peasant’s wife, she could not have done it so deftly. Thus, it was clear the scholar was telling the truth. As for the money, I placed it in a cup of water and checked this morning to see if oil had settled on the surface. If the money belonged to the oil merchant, there would have been traces

of oil from his hands. There was no oil on the water, so it was clear the butcher was right."

The judge continued, "The most difficult case was yours. The beggar pointed to the same horse just as you did. But I took you both to the stable not to see if you recognized the horse, but to see which of you the horse would recognize. When you approached, the horse turned its head and leaned toward you. But when the beggar approached, the horse pinned its ears back and raised its front legs in anger. That is how I knew you were the horse's true owner."

King Hethum then said, "I am not a merchant, but King Hethum I. I came here to see if the reports about you were true. I see now that you are a wise judge. Ask for whatever you wish, and I shall give it to you."

The judge replied, "I need no reward. I am already happy to have earned my King's praise and to serve my country and my people."



Garo Sasouni: A Revolutionary, Intellectual, Historian, and Educator

Friday, January 4, 1946, was a crisp, pleasant winter day in Lebanon. With our duties wrapped up and overnight passes in hand, my close friend Antranig Atanian and I headed out. We had enlisted together in Aleppo on June 24, 1943, to serve in the French Army. After being posted to Beirut at the Caserne Dugré de Lou barracks in the coastal neighborhood of Mar Elias, we were deployed to various bases across Syria and Lebanon. For nearly three years, we served together in the artillery regiment, completing specialized military and technical training side by side until we earned our stripes as non-commissioned officers. On March 1, 1946, we were set to be discharged at our parents' request so we could sign up for the repatriation caravans to Armenia.

Antranig and I went down into Beirut, stopping first at his family home in the Nor Sis district. While there, we heard that a lecture was scheduled for 7:30 that evening at the Azirian Club hall. Garo Sasouni was the featured speaker, presenting on the ongoing work of the Armenian Cause.

After dinner, we made our way to the Azirian hall before 7:30. The room was already packed. We found two seats in the back row and waited for the event to begin. Dressed in our Free French uniforms and insignia, we quickly drew stares from the organizers and the audience. Most people assumed we were French soldiers and were surprised to see foreign troops attending an Armenian lecture.

The confusion cleared when a young man from the organizing committee came over and spoke to us in French. When I answered him directly in Armenian, his face lit up. He walked straight onto the stage and announced to the crowd that the two soldiers they thought were French were actually Armenian recruits who had come to hear Garo Sasouni speak. The crowd responded with a warm round of applause.

The moderator opened by introducing Sasouni, outlining his career and public service before inviting him to speak about the Armenian Cause. Sasouni began by reviewing the situation in Armenia before and after the Russo-Turkish War of 1878. He outlined the discriminatory policies

of the Ottoman government, the repeated attempts at civil reform, and the revolutionary movements that followed. These events forced European powers to step into Ottoman domestic affairs, demanding that the Sultan stop the massacres and even appointing two European inspectors to oversee the promised reforms.

But those agreements were swept away by World War I, which gave the Young Turk leadership the opportunity they wanted to wipe out the Armenian presence within the Ottoman Empire. Sasouni then confronted the catastrophe of the Armenian Genocide:

"Armenian history has recorded many great disasters that drained the nation's strength and vitality. But the period from April 11 to 24, 1915, exceeded all ancient catastrophes in its scope, its unspeakable brutality, and above all its sudden, swift execution. It was the rollout of a cold-blooded plan for the complete destruction of a people, where deportation and robbery were simply the natural tools of the scheme.

"The axe fell across the spine of the Armenian nation, devastating and complete. Every year, Armenians come together in shared mourning. That ache will last for generations until the rebirth of the Armenian people can, in time, heal the loss of more than 1.5 million martyrs.

"Yet the wounded and heartbroken Armenian nation keeps breathing, doing everything possible to stand tall and keep up the struggle for a shared national life. Driven by a desire to live and rebuild, yet cautious and distrustful of the world around them, Armenians move forward carefully because their eyes are constantly pulled back to their traumatic past. That protective instinct has to become a conscious awareness. Alongside their grief, the surviving generations must look critically at what happened to them, drawing lasting lessons from the nightmare that forms the red and black chapters of our history known as the Armenian Genocide.

"The genocide failed to destroy the Armenian nation. The finest sons of that surviving generation gave a defiant answer through armed justice. Between March 15, 1921, and July 25, 1922, Armenian avengers

carried out Operation Nemesis,[46] demonstrating the resolve of Armenian justice on the streets of Berlin with Talat and concluding it on the sidewalks of Tiflis with Jemal.

