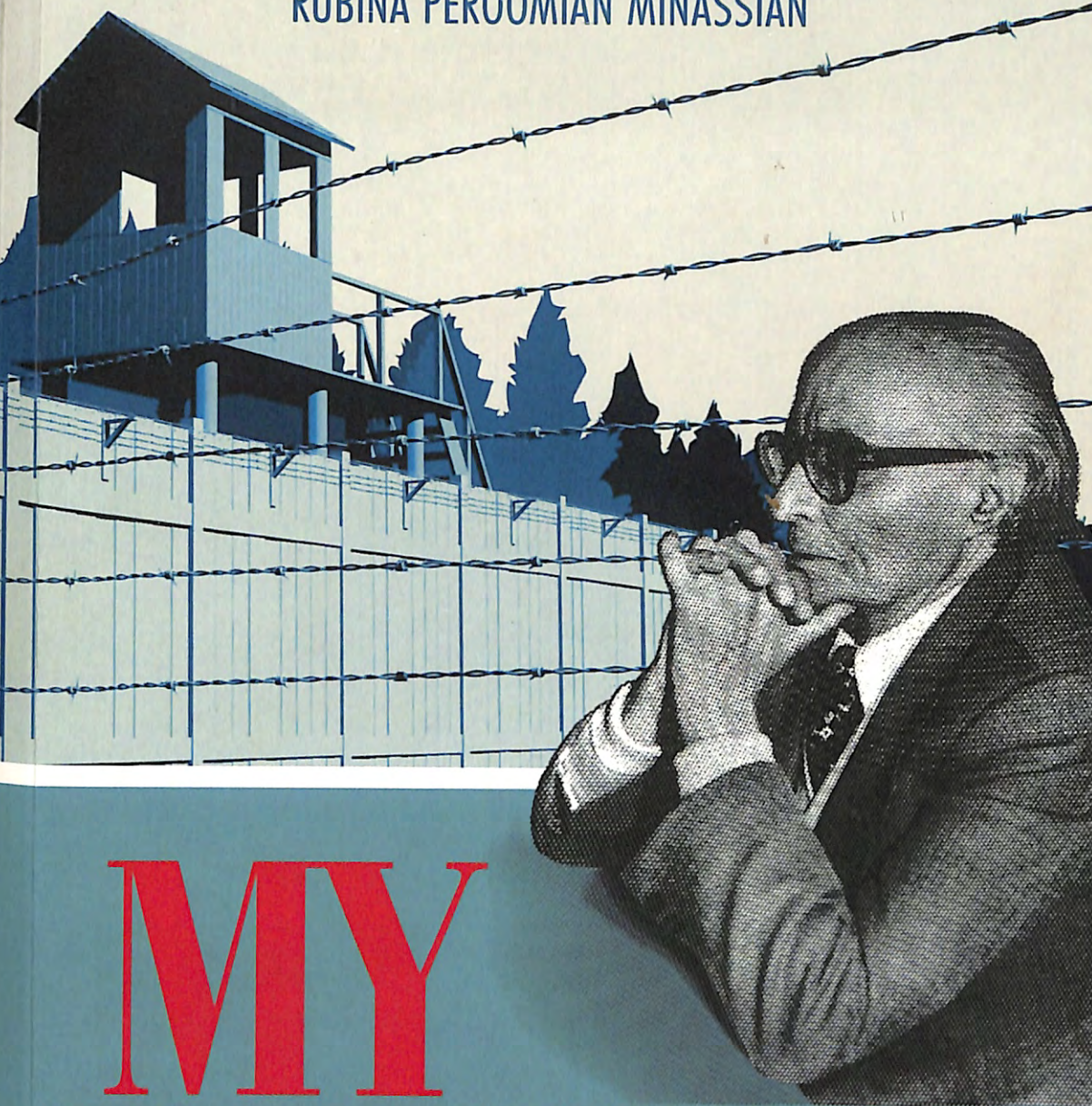


RUBINA PEROOMIAN MINASSIAN



MY FATHER

A MAN OF COURAGE AND PERSEVERANCE
A SURVIVOR OF STALIN'S GULAG

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MY FATHER

*A Man of Courage and Perseverance,
A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag*

Rubina Peroomian Minassian

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father
and all the victims of Stalin's GULAG

MY FATHER
A Man of Courage and Perseverance,
A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag
By
Rubina Peroomian Minassian

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Contents

Foreword	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter One: The beginning of a new life</i>	15
<i>Chapter Two: A brief biography: A life of poverty and deprivation</i>	27
<i>Chapter Three: In the flames of World War II: Abducted and jailed in Tabriz</i>	56
<i>Chapter Four: The NKVD prison in Yerevan, the indictment, and the journey to Siberia</i>	84
<i>Chapter Five: My effort to continue the narrative: Life in Stalin's Gulag</i>	105
<i>Chapter Six: Gulag survivors widen the window on my father's life story</i>	156
<i>Chapter Seven: A "widow" and two orphan girls</i>	197
<i>Chapter Eight: A God-sent gift that remained with us for twenty-two years</i>	218
<i>Chapter Nine: A finale to a precious life</i>	236
Select Bibliography	248
Index	252

Foreword

It was the day my latest book came out, fresh off the press in Yerevan. I felt a great relief. I had accomplished my goal of publishing it in 2015 and dedicating it to the centennial of the Armenian Genocide.¹

We stored the books and sat down to enjoy an evening with family. My younger son, Oshin, a theoretician in science and a pragmatist in matters of life, stepped in to harness my excitement.

“Mom,” he said, “you have dedicated all these years to telling others’ stories. You have devoted your life to showing the world the catastrophic experience of the Armenian people through the Genocide. Don’t you think you have to stop here and tell your own story?”

At first I was stunned, not understanding what he meant. I am not a novelist to concoct a dramatic fiction out of my life story.

“*Mepapa*,” he continued, meaning grandpa—this is how my sons called my father—“*Mepapa* was a victim of the Stalinist terror. After he was released from the labor

¹ *The Armenian Genocide in Literature: The Second Generation Responds* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2015) was the fourth volume in my continuing study of Armenian Genocide literature.

camp in the tundra, he suffered even in his freedom. You owe it to him and to the world to tell the story of his life and yours with him.”

Was it indeed time? Could this be the sign, the impetus to drive me to confront an unresolved inquietude nested deep in my conscience? Yes, I have thought about this a great deal. I have had my scruples at being so deeply engaged in my own field of scholarship as to forget my filial duty. I was a product of my father’s sacrifices. I took after him in many ways. I tried to emulate him and follow his path. I was always thrilled when someone in the audience at one of my lectures—it would be an Iranian Armenian, of course—approached me and said, “You are a true daughter of your father. We hear his erudition, the spark of his enthusiasm speaking through you.” And yet, among the Armenian communities outside of Iran, especially the younger generation, very few know about his life, his devotion to the Armenian cause, and his long years of suffering in Soviet prison camps. That was my fault alone.

That day in late October was followed by a lot of reflection and reconsideration. What impact could be expected of this undertaking? Who would be the targeted readership?

I have read many memoirs and novels and poetry by Armenian and non-Armenian intellectuals, victims of Stalinist repression, describing the hellish atmosphere of the Soviet Gulag,² the unbearable, the unspeakable

² *GULAG* is an acronym for the Soviet bureaucratic institution, *Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh Lagerei* (Main Administration of Corrective Labor

conditions in those prison camps where the “enemies of the people” dragged out their gradually expiring existence, paying with their life for having dared to oppose Stalin’s heinous conduct. In the atmosphere of Stalin’s repressions, utterly innocent people, even staunch communists, fell victim to envy, to jealousy, to the grudge of a neighbor or a colleague who had informed on them and brought them a lifetime of incarceration and isolation from human society. In fact, beginning in the 1960s, former inmates of the infamous labor camps and prisons in the Soviet Union, those who had somehow survived and returned to their hometowns, penned their experiences without any hope of their writings being published. Some of those writings remained locked in drawers. Others saw the light of day and were published in censored form, of course. Still others were secretly passed on from reader to reader via *samizdat*.³

And those narratives portraying the morbid landscape of the prisons and labor camps struck me for the many themes they all had in common: the crowded lice- and rat-infested prisons; the spine-chilling death-truck or “Black Raven” used to transport the prisoners;

Camps). These prison labor camps began operating in 1918 and housed all kinds of inmates, from common criminals to political prisoners. Detainees worked in various fields such as construction, mining, logging and farming. During the Stalin era, the Gulag became the cruelest institution for the oppression of political opposition in the Soviet Union.

³ *Samizdat* or “self-publication” was a tool for dissident writers, a way for those who defied the official line to secretly reproduce and distribute their work. Some of their work found its way through the Iron Curtain and was published outside. Armenians too had their *samizdat*. Many memoirs and works of fiction and poetry on the Siberian experience, rejected for publication by Soviet Armenian officials, were secretly copied and distributed and even published in the Diaspora.

the physical details of the barracks in the camps—the bare floors, the iron barrel serving as a wood-burning stove, emitting suffocating fumes, the ranks of two- or three-tiered wooden sleeping platforms with no bedding at all unless it was a worn-out, lice-ridden mattress and a filthy blanket; the sanitary facilities or lack thereof; the inferior quality of the food and the skimpy rations; the impossible workload and the long workday; the primitive tools and equipment provided for work; the terrible subarctic climate; the cruel and inhumane treatment, the humiliation and dehumanization that reduced the inmate with an intellect a hundred times that of the crummy warders or the sleazy Chekists to a mere number, that robbed him of his name, his past, his life; and most abominable of all, the larger-than-life portrait of Stalin (occasionally Stalin and Lenin together) hanging in the mess hall to greet the prisoners, usually with a banner reading “Long Live the Great and Wise Stalin, Father of All the People.”

It took a long time for my father to be able to confront his traumatic experience and begin to write it down. And once he did begin working on his memoir, he didn't have time to finish it or fill in the details of the horrors of the Gulag. So, strangely and ironically, I learned about my father's life in the Gulag through the works of Solzhenitsyn in the 1960s and 70s, and later in what Gurgun Mahari, Suren Oganessian, Suren Ghazaryan, Mkrtich Armen, Vahram Alazan and many others, non-Armenians as well, diligently described. I heard my father speaking of the dreadful life in the labor

camp in the voices of Gulag survivors interviewed by Zareh Tjeknavorian for his documentary film, *Enemy of the People: Armenians Look Back at the Stalin Terror* (1998). And in the archival footage he included, I visualized my father toiling on those horrible sites under intolerable working conditions.

And now my father's story joins the stories of those who suffered for their political convictions, who yearned for the right to self-determination in a despotic world, who struggled for the freedom of their nation and the independence of their homeland. As the editor of *Droshag* wrote in 1991, “Every new piece of evidence, every new narrative of a life in exile opens up a new world to the reader and once again sheds fresh light on a nefarious manifestation of the human conscience grown dull.”⁴

No, Armenians and particularly ARF leaders were not strangers to the forced labor camps of Siberia. Again quoting the editor of *Droshag*:

From the Tsars' repression of Armenian aspirations down to the Bolsheviks—their true successors in dealing with the Armenian national struggle—the policy continued unchanged. The voice of Dashnaktsutun had to be silenced.

4 From the foreword to my father's unfinished memoir by the editor of *Droshag*. See Baghdik Minassian, «Տասը Տարի, Տասն Ամիս եւ Տասնեօթ Օր Խորհրդային Բանտերում եւ Աշխատանքային Ճամբարներում, 1944, 3 Յունուար - 1954, 17 Նոյեմբեր» (Ten years, ten months and seventeen days in Soviet prisons and labor camps, 3 January 1944 – 17 November 1954) (Athens: Յեղափոխական գրադարան [Revolutionary Library], No. 13, 1991). *Droshag*, the official organ of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), was published in Athens at the time.

Incarceration and exile to Siberia remained the same, from the days of Hamo Ohanjanian to the days of Garegin Nzhdeh.

My father Baghdassar (Baghdik) Minassian was one of those voices, and his life story is worth recording, not only to highlight a valuable human life, that of MY DAD, victim of inhumanity, but because the oppressive policies that created and ran the Gulag system still exist. Indeed, if the end of World War II was also the end of Nazi concentration camps, it paradoxically marked the expansion of the Soviet Gulag which continued to “thrive” at least until Stalin’s death, following which some of the labor camps were dismantled.

The labor camps may have been dismantled but the Gulag mentality persists, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The world nonetheless chooses not to see the truth about Russia and all the former Soviet states’ internal policies, with their insensitivity to individual human rights and the iron fist of the secret police still in command, callously crushing any opposition. The world fails to recognize the role Russia plays in today’s volatile peace where extremists have gained the upper hand. Russia has not faced its past, the Soviet past, since its change of course has not been all that significant.

With these overwhelming thoughts engulfing my mind, I could now see the signs loud and clear. I had to embark on the long overdue introduction of my father to the world and especially to his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren and the generations to come.

Four months of pondering, of calculating the possibilities, assessing the sources, examining my father’s papers available to me, have convinced me that I have a long and winding path to tread, but that I have to do it anyway, wherever this journey takes me.

With filial awe and great anticipation, I thus begin the difficult trek ahead.

Glendale, California
February 2016

Introduction

After we moved to the United States, the boxes shipped to us from Tehran containing my father's handwritten papers—together with some valuables, some books, and items of nostalgic and sentimental value—had very little additional information to offer. The papers turned out to be the first drafts of books and articles my father had published in the 1960s when he was working hard to make up for lost time.¹ The boxes also included my father's

1 My father's published works include:
«Հայ ժողովրդի Սարդաբանական եւ Պատմահոլովութեան Գոյացումը» (The anthropological and historical origin and evolution of the Armenian people) (Tehran, 1962);
«Անպատիժ Մնացած Ցեղասպան-Հայաստան Թուրքիան Շարունակում է իր Հակահայ Հալածանքները» (Genocidist-Armenocidist, unpunished Turkey continues its anti-Armenian persecutions) (Tehran, 1964);
«Թուրքիայի Հայաստանութեան եւ Հայաստանի Բաղաբական Ոչնչացման Բաղաբականութիւնը» (The Turkish policy of Armenocide and the elimination of Armenia) (Tehran, 1975);
«Հայաստան եւ Հայ ժողովուրդ» (Armenia and the Armenian people) (Tehran, 1977); this posthumous publication includes a short biography and a tribute to my father as well as the texts of four lectures he delivered in Australia in May–June, 1976;
«Հայաստան, Հայ ժողովուրդ եւ Հայկական Դատ» (Armenia, the Armenian people and the Armenian Question) (Beirut: Hamazkayin, 1979), likewise published posthumously.
In addition to the above, at the beginning of his career as an educator in Iran, my father authored a book on pedagogy and educational methodology titled «Մանկավարժութեան Հիմունքներ. *Principes de pédagogie*» (Principles of pedagogy) (Tabriz, 1931).

unfinished memoir typewritten by my cousin Knar, one of the few people who could read his handwriting.

After my father's passing in 1976, I had requested permission from the ARF Bureau (the supreme body of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) to publish this memoir in its unfinished form, but I was told to wait. They maintained that it was not the right time for such an anti-Soviet publication. How ironic!

After years of waiting and multiple inquiries, I was finally given the green light. The manuscript, with some copyediting and an epilogue I had written as well as a foreword by the editor of *Droshag*, was published in 1991 under the title «Տասը Տարի, Տասն Ամիս եւ Տասներորդ Թորի խորհրդային Բանտերում եւ Աշխատանքային Ճամբարներում, 1944, 3 Յունուար - 1954, 17 Նոյեմբեր» (Ten years, ten months and seventeen days in Soviet prisons and labor camps, 3 January 1944 – 17 November 1954) as Number 13 in the «Յեղափոխական Գրադարան» (Revolutionary Library) series.

The published memoir encompassed the timespan between the Red Army descent and occupation of Azerbaijan² in 1941 and my father's sojourn at the transit

distribution center in Krasnoyarsk which was the last stop before he was shipped to the labor camp in northern Siberia. It contained a brief description of the situation in Tabriz during the Soviet occupation, my father's abduction in Tabriz by the Cheka (*Chrezvychaynaya Komissiya*, meaning "Extraordinary Commission") or the Soviet NKVD (forerunner of the KGB), his transportation to Yerevan and his solitary confinement in the Cheka prison there, his interrogation and indictment, and his journey toward exile.

My father had started working on his memoir only about a year before his passing. Prior to that, he simply could not speak about his ordeal. The subject was too painful. The memories were so dreadfully alive in his imagination that talking about them or writing them down meant reliving that agonizing period. On occasion, when he tried to talk about those formidable years, his face would turn red and a blue vein would puff up on his broad forehead as if ready to burst. It was quite clear that he had become momentarily unaware of his actual surroundings and was as if transported back to the place and time he so dreaded. Alarmed and worried, we would beg him to stop lest his blood pressure, already very high, rise even further and cause a stroke.

During the first years after his return from exile at

² Azerbaijan, or Atrpatakan as it is called by Armenians, is the northwestern province of Iran, not to be confused with the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan. A historical note may be added here by way of explanation: After the fall of the Tsarist Russian Empire and the secession of Transcaucasia, the three major ethnic groups of the area, Georgians, Armenians and Tatars, declared their independence in May 1918. Musavat, the leading party among the Shiite Tatars of the eastern Caucasus, deliberately chose the name Azerbaijan to identify the new state with the province of the same name in Iran populated by Turkic-speaking but ethnically Aryan and not Tatar Iranians of Shiite denomination. The state was called the Independent Republic of Azerbaijan and the Tatars therein took the name Azeri, a non-existent ethnic entity. The ultimate goal of Musavatist leaders, imbued with Pan-Turanist ideology, was to

eventually join the province and the republic in one large independent country. The independence of the three Caucasian republics was short-lived as they were Sovietized within two years. The idea of uniting the two Azerbaijan, however, was readily adopted by the Soviet leaders; it was also consistent with the Tsarist Russian policy of moving the frontier toward the warm waters in the south. Subsequent political processes as well as the occupation of northern Iran by the Red Army during World War II demonstrated the persistence of that policy line.

the age of fifty-two, my father struggled to regain his physical and psychological health, to raise a bridge to the normal life of yesteryear and to fill the huge economic, social and psychic gap that his long absence had caused. With an iron will he overcame. He kept himself super-busy and buried his tormenting memories in various activities and the hustle and bustle of everyday life. He was one of the few who successfully overcame—well, almost—the trauma he had endured and returned to a relatively normal life.

Through Grigor Ajemyan's testimony about the successful and prolific life of his father, Guren Mahari, after his return from eighteen years in exile, we see that Mahari was another exception. Ajemyan writes, "Many revolutionaries succumbed to the hardship of the Gulag. They were physically or spiritually lost. If they were not buried in unknown graves, they returned as faded shadows or the living dead."³ And how about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, my favorite writer in this field? Without the benefit of paper and pencil which were denied to prisoners, building on his extraordinary memory, he produced after his return an unprecedented and unsurpassed picture of the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn was only thirty-eight years old when he was released, still young and robust. The Gulag had not been able to wring the sap from his life.

Twenty years after my father returned from exile, having retired from teaching chemistry in public and Armenian high schools in Tehran, and having resigned

from his position as editor-in-chief of the Armenian daily newspaper *Alik* (The Wave), he began to work on his memoir. He was finally ready to put pen to paper and relive the years of horror. Alas, he was not given the chance. Fate, providence or bad luck? In May 1976, the ARF Dro Committee of Australia invited him for a month-long visit, with meetings and lectures in Sydney and Melbourne. He embraced the opportunity and he successfully accomplished his mission. But during the last week of his stay he was stricken with influenza—the record outbreak in Australia claimed many lives—and he was taken to a hospital for emergency treatment. When he returned home, he was not fully recovered but he was happy and excited. The Australian Armenian community had received him cordially and enthusiastically. His lectures had been well attended and warmly commended. He promised to tell us all about it the next day, but first, he needed to rest.

That night, we rushed him to the hospital almost unconscious, with a bleeding ulcer inflamed by the heavy dosage of aspirin he had been given in the hospital in Sydney. His cautious abstemiousness over the years had camouflaged the ulcer he had contracted in the Soviet *lager* (camp). The date was June 13. After major surgery and a month of return stays in the hospital, he passed away on July 13. Doctors were unable to stop the bleeding which caused the steady drop of his blood pressure and drove him in and out of coma. I remember a few times when he was half-awake, he would utter in a fading voice, "Yenisei... Narilsk...." I would ask him what he meant, but

³ See Grigor Ajemyan's preface to his father's papers in «Սիբիրական» (Of Siberia, or The Siberian) (Yerevan: Yerevan State University, 2009), p. 9.

he couldn't hear me. He would sink back into deep sleep. To my ignominy, it was only after his death that I began to read his memoir. There it was, Yenisei, the river on which he had been shipped to Narilsk (Norilsk) in northern Siberia.⁴ And that was where his memoir came to a stop.

This unfinished manuscript was my only source of knowledge about his experience, aside from some descriptive lines I also found in his handwritten notes, such as the outline he had drawn up for his project, listing the topics that were to follow. When the ARF Bureau finally expressed readiness to publish my father's memoir, I incorporated those lines in the epilogue I wrote for the publication in order to convey to the reader a sense of what his memoir would have been like if my father had had the chance to finish it. In chapters 3 and 4 of the present book, I have included the content of that Armenian-language publication, condensed, rearranged and translated into English. I have tried to give voice to my father, casting the narrative in the first person to present his views and analysis of the situation in Tabriz before his abduction, the events in the Yerevan prison, his indictment and sentence of exile to Siberia, and his journey toward that destination.

My search for additional material took me to the National Archives in Armenia. I was hoping to

find documentation of my father's incarceration and interrogation and the verdict that sent him to ten years of exile and hard labor. I was interested to see the procès-verbal, the official account of the charges, that my father had signed after his extended interrogation was over. I had learned from my many readings that prisoners were made to sign outrageous "confessions" under torture, well knowing they were signing their own death warrant or preparing their own exile of ten, fifteen, or twenty-five years.⁵

I had been told that documents in the KGB archives pertaining to arrests and indictments in Armenia during the Stalinist purges were recently turned over to the National Archives. I began my inquiries, and thanks to the cordial assistance of the deputy director, Mrs. Sona Mirzoyan, I found bits and pieces but nothing significant on my father's sixteen-month imprisonment in Yerevan. Parenthetically, one such item, a report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic on the Armenian community in Iran mentioned my father's name as the editor of *Alik* (newspaper) in Tehran in the 1960s and noted that, because of his anti-Soviet activities, Baghdassar Minassian had been punished and exiled to Siberia.⁶ Finally, the director, Mr. Amatuni

4 The Yenisei River runs north through Siberia to the Arctic Ocean. Norilsk (or Narilsk, according to Russian pronunciation) lies above the Arctic Circle, over a thousand miles from Krasnoyarsk, at the base of the Taymyr Peninsula and east of the Yenisei. It is considered the world's northernmost city and is ice-bound all year. Rich in minerals such as nickel, copper and palladium, this industrial city was founded in the 1920s but gained importance in the late 1930s when it became the center of the *Norillag* (Norilsk labor camp) in the Gulag system of labor camps.

5 It was within the powers of the NKVD Special Meeting/Consultation to decide the destiny of the condemned outside Soviet courts. The number of years of exile varied depending on the rights bestowed on this special committee by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the years before, during, and after World War II.

6 Republic of Armenia National Archives, 326/1/532, p. 3. A note of explanation: In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet regime in Moscow granted permission to its satellite republics, including Armenia, to establish a Foreign Ministry. This meant the restoration of the People's Commissariats for Foreign Affairs which

Virabian, told me that the National Archives had only obtained documents pertaining to political prisoners of the Stalinist purges of 1937–1938. He recommended I try Armenia's National Security Service.

A new challenge began.

I was pessimistic. Approaching the National Security Service with such a request seemed farfetched and even risky. But to my surprise and to the credit of two amiable and cooperative young employees, I received an answer to my inquiry the next week.

The report contained short biographical notes on B. Minassian, his employment as a teacher in the schools of Rasht, Ghazvin (Qazvin), Tehran and Tabriz, his affiliation with Dashnaktsutun's youth organization since 1919 and his election as president of the organization shortly thereafter. The report also noted his membership in the Dashnaktsutun Central Committee of Atrpatakan in 1939–1940, his work with the Party's youth organization and leadership of the Dashnaktsutun educational program, and then his presidency of the Atrpatakan Central Committee after 1941. The report also defined the reasons for his arrest:

As an active ideologue and devotee of the Dashnaktsutun Party, carrying out subversive acts against the Soviet regime and the Bolshevik Party as well as criticism of its press, B. Minassian

had been abolished in 1922. The institution established in Yerevan in 1946 was named the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Armenian SSR and functioned as part of the Soviet diplomatic service. All the Ministry's reports and records, including the report cited here, were of course written in Russian.

was arrested in Tabriz on January 7, 1944.⁷ His arrest was formalized on March 12, 1944, by the decision of the Special Consultation of the ՄԱԿՍ ԵԳԺԿ,⁸ and he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Following the decision of the USSR Supreme Court's Military Collegium on June 5, 1953, B. Minassian was prematurely discharged from carrying out his punishment, and as an Iranian citizen he was delivered to the Iranian government on July 3, 1954.

Although the report mentioned the Special Council's decision to sentence my father to ten years in prison, there was no record of his having served that sentence in the labor camps of Siberia. A line at the end of the report foreclosed any further inquiry: "No other information is available." Not enough! But there was no sense in waiting to hear from them any longer.

I also learned that for budgetary reasons, documents in the ARF archives housed in Boston, Massachusetts, were categorized and digitized only up to 1928, and nothing was available after that. So there was no way I could obtain any information on my father's activities or the impact of his abduction on the Party membership.

I had my work cut out for me.

I went back to the books that had given me so much insight into life during Stalin's rule of terror, the prisons

⁷ In fact, January 7 was my father's first day in the Cheka prison in Yerevan.

⁸ Meaning the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs in the Soviet Union, that is, the NKVD (Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del), or the state security service of our day.

and the Gulag, and then made another search through my father's papers. They were kept in boxes, with some papers in folders and others just piled up, and among them a handwritten sheet caught my eye. I had missed it the last time I had looked. Written across the top was «Զօն» (Dedication). This was certainly the dedication my father had written to be published with his finished memoir, and he dedicated it to the Armenian nation and to Dashnaktsutun, the son of the Armenian nation.

Before I proceed with my father's life story, I want to share with my readers my father's spirit, drive and vigor which are reflected in his dedication note and by which he undertook, alas too late in life, the difficult task of sharing his tragic life story with his readers. I reproduce the note here in the original Armenian, the way my father intended.

Քեզ եմ ձօնում հայ ժողովուրդ, քեզ, որ քո ցեղային Մեծ Նամբերութիւնը քո ինքնապահպանման եւ յարատեւութեան վահանը դարձրիր քո վատ օրերին, քեզ, որ քո Մեծ եւ Յաւիտենական Յոյսը՝ քո խաւար օրերի լուսա-վառ փարոսը դարձրիր լաւ օրերին հասնելու համար, քեզ, որ քո պատմական երթը դրիր գաղափարի ռելսերի վրայ, եւ քո կրտսեր Զաւակին՝ Ն. Յ. Դաշնակցութեան, որ ժառանգեց քո ֆիզիքական, հոգեկան եւ բարոյական իսկական էութիւնը եւ կրում է քո պայքարը:

A rough translation would be as follows:

I dedicate this to you, the Armenian people, you who in your worst of times made your collective fortitude, self-preservation and everlasting endurance your symbol and shield, you who in your darkest hour made your Grand and Eternal Hope your guiding light in your journey to the best of times, you whose historic trek was placed upon the rails of ideology; and to your adolescent son, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, which inherited your physical, mental and moral essence and bears your struggle.



ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆԻ ՀԱՆՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ
ԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ԱՆՎՏԱՆԳՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԾԱՌԱՅՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

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Օր. թիվ 1

Ռուբինա Փերումյանին (Մինասյան)

ք.Երևան, Հանրապետության 62 շ., քն.32

Ի պատասխան Ձեր 29.03.2016թ. դիմումի

Հայտնում ենք, որ Բաղդասար (Բաղդիկ) Խաչատուրի Մինասյանը ծնվել է 1902թ. Իրանի Ղարաղաղի շրջանի Ողա գյուղում, Իրանի քաղաքացի, բարձրագույն կրթությամբ: Իրանի Ռեշտ, Կազվին, Թեհրան և Թավրիզ քաղաքների դպրոցներում աշխատել է որպես ուսուցիչ: 1919թ-ից Իրանում հանդիսացել է դաշնակցության երիտասարդական միության անդամ, այնուհետև՝ նույն միության կառավարման նախագահ: Բ.Մինասյանը 1939-40թթ. եղել է Ատրպատականում (Իրան) դաշնակցության կենտրոնական կոմիտեի անդամ, ղեկավարել է կուսակցության դպրոցը և աշխատանք տարել կուսակցության երիտասարդական միության հետ, 1941թ. հանդիսացել է նույն նահանգի դաշնակցության կենտրոնական կոմիտեի նախագահ:

Բ.Մինասյանը՝ որպես դաշնակցության կուսակցության ակտիվ գաղափարախոս և նվիրյալ, սովետական իշխանության դեմ քայքայիչ աշխատանքներ տանելու, բռնկվելու կուսակցության և նրա մամուլի դեմ հանդես գալու համար 07.01.1944թ. ձերբակալվել է Թավրիզում, հետագայում ձերբակալումը ձևակերպվել է ՍՍՀՄ ՆԳՏԿ հատուկ խորհրդակցության 12.03.1944թ. որոշմամբ և 02.09.1944թ. դատապարտվել է 10 տարի ազատազրկման:

ՍՍՀՄ Գերագույն դատարանի զինվորական կոլեգիայի 05.06.1953թ. որոշմամբ Բ.Մինասյանը վաղաժամկետ ազատվել է պատիժը կրելուց և որպես իրանահպատակ 03.07.1954թ. հանձնվել է Իրանի իշխանությանը:

Այլ տեղեկություններ առկա չեն:

Հաշվառման և արխիվային ֆոնդերի վարչության պետ

Գ. Տեր-Վարդանյան

Chapter One

The beginning of a new life

It was a hot day like any other day in Tehran in July 1954. My sister Roozan and I came home to find my mom surrounded by our neighbors and acquaintances, everyone holding a newspaper in their hand. *Keyhan*, the leading Persian-language daily, had published a story about a group of Iranian prisoners of war who had been acquitted and released from Soviet prisons and turned over to the Iranian government. They were being detained in a special camp and would be released after thorough examination and investigation. Among the detainees, *Keyhan* reported, was a chemistry professor named Dr. Baghdassar Minassian. Curiously, his was the only name mentioned in the story. Every one of our friends and relatives who had heard the news had bought a copy of the paper and rushed to our house to share the story.

The news was both astonishing and incredible. Was it really true? Was our lost one coming back to us after so many years? Or was this another cynical joke played by the press in the context of Iranian-Soviet relations

which had grown tense after the fall of Prime Minister Mossadegh's government the previous summer? I know my poor mother could not have taken another blow of disillusionment. Looking back to that day, I can see that it was a turning point in our lives. Nothing remained the same afterwards.

That evening we all gathered at my Aunt Almast's house (Almast was my father's older sister). There was exhilaration and celebration, but also doubt and suspicion. The story in the paper could not be fully trusted, so it was decided that my mother's brother, Uncle Alexan,¹ and Aunt Almast's two sons, Vachik and Babken (Baboush), should go to Mashhad where the discharged Iranian POWs were being quarantined and verify the news.

The three left the next day and we waited to hear from them. They were not allowed to see my dad, but the security officer in charge of the camp showed them his file and a photo taken at the border. It was him, no doubt about it, looking so old and frail in his fifty-second year.

The detainees were not discharged right away. Surely, the Iranian government looked at them with suspicion. How many of them were Soviet spies slipped into the country this way? Intensive checking was necessary. They would be released gradually and sent to Tehran.

We had no further news of my dad for a long time, until one day at *Alik*, which was also the meeting place of Dashnaktsutun, Unger Tigran Baghdassarian called me

1 My Uncle Alexan Sargsian was a dedicated ARF and community leader. He was also fond of the theater and as a young man he had organized theatrical troops and performances in Ghazvin and Hamadan. He and my mother, a young and lively girl at the time, were the stars of those performances.

to his office and asked me to accompany him to a secret meeting.² He was a man of stature, a former officer in the army of the first independent Republic of Armenia. We had heard so many tales of his valor. On the way to that secret meeting, he told me that they had arranged with the Iranian Secret Police to allow a short visit with my dad at the house of Aslan Stepanian, known as *Khmbapet* (Captain) Aslan, another veteran *fedayee* from the days of the Armenian Republic and a fellow well respected by the Iranian government. Evidently, my dad had been transferred to Tehran but was still in custody, and I was the member of our family privileged to see him before his final release.

My heart pounding with fear and anxiety, I entered a room where a tall, well-built officer greeted me in perfect Armenian (I later learned that he was a high-ranking Persian officer in the Iranian Secret Police and the government's liaison with the ARF). I looked around the room. An emaciated old man stood up and walked toward me with open arms, exclaiming, "Oobik jan!" That must be my father, I thought. He was the only one to call me Oobik in my childhood memory (I was known as Oobi among my very close friends and family). His only recognizable features were his thick, round-rimmed glasses and his broad forehead that I remembered from old photographs. It was a moment of realization, a dream

2 *Unger* (ընկեր) means "comrade," which is how Dashnaktsutun Party members of all ages address one another. By the way, at that time I too was a Dashnaktsakan, having taken my oath of loyalty and service to the Party before my sixteenth birthday. This was a special concession to me in memory of my father, overlooking the minimum age requirement of eighteen years.



come true, an answer to my prayers every night for eleven years: "God, please bring my dad home."

I don't remember our exact conversation that day. I was in shock and everything was a blur. I was drowning in a sea of emotions. He certainly asked about my mother and sister. Were we all doing well? Was my mom healthy? The latter question, I was told later on, stemmed from an eleven-year-long anxiety: had my mother waited for him or had she remarried and formed another family? His question was a subtle way of eliciting the answer to his tormenting apprehensions. Our meeting went by like a flash, before I could catch on and live its reality. The officer stood up and announced the end of the visit. He had to take my father back to where he was being detained.

After that momentous and privileged meeting, we had the opportunity a couple of times, my mother, my sister and I, to meet with him for short visits, always at Aslan Stepanian's residence, and my father was always accompanied by the same officer. We were euphoric. A new life, a brighter life was dawning upon us. All of our acquaintances had heard the news and they were all happy and constantly congratulating us. They too were impatient to see the man, the hero who had escaped the graveyard of Siberian exile.

Roozan remembers one day at school when she was sliding down the banister: there at the foot of the stairway stood Khanum Farazmand, the famously strict vice principal, with a ruler in her hand. Roozan knew she was going to get whacked on the hand with that ruler, how many times or which side she didn't know. When

it was a matter of serious mischief, Khanum Farazmand would strike the student's hand with the sharp edge. The flat side was for lesser "crimes." But this tough disciplinarian, feared by generations of students who had passed through Mariamian Armenian School, just smiled and said, "What can I say? Roozan Khanum is in heaven: her father is coming home."

After several more weeks of waiting, my dad was finally released on November 17, 1954. He came home to face the difficult task of picking up the pieces of our shattered life and continuing where he had left off. Eleven years on, he returned to his family now grown into a bunch of strangers. Paranzem, or Parik as my mom was called, had adjusted to the role of an independent, self-reliant single mother. In addition to her job at the Singer Company, she had mastered the art of creative machine embroidery and she worked hard filling large and small orders, even taking menial jobs to earn money and raise her two daughters. She had managed to kill her feminine ways and desires. She had forgotten how to love a man, had forgotten even the idea or the possibility. She had turned down many suitors, friends of my dad who had approached her over the years to propose a new life and take her out of the misery of a single woman with the heavy responsibilities of managing a family alone. Incredible as it seemed to many, she had never lost hope of my father's return. As for my sister and me, we had built our world without a father figure in it. It was never a perfect world, never adequate, but his absence had become a way of life for us, three women alone in

the world and unused to the intimate presence of a male.

When my dad came home to us, we were living in a small one-room “apartment” with no kitchen and a bed in one corner with our bedding all piled on top of it. Our room was on the second floor of an apartment building with multiple rooms and many tenants. There was one toilet, or rather a hole at the bottom of a closet on the first floor that all the neighbors used, and of course there was no bathroom. Dad returned to share our room which was already too close and uncomfortable for the three of us.

Dad was a stranger especially to my sister Roozan who was only three-and-a-half years old when he was abducted. Today she remembers with some compunction how he would wake up first and light the heater to warm up the room before we awoke. He would turn the flow of kerosene to the max and the metal body of the oil-burning heater would turn red and growl like a bear, scaring Roozan. “Mom, tell that man not to do that!” she once yelled, putting all her resentment, estrangement, rage and fear in her voice.

The four of us had an arduous road of adjustment and catching up to travel.

I was in the eleventh grade and doing extremely well in school. In fact, I was the only student to represent my tenth-grade class at Reza Shah Kabir High School the previous summer at a girls camp held on the shores of the Caspian Sea in the presence and under the auspices of Empress Soraya. The camp was organized for tenth-grade high achievers from all the schools in the country. That summer had been very special for me: first a visit

with my father and then a heavenly vacation such as I had never experienced ever since his disappearance. By the time my dad was released, I had already started eleventh grade. Now, despite the bumpy road ahead, I felt a special bond with him. I was ready to embrace his presence, take refuge under his fatherly wings and make up for the lost years.

My mother had done her best to provide for our education but I had to work hard too, harder than any other student in class, and always be the best in order to earn my exemption from paying tuition fees. I was well adjusted and active in school and in the Armenian Primary School Alumni Cultural Society.³ At home, I helped my mother with household chores and also served as her soul mate, discussing all the problems she faced. Together, we tacitly assumed the task of protecting Roozan who was very sensitive, the real orphan in the family. I was three years older than her and felt I had to share my mom’s burden by helping my little sister grow up free of tribulation.

In such circumstances, it came as no shock to me when during one of our *tête-à-têtes*, before we heard the news of my father’s release, my mother suggested that I consider going to work after graduating from high school and forget about a university education, in order to ease

³ This was another instance of special treatment. I did not attend Armenian school but Mr. Yervand Hayrapetian, a well-respected, long-time Armenian language teacher and advisor to the Cultural Society, made an exception for me. The society had been established when there was no Armenian high school, in order to give Armenian primary school alumni a chance to continue in an Armenian environment.

her financial burden. I could see that her health wasn't that good, that she was worn out by the long hours she worked at Singer and by the long walk back and forth to work, a half-hour each way, every day in the scorching heat or the freezing cold. Logic and practicality made me abandon my dreams of the future. I began psychologically preparing myself to become an ordinary secretary. One of my father's old friends, a rich contractor, promised my mom to hire me in his office when I was ready.

With my dad's return, our plans for my future changed. "I won't let my Oobik settle for a high school diploma," he said. "She must continue her education in whatever field she chooses." I was thrilled. He truly brought me the beginning of a new life. He was serious about my potential and possibilities.

My father approved of my participation in the Alumni Society but he was uncomfortable with my relationship with my boyfriend who was two years older than me. We had woven dreams of a future together but I had to obey my father and break up with him, even though I felt miserable for a while. I cried many nights, listening to him whistle the same familiar Komitas tune as he passed our street on his way home. In my childish heartbreak, I have to confess, I even wished my father hadn't returned, so that I could go on with my plans without him pushing me around after years of absence.

What did my father see in my erstwhile boyfriend that he didn't like, and what was it that he saw in Neshan, my future husband, whom he met a few years later and developed a liking for, even before a serious relationship

developed between Neshan and me? I was too immature to fathom my father's foresight and sagacity.

When I later rejoined the Հայ Մշակութային Արարատ Կազմակերպություն (Ararat Armenian Cultural Organization), I served as the youngest member of the executive body, and there I met Neshan and developed a working relationship with him, and subsequently a more emotional relationship.

While my dad brought the beginning of a new life for me, it wasn't so simple for my mom. I wish I could analyze the full impact, especially the psychological impact of my father's return on my mother. Obviously, I was left out of their private sentimental and marital relationship. After all, at fifty-two and forty-two years old, they were a relatively young couple. Looking back now, that is how I see them, but back then, they were my *old* parents.

My mother had faithfully waited for him, stifling her feminine desires, but in the process turning into a rigid woman, devoid of sexual feelings. I remember that my Uncle Alexan and Aunt Manoush invited us to spend a few days with them shortly after my father returned. Their apartment had numerous rooms and was obviously more convenient for my parents' reunion than our one-room apartment. They had three daughters and a son, and my sister and I slept in the girls' room. On the first night we were there, my aunt made up a bed in the living room for my mom and dad and said, "Let's see if you haven't forgotten how to love each other." Later during our stay, I overheard her say to my mom, "What is it, have you lost your femininity?"

My mom quit her job at Singer. She had a more comfortable life now and she could devote herself to the well-being of her working husband, helping him to overcome the past, to adjust and find his way in the new environment and even within the circle of friends and relatives, some kind and some not so kind. My Uncle Alexan was so kind to us and to my dad in particular. When he died in 1957, my dad, only three years a free man, lost a true friend and supporter.

My father managed with some difficulty to resume his position as a state high-school teacher. He also began to contribute political analyses to *Alik*, the local Armenian newspaper. My mom would help him with his articles, taking dictation while he composed his thoughts, pacing back and forth in the room. The idea was to spare *Alik's* typesetter the task of reading my father's unintelligible handwriting. It was a pleasant scene I will always remember.

I also remember my parents' favorite card game, *belote*, which they played with Uncle Alexan and Aunt Manoush. While they laid their cards on the only table in the living room of my uncle's apartment, we cousins loved to deal out our own cards on the floor and play the game as we had learned it from them. It was always fun for our parents because the mischievous ladies partnered against the men, and they cheated and laughed and their poor opponents could never catch them out. My dad used to say to my mom, "You haven't changed. You used to cheat at backgammon too." He once confessed that during his lonely hours in exile, when he tried to

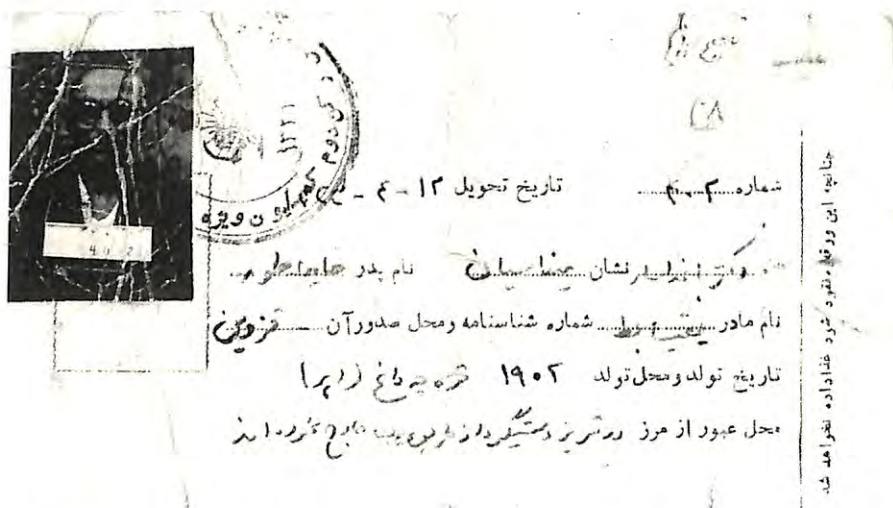
visualize himself back with his family, he thought a lot about how Parik had always come out the winner every time they had played backgammon back in Tabriz. Of course she cheated, but how did she do it?

I know my father tried hard to please my mother and break up her rigidity with words of endearment and with the bouquets of multicolored carnations he brought home once in a while. But did it help?

My dad brought the beginning of a new life for my mother, but was it well received? They were both struggling to adjust, each in a different way.



In the quarantine camp
near Mashhad



Baghdik Minassian's identity card, dated 12/4/1333 (July 3, 1954), issued by the Iranian Security Service (Rokné do) when he was received at the Soviet border by the Iranian government

Chapter Two

A brief biography: A life of poverty and deprivation

I think I owe it to my readers to offer a brief account of my father's life and work before his abduction by the Soviets, in order to put his memoir in perspective.

Baghdassar (Baghdik) Minassian was born on December 10, 1902, in Voghan, a small Armenian village with a history going back hundreds of years.¹ This idyllic village was nestled in the heart of forest-covered Gharadagh in Iranian Azerbaijan (ancient Roman Atropatene, modern Armenian Atrpatakan) which geographically and historically corresponds to the mountainous region of ancient Armenian Parspatunik, a part of Vaspurakan province in the kingdom of Metz Hayk.

¹ In the mid-nineteenth century, Voghan was relocated to safer and flatter terrain five kilometers to the west of its original site. According to the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Atrpatakan, the village had one church named after Sourb Martiros, one school and a population of ninety-five. The majority of the Armenians of Voghan repatriated to Soviet Armenia in 1946, and the few remaining families migrated to Tabriz and Tehran in the 1960s.

After the partition of Armenia between the Romans and the Sassanids in 363 AD, the highlands of Parspatunik were called Siah-Kouh ("Black Mountain" in Persian) because of the thick forests covering the mountainsides. After Turkic tribes conquered the region circa the eleventh century, it was called "Ghara Dagh," a literal translation of Siah-Kouh. In the eighteenth century, Gharadagh (Karadag, Qaradag) was established as a khanate in the northeast of the Iranian province of Azerbaijan, lying along the south bank of the Arax (Aras) River, with its capital at Ahar (ancient Armenian Drounk).

Gharadagh, which corresponds to modern-day Arasbaran, lies southeast of Syunik and due south of Gharabagh. In terms of climate and geography, Gharadagh and Gharabagh are like a huge apple divided in two by the Arax River, according to historian and ethnographer Hovhannes Hovsepian.² His two-volume study of the ethnography and folklore of the region, titled «Ղարադաղի հայերը»,³ is indeed a wealth of information on Gharadagh as I have not seen in any other publication.

In the 1920s, there were about 400 villages in Gharadagh, twenty-eight of them Armenian. The total Armenian population of these twenty-eight villages was

² See Hovhannes Hovsepian, «Ղարադաղի հայերը» (Gharadagh Armenians), 2 vols., (Yerevan: Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, 2009).

³ The reader may have noticed that I have used the new orthography (Հայաստանեան ուղղագրութիւն) in reference to the above title. This is done on the basis of my a priori decision to cite the titles of books published in Armenia in the orthography used in Armenia. For the rest of the Armenian titles cited in the present book, I have retained the classical or Mesrobian orthography in which I believe and in which I always write.

close to 3,000. But these Armenians, who had adhered to their Armenian identity, culture, religion and traditions for 1,600 years under foreign rule, were lured to Soviet Armenia by repatriation propaganda in the 1940s. They sold their livelihoods and moved to Tehran in the expectation of receiving the appropriate paperwork and repatriating to Soviet Armenia forthwith. Many did so, but many others remained stranded on the outskirts of the capital when the repatriation project abruptly came to a halt. Finding themselves in dire financial straits with no hope of repatriating, they struggled to start new lives as city dwellers. As to the few who remained in the villages, they tried to carry on as before. But with Turkic encroachment in their villages leading to increasing economic and religious repression, they were forced to migrate to urban centers and join established Armenian communities such as those in Tabriz or Tehran. Although no Armenians live in the villages of Gharadagh today, when my father was born, Gharadagh had a definite Armenian character.⁴

Baghdassar lost his father, Khachatur, at an early age, and creditors stripped the family of all their belongings, leaving Baghdik's mother, Yeghissabet, in abject poverty with four little children to raise.⁵ The poor woman took

⁴ Here I must mention a special trait of Gharadagh Armenians: they are known as good painters, that is, artisans, house painters. Curiously, I too like to paint, mostly wall decors, and every time I take a brush in my hand and surround myself with colorful paints, I am told, "the Gharadaghtsi in you is acting out." Hovhannes Hovsepian explains the origins of this trait in *Gharadagh Armenians*. He says the lush vegetation of the region was rich in plants, roots and flowers from which the locals learned to extract natural dyes.

⁵ Hovsepian (ibid., p. 113) mentions the local khans tyrannizing the villagers of Gharadagh, looting and murdering and confiscating their properties, especially

in laundry to earn a scant living for her family. To add to her ordeal, Baghdik, her eldest child, was taken by a creditor to serve as a houseboy in lieu of an unpaid debt. When he was eight or nine years old, Hovsep Ter-Hakobian, a rich relative, retrieved him from that house of servitude and brought him to his home in Tabriz where conditions were better for the little orphan boy. He performed chores around the house and ran errands for his patron's shop. "From a young age I was deprived of motherly love and affection," he wrote to his future wife, Paranzem (Parik) Sargsian, in a letter dated February 11, 1933. "My school and university years were turbulent and full of deprivation."

Much like Hovhannes Tumanian's "Gikor," the eldest daughter of this wealthy merchant, named Maro (Baghdik called him Maro Kuyrik—kuyrik meaning sister), noticed the boy's extraordinary zeal for reading and writing and took charge of teaching him both and providing him with all kinds of books to read. Without setting foot in a classroom, but with hard work and perseverance, Baghdik prepared himself for the elementary school completion examination which he needed to pass in order to enter high school.

In an article titled «Մեր Բաղդիկը» (Our Baghdik), published in the commemorative issue of *Alik*, August 21, 1976, the Iranian Armenian poetess Arshi remembered the first day he set foot in a classroom: he was thin and

during the period between 1900 and 1921. My guess is that the family's misfortune, the confiscation of their house and belongings, may have been caused by those tyrants.

taller than average, with a broad forehead, and he soon captured the attention of students and teachers alike. He was studious and scrupulous, serious but humble, always ready to help, and he had an aptitude for leadership.

Baghdik was admitted to Prelacy Central High School in Tabriz in 1919. He had teachers of high calibre such as Karapet Pionian and the Armenologist Hrachia Acharian, both of whom left a rich legacy in the history of Armenian education and an everlasting impression on my father in particular.⁶

This period of Baghdik's life was quite tempestuous for Armenians at large and directly impacted his immediate environment.