"One by one, the architects of the massacres fell: Talat in Berlin, Jivanshir in Constantinople, Said Halim in Rome, Behaeddin Shakir and Jemal Azmi in Berlin, Jemal in Tiflis, and others. Those avengers were Soghomon Tehlirian, Aram Yerganian, Misak Torlakian, Arshavir Shiragian, and their fellow patriots. We will remain Armenian and we will survive, striving until we return to our historic homeland."

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My brother Hovhannes, who was the head of the electrical department for the lime-brick factories in Aleppo and Latakia, had a disagreement with the general manager. He resigned from his position and was invited to take the same role in Lebanon at the '*Cimenterie Nationale*' factory near the village of Chekka, about 30 kilometres from Tripoli.

A year after taking that position, he invited me to work there, considering that I too had been certified as an electrician in France. Since my sister-in-law Meline, her husband Sarkis Kondjian, and their children lived in Tripoli, I gladly accepted my brother's invitation. On January 28, 1958, I left for Tripoli and assumed my duties. Two months later, my wife Shake and our firstborn son Antranig arrived in Tripoli, where I had already rented a house.

I was happy with my work. My son Antranig began attending the Noubarian National School in Tripoli. My wife joined the Armenian Relief Cross (ARS) of Lebanon, and I joined the local committee of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), having brought my transfer papers from Aleppo.

Our life in Tripoli continued smoothly. I had already become acquainted with the members of the community and my fellow committee members. During the committee elections, they elected me as a member and secretary. In 1959, for the 41st anniversary of the independence of the

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[46] *Conceived at the 9th World Congress of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) in 1919, Operation Nemesis was a covert assassination campaign targeting the Ottoman architects of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Operatives such as Soghomon Tehlirian and Arshavir Shiragian tracked and executed key Young Turk leaders across Berlin, Rome, and Tiflis between 1920 and 1922.*

Republic of Armenia, the Tripoli committee invited Garo Sasouni as the keynote speaker.

As part of the organizing committee, I suggested to my colleagues that I recite my own poem, 'A Beautiful Day in May', during the event. Everyone agreed. However, considering that I do not have a natural talent for recitation, I had quite a bit of difficulty memorizing my own writing so that I could perform it without mistakes.

The May 28 Independence Day celebration took place in the hall of the ARF club. The moderator invited me to recite 'A Beautiful Day in May', while also announcing that I was the author and that my roots were from Sasoun. I recited it flawlessly and smoothly (thank God), earning loud applause.

After reading Garo Sasouni's biography, the moderator invited him to speak. Sasouni delivered a magnificent speech about Armenian independence from the perspective of an eyewitness and participant. Among other things, he said:

"The conditions the Armenian people lived through starting in January 1918 were considered equivalent to a miracle by outside observers. Even our own relatives who were not involved in those bloody battles or who were abroad considered what happened a miracle. Yet, the great achievement of May 28 was the result of a long and painful labour, a frenzied race of liberty or death through stormy battles. Only after passing through the bloodiest stages of labour could infant Armenia be born. Perhaps it is meaningless to some, or even laughable to others, but if you look through all of international history, you will not find another nation that became a man of iron and a soul of stone during its bloody history of liberation.

"The Armenian became as strong as iron and stone. Present-day Armenia, the Armenia of the suffering Armenian, is the birth of this supreme mystery. Whoever wishes to verify this truth should speak privately with the stones and the towering cliffs of Armenia. The existence of the Armenian people today, the reality of a small homeland, and the collective or partial efforts of Armenians spread outside the homeland for the endurance of the nation are all anchored in the Armenian liberation movement. The foundations of our existence and our national edifice are reinforced with the mortar of the blood of our freedom fighters."

At the end of the evening, Garo Sasouni called me over and said, "My boy from Sasoun, what a beautiful poem you wrote, and you recited it so well and with such genuine emotion. Congratulations, and long life to you!"

Years later, when he visited Aleppo, I had the chance to take a photo with him and a group of friends —a keepsake I cherish to this day. Knowing that Sasouni was a fellow native of Sasoun inspired me to learn everything I could about his life. As I followed his career over the years, he became an exemplary figure for me: an intellectual, historian, literary critic, revolutionary, author, educator, and political leader.

He was born in the mountain village of Ahronk in Sasoun, the cradle of historic Armenia, under the roof of his ancestral home. Sasouni wrote about his family roots: "Among the names in Mango's house, Manoug, Mamgo, and Mamigon appeared again and again, carrying on the name of the original founder of our household. The village priests generally referred to our home as the Mamigonian house in honour of our lineage, while the villagers simply called it Manoug's house."