The local Kurdish khans of Gharadagh wreaked havoc on Armenian villagers, causing many to leave everything behind and migrate to the safer cities. The goal of the khans was to drive them out of their ancestral land and usurp their properties, and for the most part they succeeded.⁷

6 Prelacy Central High School of Tabriz (Թաւրիզի Թեմական Կենտրոնական Միջնակարգ Դպրոց), founded in 1909 and closed in 1936, was a modern center of Armenian co-educational instruction with a curriculum parallel to that of Caucasian Armenian schools, and with a strong cohort of experts and educators in the faculty. Serving Armenians of Azerbaijan and beyond, the school was established midway between the two major Armenian quarters of Tabriz, Lilava (Leiliabad) and Ghala (Berdatagh; *ghala* or *kalé* meaning "fortress" in Turkish). All the Armenian schools in Iran were closed in 1936 by a decree of Reza Shah, obviously in accord with advice he had received from Atatürk, the leader of neighboring Turkey.

7 Hovsepian, in «Ղարաղաղի հայերը» (Gharadagh Armenians), tells a story of the Voghan Armenians' resistance to the Kurdish tyrants. Voghan was one of nineteen villages owned by the wealthy Tumanian brothers whose ancestors were natives of Voghan. The brothers established a large trading company in Tabriz and subsequently moved their headquarters to Baku, leaving a fellow named Baghdassar of Voghan to manage their local properties. When the brutal Haji Khan went so far as to murder Baghdassar, the Tumanian brothers raised a group

In 1915, when Baghdik was twelve years old, the horrible massacre and deportation of Western Armenians began. The Armenian population of Van took to the road, fleeing the Turkish murderers in May 1915 and again the following year. The refugees passed through Atrpatakan on their way to Russian Armenia. This cataclysm no doubt impacted the city of Tabriz where Baghdik was living at the time, especially given that Archbishop Nerses Melik-Tangian, Prelate of the Atrpatakan Armenian Apostolic Church, was heavily involved in refugee relief work.

Following the withdrawal of the Russian army in 1917, the Ottoman army took advantage of the power vacuum to advance on Azerbaijan and capture Tabriz. Once again the Atrpatakan Armenians came under fire from the Armenocidists who occupied Tabriz and perpetrated abominable acts until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918.

The Republic of Armenia, confined to a sliver of the eastern portion of historic Armenia, declared its independence on May 28, 1918. Thus, when Baghdik began his formal education the following year, the newborn Republic of Armenia was trying to rise from the ashes of World War I and the Genocide, a situation that was aggravated by the collapsing economy, severe unemployment, and the burden of more than 100,000 refugees, remnants of the Genocide suffering starvation and epidemic diseases, without shelter and with little

of local youths, outfitted them in Russian army uniforms and sent them to attack the Kurds. They killed Haji Khan and destroyed his gang and the surviving Kurds fled in terror, convinced they were being attacked by the Russian army. That was in 1916.

help from the authorities or benevolent organizations. It didn't help that these very conditions fuelled the subversive activities of the Armenian Bolsheviks. Caught between "the Bolshevik hammer and the Turkish anvil," as Simon Vratsian put it, Armenia had to defend itself from the advance of the Turkish army on one side, and on the other side, stand up for its sovereignty vis-à-vis the Bolshevik threat and the Red Army which was ready to invade the small republic. The two-and-a-half-year life of the Republic was a time of high hope and disappointment for Armenians all over the world and for those practically next-door in Atrpatakan. Baghdik must have lived that hope and enthusiasm, especially since he was already a member and later a leader of the Dashnaktsutun youth organization.

The Sovietization of Armenia on December 2, 1920, was a huge blow. The uprising of February 1921, led by Dashnaktsutun, met a tragic end. The Bolsheviks defeated Garegin Nzhdeh and quashed the uprising in Syunik, which ended the last struggle of the Armenian people and marked the end of their aspirations for an independent Armenia. As a result, a flood of ARF leaders, followed by the hopeless masses fleeing the terrors of Bolshevism, poured into Iranian Azerbaijan. Most of them took refuge in Tabriz. Even if temporary, the sojourn of ARF leaders and intellectuals in Tabriz impacted the cultural life and the Party structure in the region.

How did young Baghdik navigate that tempestuous period of six or seven years? That was a distant era my father never discussed, but the birth of an independent

Armenia and the ideology of freedom it inspired no doubt had a role in shaping his future.

Dashnaktsutun was exiled, driven from Eastern and Western Armenia, but not incapacitated or deactivated. There was a great need to reorganize the Armenians scattered around the world, to keep the flame of Armenianness burning, to uphold the idea of free, independent and united Armenia in the generations to come, until one day....

One of the projects undertaken by Dashnaktsutun was to educate and train future leaders to carry the torch. A cohort of high-achieving students was chosen to be sent to European universities, there to receive the highest possible level of education, thence to return and serve the Armenian people. Baghdassar was one of the chosen few. He had graduated from high school in three years as the best student in his class and had demonstrated his skill and capability in leading the ARF student union. When he was accepted to Charles University in Prague (Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis), he began his journey to the heart of enlightenment and education in Europe.⁸

Baghdik chose to major in natural sciences (biology and chemistry as we know today), with a double major in pedagogy. His love of science came from his high intellect, and he had probably developed the intention to prepare himself for a career as an educator under the influence of Karapet Pionian, his favorite teacher and the principal of

⁸ Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis, one of the oldest (founded in 1348) and most prestigious universities in Europe, is the alma mater of world famous scientists, statesmen and Nobel laureates.

Prelacy Central High School. When a subject is taught by an extraordinary teacher, it naturally becomes the student's favorite and a likely focus of future study.

I have scant information about the five or six years my father spent in Prague. All I know is that the group of Armenian students who studied at Charles University during that period remained active in the ranks of the ARF and organized cultural and political events in Prague. Coincidentally, I gained access to a rare book that was published by the Committee of the ARF Students Union of Prague in 1927 and dedicated to the sixth anniversary of the February 1921 uprising.⁹ The foreword spells out the students' continuing commitment to the ultimate goals of the ARF and the Armenian nation, which is clear throughout the book. These young Dashnaktsakans expressed their readiness "to toil and struggle for the realization of Free, Independent, United and Democratic Armenia."¹⁰ My father was one of these students, and his life and work would become the epitome of the charge he so wholeheartedly undertook as a young graduate student.

The stipend these students received was meager and their living conditions were harsh. Some of them could not stick it out and left after two or three years without earning a degree. My father and his close friend

⁹ This book is held by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan and was loaned to me by Dr. Hayk Demoyan, director of the museum.

¹⁰ Simply titled «Փետրուար 18» (February 18), the book comprises a few articles describing and analyzing the uprising, a chronology of the events, and documents pertaining to the correspondence between the leadership committee, Փրկութեան Կոմիտե (Rescue Committee), and the regional committees.

The entire book stands as a polemic against that Soviet Armenian historiography which distorts history and tries to show the popular movement against the despotic Bolshevik dictatorship to be the work of "a bunch of Dashnak adventurers."

Hovhannes Hakhnazarian were the only students who followed the difficult road to the end and graduated from the university, Baghdik with a PhD in Natural Sciences with a specialization in Chemistry and a Certificate in Philosophy and Pedagogy (Bachelor of Art), and Hovhannes with a PhD in History and Philosophy.¹¹

To keep the memory of my father alive while he was gone, my mother used to tell us stories about his life, both happy and sad experiences. One of those stories was about my father as a struggling student in Europe. His scant stipend often arrived late and sometimes he went to school hungry. That was the case on the day he went before a committee of distinguished professors to defend his dissertation (his subject was the respiration of plants and the effects of chemicals on that function). Halfway through his defense, as the professors were blasting him with questions, Baghdik realized that his nose was bleeding. Then he felt his head spinning, his vision went dark and he almost fainted. He was terrified—fearing he was about to lose all those years of hard work—but the professors understood. They calmed him down, gave him a glass of water and waited until he recovered and felt able to continue.

Baghdik successfully completed his education in June 1928 and returned to Iran immediately. He took various

¹¹ Born in 1900 in Agulis in the Goghtan region, Hovhannes Hakhnazarian settled in Tehran after he returned from Prague. He lectured at the State University of Tehran and taught at the Davtian-Kooshesh Armenian School and was later appointed school principal (1946–1964). He was an influential and respected intellectual in the Armenian community and maintained good relations with Iranian authorities. He died in Tehran in 1978. Incidentally, he was best man at my father's wedding.

positions as a teacher or principal in Armenian schools in Rasht, Ghazvin, Tehran and Tabriz, at the same time committing time and effort to the activities of the ARF.

In 1931, my father published his first book, «Մանկավարժութեան հիմունքներ, *Principes de pédagogie*» (Principles of pedagogy). It was printed by the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Tabriz with the endorsement of the Iranian Ministry of Education. The 420-page tome includes a bibliography of sources in French and Czech and a few in Armenian, as well as an annotated table of contents practically amounting to a summary of the material in Armenian and French.

As I page through the book, I am astonished at the erudition, the scope of the research and the scholarly analysis, all supported by the proper apparatus of footnotes and references. The text begins by defining pedagogy and education, explains the interrelation between the two, lays out the goals of education (moral, individual and social, and national, focusing on Armenian national education), and discusses the problems of co-education and the sexual issues involved, the question of the relationship between the body and the soul, and the importance of physical education. The second part of the book expounds on general methodology in various categories, such as the education of the intellect, the sensibilities and the will. The third part is dedicated to Armenian national education, suggesting reforms and making recommendations that were beyond the Armenian reality of the time. I remember my mom saying

that the book did not sit well with my father's Armenian colleagues. Now I understand why.

I do not intend to review the book here, but I want to tell you a story about a striking feature on the first page, a clue to Baghdik's life before he married my mother. It is a dedication simply saying, "A present to my dear Kristiné." The puzzling part of the story is that my mom had saved a few copies of the book, all with the first page torn out. When I was a child, I would proudly open my father's book without attempting to read the lofty, complicated contents. And to my innocent question of why the first page was torn out of every copy we owned, my mom would answer vaguely and I never bothered to insist. It was long after my father returned from exile that I laid hands on an intact copy and read that note of dedication. I cannot explain why I never asked who Kristiné was. Perhaps I thought it was unimportant, an ephemeral attachment of my father's. I forgot all about it, but long after my parents had passed, some low-life busybodies had not forgotten, and they took it upon themselves to run down our family. Kristiné was my father's girlfriend or fiancée who followed him to Iran, so they said, but after a while he ended the love affair and sent her back. Regardless, Kristiné was a reality, not an ephemeral attachment. She was an inspiration to my father and undoubtedly helped him in harsh times and she ought to have a place in his life story.

I do not know when their love affair ended and Kristiné returned to Prague. All I know is that my father's love letters to my mom began in late 1932 when

he was the principal of the Armenian school in Ghazvin. I recently found those letters in a well-preserved folder. They are romantic and passionate. My father entreats my mom to take his love seriously and consent to marry him. He is lonely and miserable without her.... Life has no meaning without her.... He cannot go on without her.... It took two long years and dozens of letters to finally persuade her to reach the decision to reciprocate his love.

The jobs my father was assigned to after he returned from Prague are illuminating. Apparently, he placed himself at the disposition of the local ARF leadership in accordance with the pledge he had made before accepting his scholarship. He was assigned to Armenian schools in Rasht and Ghazvin before he was finally transferred to Tehran. Was it a case of the decision makers' former schoolmate, fresh back from Europe and equipped with an incomparably higher education, cautiously being kept away from the center? For my father, no job was too menial or unworthy. In all modesty, he went where duty called. While in Ghazvin, he brought together a group of young high-school students and taught them advanced chemistry and biology. My mother, a lively eighteen-year-old young woman, was one of his students before she returned to Hamadan, her birthplace. That contact sparked the flame in my father's heart and became the origin of his life-long love and commitment.

My mother's memories of that period give further insight into Baghdik as an educator. As the principal of Ghazvin Elementary School, he was actively involved in the practice of instruction. He did not sufficiently trust

the teachers' pedagogic skills and took charge of the first-grade class himself in order to correctly lay the foundation of the children's education. He tried to implement the pedagogic methods he so ardently described in his book. His advanced ideas, however, were too much for those who professed to be the best in the trade. He was persecuted and he wrote about it in his letters to my mother, calling her the only spark of hope worth living for. Obviously, his unhappy childhood and his struggle against life's obstacles from a very early age had left a deep psychological impression, and the unfriendly atmosphere of resentment, unfounded criticism and gossip didn't help.

The love letters stopped for a few months and then picked up again after Baghdik had been transferred to Tehran, but now they struck a more positive note. Paranzem had reciprocated his love.

Parik and Baghdik were married on March 21, 1934, in a Catholic church in Tehran. The Armenian Apostolic Church would not wed them since they were cousins, the children of two sisters, Yeghissabet and Tamam.¹² Of course, this had been a topic of gossip and slander all along, making my mother hesitant to accept my father's persistent appeal to set a wedding date as soon as possible. She kept finding excuses to postpone her final decision. His desperate letters speak of this.

My father was now teaching chemistry and physics

¹² My mom used to tell us a funny story about her mother who was born the seventh daughter of her parents. Having tried hard for a boy, they were disheartened, so they named her Tamam (meaning "finished" in Persian and Turkish): no more trying, it was hopeless. But as my mom recalled, Tamam was not their last child after all. I never saw my Grandmother Tamam. She died when my mom was very young.

in Armenian high schools in Tehran, and apparently his students loved him. According to Shahan Petrossian, one of his students at Davtian High School, there were no Armenian chemistry or physics textbooks at that time (and I doubt there were any at all in the Diaspora). Shahan wrote that Dr. Minassian, a young and charismatic teacher, brought German and Czech textbooks to class, translated lessons on the spot and dictated in fluent Armenian.¹³ V. Gurgen, a student at the co-ed Haykazian High School in the 1933/34 school year, remembered the exhilaration at having a new teacher who was knowledgeable and strict in the classroom and a pleasant and helpful friend outside.¹⁴

When Reza Shah ordered the Armenian schools closed in 1936, my father was immediately employed by the Ministry of Education and sent to Tabriz—with all his moving expenses paid by the government—to teach chemistry in the senior class of Ferdowsi High School. Here too his services were highly valued, as attested to by the certificates of praise and appreciation I found in his papers, including a letter dated 1/10/1317 (December 22, 1938) from the principal of Ferdowsi High School to the office of the Ministry of Education in Azerbaijan, copied to Dr. Baghdassar Minassian.

Those were difficult years for Atrpatakan Armenians and Baghdik dedicated his time and energy to serving his people, shouldering responsibilities and assuming

¹³ Shahan Petrossian, «Ամսօրնախաղի դէմքերից մէկը» (One of the unforgettable people), in the special commemorative issue of *Alik*, August 21, 1976.

¹⁴ V. Gurgen, «Յիշողութիւններ» (Memories), in *ibid*.

positions in the community leadership and the ARF. He also regularly contributed articles of political analysis to *Alik* in Tehran and *Housaper* in Cairo, both organs of the ARF.

With the outbreak of World War II, the situation became very tense. During the interwar period, Reza Shah had developed economic and political ties with Turkey and Germany. The British regarded those alliances as a threat to their interests in Iran, especially their exclusive rights to Iranian oil. Although Reza Shah declared Iran's neutrality, the Allies accused him of rapprochement with Nazi Germany and pressured him to deport all German citizens residing in Iran. The tension ratcheted up when Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Iran's importance to the Allies, in terms of its oil and its geostrategic position, proved detrimental to its independence. The joint Soviet-British invasion of Iran began on August 25, 1941, by land and air from all directions. The invaders caught Reza Shah's recently established modern army by surprise, encountering little resistance as they occupied almost the entire country. Tehran was under continuous air raids. There were severe shortages of water and food. Reza Shah attempted to negotiate with Soviet and British representatives but to no avail. The Allies occupied the capital in mid-September and the British arrested Reza Shah and sent him out of the country, eventually exiling him to South Africa. He was replaced by his son, Crown Prince Mohammad Reza, who soon signed a treaty with the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, guaranteeing

Iran's territorial integrity and promising the withdrawal of Allied forces after the war.¹⁵

Although the Allies withdrew their armies from Tehran, Iran was effectively divided between the Soviets in the north and the British in the south of Hamadan.

The province of Azerbaijan was under the absolute control of the Soviets. Iranian government agencies were dysfunctional and total chaos prevailed. Untethered and unchecked, the Azeri Turkish mob set about stealing, robbing shops and committing petty crimes in the street, and the targets were mainly Armenians. Under the circumstances, many Armenians, even those in the ranks of the ARF, took their families and fled to safer places. That was not an option for my dad. He vehemently refused to leave. He would not abandon his position as representative of the ARF Central Committee of Atrpatakan. He would not desert his people.

It is ironic how some members of the ARF, even those in higher positions, shifted their allegiance, resigned from the Party and adhered to the Soviets, certainly not for any ideological reason but to play it safe and save their own skin. (In order to prove his allegiance

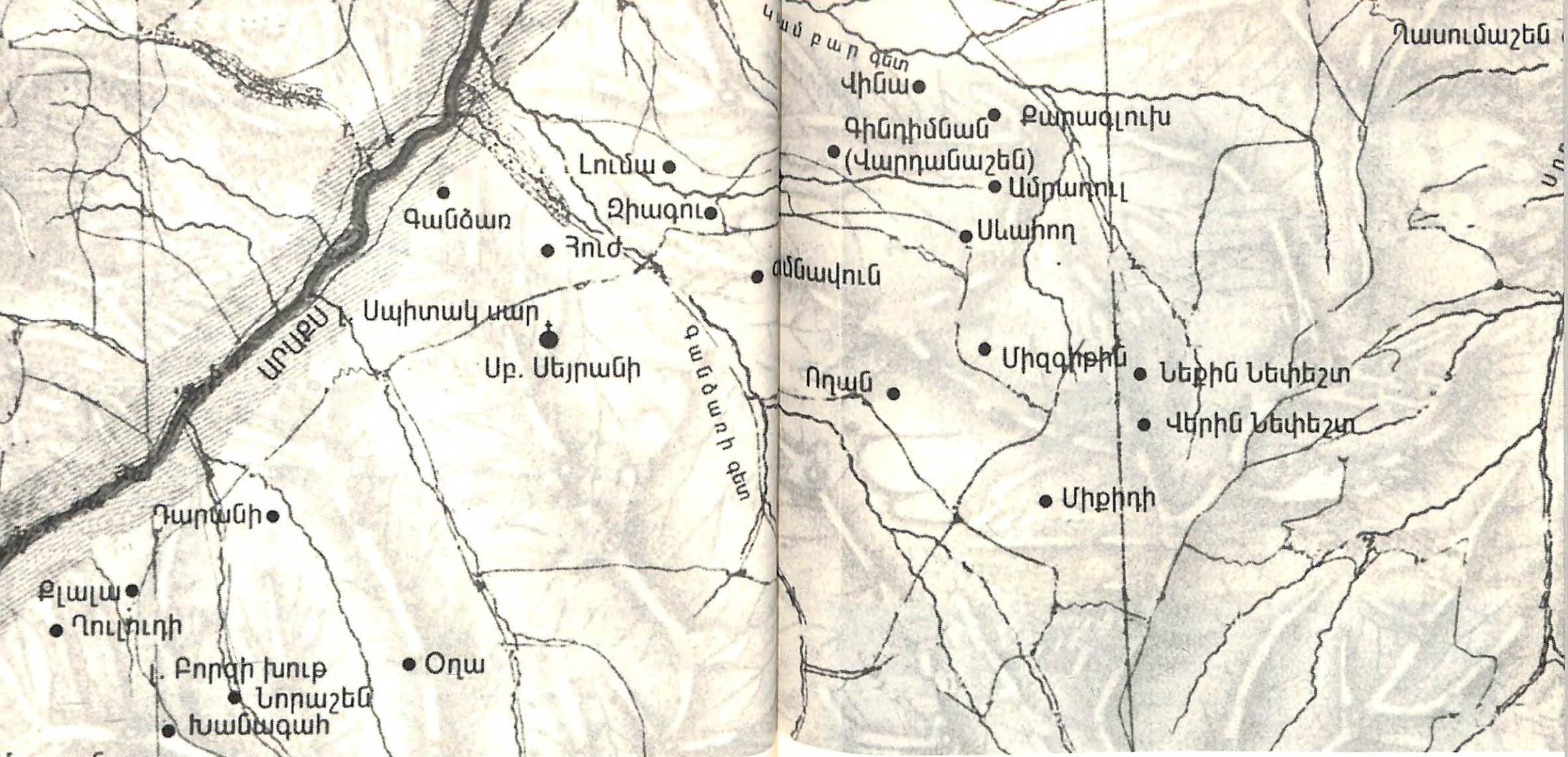
¹⁵ The Tripartite Treaty of January 1942 provided for the withdrawal of Allied troops no more than six months after the end of hostilities. Upon its declaration of war against Germany in January 1943, Iran was recognized as one of the Allies. At the famous Tehran Conference in November–December 1943, Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin and Franklin D. Roosevelt reaffirmed the commitment to Iran's territorial integrity. The deadline for the withdrawal of Allied troops was later set at March 2, 1946, but the Soviets did not leave Iran until December 1946. Meanwhile, they strengthened their influence in the country, establishing the Tudeh Party (*tudeh* meaning "masses" in Persian) and inciting people to rise against the government. Stalin was on the verge of realizing his goal of detaching Iranian Azerbaijan and annexing it to Soviet Azerbaijan.

to Soviet Armenia, one such renegade who published calendars had November 29 printed in red and May 28 printed in black.)¹⁶ Another irony is the fact that, after the Soviets had left and law and order were restored in Iran, those same people returned to the ARF, resumed their positions and continued as respected leaders of the Armenian community.

In my father's papers, I found multiple copies of the August 15, 1946, issue of *Arevelk*, published in Tabriz, no doubt a leftist newspaper, in which the resignation of a number of ARF members was proudly announced. Although my father only passingly alluded to that unfortunate phenomenon in later years, I presume that his Cheka interrogator in Yerevan had boasted about Dashnaktsakans leaving the Party and becoming informers for the Soviets. That could have been part of the Cheka's strategy to intimidate and humiliate my father and force him to open up. It is also possible that after my father returned from Siberia, he searched for evidence of those desertions, found the names of the apostates in that issue of *Arevelk* and saved the copies. I spotted the names of many who later came to be known as respected leaders

¹⁶ Armenian calendars published in pro-ARF communities in the Diaspora always printed May 28 in red, marking the day in 1918 when the independence of Armenia was proclaimed, and May 28 is still celebrated today. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, disdained and ignored the birth of Armenian independence and the existence of the free and independent Republic of Armenia. Instead, they celebrated November 29 as the anniversary of the Sovietization of Armenia in 1920. Of course, November 29, 1920, was the day when a group of Armenian and Azeri Bolsheviks entered Armenia from already Sovietized Azerbaijan (one of the independent republics of Transcaucasia, not to be confused with the province of the same name in Iran) and declared the Sovietization of Armenia. The transfer of power to the Bolsheviks actually occurred on December 2, 1920.

of the community. They chose the easy and expeditious path in life while Baghdik Minassian was suffering in the Soviet Gulag.



Armenian villages of Gharadagh (from Hovhannes Hovsepian, *Gharadagh Armenians*, v. 1)



A Gharadagh landscape



Mountains of Arasbaran



Karapet Pionian, Principal of the Central School of Tabriz, when Baghdik Minassian was graduating



Baghdik Minassian's high school diploma, June 8, 1923, signed by Principal Karapet Pionian



An old picture of the Central School of Tabriz



Seat of the Faculty of Natural Sciences since the 1920s, Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis



Armenian students in Prague, 1924. Left to right: Baghdassar Minassian, Andre Ter-Ohanian, Gaspar Hakobian, Hambartsum Grigorian, Haik Yegharian



Baghdik Minassian, Prague, 1927

Česká vědecká zkušební komise pro učitelství na středních školách
v Praze.

Číslo 2618

VYSVĚDČENÍ
O PŘEDBĚŽNÉ ZKOUŠCE FILOSOFICKO-PEDAGOGICKÉ

Pan Baghdassar Minassian,
1902 v Kerağagh v Persii,
vykonal

u české vědecké zkušební komise pro učitelství na středních školách v Praze

**PŘEDBĚŽNOU ZKOUŠKU
FILOSOFICKO-PEDAGOGICKOU**
podle článku VII. zkušebního řádu z r. 1911.

Při zkoušce dány byly tyto otázky:
Poměr pedagogie a sociologie
Obsah Rousseauova Emila
Moderní pedagogové francouzštiny
Vývoj dětského myšlení
Vývoj francouzské vysoké školy

Výsledek zkoušky byl ve l m i d o b r ý

Ředitelství české vědecké zkušební komise pro učitelství
na středních školách v Praze

dne 27. dubna 1927

Václav Příhoda
examinátor.

Kol. D. Janek
ředitel zkušební komise.

Státní nakladatelství, Praha. — 654-22.

Baghdik Minassian's Certificate in Philosophy-Pedagogy,
dated April 27, 1927



The first official photo of
Baghdik and Paranzem,
Tehran, 1934



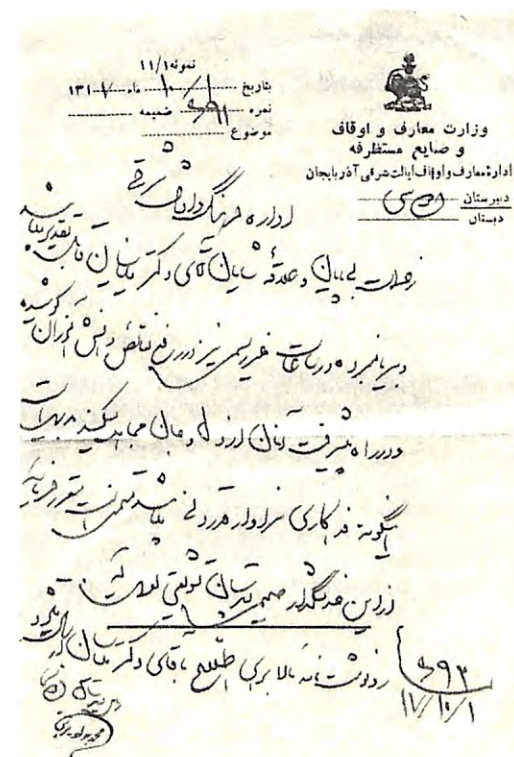
Baghdik and Parik, the happy couple in Yam,
a summer resort near Tabriz, 1937



Baghdik with his mother, Yeghissabet,
Parik and Knar standing



Newlyweds Baghdik and Paranzem with best man Hovhannes Hakhnazarian, Tehran, April 1934



Example of a letter of
appreciation, dated
1/10/1317 (December 22,
1938), from the Principal of
Ferdowsi High School to
the Ministry of Education
in the Province of
Azerbaijan

Chapter Three

In the flames of World War II: Abducted and jailed in Tabriz

World War II broke out on September 3, 1939.¹ Hitler's military campaign aimed at procuring vital space for the German people, and in order to realize this goal, he rapidly captured Czechoslovakia, Poland, Holland, Belgium, France and the Balkans. That campaign stopped upon meeting with a fierce defense by the British. Hitler realized his mistake and changed course to the East. On June 22, 1941, German forces invaded Russia, whose vast territories and rich mineral resources could provide the coveted vital space. Meeting little resistance, German

¹ As noted in the introduction, the content of this and the next chapter is the English translation of the abridged and rearranged version of Baghdik Minassian's unfinished memoir, «Տասը Տարի, Տասն Ամիս եւ Տասնութ Ծր...» (Ten years, ten months and seventeen days...). It is narrated in my father's voice and reflects his views and analysis of the situation in Tabriz before his abduction, the events in the Yerevan prison, his indictment and sentence of exile to Siberia, and his journey toward that destination. I have interjected only where necessary to provide explanations, either in brackets in the main text or in the footnotes. The narrative stops at the Krasnoyarsk transit distribution camp on the shores of the Yenisei River where my father was imprisoned before being sent on to Norilsk.

forces advanced deeper into Russian territory. Caught by surprise, the Red Army retreated, leaving behind a great number of prisoners of war. The Soviet air force did not have time to pull together and organize an air defense, as if it did not find the courage to enter into war against Germany. For many in the West, German warfare in the East was a blessing.

The flames of war were fast approaching the Caucasus. There was a strong possibility that Turkey would enter the war and that German-Turkish forces would advance on Transcaucasia. There was an even stronger possibility that the Allies would occupy Iran in order to route arms and military supplies to the Soviet Union and halt its defeat.

The Dashnaktsutun (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) Central Committee of Atrpatakan, headquartered in Tabriz, was more concerned about what would happen to Soviet Armenia if the Turks, with the help of German forces, were to move to the east to realize their longtime dream of Pan-Turkic expansion. The destruction of Soviet Armenia would become the first step toward the creation of that dream empire. The threat to the security of Soviet Armenia was real and we were worried. The ARF Central Committee delegated me as the committee's representative to negotiate with Soviet representatives in Tabriz and offer our unconditional physical, moral and financial assistance to ward off the Turkish danger.

The negotiations began in a cordial atmosphere. Agaronov (Aharonian), representing the Soviet Union [at the consulate] in Tabriz, treated me with amity and

respect. He even once said to me, "We should break the ice between us."

Later, the ARF Bureau reaffirmed our strategy, declared the Party's allegiance to the Allies and recommended that the Atrpatakan Central Committee support the Red Army against Turkey.² Our negotiations continued after the occupation [of northern Iran by the Soviet Union in August 1941]. Two Armenian officers who had arrived in Tabriz with the Red Army were always present at these meetings. However, the atmosphere soon took a turn for the worse and became more like that of an interrogation. Our interlocutors clearly demonstrated Bolshevik intolerance, hatred and enmity toward Dashnaktsutiun.

The negotiations were discontinued for a while and then stopped altogether, having produced no results. Not only did the ice not break between us but it grew thicker. Nevertheless, for the sake of the security of Armenia and the welfare of the Armenian people, we declared our loyalty to the Allies and to the Soviet Union, to be sure. Evidently, however, the Bolsheviks' priority was to continue and perpetuate their regime, and national interests were not of the essence.

With the German *tour de force* in the Soviet Union, the issue of sending arms and supplies and aiding the Soviet defense grew more and more important for the Allies, and the only safe way to achieve that goal was

² The 13th ARF General Congress in 1938, the last one before the war, passed a resolution according to which, if war should break out, the ARF would strictly follow a policy of working solely for the security of the Armenian people.

through Iran. In order to control this crucial route, later dubbed the Golden Bridge, and to drive the Germans out of Iran, the Allies invaded the country. In total contempt of Iranian neutrality, the attack began on August 25, 1941, the British entering from the south and the Red Army from the north. The Iranian Army showed little or no resistance. Iran fell under Allied occupation. German influence in Iran was being expelled.

It is a matter of fact that, despite the position of neutrality adopted by the Iranian government at the start of the war, most Iranians had a special predilection for the Germans and a pronounced dislike of the British and the Russians. They clearly showed their enthusiasm and cheered German military successes. Even semi-official circles in the leadership expressed hope that Germany would soon conquer the Caucasus and reach the oil fields of Baku. With that, they would establish their military headquarters in Yerevan. Of course, this mentality was the result of German propaganda spread by the numerous German agents and residents in Iran trying to draw the country into Germany's orbit, win over the people and use them to their own advantage. However, this mentality had little or no effect on the central government's policies and actions. Even before the occupation, the Turkish youth and intelligentsia in [Iranian] Azerbaijan were especially tense and excited. Dissatisfied and discontented with central government policies, they dreamed of severing Azerbaijan from Iran. And the Soviets had their own ulterior motive for encouraging that idea.

It was a strange situation in Tabriz, neither war nor peace. The Red Army was advancing in Azerbaijan, bringing the Red ideology, the boorish communist mob movement. The future was uncertain and unpredictable. What was evident, though, was that there was fear, there was panic.

An Iranian Army regiment, together with tanks and armored cars, was proceeding along the main street in the direction of the Iranian-Soviet border, accompanied by the sad, soft music of a single wind instrument. The troops marched at a slow pace, as if without purpose. The procession looked nothing like a military column moving to the battlefield.

The unknown and the uncertainty worried me. All sorts of rumors were circulating but it was impossible to verify any of them. In the street that morning, I met Colonel Beglari, the principal of the military school in Tabriz, and asked him what was going on. He answered with pretended indifference, "Nothing. The army is on its way to a maneuver." It didn't make sense. I was troubled. On top of it all, just the day before, my wife Parik and my older daughter Rubina had come in to Tabriz for a day from Vasminj, a summer resort where the rest of my family, including my younger daughter Roozan and my cousin Vartuhi, were staying together with other relatives and family friends.

I tried to find a car or a horse-drawn carriage to get there and bring my family back. The situation was fluid and changing rapidly. The streets were becoming deserted. The government had commandeered any and all means of

transportation for the army's movements, so people had hidden their vehicles in order not to surrender them to the authorities. After a long search, I found two carriages in a remote corner of the city and rented them for several times the usual rate. I started off toward Vasminj, a few kilometers down the road to Tehran.

The Armenian vacationers had all gathered together and were anxiously waiting for help to arrive. I was the first to reach Vasminj. Seeing the situation, I suggested we load all the children into the two carriages and move toward the city, with the adults going on foot. My suggestion was turned down, and strangely, one of our older acquaintances, whom we addressed as Joj-Agha [Big Sir], suggested that all the men take the carriages and go back to Tabriz and hide. He thought there would be no danger to the women and children if they remained in Vasminj. That was outrageous. I finally decided to take my family and as many relatives as I could fit into the carriages and get on the road. Just past Shibli, where the panorama of Tabriz came into view down below, an incredible scene spread out before us. The people of Tabriz were exiting the city in a long and disorderly line. Terrified people had left their homes and belongings and were fleeing the chaotic situation, some on foot, others in various forms of transportation. That was the first time I witnessed the bitterness of mass migration, the somber exodus of desperate people, a horrifying beast that has destroyed Armenian homes and possessions so many times in history.

I was devastated. Did this mean the Red Army had occupied the city? Did this mean the city was being

bombarded? How were my wife and daughter coping? I knew the majority of the Turkish population had no friendly feeling toward Armenians, to say the least. That unfriendly feeling had now surfaced. A few times along the way, fleeing Turks stopped our carriages and tried to force our drivers to throw us out and give them the carriages. We were returning to our homes and belongings and they were on the run, leaving everything behind. They saw us as their enemies. "Those people are going to their friends and we are escaping from them," they reasoned, referring to the Russians as our friends and their enemies. That was a deep-seated impression among the Turks, always seeing us as Russophiles. Fortunately, our drivers were honest people. They didn't flinch.

We were on the outskirts of the city when a car stopped. I heard someone shouting, "Doctor, where are you taking those children? The city is on fire, destroyed, blood is flowing." It was Colonel Beglari, the same man who had assured me that morning that nothing was happening.

As we approached Tabriz, we saw no fire or bombs dropping. The city had sunk into an ominous calm. My brother Asatur met me at the city limit and assured me that there was no danger to anyone and the Armenians were calm and cautious.

Our apartment was located on Pahlavi Avenue in the heart of the city. I was advised to move my family to Lilava, the Armenian quarter.³ We moved to Gurgun

³ Lilava is a distorted form of Leiliabad, the name of an Armenian quarter in Tabriz (see chapter 2, footnote 6). Legend has it that a Muslim girl fell in love with an Armenian boy, and in order to escape the fury of her coreligionists, she fled to an Armenian neighborhood which later expanded and was named after the girl.

Badalian's home where we enjoyed the warm and sincere hospitality of Gurgun and his wife Varti for a few days until we found a house in Lilava. The house was on a narrow street like others in the neighborhood, relatively safe and away from any unwanted incidents.

The rumors were not totally wrong. The Red Army had invaded Azerbaijan, and meeting little resistance, had captured Salmast and Rezaiyeh (Urumieh). They were now stationed at the Iranian-Turkish border, apparently to prevent any Turkish-German aggression toward Iran that could menace the routes of assistance to the Soviets or the way to the oil fields of the Caucasus.

Another part of the Red Army had moved on Tabriz and "victoriously" entered the city on August 26, 1941, then continued in haste toward Tehran, apparently intent on reaching the capital before the British. When they reached Karaj, however, they were compelled [by the British] to stop and go back to Zanzan and station there, since Tehran was declared a neutral zone.

Tabriz was in turmoil. Soviet planes were circling over the city, dropping leaflets warning people to "surrender weapons." The situation was quite attractive for the Turkish mob which attempted to attack the Armenian quarters on the pretext of carrying out the orders of the occupying army. With no functioning governmental institutions, the unruly Turkish mob controlled the streets, shouting jihadist slogans against the Armenians and the Dashnaks. Like a fifth column in this volatile situation, the *mohajees*, Turkish and Armenian refugees who had been expelled from the Soviet Union in 1938–

39, were now celebrating the Soviet presence in Tabriz. They joined the Turkish mob and shouted, "We will smash the heads of the Dashnaks." There was no peace and no security in the occupied regions. The ARF tried its best to guard the Armenian quarters and prevent any vengeful incidents.

Immediately upon occupying Tabriz, the Red Army established its headquarters in the city and declared martial law. All weapons and all radios were to be surrendered to the military command. In an emergency meeting of the ARF Central Committee, it was decided not to surrender weapons. To that effect, a special meeting with Soviet representatives was requested.

I left our house to go to the meeting, but a few steps along on our narrow street, I was stopped by a drunken Armenian *mohajeer* armed with two rifles. "Where are you going? Dashnaks have a meeting at the Diocese. Don't go there." "Very well," I replied and kept walking. The streets were in total darkness and quite deserted because of the martial law regime. A few more steps along the way, I met the designated liaison and together we walked to the temporary Soviet headquarters in Ghala. En route, we were stopped several times by Russian soldiers. "Stoy," they shouted. My liaison whispered the password and we continued.

When we arrived at the military headquarters/Cheka building, a guard escorted me to Agaronov's office. After exchanging a few formalities and the usual greetings, I took up the main subject and told him,

"I believe the order to surrender all weapons concerns

individuals. Our organization certainly owns weapons. We have owned weapons for self-defense in Turkey and Russia and we have never turned them in to the authorities. It's the same here. We will not surrender our arms. But you are in control of the situation. You can confiscate them by force, and let me tell you, it will be over our dead bodies."

At that moment, the red curtain at the back of the room drew open and a tall, slender Armenian officer came through and approached me with a theatrical gesture. He shook my hand and said, "I salute your position." Agaronov offered me a ride home but I refused. I wasn't sure whether the driver might not change direction and take me to Julfa and [cross the border] into the Soviet Union. Instead, I asked to have a soldier accompany me to deal with the street patrols.

I reached home safe and sound. My wife was sitting on the bed, praying and crying. She was in a state of high anxiety. Right after I had left, she had heard shooting in the street and presumed that I had been shot. The wives of ARF leaders have miserable lives. They suffer, they panic, they are distressed, but they take it all with patience, heroically. They are the real heroes.

The situation in the occupied regions was deteriorating. Soviet planes were dumping propaganda leaflets, inciting the mob against Dashnaktsutun, the only force defending the Armenian quarters. The local authorities were on the run. Governmental institutions had all shut down. Most of the officials had fled to Tehran. Only the secret police remained, closely observing the scene and

sending reports to Tehran. Policemen walked the streets, not to keep order but to get in on the looting.

The Russian military ruled the occupied regions and the Cheka was in charge of political life and the manhunt. But the *mohajeers* were the self-appointed rulers in the streets. They had set up their headquarters on Karashenk Street [a main thoroughfare in the Armenian quarter] and they were out making grand statements and harassing passers-by. We knew most of the leaders of that "movement." One of them was Dali Ghazo, a renegade Dashnaktsakan.

The Cheka was undoubtedly behind all these shenanigans, frightening Armenians and keeping them at bay, and at the same time provoking Dashnaktsutun to react, first in order to assess our capabilities, and second, to find excuses to make arrests. The Central Committee convened and examined the situation. Word was sent to the rank and file to remain cool, calm and collected at all times in dealing with hooligans in the street; to put up a strong defense when attacked with firearms; to maintain control of the Armenian quarter and never let those ruffians enter; to never surrender weapons; and to never give any information about the ARF if summoned by the Cheka and only tell them to contact the Central Committee representative. With these precautions, Dashnaktsutun would remain firm and present a united front. The decision was also taken to lend protection to Archbishop Nerses Melik-Tangian, the Prelate of Atrpatakan. Central Committee members were instructed not to leave the city and to remain with the people.

The provocative and subversive activities of the mobsters were mainly directed against Dashnaktsutun. They were spreading disinformation and spying on the Armenian community. Dashnaktsutun was firm and unwavering. However, there are always cowards and deserters who will betray their faith to gain an advantage or save their hide. Some members of Dashnaktsutun changed camp and became Cheka informants. They helped the Cheka put together a complete list of Atrpatakan ARF members. Ironically, in their haste to serve the enemy, the list they concocted showed the ARF to be 20–25,000 strong.

Dali Ghazo [*dali* meaning "crazy" in Turkish, a moniker given to him for his brave and fearless actions as a fedayee before the Sovietization of Armenia] was one of those lost souls. One day he came to me and told me that he had gone to Red Army headquarters and turned in his *Mauser*, saying, "I have fought against you, and now I surrender my weapon. Do what you want with me, kill me or forgive me." They had "graciously" forgiven him and now he was actively working for their side. I reproached him. I told him that he was a fool, that the Soviets would use him and then destroy him. He went away and I never saw him again. I won't name the other Dashnaktsakan unger who came to me and confessed that he was working for the Soviets and asked me not to trust him with any inside information. I was sad to hear that. He had been a valuable unger and I respected him for his honesty. He could have kept his dereliction secret and spied on us for the Soviet authorities.

The atmosphere grew even more tense when the daily *Vatan Yolenda* [meaning "On the road to the homeland" in Turkish] started publishing in Tabriz. The paper belonged to the secret police of Soviet Azerbaijan now stationed in the city. It was forcibly sold in the streets and in the schools. Almost every article called for the separation of Iranian Azerbaijan and its unification with Soviet Azerbaijan. The paper anathematized the Dashnaktsutiun, the Musavatists and the Fascists. It called them all German agents and threatened to destroy them. These provocations encouraged the mobsters in their anti-Armenian activities and fired them up to mount audacious attacks on the Armenian quarters. Of course, they were driven away each time by the armed young ARF watchmen guarding the streets.

It became necessary to meet the people in charge of *Vatan Yolenda* and explain our pro-Soviet and pro-Allied position. Obviously, I was the one to go meet them. The editorial office was located in a big building the Red Army had appropriated for its use on Pahlavi Avenue in the city center. A large part of the sidewalk in front of the building was blocked off with chains and two soldiers with machineguns were posted on either side. The guards checked me at the door and let me enter.

In the editor's office, I was met by an Azeri Turk from Baku, a short, heavy man with a dark complexion. He was pompous and arrogant, one of those types who think they own the world, with all mankind at their beck and call. Since I wasn't very fluent in Turkish, I asked for an interpreter. An Armenian officer joined us, a

tall, congenial, middle-aged man, and the conversation began. I informed the editor about the purpose of my visit, our position against Germany, and the fact that we had conducted negotiations with the Soviets before and after the invasion and had offered our support and assistance. Despite all that, I said, his paper was publishing provocative articles and inciting the mob against Armenians. I told him I was there to ask him to stop this conduct. He asked me to submit my points in writing to which I objected, saying that I was not there to write articles for the paper, and if he did not trust the validity of my explanations, he could check with the Soviet Consulate.

I have to admit that my visit bore no results. The provocations continued. What impressed me though and filled my heart with pride was the behavior of that Armenian officer, his overt pleasure when I explained our firm position and expressed my demands. An Armenian is an Armenian, no matter what regime he lives under. He belongs to the mother nation, the Armenian nation.

Under the occupation, our communications with the ARF leadership in Tehran were carried out solely through couriers. All other channels were controlled by the Soviets. We would send reports by trusted travelers to Varos Babayan,⁴ the Bureau representative, and receive

⁴ Varos Babayan, born in Alexandropol (Gyumri) in 1886, was an active member of the ARF from an early age. In 1918, he served in a high-ranking position in the Ministry of Labor in the government of the newly established Republic of Armenia. In 1921, together with other members of the government, he escaped the Bolsheviks and settled in Tabriz. There he worked as a teacher in Armenian schools. After the schools were closed in 1936, he moved to Tehran with his family. At the time of the narrative, he was the ARF Bureau representative in Iran.

feedback the same way.

We received information from reliable sources that Varos was about to be arrested. We relayed word of the imminent danger and asked him to leave Tehran for a while. The Tehran ungers also asked him to leave, but he decided to stay and be with the people in those trying times. Not very long after that, we received word of his abduction on December 26, 1941. There was no news of his whereabouts.⁵

I was devastated. My wife dropped her preparations for the New Year celebration. She foresaw disaster hanging over our family and she was frightened. The rank and file of the Atrpatakan ARF were in commotion. Their feelings were running very high. They were pushing for permission to reciprocate. It was hard to hold them back. Fearing an act of revenge, Agaronov went about with bodyguards. To appease him, we sent word that we did not intend to do anything in revenge, for the time being.

The Party leadership in Tehran was shaken by Varos Babayan's abduction. Disagreement and even stark opposition among the members of the Central Committee threatened the solidarity of the rank and file, especially when their disputes and clashes became the talk of the town and threatened the Party's prestige. The ripples reached Atrpatakan and jeopardized our stance vis-à-vis the occupying army. For that reason, the Central Committee in Tabriz decided that I should go to Tehran

and he was employed as the manager of *Alik's* publishing department.

⁵ The assumption is that Varos Babayan was arrested in Tehran by the Soviet NKVD and sent to the Soviet Union. It is also assumed that he died in prison in Moscow.

and talk some sense into our ungers. Zangezurtsi Grigor, a member of our armed defense group,⁶ accompanied me.

My mission was difficult and unpleasant. After several private meetings with ungers involved in the dispute and other important members of the organization, I came to realize that communist propaganda had successfully hit its target, had penetrated the organization and sown the seeds of disunity. Two members of the Central Committee demanded the dissolution of Varos Babayan's "pro-German" Central Committee and the election of a new pro-Soviet body, and they wanted to draft a staunch communist to the membership. That was outrageous. Soviet agents had been able to penetrate the very minds of our veteran ungers. I failed in my mission. There was nothing I could do to restore the erstwhile strength and unity of the ungers in Tehran.

Meanwhile, the Soviets continued to harass our ungers in Tabriz. One day I met Dr. Armenak Aftandilian in the street. He was bewildered. He told me that two Soviet soldiers had literally grabbed him off the street and taken him to attend a patient. Arriving at an office instead of a house, he had realized that there was no patient. Instead, a few more soldiers or officers had interrogated him about Dashnaktsutun, about its strategies and future plans. He had told them he was a physician and had no interest in politics. He was frightened. He said he wanted to obtain British citizenship. I calmed him down and

⁶ The reference is to a group of young ARFers, called *մարտական խումբ*, who had received special training to bear arms and to always be ready to counter the mob provocation and harassment of Armenian citizens.

said that changing his citizenship would not help him and promised to provide him with protection.

In order to avoid complications and arrests, we smuggled Hayk Stepanian out of town. He had come under suspicion and was being followed and harassed because of his former employment with a German company. We sent Onnik Chitjian away too. He was a member of the armed defense group and the mob had tried to gun him down in the street several times. We also had to help Krist escape because he had murdered his ungrateful friend Karo. When Karo had fled the Soviet Union in 1933, Krist had graciously taken him in to live in his house and work in his shop. After the occupation, Karo had changed completely. He became a Bolshevik propagandist and a mob leader. He was so corrupt that he dared to sexually harass Krist's daughter. That was the last straw. One day, with his whole family gathered around the table, Krist took out his gun and emptied the bullets into Karo. We immediately sent him to Hamadan to save him from the mobsters' wrath.

The interesting part of the story is that Karo's funeral turned into a Bolshevik anti-ARF demonstration in front of the building where the *mohajeers* had their headquarters. First they shouted their empty slogans and made hate speeches, then the mob picked up the casket and moved off toward the cemetery. But instead of burying the dead, they took the body out of the casket and carried it back to their headquarters. They had decided to take revenge on the enemy and then bury their hero. After another round of shouting and cursing the Dashnaks, they took

the body back to the cemetery. That is how empty-headed and absurd the Bolshevik sympathizers were.

The situation was the same in other regions of Atrpatakan. There was anarchy everywhere. The Turkish mob was stealing and looting and committing crimes in the streets and no one was stopping them. In Maragha, they swarmed and ransacked Dr. Melkonian's house. The Soviet occupying forces arrested his German wife, his son Sako and his daughter Nadia. Dr. Melkonian had already escaped from town. After lengthy negotiations and some threats, we managed to get the Soviets to release the family and allow them to go to Tehran.

In Salmast, a self-appointed group of two Turkish and one Armenian armed men ruled the streets and looted the poor Turkish and Armenian population. Although that Armenian man is dead now, I won't mention his name because afterward he nailed a "respected" social position for himself.

Arshak Sinanian, a dedicated and trustworthy representative of the ARF Committee in Rezaiyeh, was being constantly pursued, and that was because another member engaged in subversive activities had sabotaged the Committee and informed the Soviets. We believe there was no ideological motive involved in his apostasy: he only did it to save his neck. One day, Soviet soldiers besieged Arshak's house. A few Chekists entered and asked where Arshak was. Of course, he was still at work. Somehow he heard about the raid, and instead of going home, he took off on foot and reached Tabriz. We sent him to Tehran.

Despite all these unpleasant incidents, we managed to avoid any serious events, and that was because of our firm stance and restrained conduct. But the criminal acts of the so-called Bolshevik horde were intolerable. They had to be stopped so that life in the occupied region could be a little easier. To voice our complaints and demands, I met with Agaronov again, along with one of the Armenian officers who was participating in our negotiations. I asked these representatives of the Soviet Consulate in Tabriz to get the mob under control. I warned them that if one Armenian was killed, we would kill ten of theirs. The meeting had positive results. The irritating slogans and attacks on the Armenian quarters stopped.

The hardest blow to the Tabriz organization was the arrest of Khachatur Grigorian, a key member of the ARF. Under Soviet pressure, the Iranian government or the shadow government in Tabriz arrested him in the fall of 1943. After holding him in the central police station in Tabriz for a few days, they sent him to an unknown destination. We put all our secret connections and investigative machinery to work and found out that he was in Rasht, together with other prisoners, and from there the Soviets were going to ship him to the Soviet Union. Fortunately, through the intervention of the Tehran government and the Allies, the Soviets agreed to free their Turkish and Armenian prisoners, including Andre Ter-Ohanian, another ARF leader. Khachatur Grigorian returned to Tabriz but died not long afterwards, succumbing to the illness he had contracted in prison.