He recalled: "I was born in 1888, though another record gives July 15, 1889. I studied in our village school from age 7 to 13. For just one year, around age 9 or 10, I went to Moush to attend the St. Marine elementary school. In 1901, after crushing my foot, I moved to Moush for treatment and stayed, enrolling in the Mkhitarian School, where I graduated in 1906."

In the summer of 1906, he returned to his village with his diploma. That same summer, Manoug Lusinian (Danielian), the principal of the school in Farghin in the Dikranagerd region and a prominent revolutionary intellectual, visited their home. Lusinian insisted that Sasouni come with him to Dikranagerd to take up a teaching position. Barely 17, Sasouni agreed. Later, during his university years, he joined the ARF student ranks, leading straight into the turbulent 1914–1918 war years. During the independent Republic of Armenia, Sasouni served as a member of

Parliament and as Governor of Shirak. After the February 1921 Uprising,[47] his activities branched into many fields: party organizer, writer, teacher, memoirist, editor, and historian.

Another major chapter of his life unfolded abroad. Armed with higher education, seasoned by public service, and possessing deep ideological convictions, he traveled across the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas wherever diaspora communities needed organizing, leadership, or cultural direction. He carried out every task entrusted to him with intelligence, initiative, and dedication.

In 1917, Sasouni was elected to the ARF Bureau in Armenia. At the 1923 Vienna conference, he joined the ARF Responsible Body, and he went on to serve six terms on the ARF Bureau until 1967.

After settling in Lebanon in 1933, Sasouni expanded his intellectual, writing, and educational work. Among his missions, he represented the party during the Dersim uprising. He served for many years on the Central Executive of Hamazkayin and taught Armenian literature and the history of the Armenian Liberation Movement at the Nshan Palandjian Djemaran in Beirut.

Sasouni wrote regular political, historical, and literary analyses for leading ARF periodicals like *Droshak*, *Vem*, *Hairenik*, *Housaper*, and *Aztag*, and took on editorial duties for the weekly *Aztag Shapatoryag* and the literary monthly *Pakine*. The extensive shelf of historical studies, political memoirs, and literary essays he left behind remains a valuable cultural heritage for generations to come.

Garo Sasouni took his first journalistic steps in 1912 in the periodical *Yergounk* of the ARF Student Union of Constantinople under the pseudonym Rivaretz. His main literary and memoir works include *The Mystery of the Mountains* (under the pen name Viken Klag), *David of Sasoun, The War of Daron, The Epic of H. Mamigonian , The History of Modern Western Armenian*

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[47] *Following the Sovietization of the First Republic of Armenia and the subsequent imprisonment of its military and intellectual leadership by the Cheka, a nationwide rebellion erupted on February 18, 1921. Led by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), insurgent forces briefly liberated Yerevan and restored an independent administration for two months until the Red Army recaptured the city in April.*

Literature, Literary Gems (Medieval Literature), *In the Whirlpool of Life , The Lion of the Mountains*, and *Memories and Testimonies*.

Among his political-historical works are *Turkish Armenia Under Russian Rule 1914–1918* (1927), *Turkish Armenia During the First World War* (1966), *The May Turmoils and the Tatar Insurgent Regions* (1968), *The Armenian-Turkish War in 1920* (1969), *The April Genocide Through a Critical Lens* (1931), *Hrayr's Role in the Armenian Liberation Movement* (1964), *The World of Daron* (1966), and *The February Uprising* (1970). In this regard, it is noteworthy that Sasouni was well-acquainted with Kurdish national movements and was convinced of the importance of Armenian-Kurdish cooperation. A monumental historiographical work is Sasouni's large volume, History of the World of Daron (1957). He also has translated works. Through Sasouni's written creations and public speeches, and within the rhythm of his steadily advancing steps, one can hear the beating of his heart, which throbbed only for the noble Armenian people and their eternal homeland.

In the final chapter of his stormy life, during the summer of 1974, Sasouni suffered a stroke that resulted in partial paralysis. He lived through the hardships of the Lebanese Civil War in that weakened physical condition. He had already grieved the loss of his lifelong partner, Leola Sasouni, and was separated by distance from his three children living abroad. Despite these trials, he shared every hardship of the war with his fellow Armenians, brightening the atmosphere around him with his natural warmth and optimism. Guided by his sharp mind, deep compassion, and unwavering convictions, he completed his earthly journey on August 11, 1977, in Beirut.