The ARF lost a valued member, a selfless, dedicated and humble unger who became one more victim of Soviet persecution. We had given him a timely warning of the Soviets' intention to arrest him but he had trusted them and, despite our admonition, he had continued his relationship with them.

The Soviets were in Atrpatakan to stay. In the world of politics, it is a known fact that when a Soviet soldier sets foot on foreign soil, he hardly ever leaves. The Allies had occupied Iran in order to secure a vital supply line to the Soviet Union, among other reasons. But the Soviets had an ulterior motive: the separation of Iranian Azerbaijan from Iran and its unification with Soviet Azerbaijan, that is, the expansion of the Soviet Empire. The political and military machinery they established in Atrpatakan was relentlessly and systematically engaged in open and clandestine activities geared toward that goal.

The only obstacle to these activities was not the Iranian government, which was weak and dysfunctional in Azerbaijan at the time, but the agents of Turkey who were working toward their own goal of joining Iranian Azerbaijan to Turkey. Mind you, they had more sympathizers among Turkish intellectuals than the Soviets did. Obviously, as a political player in Atrpatakan, we were resolutely opposed to any annexation and we stood in defense of Iran's independence and territorial integrity. But in those dire circumstances, our role was inconsequential. Meanwhile, the presence of the Red Army was tipping the scale.

The Soviets were stirring up the educated Turkish

youth against the central government, accentuating Tehran's wrongful policies in Azerbaijan and convincing them that their only deliverance would be the separation and independence of the province. That was the Soviets' way of rousing the nationalist Turks. But it was merely a cover for their ultimate goal, the annexation of the province of Azerbaijan, and in order to realize that goal they were preaching communism. After laying the groundwork, they established [in the fall of 1941] the Tudeh Party of Iran [*tudeh* meaning "masses" in Persian]. Then they began to manipulate the Tudeh to their advantage. Aside from the mass demonstrations and full cooperation with the Soviet authorities, the high point and grand achievement of Tudeh actions in Atrpatakan was the short-lived, Soviet-sponsored Azerbaijan People's Government in Iranian Azerbaijan [November 1945], with Tabriz as its capital and a puppet government in place. By then, I was already in exile, toiling in a Soviet labor camp. I read about it in *Pravda*. According to the paper, the "patriots" of Azerbaijan were exalted by their victory.

Needless to say, the de facto separation of a portion of Iranian territory and the Soviet refusal to withdraw their forces from Iran contravened the promises the Allies had made at the Roosevelt-Stalin-Churchill conference in 1943. They clearly broke the covenant. But that is and always has been how the Soviets operate.

Azerbaijan had indeed become a hub of Soviet propaganda and a prelude to Soviet expansion in the East. Tabriz functioned as a window to the outside world.

There were frequent visits by artists as well as musical groups and theatrical troops. Concerts and exhibitions were staged, and the performance by the Ayvazyan Jazz Group was one of those cultural showcases.

The Diasporan Armenian is a strange being when it comes to anything pertaining to Armenia. We become sentimental patriots and we welcome, honor and celebrate the artist, scientist or writer who comes from Armenia. Thus the atmosphere was one of jubilation when the Ayvazyan Jazz Group came to Tabriz. The entire Armenian population of the city turned out to greet them, forgetting for a moment the wretched situation they were living in. Obviously, I had no intention of going to their concert, given the unsafe environment, and also because we knew through our connections that there was a plan afoot to arrest Archbishop Melik-Tangian and myself. I preferred to be more cautious and not show up in a busy public place. In that dangerous situation, I received an "invitation" to attend the concert.

I was sipping my coffee in Davit's café one day when the two Armenian officers from the Soviet consulate came in, took a table and ordered Armenian coffee. We did not greet each other. "Outside of this room," they had cautioned me during our meetings, "we do not know each other." Before leaving the café, they approached Davit's sister at the cash register and engaged her in conversation. While they were talking, she turned her head and gazed at me a few times. Thus I knew they were talking about me. When the officers left, Davit's sister came over and told me they were asking about me, who I was and what

my name was. Then they asked her to tell me that I was invited to go to the concert and to express my opinion about the event. That was my "invitation" to the Ayvazyan Jazz Group's concert, which sounded more like an order.

What to do? Why did they want me to go? I consulted a few friends. They all agreed that if I didn't go, the Soviets would think I was afraid. They advised me to go but to take safety precautions. So I went, accompanied by my wife Parik and my friend Samson Khachikian.

During the first intermission, Samson and I went out to the foyer to smoke. Agaronov was there with a Russian officer. The officer approached me and asked for a light from my cigarette. That was odd. Was it a way of marking me for recognition? I was intrigued and wanted to find out what was going on. During the second intermission, we went to the other side of the foyer from where we could see the back lot. There was a car parked there and Agaronov and the Russian officer were circling around it at a rapid pace. And they weren't just strolling. They were up to something.

The concert ended and we walked out. An Indian officer of the British Army joined us and walked alongside us without a word until we reached the main street. He then cast me a look and left us. Was it just a coincidence? Or did the British know the Soviets were out to arrest or abduct me? A number of our ungers were waiting at the end of the street to accompany us home. Evidence uncovered later would show that this was the first Soviet attempt to abduct me.

The persecution ramped up. Our sources told us there

were going to be new arrests and abductions of the ARF leadership. The intent was to frighten our membership and break our solidarity. And indeed, they succeeded. There was disquiet, impatience, intolerance, and more importantly, protest against our inaction. And there were many cases of defiance and faltering allegiance. The ARF Central Committee in consultation with other Party members decided that I should meet with the authorities and question their conduct in the face of our neutral stance on internal politics and our loyalty to the Allies.

I went to the consulate to discuss the situation and ask for an explanation, particularly about the arrests of Varos Babayan and Khachatur Grigorian. It was December 15, 1943. The two Armenian Red Army officers whom I had already met several times denied having arrested Varos Babayan. "He may be hiding in one of your villages," they said. As for Khachatur Grigorian, they reminded me that "your own government arrested him." I responded by saying that we knew where they were and who had arrested them. But it was useless. The meeting ended in ambiguity, with no result.

Leaving the consulate, I headed straight to Panos Zhamharian's residence where our ungers had gathered to hear my report. We were all very worried and pessimistic about what was coming. As we sat down to dinner, Hayk Ajemian turned to me and said, "Unger Baghdik, this is your last dinner with your ungers, just like Christ's last supper with his disciples."

He was right. It happened. It was inevitable.

I was abducted.

Even though it was expected and unavoidable, it was a tough blow, really detrimental for me and my family.

Our agents had cautioned me that the local Soviet political agencies had decided to abduct me and Archbishop Melik-Tangian, or to assassinate us if the abduction failed. We advised the Prelate to be extra careful and added guards in and around the Diocese.⁷ During one of Soviet Consul Navasartian's frequent visits to the Prelate, the latter had innocently asked him, "I hear you've decided to arrest Baghdik and me." As usual, Navasartian had denied the rumor and asked, "Who told you that?" The Prelate had replied, "Baghdik did."

I believe that expedited my abduction.

It was January 3, 1944, three days before Armenian Christmas, Epiphany, and my name day which we always celebrated with a lavish reception for friends and relatives at our home.⁸ Before 11:00 AM that morning, I walked out of Davit's café and headed toward my school. After I finished my work in the chemistry lab there, I walked to [Ghazar] Makunts' factory which was located on Pahlavi Avenue, near the Cheka. He was a member of our Central Committee and I periodically visited him and other members of the CC to discuss current issues.

⁷ My father refused to have any bodyguards accompany him. Had he had a bodyguard, at least the man would have testified as to when, where and how my father was abducted.

⁸ The Armenian Apostolic Church has dedicated various days of the year to Christian saints. If a person is named after a saint, that saint's day becomes his or her "name day" and is celebrated as such. My father was named after Balthazar (Baghdassar in Armenian), one of the three Magi celebrated on Epiphany. I remember as a young child the lavish dinner party my mother always organized on January 6. I also remember that after my father's disappearance, that day was always a day of mourning for us.

As I was passing the Cheka building, an Armenian officer grabbed me in the back and said, "Let's go in here. Give me your gun." "I am not a soldier," I replied. "I don't carry a gun."

By that time, another officer had pushed me through the door. Moments later, I was in their office being interrogated. I remember the following conversation taking place between me and the officer.

What is your first and last name?

Who are you looking for?

Baghdik Minassian.

You are not mistaken.

What is your position and your role in Dashnaktsutun?

Who were you looking for and who did you arrest?

The Central Committee representative of the Atrpatakan Dashnaktsutun.

You are not mistaken.

Put all the money you have on the table.

I emptied my pocket, about twenty-nine riyals [about eighty cents].

Do you have dollars?

We are in Iran, not the United States, I replied, guessing what he really meant.

The interrogation ended there. They put a sack on my head which I angrily pulled off. The Cheka officer explained that they were doing that for my own good, for my reputation, so the neighbors wouldn't recognize me. They covered my face with the lapels of my overcoat and led me like a blind person down to the backyard and into the basement prison. It was cold and humid in that cold

winter of Tabriz, with a dirt floor, no windows and no furniture. I couldn't sit or lie down. Rats would attack my feet and my ears. I walked back and forth, day and night, smoking all the time.

For the first time in my life I had the bitter feeling of humiliation and disgrace. I felt stripped of my willpower. And these feelings raised a tempest in my inner world.

It was during one of those days or nights, I couldn't tell the difference, when I heard the wailing voice of a child screaming, "Papa jan!" I was convinced it was my daughter Rubina calling her lost, disappeared father.

More than thirty years have passed and I still haven't forgotten that heartrending cry.



Varos Babayan, ARF Bureau
representative in Iran



The streets of old Tabriz



Soviet troops crossing the Iranian border



Soviet tanks of the 6th Armoured Division in
the streets of Tabriz

Chapter Four

The NKVD prison in Yerevan, the indictment, and the journey to Siberia

After three days and nights, the prison guard opened the door and took me upstairs to the office.¹ “We are sending you to Yerevan,” the officer said. “You will return home in a few days.” And then, to frighten me, he turned to the officer who was going to accompany me and ordered, “Kill him if he tries to escape.”

They covered me with a Soviet soldier’s cape, put a soldier’s cap on my head and took me down to the backyard where a truck was waiting. My escort consisted of four Russian soldiers with automatic rifles and the Armenian officer with a *Nagant* revolver. We were driven to the Tabriz train station where I was put into a special compartment, surrounded by the same armed guards, and the train took off.

The Armenian officer went to sleep, gun in hand. I

¹ This chapter continues the narration in my father’s voice. See chapter 3, footnote 1, for further explanation.

had reassured him that I had no intention of trying to escape, so he could rest. After a little while, the ticket collector opened the door, peeked in, backed out and closed the door. I recognized him. I had seen him in the store of one of our ungers, Nerses Passian. The thought that that Armenian ticket collector would tell Nerses about me put my mind at ease. Our people would know that the Soviets had abducted me and were taking me to the Soviet Union.²

At daybreak we reached Julfa on the Iranian-Soviet border. I saw the Arax River and suddenly remembered a dream I had seen two years ago. I was strolling with my wife and children when a blue lake spread out before me. My wife and children disappeared. I began calling them and frantically searching for them but I couldn’t see or hear them. I was distraught. I wouldn’t see my wife and children anymore. I had woken up and breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God! It was just a dream. And now the River Arax separated me from my wife and children. My dream was coming true. I won’t see them again. I was woefully distressed imagining my children growing up as orphans and suffering as I had suffered in my childhood.

We had to wait ten hours at Julfa for the train to arrive from Baku to take us to Yerevan. Meanwhile, they locked me in a shack together with my guard. To start a conversation, or to what purpose I do not know, the guard said to me, “I really miss the meetings

² Obviously, the Armenian railroad employee understood very well what was going on but did not share it with anyone. Once again, in that dreadful atmosphere, fear overcame morality.

[demonstrations]." Calmly and with some sarcasm, I replied, "Isn't there anything else to miss?" That was the end of the conversation. Finally, the "prison" door opened and I was taken to the train, surrounded by soldiers.

They seated us in a corner of the wagon so that I couldn't see any passengers but I could hear them talking. A Western Armenian fellow was loudly criticizing the government, complaining about the dire living conditions and the hard work. The other passengers kept quiet, neither affirming nor contradicting his "criticism." Most likely, their life experience had taught them to ignore such critics and protesters who were obviously informers and spies. That was one of the tactics of the manhunt. Indeed, the Soviets are masters at concocting an accusation, abducting or simply stealing people. That is characteristic of their politics even today.

The train stopped in Yerevan. After all the passengers were gone, they let me off. Martial law was in force and the station was submerged in darkness. Once in a while an anti-fascist billboard caught my eye in the dark. A military officer—who happened to be my future interrogator—received me and rode with me in a car. Soon we were in an office in the Cheka building in Yerevan.

After some formalities, and after taking every object from me that could have been used to commit suicide, they put me in a cell. It was clean and warm, a real paradise compared to my cell in Tabriz. But I was in the Cheka prison, a notorious place known for murderous torture throughout the history of Bolshevik Communism. But

it didn't matter anymore. I had made peace with death. Death was not my enemy. The boundary between life and death was erased for me. I was calm and composed. I had not slept for days, so I lay down on the wooden floor and went to sleep.

Suddenly, I felt a hard kick. The prison guard was kicking me to wake up. I stood up with difficulty, moaning and groaning. My body ached all over from sleeping on the bare floor. "What did you expect?" the guard snapped. "Silk bedding? You Dashnak-Fascist!"

He took me to a room with black curtains covering the walls. The same man who rode with me from the train station was there, Ruben Ghazaryan, my interrogator, very proud of his Artsakhtsi origin. He said he was taking me to see Martirosyan, the Minister of National Security,³ which he said was an honor for me, an honor I did not care for at all. After passing through long corridors, we entered Martirosyan's office. He was sitting behind a desk covered with green baize, and above his head, on the wall behind him, two large portraits of the two Bolshevik idols, Lenin and Stalin, reigned over the room. Six Armenian officers were sitting near the Minister's desk. At some distance from the desk, there was an ordinary chair, the seat of the accused. They ordered me to take that seat and the interrogation began.

I was still very tired. I was afraid I might weaken and say something that would be used against me. I had to find a way to abort the session. I decided to exploit

3 The reference is to the commissar of the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) of the Armenian SSR.

Martirosyan's personality. He had blue eyes and an agitated expression. Such people are usually edgy and short-tempered.

He made a few accusations and declared, "The Dashnaktsutun Party is detrimental to the Armenian nation and should be disbanded." The moment had come too soon. I put on a calm expression and said, "Political parties are not born to order and do not die to order. People's needs and demands give birth to them, and history and events make them disappear. Now the needs and the history of the Armenian nation will show which party should disappear, the Dashnaktsutun or the Bolshevik Party." Martirosyan was startled. He stood up and began pacing the room. "*Nastayashchi* [real] Dashnak," he grumbled through his teeth. "Take him and show him around Yerevan," he ordered in Russian. "We'll break him." Thanks to his temperament, I had achieved my goal.

Ruben Ghazaryan, who was also the Deputy Minister of National Security, took me in his car and drove me through the streets of Yerevan. I honestly have to say that I was not very much impressed or elated or enchanted, such that Martirosyan could "break" the "*nastayashchi* Dashnak" in me.

We returned to Ghazaryan's office and the prison guard took me down to the basement and locked me up in cell No. 3.

My cell was very small, two paces wide by three or four paces long. There was no furniture. During the daytime I would sit on the "bedding." It was forbidden to sleep during the day. There was a small opening in a corner

of the ceiling where a dim light entered. My cell was separated from the long corridor by an iron door which had a small door in it with a glass peephole. That was for the guard to check on the prisoner and wake him up with a roar of curses and insults if he dared to sleep during the day. The iron door was opened once in the morning and once at night to let the prisoner out to use the toilet. It was also opened to take the prisoner to interrogation, and that usually occurred after 10:00 o'clock at night. Meals were handed in through the small door.

Two guards took turns watching my cell, occasionally shouting a sentence or two at me. One was an Alexandrapoltsi, always cross and gloomy. The other was a Karsetsi, serious, gentle and more humane.

I wasn't taken to the Minister's office again. I remained in solitary confinement in that cell for sixteen months, enduring endless nightly interrogations, waiting for the bill of indictment that would not come.

How unbearable is loneliness! How sad it is to live one's life in solitude, punishment within punishment. My only interlocutor was the tough and unyielding interrogator, not counting the three stool pigeons at different times, each one for a week or ten days, thrown into my narrow cell with pronounced boorishness. The Cheka had a group of these informers in its service and planted them in cells to spy on detainees. These lowly creatures were given a piece of *chorni khleb* [the lowest quality of dark bread] and some *makhorka* (*tabacum rustica*, the lowest-quality cigarettes) while performing their service. There were some of these types in the labor camps as well, but the

criminal prisoners took care of them by beating them up and throwing them out of the barracks.

It is ironic what the famous Russian writer and poet Mikhail Lermontov said during his incarceration: "At least here I can speak freely." Apparently there were no spies in tsarist prisons. That was a Bolshevik invention.

My formal interrogations were long, brutal, depressing and soul-destroying, but I must say, without physical torture. I remember the first session. I am sitting on the seat of the accused without any formal accusation against me. Ruben Ghazaryan is behind his desk. As a psychological ploy, to intimidate me and break my self-confidence, he takes his *Nagant* revolver out of the drawer and places it on the desk.⁴ Then he opens a fat, bulging file to give me an impression of how much material has been collected on me and how grave my crime is. To show my indifference toward the spectacle, I ask,

Please tell me where I am.

You are in Yerevan in the National Security Building.

I am a foreign citizen. Why have you arrested me and brought me here?

It is war time and power is might, he replies coldly.

The interrogation begins and the questions cover a lengthy period, from 1921 to 1944, that is, from the Sovietization of Armenia to the day of my arrest.

Almost every night during the five or six months of

⁴ This must have been a common practice during interrogations. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn explains: "As long ago as 1919 the chief method used by the interrogator was a *revolver on the desk*. . . . The frightening revolver lies there and sometimes it is aimed at you. . . ." *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, I-II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 97.

my interrogation in Yerevan, the inquisitions covered a wide range of issues, but without any formal accusation. Evidently, the Soviet Armenian National Security Service had no case against me and was trying to concoct something by breaking the "*nastayashchi* Dashnak" and making me say things they could use against me. That is truly against all standards of human rights or any acceptable conventions, but that is the Soviet judicial system.

During these "preliminary" cross-examinations, my interrogator and the other Chekists in attendance treated me politely, in a civilized manner, without inflicting any physical pain. Contrary to many Armenian prisoners whom I met in the labor camp, I did not experience the brutality and torture they had gone through.

My interrogator and I addressed each other as *Baron* [Mr.], which at least in appearance showed mutual respect. Significantly, Mr. Ghazaryan never used the derogatory term "Dashnak" but always "Dashnaktsutun" or "HoHiDashnaktsutun." Perhaps my unyielding stance made him respect me and my Party. On many occasions, he told me stories of similar situations or brought up examples as if to encourage me to continue my unwavering posture. On one occasion, when I told him that my Party discipline and my principles did not allow me to answer a particular question, he retorted,

A Red Army officer was tortured by the Gestapo but he didn't give in.

What do you expect? If a Russian refused to concede and revealed no secrets, how can an Armenian and a

Dashnaktsakan give up his Party's secrets?

Then he told me another story.

We arrested a Turk (from Turkey). He wouldn't say anything so we let him starve for a few days. Then we asked him, "Do you want food?" He said, "Yes," and he ate the food. Then we asked him if he wanted fruit, and he ate the fruit too, and he began to talk. We got what we needed out of him, but he turned into a worthless creature in our eyes.

Conspicuously showing that I was hurt, I replied,

I'd like to believe that you would not compare me with an ignorant and voracious Turk. You know very well from our history that Armenians will not sell their soul, their pride, their moral values and their dignity to save their skin.

Some questions, posed rather as accusations, came up repeatedly during these nightly interrogations. However, Ghazaryan always listened to my responses attentively, as if to fully absorb my explanations. One of his favorite questions, or rather allegations, was that Dashnaktsutiun was fighting against "us" and was engaged in subversive and destructive activities in Armenia. My answer was always the same, simple and consistent:

Dashnaktsutiun is fighting not against Armenia but against Soviet Russia which has usurped Armenia and is sitting on it. We have struggled through the printed media and not in material terms. Besides, we would never engage in harmful activities in Armenia because Armenia belongs to all Armenians. As an Armenian national

organization, Dashnaktsutiun could never harm the Armenian people. Political regimes come and go. They are temporary. The Armenian people and their homeland Armenia are permanent and eternal.

Another subject of interest to my interrogator was the wartime activities of Dro and Nzhdeh. "Your Dro and Nzhdeh and their armed troops are fighting on the German side against the Red Army," he said repeatedly. And I would explain to him, as we had proclaimed and I had explained to the Soviet representatives during our negotiations in Tabriz, that Dashnaktsutiun was on the side of the Allies. As far as I knew, Dro and Nzhdeh were not fighting in the war: their goal was to save Armenian POWs from being executed in German camps.

One assertion that Ghazaryan repeated time and again was that Dashnaktsutiun had an army of 25,000 in Iran ready to fight the Soviets. Did the Soviets really believe that about the Armenians of Iran? I tried to explain that a community of 80–100,000 cannot muster an army of 25,000: what we had there was a small group of men who were armed merely to protect and defend the Armenian community. But apparently he was not convinced. He came back to this issue again and again.

I was accused of having planned the assassination of Soviet officials in Tabriz. I had to explain the facts to him: "Has anyone been assassinated? If not, no such plan exists, because as you know very well, Dashnaktsutiun's bullet does not miss its target."

He kept pressing me to tell him who the members of the Tabriz Central Committee were and what decisions had been made in the ARF General Congress. Obviously, I had no response to that. My political convictions and the discipline I had embraced since I was a teenager prevented me from answering such questions.

To his outrageous idea about our relations with the British, I kept answering, "The British are *your* allies. We have no need to develop a relationship with them."

The "preliminary" cross-examinations finally came to an end. They didn't call me for questioning for about two weeks. One day, after a long period of waiting, the iron door opened with its nerve-wracking squeal. A guard walked in and called me for *dapros* (interrogation).

I was surprised, since my interrogations usually took place after 10:00 o'clock at night. This must be something extraordinary. I was taken to another section of the Cheka where they photographed me and took my fingerprints, then I was sent back to my cell. That was a puzzle and made me think for a long time. That kind of registration and documentation of prisoners normally takes place during the first days of incarceration, not six months later. Was this a good omen or a bad one? I couldn't tell.

I had been abducted and brought to Yerevan and kept in solitary confinement so that no other prisoner would see me or know of my existence. That worried me, although I no longer dreaded death. But I knew that one day they would get rid of me without a trace in order to cover up their crime of abduction. On the other hand, the optimist in me suggested that the Cheka was

legalizing my imprisonment.

Ten days passed, full of anxiety and contradictory thoughts. My iron door opened again and I heard the infernal call, "*Dapros*."

I am in my interrogator's office, sitting on the seat of the accused. Ghazaryan very ceremoniously opens the file and with an officious poise begins to read the indictment. "Why now?" I protest. "Shouldn't this bill of indictment have been presented to me at the beginning and not after six months of interrogation?" But inside I am somehow content. The indictment is proof that the Cheka has acknowledged my incarceration. I am no longer "stolen goods."

About the content of my indictment, I should say that it incorporated all the issues brought up during the interrogations, and that my answers and explanations had no role in it or effect on it. After the presentation of the official indictment, however, the interrogations continued for another few months. They asked the same questions and I gave the same answers. That was the official interrogation at the end of which I signed the official indictment papers. The Russian version was attached to the Armenian text.

The next step should have been a trial. I waited a long time, but there was no news of a possible trial. I was becoming impatient and nervous. My only pastime was the reading material they gave me, mostly old books that I devoured anyway. One night, during a now rare session with Ghazaryan, I asked him why my trial was being delayed for so long. I was surprised to hear that my

dossier had been sent to Moscow where a Special Council of three was going to examine it and decide my fate, without my presence, without a lawyer to defend my case, without a chance to say my last words. How unfortunate! "Free and thriving" Armenia was deprived of the right to try, pass judgment and punish an Armenian who had committed a "crime" against her. What was the difference then between the Armenian *gubernia* of Tsarist Russia and today's Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia? This was an insult to my national pride and dignity, but these things count for nothing for the tyrannical colonialist that Soviet Russia was.

Months passed, until one day the prison guard informed me that the Special Council in Moscow had sentenced me to ten years of forced labor in prison labor camps. I was kept waiting again.

On April 15, 1945, sixteen months after my imprisonment, the iron door to my cell opened for the last time and the Alexandrapoltsi prison guard yelled, "*Saberay sveshchami*," that is "Collect your things." I had nothing to collect so I walked out. He took me to his office and said, "You protested against the verdict and the sentence. Now we are sending you to Moscow. Go there and tell them what you want."

That was a big lie, no doubt, a cover for the decision that had already been handed down from above. They took me to the railway station and put me in a prison wagon. There was a Georgian NCO [non-commissioned officer] and two soldiers in the compartment next to mine. They were in charge of escorting me to Rostov.

And so began my long and torturous journey to exile. At the time, I didn't know where I was headed, an unknown, uncertain destiny.... Later I learned that I had been exiled to Narilsk, to the frozen Tundra, the Taymyr Peninsula, the permafrost zone, inside the Arctic Circle. My journey would take me from Yerevan to Tiflis [Tbilisi], Baku, Rostov, Moscow, east over the Ural mountains, across Siberia to Krasnoyarsk, and from there up the Yenisei River to Narilsk, my final destination.

Farewell my beloved homeland, Armenia, suffering under the yoke of foreign usurpers. Farewell my Yerevan, deprived of the freedom you so helplessly aspire to. I am going to my death. I will pass, but you will endure. You are forever....

Early the next morning we arrived in Tiflis. All the passengers got off but I was kept locked in my prison wagon. It was very cold. I was shivering from cold and distress. I needed to relieve myself, but where and how? I was a prisoner under lock and key, with no rights whatsoever. My sixteen months of solitary confinement had not taught me the impudence, the vulgarity, the audaciousness and all the other inhumane qualities a prisoner needs to survive.

The next stop was Baku. Here too, as in Tiflis, a loudspeaker was broadcasting the imminent end of the war and Russia's victory, praising Generalissimo Stalin for having saved the Soviet Union and the entire world from the claws of Fascism.

It took us a few days to get to Rostov. There I was taken under armed guard by my Georgian escort on a

long walk from the railway station. We came to a large building that turned out to be the prisoner distribution center. The grounds were surrounded by high barriers of barbed wire studded by watchtowers from which armed soldiers overlooked the premises. Inside the building, there were thousands of detainees, already adjudicated and sentenced, waiting to serve their time and take their punishment. Some sat idle, some were pacing, miserable creatures speaking in hushed voices, perhaps talking about their families now left fatherless. Their faces expressed deep anxiety and all the evil of the world. It seemed that the making of the Soviet citizen, or *homo sovieticus*, started right here in the distribution center, a project embodying the Soviet ideological aim, a grand endeavor engaging communist theoreticians and the entire social, political, economic and cultural leadership of the Soviet Union.

Despite all the misfortune around me in that huge detention camp, I felt better there. I was surrounded by others who shared my destiny. I could move, I could speak to other prisoners. Months of solitary confinement had affected me gravely, and every so often I was visited by excruciating nightmares.

Alas, a vicious call cut short my few days of "happy" life in the camp: "Prisoner Minassian, *saberay sveshchami*."

The guard took me outside where the "Black Raven" was waiting, the infamous black cargo truck used to transport condemned prisoners to the place of their execution. An eighteen- or twenty-year-old Russian girl at the door shouted at me with sadistic pleasure, "Go,

fascist! You'll never see the sun again."⁵

The death-car moved off and I was taken back to the Rostov railway station. Again I was locked in a prison wagon attached to the passenger train, with three armed guards in the compartment next to me. The Georgians had been replaced by Kalmyk soldiers.⁶ We reached Moscow where my prison wagon was detached and shunted off to a siding.

Although I knew very well that my prison guard in Yerevan had egregiously lied to me, I still retained a flicker of hope. Perhaps they had actually brought me to Moscow for a real trial. But no such thing. If they had wanted to grant me a real trial, they would have taken me there directly and not kept me locked in this wagon for three days.

My wagon was reattached and the train finally got on its way. I was sent to Krasnoyarsk, a metallurgical town, relatively new at the time, with a population of 484,000. Krasnoyarsk spread out on both sides of the Yenisei River which rises in the far south near Lake Baikal and runs north to the Taymyr Peninsula where it flows into the Kara Sea and thence to the Arctic Ocean. The Yenisei is only navigable for a month and a half or two months

5 Here I must note that by this time my father was already quite familiar with the Russian language which he later perfected in the lagers. By his own account, the Czech language he had mastered at the university in Prague helped him to learn another Slavic language.

6 The Kalmyks belong to the Mongolian group and were mostly concentrated on the western shores of the Caspian Sea. They are Buddhist by religion. See Viktor Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). In December 1943, NKVD agents entered Kalmyk homes, drove entire families out and deported them to various places in Siberia, and the Kalmyk community was broken and scattered.

a year, from late June to August, and for the rest of the year it is frozen over. Transportation of new prisoners as well as Cheka personnel, foodstuffs, clothing, tools, machinery and construction materials from Krasnoyarsk to Norilsk and the Taymyr took place during the short period of ice melt.

It was late at night when we arrived in Krasnoyarsk. I was taken to the transit camp, another prison. The receiving guard threw me into the barracks with a rude gesture and locked the door. It was full of detainees, another sight of the misery of humankind, of the physical, psychological and moral tragedy of the "homeland of Socialism." Most of the prisoners were asleep. I looked around and began anxiously pacing the room.

"Hey! What are you doing?" a man shouted at me. "What are you looking for? This ain't no Grand Hotel here. Lie down and go to sleep." He probably figured out that I was new to the situation.

At dawn, the wretched victims of the regime woke up and, one group after another, they went to the latrine (*barasha*) in a corner of the barracks to satisfy their natural needs. A few employees came in to check whether there had been any escapees during the night, after which the orderlies on duty that day took the latrine tank out to empty it. The stench was gone and the air became relatively breathable. Then breakfast was served: a soup made of fish heads and 300 grams of soggy black bread full of sand. The prisoners ate their meal, thanked God and cursed Father Stalin, the leader of all humanity.

At the Krasnoyarsk transit camp, the inmates were

given a thorough medical examination for the purpose of evaluating their physical capability. They were then divided into three categories according to their physical strength and "sold" to various enterprises.

I had already gotten to know my fellow inmates. They were mostly from western Ukraine, ultra-nationalist, anti-Russian and anti-Soviet. They were proponents of a free and independent Ukraine and critical of the political position of Ukrainian Russians. The Special Council in Moscow had sentenced them to twenty-five years of forced labor and they were subjected to a special regime. I was surprised at being put together with them. Perhaps I too was condemned to forced labor, contrary to what I had been told in Yerevan.

The situation in that transit camp was horrible in every respect. Our hair and beard grew like bushes. It was an annoying feeling but there was nothing to shave with. Anything sharp that could be used to commit suicide or to harm others was confiscated. Yet situations bring about the ingenuity that produces the necessary means, no matter how crude or primitive. An inmate came up with an "invention." With cold water and a piece of broken glass he had found, he shaved the prisoners and received fifty grams of bread from each one. Mind you, there was more blood than hair shedding from their faces.

It was my turn. All blood. It took me a long time to stop the bleeding.⁷

⁷ Here my father's memoir ended, but he had not yet reached his final destination. Shortly after his death, I delved into the mass of his handwritten papers in an effort to find the continuation of his journey, with the intention of publishing his memoir someday. In the next chapter, I will guide the reader through that journey.



National Security headquarters (KGB), Nalbandian Street, Yerevan;
Commissar Aramakis Yerznkanyan (who became a victim of 1937–38 purges) ordered the construction of this building to replace the old one which was too small to house all the political prisoners



Krasnoyarsk to Norilsk via the Yenisei River



Ministry of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the Armenian Soviet Republic in 1936



Norilsk on the world map



Prisoners in Norillag



Prisoners building a copper factory in Norilsk in 1949



Norilsk camp (Norillag), 1951

Chapter Five

My effort to continue the narrative: Life in Stalin's Gulag

The report on my father's abduction and sentence of exile which I initially received from the National Security Service of the Republic of Armenia did not satisfy me.¹ It only validated my intuition that my father's file was in fact still in the KGB archives. I assumed that the report was a hastily written synopsis of the existing file. I knew there was more. There had to be more....

I did not give up. I tried every connection I could think of. And finally one worked. A friend in Armenia promised he would get copies of everything in my father's file. I waited in anticipation.

Lo and behold, a year after I had received the initial report, when this book was in the final stage of

¹ This report, dated April 6, 2016, came in response to my inquiry of March 29, 2016. See my introduction and a scan of the report following the introduction.

production, I received a thick envelope. The pessimist in me was pleasantly surprised. I really have to thank my friend, who must remain anonymous, for his efforts.

The envelope contained the so-called Search Protocol, the first bureaucratic record of my father's arrest, a two-page form filled out as the detainee was being subjected to a full-body search prior to his first interrogation, which in my father's case took place in Yerevan. Interestingly, the primary language of the form, including its heading, is Georgian, with the Russian version below each line. The form itself, though, was filled out in Russian.

The date, January 3, 1944, and the duration of the search, from 11:00 to 11:35, indicate that the Search Protocol was filled out right after my father was manhandled into the Cheka building in Tabriz. Next come the names of the authorized agent, K. K. Sultanyan, OKR Smersh 15,² who conducted the body search, and the witnesses, First Lieutenant Mdivani and First Sergeant Klochkov. Curiously, though, the line pertaining to the arrest order (Arrest made in accord with Order No. _____, from _____, date _____) is blank. The Search Protocol also lists the items confiscated during the search: two notebooks, fourteen pages of documents and letters, and one copy each of the Armenian-language periodicals *Lusaber* and *Hairenik*. At the bottom of the form, reference is finally made to File No. 54719 for further information on the arrest order and search details.

² Smersh is an abbreviation of *smert shpionam* ("death to spies" in Russian). This counterintelligence and counterterrorism organization, an offshoot of the NKVD, was established by Stalin in late 1942 and functioned until 1946.

The list of confiscated items is completed on a separate form to include a wallet, comb, belt, handkerchief, tie, pen, wristwatch, and currency in the amount of 29 riyals and 50 dinars (equivalent to about 80 cents). A receipt in my father's handwriting, dated January 6, 1944, attached to the form, indicates that the 29 riyals and 50 dinars were returned to him on the day he was dispatched to Yerevan. There is no mention of the other confiscated items.

A second set of documents includes the so-called Interrogation Protocol, dated January 8, 1944, apparently a record of the first formal interrogation session in the NKVD prison in Yerevan. This form is headed, in Russian, "Armenian SSR, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, State Security Administration." The two-page form with twenty questions in Russian is filled out in Armenian and basically contains personal information on my father as well as information on his family members, parents and siblings. It is continued on five additional pages, all neatly written in Armenian, apparently a close record of his responses to the interrogation.

Following the primary questions related to his personal life, the first question is, "Since when do you consider yourself a Dashnaktsakan?" To which my father replies, "I have been a member of the ARF Youth Organization since 1919 and a Party member since 1928." From here on, the questions concern the structure of the Dashnaktsutun and my father's membership and position in the organization. Interposed here and there are questions about the identity of Party members serving on various leadership bodies, to which my father

refuses any comment, always giving the same reply: "My Party discipline and my principles do not allow me to answer that." To a question about the membership of the ARF Central Committee of Atrpatakan, my father responds that, due to the extraordinary wartime situation in 1941, the regional conference where, according to the organization's bylaws, the Central Committee is elected, did not convene. "Consequently, as an exception, Varos Babayan, the ARF Bureau representative, appointed the members of the Central Committee, with me as the representative. As to the identity of the rest of the members," he is recorded as saying, "that is a secret I cannot reveal."

My father's signature appears on every page of the Interrogation Protocol. On the last page, he attests to the accuracy of the record with his signature. The document is also signed by Ghazaryan, head of the NKVD's Investigation Department. The session is recorded as having begun at 1:00 and "interrupted" (not ended) at 4:35. I presume the time-keeping followed military protocol, hence, the session lasted from 1:00 AM to 4:35 AM, which is consistent with the NKVD practice of night-time interrogation.

My father's memoir mentions his formal registration, fingerprinting and photographing as having taken place six months after his incarceration. And here it is in the envelope, the three-page Arrestee Questionnaire, in Russian, undated, comprising fourteen questions, the print of his right index finger, and two photographs, front and profile. A warning at the top of the form states, "It

is forbidden to give this questionnaire to the arrestee to fill out. It should be filled out according to the words spoken by the detainee and compared and checked with the documents." The Arrestee Questionnaire was most likely prepared to be sent to Moscow together with the recommended judgment/verdict for approval.

Another document, dated September 2, 1944, is a two-column form letter titled "Extract from Protocol No. 37" and subtitled "Special Meeting of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR."³ Its typewritten contents document the decision taken in Moscow, i.e. the formalized indictment, the verdict and the penalty. The left-hand column is headed, "It was heard." There is a reference to "203. File No. 10907/ NKVD Armenia SSR," below which are recorded the full name of the accused and basic information about him, followed by a notation of Articles 19-61, -63, -65 and -68 of the Criminal Code of Armenia SSR as the basis of the accusation. These few lines, I assume, summarize the contents of the recommended judgment/verdict sent from Armenia.

³ The Special Meeting of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR was established in 1922 with powers similar to those of the Special Meeting of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (1882-1917) of Tsarist Russia. Empowered with the right to imprison or exile in absentia, this extrajudicial administrative body was established to alleviate the burden of state courts overwhelmed with the cases of alleged anti-revolutionary or socially dangerous persons whom Stalin intended to dispose of. Because of its association with the old body from the tsarist period, the Special Meeting was later renamed the Special Commission. Its rights and provisions, especially in terms of the length of the penalty it could apply, also went through changes. It was also promulgated that the reason for the indictment and sentencing should be attached to each case. In 1940, the Special Meeting of the NKVD was given the right to confiscate the property of the accused, and in 1941, due to the military situation, it was given the right to execute the condemned.

The right-hand column of the "Extract from Protocol No. 37" is headed, "It was resolved." This contains the actual verdict and spells out the sentence: "Minassian Baghdassar (Baghdik), son of Khachatur, belonging to an anti-revolutionary espionage organization and having terroristic intents, to be confined in corrective labor camp for a period of TEN years, considering the term to begin from March 11, 1944." The form is signed by the head secretary of the Special Consultation at the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs USSR and bears the stamp of that organ. A typewritten note on the document indicates its receipt by the NKVD of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic on September 17, 1944.

Examination of this important document raises two perplexing questions. First, if the verdict was recorded in Moscow on September 2, 1944, and received in Yerevan on September 17, why was it not carried out immediately? My father was held in the NKVD prison in Yerevan until April of the following year before being sent off to Siberia. In fact, a letter of protest which he wrote in March of that year, which I will discuss below, clearly shows that he was not informed of the verdict until then. Was this due to a backlog or to some other consideration? Unfortunately, we will never have the answer to this question.

Secondly, my father was convicted according to an array of articles in the Criminal Code of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia and was sentenced to be punished for violating those articles. What were they? Mr. Amatuni Virabian, director of the National Archives of

the Republic of Armenia, provided detailed explanations. They are as follows:

According to Article 19 of the Criminal Code of the 1938 Constitution of the Armenian SSR, Articles 61, 63, 65 and 68 have been applied in your father's case.

Article 19: If a crime has not reached its completion, then judgment is made by applying the articles that concern the type of crime at issue.

Article 61: Any kind of collaboration with the international bourgeoisie with the objective of overthrowing the Communist regime.

Article 63: Espionage, that is, the communication of state secrets to foreign countries and anti-revolutionary organizations.

Article 65: Committing terrorist acts against representatives of the Soviet Union.

Article 68: All kinds of organizational activities that relate to the preparation or the realization of crimes defined by this section [Article 19] of the legislation.

These are nothing but fabricated allegations consistent with the repetitious questions put to my father during his lengthy interrogation, clearly showing that the NKVD was trying to invent a Dashnaksutun conspiracy against the Communist regime and pin the crime on him.

And finally, the last document in the envelope is the four-page letter my father wrote to "The Commissar of

State Security and the Government of Armenia SSR by way of Mr. R. Ghazaryan, head of the Investigation Department," dated March 21, 1945. At this point, he has already been in solitary confinement for one year, two months and eighteen days. In desperation, he responds to the Moscow verdict that has only very recently been shared with him.

The letter conveys the shock he felt upon hearing the verdict and represents a last attempt to prove his innocence. Was he naive to still believe in the logic of the Soviet judicial system, or was this the last-gasp effort of a hopeless man clinging to the impossible? He reiterates what he has repeatedly stated during the long interrogation sessions. "As the representative of the ARF Central Committee of Atrpatakan, I implemented the wartime policy of the Dashnaktsutjun which is to cooperate with the Soviets, to negotiate with Soviet representatives to offer the capabilities of our local organization. Is this what I am being convicted of? I have explained this throughout the interrogation with absolute candor and honesty to prove my innocence." Disputing the unfounded allegations and the irrational sentence, he again asks the question, "What have I been convicted of?"

Is it because, living in a foreign country, I gave my love, my thoughts and my energy to the betterment of my homeland and my people? Is it because, with the memory alive in me of the German-Turkish conspiracy that cost millions of

Armenian lives, I did everything I could to ward off the recurrence of such a conspiracy, for the best interests of my homeland and for the sake of the security of my people? Is that why I have been convicted and my family has been subjected to immeasurable suffering? Who can explain this calamity brought upon me and my family, and that by the hands of an Armenian government? Whom shall I blame? To whom shall I complain?

My father speaks of his diminishing physical and spiritual strength and the anxiety of not knowing anything about the state of his family. Are they already lost? He begs the Commissar of State Security to release him from the hell of his prison cell and give him a job for the good of the people until his case is revisited and resolved. "Who benefits from my incarceration? Neither Armenia nor the Armenian people," he writes. He is being punished for nothing, and as a foreign citizen, he asks to be sent back to Iran, his country of citizenship.

My father's petition is full of pathetic, emotional outbursts. This is a man who still adheres to his principles, who maintains his honesty and sincerity, and who desperately tries to reason, yet with an ever-diminishing faith in human justice. The physical aspect of his letter tells it all. The handwriting is barely legible. The lines slope down to the right. The spaces are uneven, the letters ragged and incomplete. One need not be a graphologist to see how his handwriting has changed since his incarceration fourteen and a half months earlier.

At the end of this chapter, I include three samples of my father's handwriting for the purpose of comparison. The first sample is from a letter to his "Irreplaceable Paranzem," written from Tehran and dated December 13, 1933. It is rather clear and legible. The second is the first page of his petition to the Commissar of State Security of the Armenian SSR. The third, after his return from almost eleven years in exile, shows a definite change for the worse, even compared to the second sample. His handwriting never improved during his years of freedom. The change was permanent. The trauma of the tragic experience was stamped on his handwriting, as on his psyche, for good. Allan Conway, author of *The Secrets of Your Handwriting: Your Personality in Your Penmanship*, attests, "Writing tends to change to some degree as one progresses through life.... Those who suffer a major traumatic experience [will see] their writing change. Some writings will eventually revert back, but others will remain changed forever." Studying the handwriting of a group of Holocaust survivors, he writes, "When people have experienced a fundamental change in their lives, they will feel they have no alternative but to accept the new situation. This adaptation will become part of their personality as well as their handwriting." In my father's case, I might add that the change demonstrates not only submission to the new situation, but a constant anxiety coupled with an indomitable rage and indignation against injustice.

My father's letter to the Commissar of State Security had none of its intended effect. About a month later,

on April 15, 1945, by way of informing him about the journey ahead, his prison guard contemptuously ridiculed him: "You protested against the verdict and the sentence. Now we are sending you to Moscow. Go there and tell them what you want." With that, he was sent off to serve time for crimes he had not committed.

I have been assured that the contents of the envelope detailed above are the entire contents of my father's file preserved in the archives, with one exception. The only document held back was a letter of denunciation that was used as a necessary pretext to make the arrest. Who wrote that letter? Who planted "the kiss of Judas" on my father's face? I have a hunch that he knew the identity of that person, probably a close friend whom he would never otherwise have suspected. Throwing the name of that traitor at my father must have been a tool used by his interrogators in their attempt to break him. He never spoke about it. We will never know.

These documents from the KGB archives now held in Yerevan shed light on the time my father spent incarcerated in his homeland. The rest of his time away from us, his life in the labor camp in the northern Siberian permafrost, remains inaccessible to me at this stage of my life, as I cannot venture to travel to Russia or to Norilsk, as some diehard researchers have done, and dig in the dark for scraps of information on my father. So I return to the old box of his papers.

The search through my father's handwritten papers revealed in scattered notes the shape and structure of the

book he planned to write. He conceived it as consisting of three parts, the first of which covers the situation in Azerbaijan (Atrpatakan) before and after the Soviet occupation, his abduction, his imprisonment in Yerevan, his interrogation, indictment and sentencing. He completed the first part in two chapters of which I had the typewritten text. The second part, also comprising two chapters, began with the start of his journey toward exile on April 15, 1945. He titled the first chapter "Exile toward the Tundra, the Permafrost Zone and the Taymyr Peninsula." Following the same pattern as for the previous chapters, he jotted down a rather extensive outline of this chapter and I found a few handwritten pages belonging to it. Apparently, he started the narrative after tracing a roadmap for the entire book. When it came time to publish his unfinished memoir in 1991, I added those pages to the typewritten text. Chapters 3 and 4 of the present book represent the whole of the Armenian text rendered in English.⁴

The second chapter of the second part of my father's memoir was titled "The Permafrost Zone, Taymyr and Narilsk." His outline for this chapter indicates that he intended to provide a description of the region; information on its inhabitants, the Nenets and the Tungus peoples;⁵ the harsh climate, the polar day (or

⁴ See chapter 3, footnote 1, for further explanation.

⁵ In his study of *The Peoples of Soviet Union*, Kozlov mentions the Nenets and the Tungus (or Evanki) among the people of the tundra, whose economy is based on reindeer farming and hunting other animals found in the region. Because of the harsh climate, they lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Nenets and Tungus of the north were converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity but retained elements of their old religion and combined them with

midnight sun) and the polar night; the copious coal and metal mines of the region; and the Yenisei River with its month-long navigability to the Arctic Ocean which connects Narilsk (Norilsk) with the rest of Russia.

His outline also indicates that he intended to write about the lives of the thousands of prisoners of various nationalities who were forcibly brought from several countries to Norilsk and put to torturous labor; the relationships among these prisoners who had lost their human character and become vulgar and inhuman, ready to tear each other apart for a cigarette or a piece of bread; the violent mutual hatred and the collective abhorrence of the local regime and the Soviet government; and the Soviets' creation of a new kind of man, *homo sovieticus*, "in their own image," of course, as my father put it.

The second chapter of part 2 was to cover the process of separating the political prisoners from the criminal prisoners that took place in 1948; the special regime camp, that is, *gosudarstvenny asobi regimni lager*, which meant harsher treatment for the political prisoners; and the number painted on the back and the knee of the political prisoners' clothing which reduced their entire individuality and personality to a mere number, a method of dehumanization that certainly worked.

My father was planning to begin part 3 with the news of Stalin's death in 1953, which he underscored with the

their new religion. In the late 1920s, they were incorporated into national *okrugs* (small administrative districts) like other small peoples in the East of the Soviet Union. What my father's special interest was in writing about these people, I would not know: perhaps his personal contacts and experience with them; that we shall never know.

subtitle, "The Evil God of the Soviet Union Has Died." I would guess that he planned to describe how the news was announced in his camp and how it was received by the prisoners. I don't have his testimony regarding the occasion that was "festive" for some and "sad" for others, but I came across a representative scene described by Karlo Stajner who was a former prisoner in a Norilsk *lagpunkt* (the smallest camp division). It must be very close to what my father observed:

Prisoners assembled in the courtyard and solemnly heard the news of the death of the "great leader of Soviet people and of free human beings everywhere." A long pause followed. Then a prisoner raised his hand: "Citizen Commander, my wife sent me some money, it's in my account. I have no use for it here, so I would like to spend it on a bouquet for our beloved leader. Can I do that?"⁶

Stajner cast the scene as a parody, but I have come to see the reaction he described as not uncommon among prisoners who believed in Stalin's greatness and his benevolence, if only he had known what went on in the prison camps (I will elaborate on this theme in a later chapter). Was my father in the same *lagpunkt* in Norilsk? He may have been, but that was not how he would have acknowledged the death of Stalin.

⁶ As quoted in Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 477.

At the other end of the spectrum is a touching scene depicted by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, which takes place in a Russian household where some ex-prisoners are living together:

On March 5, the day of the death of the Head Murderer, they spread out on the table all the photographs of those who were shot and those who died in camps that they have been able to collect—several dozen of them. And throughout the day solemnity reigns in the apartment—somewhat like that of a church, somewhat like that of a museum. There is funeral music. Friends come to visit, to look at the photographs, to keep silent, to listen, to talk softly together. And then they leave without saying good-bye.⁷

In my father's papers, I also found his handwritten outline for chapter 1 of part 3. It is titled "The Winds of Liberation and Return to Normal Human Life Are Blowing throughout the Entire Country." This is how he intended to proceed:

- On March 5, 1953, "Father" Stalin, the self-appointed leader of progressive mankind, dies/is murdered/strangled in the Kremlin Palace.
- The thirty-year-long horror and terror is over.
- The Soviet population, pretending deep sorrow,

⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 443.

- shedding artificial tears and immersed in mourning, begins to breathe a sigh of relief.
- The hope of freedom affects the black mass of 35 million criminal and political prisoners living without any feelings on the margins of life and death.
 - Camp administrators check the files of prisoners with foreign citizenship and photograph them.
 - Good news and bad news begin to circulate. Some say the foreign prisoners will be rounded up to be sent back to their countries. Others say they will be separated out to be executed.
 - In this critical period, high-ranking officers arrive from Moscow to announce, "The time of treachery is over. Foreign prisoners will be sent home to their countries." That make sense, it agrees with the policies a post-Stalin government may adopt. But how true and how reliable is it?