Here was a remarkable man, an Armenian patriot, and a daring son of Sasoun whose example will inspire new generations to take up the national cause. They will dedicate themselves to the Armenian struggle with purpose and accountability, so that one day, with heads held high and hearts intact, they may step across the threshold of our ancestral homeland. They will climb the historic peaks of Ararat, Nemrut, and Dzovasar, weaving the fabric of a Free, Independent, and United Armenia from Western Armenia to the four peaks of Mount Aragats and across to the mountains of Artsakh.

Everlasting respect to his cherished and enduring memory.



We Live Through Memories of the Past

In 1948, I was working as a typesetter at the *Nayiri* Press for Antranig Dzarougian. He was a gifted Armenian poet, the publisher and editor of *Nayiri* magazine, and one of the editors of the *Aravod* daily.

The *Nayiri* printing house was located in the *Hokedoun* property in Aleppo. This estate belonged to the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and the responsibility for leasing and collecting rent for its houses and shops was entrusted to a local Armenian lawyer. At that time, the printing house was used for the publication of *Nayiri* and *Aravod*. It served as a daily gathering place for the Armenian intelligentsia and the leadership of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) until Antranig Dzarougian moved to Lebanon in 1949.

The printing house had been purchased for Dzarougian by Nshan Touysouzian, a well-known Aleppo businessman and prominent Homenetmen member, along with other friends. Since Nshan Touysouzian was married to the daughter of Parsegh Ganatchian, a student of the immortal Komitas *Vartabed*,[48] Ganatchian would occasionally visit the printing house and participate in the vibrant Armenian atmosphere there.

There was also a public bakery in the *Hokedoun* owned by my compatriots from Sasoun, Uncle Hagé and Setrag. Mr. Ganatchian would visit them as well. Sitting on a low chair near the oven, he would soak up the sun and converse with Uncle Hagé about the people and their past lives.

Taking advantage of a short break from my shift at the print shop, I went over to talk with Mr. Parsegh Ganatchian. He already knew who I was, and whenever he dropped by, he always made a point of asking how I was doing: "My boy, how are things today? Do you enjoy typesetting? Never forget that by setting these letters, you are serving Armenian culture."

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[48] *Born Soghomon Soghomonian, Komitas was a celibate priest, musicologist, and composer who collected and transcribed thousands of Armenian folk, peasant, and liturgical songs, saving Armenia's oral musical tradition from extinction. Traumatized by his arrest and deportation during the April 1915 roundups, he spent the final two decades of his life in psychiatric care in Paris, remaining the cultural martyr of the Genocide.*

I greeted him, “It's Krikor — how are you feeling today?”

His eyesight had grown quite dim. Ganatchian raised his head, let out a quiet sigh, and looking toward me, replied softly, “My son, how could I be? I live through the memories of the past.”

That answer stunned me. I couldn't imagine how anyone could survive on memories alone and still be content with life. At the time, as an energetic 21-year-old fresh out of service with the French military, working hard and looking forward to a bright future, Ganatchian’s answer made no sense to me. I was simply too young to understand it — until the day came when I, too, joined the ranks of those who live on memories. Only then did I grasp how much spiritual nourishment and strength those recollections hold, helping us endure physical decline and life’s hardest burdens.

Now, whenever someone asks how I am holding up, I give them that same reply: “I live through the memories of the past.”

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The celebrated writer Vardges Petrosyan reflected on this exact feeling — of people whose lives are sustained by memory — in chapter 36 of his 1980 book, *Armenian Sketches*:

In a Yerevan park, several elderly men sat like stones placed side by side. It was early spring; the sun softly warmed their old bones, and they took turns talking, telling stories, and reminiscing. Within those memories, there was a small flame; under the ash, a fire. The memories took them back to that warm land called “youth,” where dreams knew no bounds, where a person loves themselves and believes in the world. They had known for a long time that their dreams had not come true and would not come true, but it was pleasant to gather with fellow sufferers and board the train of memories, which, with a sweet whistle, took them back to the warm land called ‘youth.’

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Mr. Dikran Tokmakjian was a well-known craftsman in Aleppo whom I had known since my years living there. Because his wife came

from a Sasoun family, he was considered family— our honorary *pesa*.[49] I often visited their home for friendly catch-ups over the years.

After his sons and daughters immigrated to Toronto, and after the heartbreaking loss of his beloved wife, Tokmakjian eventually made the move to Toronto himself to be with his children. Over the years, I frequently ran into Uncle Dikran at the Armenian Community Centre, where we would sit and chat warmly about life then and now.

One Sunday, Uncle Dikran was at the Centre again to spend time with friends. I waved to him from across the lounge. He motioned for me to come over, saying, "Come on, let's have a coffee together."

We sat down with our coffee, and I asked, "How are you doing, Uncle Dikran?"