There is also an extensive outline of chapter 2 of part 3. It is titled "Toward Freedom, Toward Home" and this is how it is laid out:

- Preparations are completed for the segregation of the foreigner prisoners.
- Things become clearer, though doubts remain.
- Camp administrators order the foreign prisoners to return their bedding and get ready to leave.

- The foreign prisoners are all packed into a cargo train and taken to Krasnoyarsk where they are grouped according to country of origin and sent on by train to their destinations, to China, Japan, Mongolia. Germans, French, Italians and Balkans are sent to Moscow. Iranian citizens are sent to Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan.
- Some 500–600 Iranian citizens are gathered in the Ashkhabad camp. Most are escapees from Iran who had secretly crossed the border on their own free will to live in "paradise." Others had taken part in the Kurdish movements in Iranian Azerbaijan. They had come to the Soviet Union with great expectations, only to be labeled political prisoners. They too are victims of Soviet hospitality.
- We wait in uncertainty for a long time until Iran's pro-Soviet Mossadegh government is overthrown on August 19, 1953.⁸ We are told that, under the circumstances, we will not be handed over to the Iranian government. Instead, those who have yet to serve out their sentence will be taken back to their camp or prison, and those who have finished serving their time can

⁸ Iranian Armenian readers of my generation will certainly remember Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (1951–1953), a reformer and modernizer whose greatest achievement was the nationalization of Iranian oil. That was a tremendous blow to British interests, and Mossadegh's internal reforms and his foreign policy, as well as the political orientation of the supporters he mustered, were altogether perceived as Iran's alienation from the West and its rapprochement with the Soviet bloc. The CIA and the British Secret Intelligence Service organized a coup that overthrew Mossadegh's government on August 19, 1953 (28 Mordad 1332).

- stay in the Soviet Union as Soviet citizens.
- We are loaded into the train and taken back toward our labor camp in Narilsk, there to continue our miserable life in that icy, unlivable terrain.
 - The train stops in Uzbekistan and we are unloaded and crammed into another prison. This is strange. Why stop here?
 - After a few more days of waiting in uncertainty, we are told that an agreement has been reached with the Iranian government and we will be taken to the Soviet-Iranian border and delivered to the Iranian authorities.
 - On the Soviet side on the border, a Russian officer reads each name aloud, one by one. An Iranian officer checks each name against a list, repeats it, and admits the prisoner.
 - I hear the Russian officer read my name but the Iranian officer skips it. I panic. I dread that my name is not on his list. The Russian officer reminds his Iranian counterpart to go back to my name. The latter apologizes, saying the name is hard to pronounce. It's over. I breathe a deep breath of relief and step onto Iranian soil.
 - Thus, in July 1954, ends the story of my long and miserable life in Soviet prisons and hard labor camps.

These are the outlines of what my father intended to write. They speak to the style he would have employed,

like that of the narrative he had already written: factual, straightforward, impersonal. The scientist in him would not have allowed him to get too personal and detail his own personal torturous, traumatic and tragic experience.

In my English rendering of my father's narrative in chapters 3 and 4 of the present book, I tried to stay close to the original Armenian text and emulate his style, without artistic elaboration or creative embellishment. Then, taking the lead from his outlines, I looked elsewhere for details on life in the Gulag prisons and labor camps, and those details helped to fill in the picture of the years my father spent in that hellish system.

My father spent sixteen months in solitary confinement in an underground cell in the NKVD building in Yerevan before he was sent onward to Siberia, a most tormenting psychological punishment. Yet, in the brevity and pointedness of his style, he avoided pathetic description, saying only "How unbearable loneliness is! How sad it is to live one's life in solitude, punishment within punishment." There are no other details of his unparalleled ordeal in that cell and its consequences except for this short confession: "Months of solitary confinement had affected me gravely, and every so often I was visited by excruciating nightmares."

I learned that those dark, vermin-infested cells "were typically no larger than a couple of steps in each direction and could get extremely frigid in the winter time. By most accounts, people could spend only a short time in these cells before losing both their health and their

sanity.”⁹ Only the most ideologically dangerous political prisoners or “terrorists” were put in those infamous solitary cells. How grave was my father’s crime that he deserved such treatment? What an iron will he must have had to withstand it and survive.

During his exile in Siberia, Suren Ghazaryan was confined to a solitary cell for a time, like my father, and he described in detail how he spent that time with nothing to do during the endless, slow-moving days. Cut off and forgotten by the world, he reminisced, and that was the toughest, the most painful and intolerable time, he wrote, especially when memories of happier days came rushing into his mind.¹⁰

My father had all the time in the world to think about the happy days of the past, but there is no mention of those bitter-sweet moments in his memoir. However, as a benign memory he later chose to tell us, as something that would not hurt us nor hurt him, he once laughingly said that he had often visualized with pangs of longing the backgammon games he and my mother used to play, and wondered why he always lost, every single time. He had taught my mom how to play, and she, the novice, had figured out how to win. And she was happy, and he was happy. So that day when he told us this story of his pastime in exile, being in a better mood to talk about

⁹ David Hosford, Pamela Kachurin and Thomas Lamont, *GULAG: Soviet Prison Camps and Their Legacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, 2006 [?]), p. 18.

¹⁰ Suren Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated) (Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1988), p. 195. This is the Armenian translation of the original Russian text, titled *Eto nie dalzhno pavidaritsa*, which was published in Yerevan in 1990.

it, he asked my mom, “Parik, tell me the truth. Did you win by cheating?” And my mother playfully replied, “You were so honest and trusting.”

Again, in his brevity, my father referred to “the infamous black cargo truck” that took him from the Rostov distribution center to the train station as the “Black Raven.” The fact that the notorious death truck is mentioned in most memoirs of the Gulag is significant because it speaks to the ominous impact the often short journey in that vehicle made on the poor prisoner. “Black Raven,” “Black Crow,” “Black Maria,” “Chorni Varon” (Սև ալոնաւ), this is how former prisoners remember that horrifying van. Suren Ghazaryan was likewise transported in the Black Raven—to Metekh, the city prison in Tbilisi.¹¹ Made of solid steel and painted black, the van was divided into cage-like compartments in which the prisoners were locked up. They could not see out and nobody outside could see them. During the Great Purge and the mass arrests as described in the memoirs, most arrests took place at night so that neighbors would not be frightened at seeing it happen so often. According to Solzhenitsyn, they had it all sorted out: arrests by night and demonstrations by day. “Along that same asphalt ribbon on which the Black Marias scurry at night, a tribe of youngsters strides by day with banners, flowers, and gay, untroubled songs.”¹² After World War II, as one prisoner remembered, these vehicles were often disguised so that the public would not realize how many arrests

¹¹ Ibid., p. 91.

¹² Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 7.

were taking place; some had "Bread" or "Meat" painted on the sides like delivery vans.¹³ It was in one of those horrible vans that my father began his journey toward the unknown destination that turned out to be the labor camp at Norilsk. But that journey also marked the end of the lonely time he had spent confined in a small cubicle.

In almost all first-person accounts of the Gulag, especially those pertaining the 1937–1938 purges, the prisoners were crammed into a large common cell before being sent on to the labor camps. Those cells were so crowded that the prisoners could not lie down; they had to sleep in a sitting position, leaning against the wall or another prisoner's back. My poor father first experienced these conditions in the Rostov prisoner distribution center and later in the Krasnoyarsk transit camp. Ironically, he wrote, he was happier in those places: "Despite all the misfortune around me in that huge detention camp, I felt better there."

My father's long and tortuous journey took him to his final destination: Norillag, the Norilsk lager or labor camp complex. It was one of a number of labor camps in the Soviet Gulag system where, "between 1934 and 1953, 1,053,829 persons died."¹⁴ But numbers cannot paint the enormity of the calamity. They present cold statistics. Statistics don't bleed and they don't mean anything to coldblooded tyrants. As Stalin once said, the death of

¹³ Ibid., p. 528. See also Hosford et al., *GULAG*, p. 17.

¹⁴ This number is based on a study of Soviet archival data by J. Arch Getty, Gábor T. Rittersporn and Viktor N. Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-war Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence," *American Historical Review*, October 1993 (98/4), p. 1024.

one man is a tragedy, the death of millions is a statistic.

Anne Applebaum, the author of a monumental study of the Gulag, devotes a chapter to those who died in the labor camps and she begins that chapter with an emotionally charged poem by survivor-memoirist Nina Gagen-Torn. It broadly and authentically expresses the prisoners' feelings:

What does it mean—exhaustion?
 What does it mean—fatigue?
 Every movement is terrifying,
 Every movement of your painful arms and legs
 Terrible hunger—Raving over bread
 "Bread, bread," the heart beats.
 Far away in the gloomy sky,
 The indifferent sun turns.
 Your breath is a thin whistle
 It's minus fifty degrees
 What does it mean—dying?
 The mountains look on, and remain silent.¹⁵

This is what the Gulag was, this is what it meant to those who spent a deplorable life of suffering and deprivation in the camps.

In another study by American researchers David Hosford, Pamela Kachurin and Thomas Lamont, the Gulag is described as

¹⁵ Quoted in Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 334.

the prison camp system that arose in the Soviet Union after 1929 [and] served primarily as a way to gain control over the entire population, rather than punish criminal acts. The incarceration of millions of innocent people in the GULAG system is correctly seen as one of the worst and most shocking episodes of the twentieth century.

Jacques Rossi, a memoirist quoted in the same study, has a more poignant description:

The GULAG was conceived in order to transform human matter into a docile, exhausted, ill-smelling mass of individuals living only for themselves. And thinking of nothing else but how to appease the constant torture of hunger, living in the instant, concerned with nothing apart from evading kicks, cold and ill treatment.

According to Hosford and co-authors, quoting a 1990 report by the *Moscow News*, “between 1931 and 1953, 3,778,234 people were arrested for counter-revolutionary activities and state crimes, of which 786,098 were shot.”¹⁶

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1963) and *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) provided previously unknown windows onto this horrifying world. Solzhenitsyn was a twice-decorated Red Army officer arrested while serving in East Prussia

¹⁶ Hosford et al., *GULAG*, pp. 1, 24 and 1, respectively.

in 1945 because of derogatory comments he had made in written correspondence about “the Wisest of the Wise, whom we labeled with the transparently obvious nickname of *Pakhan* or *Ringleader of the Thieves*.”¹⁷ Solzhenitsyn was brought to Moscow and given eight years in Siberian prison camps, but when his sentence was up in 1953, he was sent to permanent internal exile in a village in Kazakhstan. His case was reviewed in 1956 and he was exonerated. Solzhenitsyn’s works shocked the world and introduced the West to the horrors of those infamous camps and the inhumane methods of isolating and eliminating all those who came under suspicion of opposing Stalin’s policies.

Many of these details are mirrored in memoirs by Soviet Armenian survivors, memoirs finally taken out of locked drawers and published starting in the late 1980s. It is through the memoirs of both Armenians and non-Armenians that I was let into the world of my own father’s suffering and emotional tumult. In one of those memoirs, an autobiography for instance, Guren Mahari described his life as a political prisoner in Soviet labor camps.¹⁸ It

¹⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 134.

¹⁸ Grigor Ajemyan, Guren Mahari’s son from his first marriage, collected his father’s writings about his life in prison and in exile—his short autobiography as well as poems, prose, letters, etc.—and published them in «Մի օր իմ կյանքում» (Of Siberia, or The Siberian), an 850-page volume funded by the Armenian section of the Galuste Gulbenkian Foundation.

After Mahari’s death in 1969, but long before his son’s great endeavor, his second wife, Antonina Mahari (née Povilaitite), wrote his biography in Russian. That text was ready for publication in 1972 but was only published in 2003 and was subsequently translated into English and other languages. The Armenian version is titled «Իմ Ողիսականը» (My odyssey). Mahari’s first wife had renounced him after his arrest, and years later in Siberia, he met and married Antonina, a much younger woman in exile from Lithuania.

contains mesmerizing details of his “journey” in cargo trains, the stripping off of his old clothes, the physical examination, the first bath in a common bathhouse, and then the distribution of the one-size-fits-all prisoners’ uniforms which did not fit any of them. Suren Ghazaryan likewise described with a tender romanticism similar scenes of disgrace and humiliation, as when a group of detainees were stripped naked outdoors in the freezing snow and sent on foot to what they expected to be their execution. But it turned out to be their first bath in a bathhouse of the Solovetsky prison complex.¹⁹ I imagine my father found himself in similar situations.

Gurgen Mahari spoke with touching detail of his shock and distress when, for the first time after years in the labor camp, he saw himself in a mirror, a rare or rather nonexistent item where he had been. Years of torture, suffering and malnutrition had wreaked havoc on his body. Given my father’s emaciated appearance when he finally came home, that must be what he too had experienced in the labor camp.

There is another poignant scene in Mahari’s autobiography, a “happy feast” that took place on a New Year’s Eve when one of the inmates received a parcel from home and the whole barracks gathered to share the hot tea sweetened with sugar, another rare commodity in the prison camps.²⁰ How many New Year’s Eves did

19 Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated), pp. 115–117. The Solovetsky Archipelago in the White Sea near Arkhangelsk was one of the first Soviet prison camps.

20 See «Սև մարդը» (The black man), in Ajemyan (ed.), «Սիբիրական» (Of Siberia, or The Siberian), p. 174.

my father spend, hungry and cold, lonely and forgotten, without hope of receiving anything from home?

Many memoirs mention that once in a while a prisoner would receive a parcel from home, usually containing warm clothes, tobacco and non-perishables like sugar. That “blessing” was often followed by a tragic scene in the barracks as other inmates, miserable and envious, would gather around the recipient in the hope of receiving a crumb and more importantly, of inhaling his smoke or cadging a drag or bumming the butts of his *makhorka*.²¹ Apparently, tobacco was in high demand in the camps: it was far more important than bread. My father was a smoker. Did he have to beg others for a smoke, since receiving parcels from home was something impossible for him?

My father never had the chance to go into such details. But read the memoirs of those who survived and returned home, like Suren Ghazaryan, Gurgen Mahari, Suren Oganessian, Valter Aramyan and others, and you will learn what life was like in the barracks and on the forced labor sites of the Gulag. Prisoners cheated, spied on other prisoners and informed their superiors in order to earn a meager favor, sometimes as meager as a hundred extra grams of bread. That was the way of life. It was literally the survival of the fittest, and if you succumbed to the hardship, the hunger and the freezing cold winters and died, burial was a luxury denied to you. They would strip you naked—your clothing would

21 Cigarettes of *nicotiana rustica*, a strong type of tobacco.

go to another prisoner—and dump you in a mass grave, without a coffin.

One eyewitness interviewed in Zareh Tjeknavorian's 1998 documentary, *Enemy of the People: Armenians Look Back at the Stalin Terror*, confirmed this practice, and added that periods of drastic shortages of food and heating fuel escalated the mortality rate in the camp. Dying or already dead? The warder had to know in order to deal with the body, and the way he found out is appalling, as the interviewee recalled. If the warder had a hammer to hand, he would hit the prisoner on the head, and if he had a staff, he would poke him in the stomach. Once it was proven that the man was dead, a piece of wood with his name and number written on it would be tied to the corpse and it was taken to the dump.²²

The renowned Armenian writer Vahram Alazan testified that, due to malnutrition and the most extreme climatic conditions, the number of daily deaths in his labor camp was overwhelming—6,000 men died in two months—and burying them was a big problem. The warder promised an extra hundred grams of bread for taking care of two cadavers. Alazan described the appalling methods the prisoners used to quickly dispose of them and go back for more. Commenting sarcastically

22 Tjeknavorian's documentary, with a request to review it, was sent to me by the *American Historical Review* in 2014, and my review was published in the journal in April 2015. The fifty-eight-minute film contains black-and-white archival footage as well as interviews in color with former victims of Stalin's terror. It opens on the scene of Stalin's body lying in the coffin in Moscow, with a mournful voice-over announcing in Russian, "Dear comrades, it is difficult today to describe with mere words the feeling of our party, our people and all progressive humanity. Stalin is no more." Then it cuts to Yerevan, showing the sad faces of young and old in mourning.

on the procedure, he paraphrased Stalin's famous remark: "In Kolyma, 'Man is the most valuable capital.'" ²³

And indeed, a prisoner's life had no significant value. Another interviewee in Tjeknavorian's documentary recalled what happened after prisoners built a narrow road for horses to carry local herbs to the train station. In the terrible climate, the horses were overworked and exhausted, so the camp administrators decided to make the prisoners carry the loads instead, because if a horse were lost they would be reprimanded, but if a prisoner died they would simply fill out the proper form and be done with it. "Horses had some value, men did not."

Yet another interviewee, a prisoner who worked in the coal mines of Siberia, said that when part of a mine caved in, some 250 prisoners were buried under the debris. The inmates began digging to rescue them. It took them a while but they found nothing, so they had to dig even deeper. But the warders stopped them and sent them back to their regular jobs because the rescue operation would only reduce their daily output. The 250 prisoners were casually reported to have died in the accident.

There was no respect for the living, the dead or the living-dead. These last were referred to as *fitili* ("wicks"), burning like a candle to the very end, or as *dokbodyagi*, from the verb *dokhodit* ("to reach or attain"). That epithet was pure sarcasm: it meant "the dying were at last 'reaching socialism'." ²⁴

23 Vahram Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering) (Yerevan: Khorhrdayin Grogh, 1990), pp. 136–137.

24 Jacques Rossi quoted in Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 334–335.

Ironically, despite all the inhumane conditions under which prisoners labored in the Gulag, there were many, especially among the Old Bolsheviks, who still believed in the triumph of communism and who maintained that its true face was marred solely by human conduct. Gurgen Mahari wrote that his fellow prisoner Andrei Slavine believed he was fighting for communism, albeit within the confinement of a Siberian labor camp. Slavine dreamt of communism, and when he closed his eyes, he saw the whole world lit up by its glory. He saw light in the hearts and souls of all humanity.²⁵

For such prisoners, communist ideology stood above everything else and they could not be convinced otherwise by the mishaps, the torture and the ill treatment they endured in the prisons and labor camps. As staunch communists, they considered themselves victims of the struggle for the victory of communism. The narrator of Valter Aramyan's «Կոլիմա» (Kolyma) recalls a prisoner who sang the "Internationale," the Communist Party anthem, as he was taken from his cell to be executed.²⁶ Vahram Alazan never lost faith in communism and the Communist Party. Back in Armenia after spending eighteen years of his life in Soviet prisons and labor

25 See «Նախօրյակին» (On the day before), in Ajemyan (ed.), «Սիբիրական» (Of Siberia, or The Siberian), p. 109.

26 Valter Aramyan (1908–1994), «Կոլիմա» (Kolyma) (Yerevan: Armenian Writers Union, 2006), p. 18. This engaging "novel," or rather, fictionalized true story, with its detailed and vibrant evocations of prison life and places and its accounts of well-known Armenian intellectuals and communist leaders who were exiled, imprisoned or shot, has been a treasure chest of knowledge and information for me. Aramyan's story of the notorious Kolyma camp complex in the far northeast of the Soviet Union was published posthumously. When did he write this novel which in my opinion is no less poignant than Solzhenitsyn's work?

camps, he celebrated his reinstatement as a member of the Communist Party with great delight in 1955.²⁷

That point of view is perhaps the most pronounced difference with my father's perspective and makes his memoir stand out. While there was little or no criticism of communist ideology in memoirs that came out of Soviet Armenia or the former Soviet bloc (Solzhenitsyn is an exception), my father used every opportunity to show the corruption, the bankruptcy, the immorality, the impracticality and the worthlessness of that ideology or the way it was laid down in the Soviet Empire.

As another common feature of those memoirs, there were always those among the prisoners who were unaware of Stalin's hidden agenda and who strongly believed that "the father of all nations" was uninformed about the mistreatment and the violations of basic human rights, otherwise he would have stopped them. Suren Ghazaryan, himself an Old Bolshevik and a seasoned Chekist, wrote multiple times to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, describing his situation and asserting that his incarceration had been a mistake since he had always served the Party with utmost fidelity and had never departed from the Party line in all his activities. He was convinced that once Stalin received the news of his incarceration and his report on the circumstances, he would order his release.²⁸

A high-ranking Russian judge in the transit camp

27 Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering), p. 239. Written between 1961 and 1965 but only published in 1990, Alazan's memoir concludes with a description of that momentous occasion.

28 Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated), pp. 129–130.

en route to Kolyma was likewise certain that his arrest and exile were the result of a misunderstanding, and that Stalin would surely rescue him if only he heard about it. Three days after his vocal protest, guards pulled his body out of the lager.²⁹

Vahram Alazan too wrote to Stalin from his prison camp in Dalstroy (the Kolyma region). He too was convinced that his exile and incarceration were all a mistake.³⁰ He too waited in vain for Stalin's amnesty. But the Dalstroy sovkhoz (state-owned farm) was heaven compared to the ill-famed prison at Magadan on the Sea of Okhotsk, where Alazan and his brigade were taken by steamboat after an excruciating eight-kilometer walk in the snow to a seaport. Nor did Alazan's ordeal end at Magadan. It took another perilous five-day, 600-kilometer journey north in a snowstorm to reach Kolyma's hard labor camps and the uranium mines of Budugechak ("valley of death" in the Tungus language). The temperature in Kolyma reaches -70° Centigrade in the wintertime, and according to Alazan, some 9–10,000 prisoners trudged from their barracks to the mines and back every day. It is daunting to read the names of the Armenian exiles with whom Alazan shared a lager for a while, many of them renowned artists, writers and community leaders.

In rare moments when my father found the courage to talk about his ordeal, I remember that he mentioned the unimaginably harsh workload, the so-called "norm" or "quota" that detainees were expected to complete every day.

29 Aramyan, «Կոլիմա» (Kolyma), p. 54.

30 Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering), p. 100.

One Norillag detainee who was put to work digging deep foundation trenches in the permafrost for new buildings explained the principle: "At the end of twelve hours they would winch you out of the hole, but only if you had completed your work. If you hadn't, you were just left there."³¹ Apparently, quotas were usually set at levels that not even the healthiest prisoners could fulfill, let alone the sick and the starving. Aside from being left out in the cold, there were other punishments for failing to meet the norm, such as the direct proportionality between the food ration and the amount of work completed. My father mentioned that too.

Prisoners were assigned different categories of work depending on their health and strength. The stronger ones were assigned the harder work and the heavier workloads, but they were fed much better than others. Of course, the rules were always bent. Leonid Trus, an inmate at Norilsk, recalled that the brigadier "simply decided which of his workers deserved better food and pay than others." Bribery and clan loyalty determined a prisoner's "output."³²

My father, sick and frail, was never able to finish his quota. Day in and day out, he must never have had the "full ration" consisting of a small piece of soggy, sandy black bread (six ounces, according to Solzhenitsyn) and a bowl of fish soup. Of course, the soup didn't have a scrap of fish in it, as my father recalled. The pieces of fish were saved for the guards, the warders and the administrative

31 Quoted in Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 193.

32 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 357.

staff. My father said, "We were lucky if we found just the head of a small fish in our bowl."

Gustav Herling, a former inmate, recalled watching prisoners line up for the first cauldron, i.e., the smallest ration of food, less than half of what the stronger or the favored prisoners received. "Dazed with exhaustion and swooning on their thin legs, they pushed their way through the hatch, whined plaintively, begging for an extra dribble, and peered greedily into the cans of the second- and third-cauldron prisoners."³³

Solzhenitsyn's protagonist, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, tells us how unfair everything was in the camp, and like Gustav Herling, he testifies that even the food was distributed unequally.³⁴ Prisoners had their ranks too. The higher-ups, the bullies, the ones who could bribe the cooks and the warders—most of whom were prisoners

³³ Quoted in Hosford et al., *GULAG*, p. 23.

³⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963). This is one of three English translations published in 1963. Solzhenitsyn used his own day-to-day experience in the labor camps to create the character of Ivan Denisovich, so true and credible, so close to reality as a simple Russian worker who had served in the Red Army during World War II, was taken prisoner by the Germans, somehow fled the POW camp and returned to his unit, only to be accused as a German spy and sentenced to ten years' forced labor.

That was common practice during the war. Once an ex-POW crossed back into the Soviet Union, he was arrested as a traitor, no matter what heroic deeds he might have done in the war. "You should have used your last bullet to kill yourself and not fall in the hands of the enemy," his interrogator reasoned. In *Gulag Archipelago* (p. 61), Solzhenitsyn further explained that the very fact of a soldier being held captive was considered "injurious to Soviet military might.... According to the Stalinist code, they should all have been shot on their return home," from which it followed that giving them ten years was only "humanitarian." In the same work (p. 243), he offered another reason for the arrest of Soviet ex-POWs: "It was absolutely clear even to a fool.... They imprisoned all of them to keep them from telling their fellow villagers about Europe. What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve for."

themselves—got most of the food before it came to the ordinary prisoners, who were always shortchanged on rations, much like my father was. Since he lacked the wherewithal to bribe anyone, he was at the mercy of tougher inmates. He must have gone to bed hungry so many nights because he had not been able to fulfill the day's norm, and unlike most prisoners, he could not beg, he could not cheat.