Uncle Dikran sighed with deep feeling and replied, "How could I be, my boy? These days, I even get tired just lying down."

I didn't say anything back, but I honestly couldn't understand how someone could get tired while simply resting. I was still young, and his answer made no sense to me. But now that my wife and I have reached that advanced stage of life ourselves, we also feel tired even while lying down, spending our quiet hours longing for the energy and memories of the past.

May God rest your soul, Uncle Dikran.

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[49] An Armenian kinship, a pesa refers broadly to any man who marries into the family. It is the male counterpart to a hars (a woman marrying in).

Praise for the Armenian Version of *We Live Through Memories of the Past*

All the short stories in this volume are presented with grace. The figures and events are real-life occurrences, recorded through the testimony of an eye-witness. In reading them, we recognize that Mr. Hotoyan, as a former educator and principal, continues through his writings to instruct us in the high and noble religious, national, and patriotic values he embraces and believes in. His benevolent concern is to guide and unveil the virtues of Christian morality, human decency, and a life lived with wisdom, so that in this world we may attain "life more abundant."

Reading the stories flows effortlessly, as the author's style is straightforward and his language engaging. Through these varied narratives, the reader is offered enjoyable and rewarding moments. To discover and interpret the nuances of human character, this volume is well worth reading— to learn from and apply in one's personal life the insightful and realistic stories of Krikor Hotoyan.

Papken Topjian,
Montreal

The overarching atmosphere of the volume is imbued with religious spirit. This quality stems from the fact that Krikor Hotoyan, from his early youth to his venerable old age, lived and was nurtured beneath the incense-scented Armenian Apostolic Church, inspired by the heaven-pleasing prayers of our hymnographer church fathers.

Conceived in this spirit, the author's stories possess educational depth and moral counsel, primarily driven by a pursuit of justice.

Through his writings, Hotoyan emphasizes that virtue emerges from the juxtaposition of good and evil. According to him, it is virtue —as the center of gravity of moral life— that keeps the defining elements of human character in equilibrium.

Hagop Manougian,
Beirut

About the Author



Born in Aleppo on August 5, 1927, with ancestral roots in Sasoun, Krikor Hotoyan completed his early education at the National Sahagian School before pursuing advanced studies in Armenology. Over a multifaceted career spanning Syria and Canada, he has served as a typesetter, editor, educator, and school principal across numerous day, summer, and Sunday schools.

A prolific writer since his youth, Hotoyan has contributed poetry, essays, and cultural commentary to periodicals across Armenia and the diaspora— frequently writing under the pen name Krikor Vartkes. He is the author of several published volumes.

Hotoyan's lifelong dedication to Armenian literary, cultural, and ecclesiastical life has garnered widespread recognition. In 1984, he was honored with a Letter of Blessing and Appreciation from His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia. During a pontifical visit to Toronto in October 2005, His Holiness Aram I awarded him the prestigious St. Mesrob Mashdots Medal.

His major career milestones have been formally commemorated in Armenia: The Writers' Union of Armenia marked his 60th literary anniversary in July 2004, and in August 2007, a coalition of literary and cultural organizations hosted an 80th-birthday celebration at the Academy of Literature's Manuk Abeghyan Hall to inaugurate his book, *Janabarh* (The Path).

Across the tumultuous twentieth century, how does an uprooted people preserve their spirit, dignity, and faith? In *We Live Through Memories of the Past,* celebrated community chronicler Krikor Hotoyan weaves a poignant tapestry of memoir, history, and moral reflection drawn from the lived experience of the Armenian diaspora.

Born in Aleppo to survivors of the Armenian Genocide, Hotoyan captures the vibrant, hard-won journey of a generation that refused to be erased. From the bustling alleys and historic printing presses of Syria to the turbulent streets of civil-war Beirut and new beginnings in Canada, these heartfelt vignettes illuminate ordinary heroes—teachers, millers, deacons, and freedom fighters—bound by unwavering faith, sacrifice, and cultural pride.

Translated into English for the first time, this collection serves as both an intimate chronicle of post-Genocide survival and a universal meditation on gratitude, resilience, and belonging. Hotoyan transforms decades of personal memory into a living testament to human endurance, showing how heritage outlasts empire and hardship gives way to grace.

Krikor Hotoyan was born in Aleppo to a family originally from Sasoun. An educator, editor, and typesetter who has worked across Syria and Canada, he pursued advanced studies in Armenology after graduating from Aleppo's National Sahagian School.

Under his own name and the pen name Krikor Vartkes, Hotoyan has authored several volumes and contributed widely to Armenian newspapers, journals, and literary reviews across the diaspora and Armenia.

we live through memories of the past

krikor hotoyan