The miserable ration that deliberately kept the prisoners on the brink of starvation was a calculated method of continuous torture used since ancient times. But the Soviets were masters at incorporating all types of torture into the everyday life of the prison camps. In his discussion of the starvation method, Solzhenitsyn remarked, "How ancient it all is, how medieval, how primitive! The only thing new about it was that it was applied in a socialist society!"³⁵

Over and above the routine methods of torture, there was another punishment that was the warder's prerogative if he felt the prisoner was disobeying him. He would put you in the "can," a very small, freezing-cold cell, also called the "cooler" by prisoners, a cubicle with a concrete floor and stone walls with no windows. Spending days in the can was alarming. You were denied of any kind of bedding—you weren't even allowed the sawdust-filled mattress and the thin, dirty blanket you had in the barracks—and you were given half the usual scant daily ration of bread.

³⁵ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 115.

My father once alluded to his traumatic experience in a punishment cell when he told us the roof leaked and there was no way to avoid the cold water that dripped on his head. For how many days? He didn't say. Well, apparently, the roof did not leak. Solzhenitsyn explained that there was a fixture in the roof designed to drip cold water on the prisoner's scalp, a "classic" form of torture.³⁶

The maximum "sentence" given out by a barbaric warder or for a most serious infraction was ten days in an isolation cell. As Ivan Denisovich says:

Ten days! If you had ten days in the cells here and sat them out to the end, it meant you'd be a wreck for the rest of your life. You got TB and you'd never be out of hospitals [as] long as you lived. And the fellows who did fifteen days were dead and buried.³⁷

Suren Oganessian described similar conditions in the dark and humid special cells of Medekh Prison in Tbilisi: "Water dripped continually from the ceiling of these cells. The prisoner unfortunate enough to 'make' these cell complexes was totally without warm food and toilet facilities of any kind...."³⁸

Interestingly, my attention was drawn to this former Siberian exile by an article written by his daughter,

36 Ibid., p. 114. This is number twenty-five in Solzhenitsyn's enumeration and description of thirty-one methods of torture.

37 Solzhenitsyn, *Ivan Denisovich*, p. 194.

38 Suren Oganessian, *Under Stalin's Sun: Reflections 1920–1945*, tr. James Tashjian (Los Angeles, California: N.p., 1981), p. 23.

Knarik Meneshian, in the *Armenian Weekly 2016 Magazine* (dedicated to the 101st anniversary of the Armenian Genocide). Titled "A Glimpse into the Life of the Armenian DPs in Europe," the article describes life in the displaced persons (DP) camp in Europe where she was born and the family's eventual arrival in the United States. But more importantly, she writes about the many conversations she had with her father about his Siberian ordeal, an opportunity such as I had lost.

In 1929, Suren Oganessian belonged to a secret rebel group in Yerevan. The following year, he was arrested in Leninakan (today's Gyumri) the minute he arrived to distribute dissident literature. He was sent to Medekh Prison in Tbilisi, transferred to Tashkent a year later, and subsequently sent to the Jirlakhd labor camp in Siberia. He escaped, miraculously undetected, on April 17, 1935, taking advantage of a severe rainstorm. His memoir covers his perilous journey back to Armenian Gandzak (then Kirovabad, present-day Ganca in Azerbaijan), a distance of 2,200 kilometers, in four months.³⁹ There he lived and worked under an assumed name until 1942 when he was called up for military service in the Red Army. He fell captive to the Germans and spent some time in German camps working as a slave laborer. After the war, he was able to avoid forced repatriation to the Soviet Union. Instead, he went to a DP camp, and after years of wandering, he reached the United States with his newly formed family in 1952.

39 Ibid., p. 77.

The significance of Oganessian's memoir, *Under Stalin's Sun*, is in the details it provides, not only of his own daily life but also of the life stories and circumstances and the "crimes" committed by other inmates of various creeds and nationalities with whom he made friends. Oganessian's memoir was yet another window onto my father's life story.

Cheating, lying, robbing and stealing went with the territory. They were considered necessary survival tools in the labor camps. My father attested to that too. But the fact of the matter is that such behavior was widespread in Stalin's Soviet Union and only intensified in the camps, as Anne Applebaum observed: "Both in the camps and outside them, it was possible to find the same slovenly working practices, the same criminally stupid bureaucracy, the same corruption, and the same sullen disregard for human life."⁴⁰ The practice of cheating on work norms was called *tufta*, without which, as Leonid Trus of Norilsk explained, "there would have been nothing at all."⁴¹

Tales of torturous interrogations fill the memoirs of ex-convicts. My father heard his fellow Armenian and non-Armenian inmates in Norilsk describe with abhorrence the dreadful tortures they had been subjected to in order to make them confess to imaginary acts of treason, but he insisted that he himself had not been tortured in the most brutal ways that others described. As some memoirs indicate, I can surmise that, curiously,

⁴⁰ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. xxviii.

⁴¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 358. Characteristically, a Polish friend of Applebaum remarked, "You think prisoners invented that? The whole Soviet bloc practiced *tufta*." See *ibid.*, p. xxviii.

Dashnaktsakans were not severely tortured. Aramyan wrote that Soviet interrogators—masters of torture no less than their Turkish counterparts—"would beat up the Trotskyites, the ones who leaned right or left. On the whole, animosity toward Dashnaktsutun was less intense because Vyshinsky had declared that the real, the most virulent enemy of the people was Trotsky and his followers."⁴²

If Dashnaktsakans were generally not subjected to intense physical torture, their situation was not any better. Added to the uncertainty of one's fate and the fate of one's family left behind were the humiliation, the degradation, the dehumanization, the loss of identity and personal dignity and the denial of contact with the outside world, all psychological tortures to which my father and others who shared his fate were subjected from the first moment of their incarceration. Then there was the lack of hygiene in the common prison cells, the filth and the insect infestations, and being forced to relieve oneself right there in the common cell. This, of course, is evidence of the government's indifference to human beings and contempt for those men and women who lost their humanity the minute they were arrested as anti-revolutionaries. It is also evidence of the economic policies that affected the prisoners, of the budget being cut to the minimum while the number of detainees grew out of all proportion, beyond even Stalin's sick imagination. However, the end result served a definite

⁴² Aramyan, «Կոլիմա» (Kolyma), p. 13.

purpose. This psychological torture demoralized the prisoners, weakened their will to resist the dehumanizing conditions, softened them up and forced them to submit.

These conditions, especially the long periods of sleeplessness, could very well cause traumatic stress, including nightmares and even auditory hallucinations. That is how I would explain the heartrending cry my father heard in the Cheka dungeon in Tabriz. During one of those sleepless days or nights, locked in that windowless basement cell, he heard a child wailing "Papa jan," and that scream tormented him through the years. Was it a case of hallucination? It turns out that auditory hallucination was not unusual in those extremely stressful situations. For example, Sergei Bessonov remembered hearing the voice of his daughter outside his cell in Moscow's Butinsky Prison, crying out, "Mother, mother, I am here too!" He was in agony for a long time, thinking that his wife and daughter were imprisoned too.⁴³

Debilitating psychological torture was worse than

⁴³ This is related in Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated), p. 151. Out of curiosity, I looked up Sergei Bessonov to whom some pages are devoted in Ghazaryan's memoir. There was no article on him in Wikipedia, but his name was mentioned as one of the twenty Old Bolsheviks, Stalin's former collaborators, who were convicted during the Bukharin trials in 1938. Apparently, Sergei Aleksevich Bessonov and Suren Ghazaryan were cell mates for a while in the Solovetsky prison complex. According to Ghazaryan, Bessonov had been working as a consultant in the Soviet Embassy in Berlin. He was one of the few convicted who were not executed but sentenced to fifteen years in exile. Ghazaryan praised the man's erudition, kindheartedness and optimism. Paradoxically, Bessonov was pessimistic about the many petitions the prisoners wrote in hopes of reaching the higher-ups or even Stalin himself: "No one reads your petitions, you innocent victims. You cannot imagine the magnitude of the catastrophe. There will be a long, long process until the time when justice prevails again." Bessonov blamed the adventurism and avarice of Lavrentiy Beria and Nikolai Yezhov for bringing about the disastrous purges of the Communist Party membership (pp. 152–153).

beating or kicking with heavy boots or pulling out fingernails to extract confessions. Vahram Alazan described his ordeal in the NKVD prison in Yerevan, the same prison where my father was held. His interrogator, the son of an old friend of his, wanted him to confess that he was keeping a journal. He wanted to lay hands on it in the hope of finding derogatory comments about Stalin and Beria and tributes to Trotsky. Alazan denied keeping a diary but his interrogator did not believe him. He showed no mercy to his father's old friend. He made him stand against the wall without food or water for forty-eight hours straight, and he beat him on the head and chest. Alazan fainted and collapsed a few times, but the guards brought him around and made him stand again and keep taking the beating. Alazan commented with sorrow and commiseration, "That is what the Stalin era did to people, it turned that naïve and innocent young man into a ferocious beast. He would have beaten his own father the same way he beat me."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering), p. 34. After weeks in solitary confinement, Alazan was assigned to a common cell. There he witnessed the torture, pain and suffering of his fellow inmates, among them Grigor Vardanian, a Western Armenian and the president of ՀՕԿ (Հայաստանի Օգնության Կոմիտե, Armenia Assistance Committee). This committee, founded in Yerevan in 1921, was actually an arm of the Soviet regime in the Diaspora. Ironically, the committee was dissolved in 1937, its leaders were accused of spying, and they were brought back to Armenia and imprisoned. Another interesting fellow whom Alazan met in prison, among the many described in his memoir, was Khmbapet Shavarsh, a revolutionary fedayee and the protagonist of Yeghishe Charents' satirical poem, «Խմբապետ Շավարշը» (Captain Shavarsh). Alazan recalled him as a straightforward and funny man who once said to him, "Even if they give you twenty or thirty years, it still isn't enough. All those years you spent fetishizing their *kolkhoz* and their tractors, and not a single poem about our homeland or our Mother Arax. Have you learned your lesson?" (Ibid., p. 45). Khmbapet Shavarsh was later executed by firing squad.

Such monstrous tortures were truly abominable. But were late-night interrogations that continued until morning not sufficiently excruciating? And when the prisoner returned to his cell exhausted, he was not allowed to sleep. These were sufficiently torturous experiences in the Cheka prison in Yerevan. My father remembered that it was forbidden to sleep during the day and that if you collapsed in your cell the guard would wake you up with a thundering curse or come into the cell and kick you awake. Solzhenitsyn ranked night-time interrogation at the top of his list of thirty-one methods of torture that “break the will and character of the prisoner,” because, he explained, “at night, the prisoner, torn from sleep lacks his normal daytime equanimity and common sense. He is more vulnerable.”⁴⁵ And there were days of sleeplessness during the period of extended interrogation: “One can say that sleeplessness became a universal method in the Organs. From being one among many tortures, it became an integral part of the system of State Security.”⁴⁶ Vahram Alazan spoke of his night-time interrogations with the same vehemence.⁴⁷

Torturous interrogations and ridiculous questions were ways of wearing the prisoner down and making him confess. But confess to what? My father remembered signing a confession in the Cheka prison in Yerevan which contained all the allegations against him. His answers and explanations, his attempts to repudiate those

45 Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 103.

46 Ibid., p. 112.

47 Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering), p. 88.

allegations all throughout his extended interrogation had no role and no reflection whatsoever in the document he signed.

In Valter Aramyan's “novel,” the interrogation/torture of Grigor lasts three days straight. The narrator occupies the same Yerevan prison cell as Grigor, and as he relates,

One day, they took [Grigor] upstairs for interrogation. Three days later, they brought him back unconscious and threw him in the cell. His thick hair was gone and his bare skull was bleeding. When he regained consciousness, he told us that they had beat him severely to force him to sign the paper. He did not. On the third day, they had tied all of his hair to a device and raised it up to the ceiling. Grigor had hung by his hair until it was pulled out by the roots and he fell down. A few days later, they called him again. He did not return.⁴⁸

Apparently, Grigor did sign the paper and he was sent to his fate, whether execution or exile.

Suren Ghazaryan's memoir, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated) contains pages and pages of description of the extended torture-interrogation sessions that he and his fellow inmates endured and the ridiculous questions put to them based on unfounded and fabricated allegations, just like my father's experience. I

48 Aramyan, «Կոլիմա» (Kolyma), pp. 14–15.

wish he had been more forthcoming in his description of those nightly sessions that deprived him of the only time he was allowed to sleep, but that also, ironically, gave him the only opportunity for human contact and interaction.

Those long sessions of torturous interrogation followed at length by an obscure and unfounded charge-sheet were nothing but the result of the incomprehensible requirement of the NKVD to document the prisoner's case, albeit with false information, prior to his exile or execution. "It is a curious fact that the Soviet authorities were obsessed with the need to obtain that written confession. In most cases, the fate of the prisoner had already been determined, but long hours of intimidation and torture were used to force the prisoner to sign the false document."⁴⁹

Ordinarily, once a "confession" is signed and the "indictment" is drawn up, a court trial should follow. But in those years of Stalinist terror, the trial was dispensed with. In some cases, the interrogator decided the prisoner's fate. In other cases, like my father's, the case went to "trial." In the absence of the accused, a troika (committee of three) in Moscow handed down the sentence which was either immediate execution or a certain number of years of hard labor in the Gulag. My father was surprised to hear that his file had been sent to Moscow and the decision made there without a trial, without his presence. Perhaps he thought his case was exceptional. But that was the *modus operandi*. As Solzhenitsyn explained, "Troikas—panels

⁴⁹ Hosford et al., *GULAG*, p. 18.

of three, operating behind closed doors—were created to bypass the courts permanently."⁵⁰ Solzhenitsyn even revealed the names of the famous Moscow Troika that was operating in 1945, the year my father was sentenced: Gleb Boky, Vul and Vasiliev. Were those people in charge of his case too? Was it their apathetic stroke of the pen that decided his and his family's calamitous fate?

And so, bits and pieces of my father's recollections began to come together with what I later learned from other writers on life in the Gulag to form a more complete story of his survival and his fight against injustice.

⁵⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 281.

[illegible]

А Р М Я Н С К А Я С С Р

Народный Комиссариат Внутренних Дел, Управление Государственной Безопасности

И делу № _____

1944 г. Июль мес 8 дня. Я, Иван Иванович Иванов
(должность, наимен. орган, фамилия) Работник

В. В. Мухоморов - дополнительный инспектор Управления допросил в качестве свидетеля

1. Фамилия Р р и ш и н
2. Имя и отчество Ришрин Р (Ришрин) Ришрин
3. Дата рождения 1902 г.
4. Место рождения г. Пизиринский уезд (Риш)
5. Место жительства г. Ришрин (Риш) г. Ришрин
6. Нац. и гражд. (подданство) г. Ришрин Ришрин

7. Паспорт _____
(когда и каким органом выдан, номер, кат. и место приписки)

8. Род занятий Инженер-механик
(место службы и должность)

9. Социальное происхождение Инженер
(род занятий родителей и их имущественное положение)

10. Социальное положение (род занятий и имущественное положение)

а) до революции _____

б) после революции _____

11. Состав семьи: Зыряев Александр (Игоревич) Филиппович (Филип) Витальевич
(близкие родственники, их имена, фамилии, адреса и род занятий)

30 ~~информ. Семейств: Родственников, у которых живёт (участков)~~

Wasser - 15 Minuten nach dem Aufsteigen 3 mal täglich, 1 mal vor dem
Wasser - 15 Minuten nach dem Aufsteigen 4 mal täglich, 1 mal vor dem Aufsteigen
Wasser - 15 Minuten nach dem Aufsteigen 14 mal täglich, 1 mal vor dem Aufsteigen

The first page of my father's 7-page-long initial interrogation record in the Yerevan prison

14. СОСТАВ СЕМЬИ

Степень родства	Фамилия, имя и отчество	Год рожде- ния	Место рождения	Место жительства, работы и должность
Отец	Минас Хачатур Багда	1870	с. Ота кара	Уезд с 1910 г.
Мать	Минас Егисан	1875	—	Уезд с 1939 г.
Жена (муж)	Минас Фаруздан Егисан	1910	г. Казань, Уезд (Уезд) Тавриз	ис. работ...
Дети	Минас Рудина	1936	Тавриз	Тавриз
	— Рудан	1940	—	—
	— Вадим (звирок сестры)	1929	Кара	Тавриз (друзья 10 лет)
Братья, сестры	Минас Багдур Хачатур	1904	с. Ота кара	Тавриз, работал инженером
	Кахален Минас Хачатур	1899	—	Тавриз — закончил
	Норикан Егисан Хачатур	1907	—	— — — — —

Место для фотокарточки



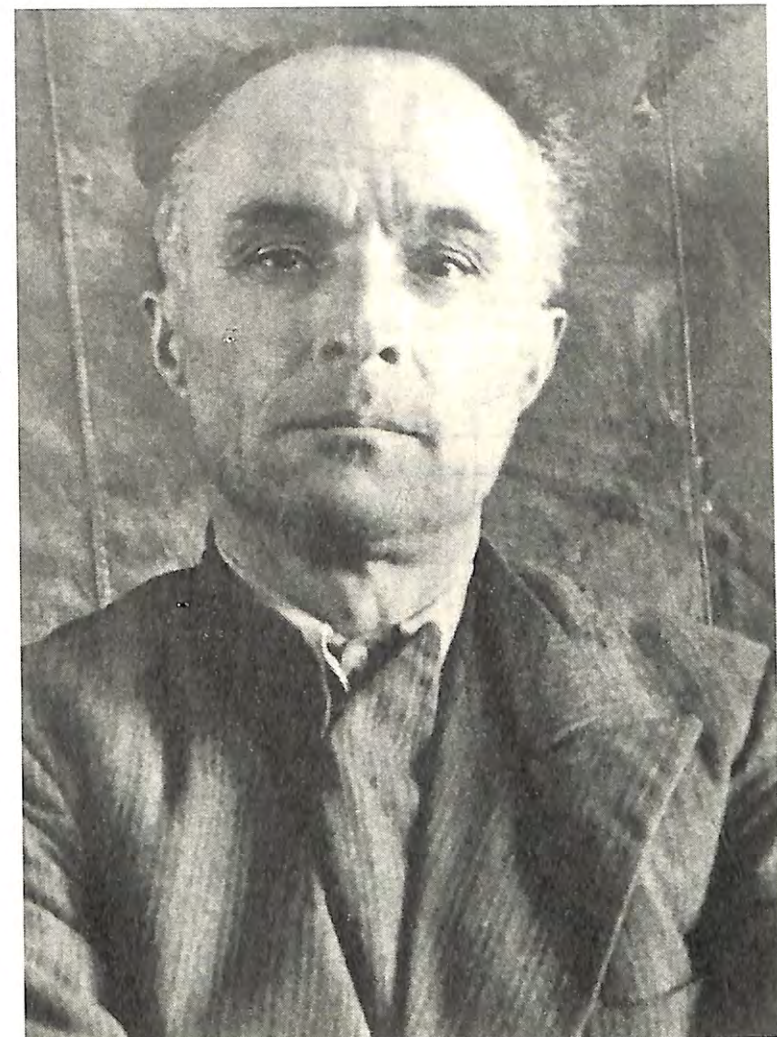
Отпечаток указательного
пальца правой руки

(при отсутствии его последующего
пальца — с соответствующей помет-
кой). Пальцевый узор должен быть
ясным и полностью прокатанным
(от одной кромки ногтя до другой)



Личная подпись
(арестованного)

Baghdassar Minassian



Baghdassar Minassian, the accused

The verdict

The Armenian translation of the verdict

Showing the changes in my father's handwriting over time.

Top: A letter to Paranzem, 1933.

Bottom left: His response to the verdict he received, 1945, after more than fourteen months in confinement.

Bottom Right: After his return from almost eleven years of exile.

Chapter Six

Gulag survivors widen the window on my father's life story

Norilsk! Anne Applebaum calls it the grimmest of the new generation of labor camps, where prisoners

not only dug the nickel, but they also built the nickel-processing plant and the power stations alongside the mines. Then they built the city—Norilsk—to house the NKVD men who ran the mines and the factories.... by 1940, [the camp] contained 19,500. At its largest, in 1952, 68,849 prisoners would be incarcerated there.”¹

According to one source, altogether 500,000 prisoners, working like slaves, took part in the construction of the Gulag camps and the metallurgical complex to extract the rich minerals. That was Stalin's big idea for

rebuilding the shattered Soviet economy: using half-hungry prisoners, skilled and unskilled workers as well as those who had never worked with their hands, to raise the infrastructure of factories, warehouses, barracks and buildings, and excavate the ores of mineral-rich Siberia. Did this inefficient method of exploiting labor boost the economy as it was originally intended to do? If it did to some degree, it was because those underfed human creatures worked in the most inhumane conditions, on a heavy work schedule, with clothing and bedding that was inadequate for the climate, all totally unacceptable in the free world. They worked and they lived at the whim of the warder who could slam on an extra punishment whether they deserved it or not. My father was just one among that enormous number of wretched men, many of whom did not survive the endless darkness of hardship to see the light of freedom.

During a recent trip to Armenia, as I was talking to my historian and social scientist friends about my project of writing my father's life story, I learned that the Norilsk prison camp, at least the original one after World War II, was built by an Armenian architect named Mazmanyán. “Of course,” they said, “there's nothing surprising in that. All the labor camps and the buildings around them were built by inmates carrying out their sentences.” My curiosity about this man, whom they knew only by his last name, took me to the «Հայկական Սովետական Հանրագիտարան» (Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia), volume 7. There he was, Mikayel Mazmanyán, architect, born in Tbilisi in 1899, died in Yerevan in 1971. The

¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 113.

design of Norilsk camp was passingly mentioned among the projects he accomplished. What is disgustingly comical in the entry is the sequence of years marking the different stages of his life. After citing his work as director of Yerevan's Construction Institute (1930–1934), the next date is 1954 when he takes the leadership of an architectural design workshop in Yerevan. There is a conspicuous gap. There is no mention of him having been a victim of the Stalinist purges, his exile in Norilsk and his return after Stalin's death. But that is Soviet historiography.

There was always some construction going on in Norilsk: more barracks and facilities, more apartment buildings and clubs for the “free” workers' settlement. But the tools and equipment were of the most primitive kind: ordinary shovels to break the icy ground, wheelbarrows to haul bricks, mortar and cement (there was a brick factory in Norilsk), hods to hoist materials up ladders. Did my father meet Mikayel Mazmanyanyan on any of the camp's construction sites?

My father used to tell us about the harsh climate of Norilsk, the unbearable winters with temperatures way below zero, and how prisoners were made to work in those conditions without the proper clothing or footwear. I search the Internet for more information on Norilsk. It is awful. According to Wikipedia, which is usually one of the first sites one checks, “Probably the worst of the camp complexes were the three built north of the Arctic Circle at Kolyma, Norilsk and Vorkuta. Prisoners in Soviet labor camps were worked to death by a mix

of extreme production quotas, brutality, hunger and the harsh elements.” In another article on Norilsk I found on the Internet, titled “Life in the Freezer,” the author explains, “For two months of the year, the city is plunged into polar night, where 24 hours a day are in darkness and in the summer they have 24 hours of light.” The author, photojournalist Caroline McGuire, describes her sojourn in that city 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle.² According to McGuire, the average annual temperature is -10°C ,³ there are snowstorms 130 days per year, two entire months of polar night, that is, perpetual darkness, and twenty-four-hour daylight in the summer. These phenomena have great influence on the physical and psychological health of the city's human denizens (polar night syndrome), resulting in anxiety, nervousness, drowsiness and insomnia. “Memoirists, poets, and novelists have all struggled to describe what it felt like to work in such frost,” Anne Applebaum writes. She cites a prisoner named Janusz Bardach as to how threatening the cold was: “Touching a metal tool with a bare hand could tear off the skin, and going to the bathroom was extremely dangerous. A bout of diarrhea could land you in the snow forever.” It wasn't that much warmer inside the barracks either. Kazimierz Zarod remembered waking

2 Caroline McGuire, “Life in the Freezer: Inside the northernmost city on earth whose residents endure -55°C temperatures and two months of total darkness every year,” *Daily Mail* (London), January 26, 2016.

3 This average is reached because of the summer heat, for although the summers are short, the temperature can rise to 30°C . It should be noted that, according to McGuire, despite this short respite from the frost, the scourge of mosquitos and the deep mud that makes walking so difficult make the summer equally unbearable.

up one morning unable to raise his head. The piece of material he had tied around his head and over his ears to keep warm was frozen to the wooden plank.⁴

McGuire notes that "Norilsk has no ground transport connections with the rest of the world. In the time of Stalin, the perilous road to Norilsk Gulag was known as the 'road of death'." Prisoners accumulated in the Krasnoyarsk transit camp were transported by boat on the Yenisei River to Dudinka, then a short train ride took them to Norilsk. Norillag, that is the Norilsk Corrective labor camp, operated from June 25, 1935, until it was closed down on August 22, 1956. An estimated 400,000 prisoners went through that infamous camp, of whom 300,000 were political prisoners. Quoting Adam Hochschild and Leo Kuper, respectively, Adam Jones has this to say about the three camp complexes located north of the Arctic Circle:

The number of victims claimed by the Kolyma camps alone was between a quarter of a million and over one million; in the lightly populated region today, "skeletons in frozen, shallow mass graves far outnumber the living." Other names engraved on Russians' historical memory include Norilsk, "the centre of a group of camps more deadly than Kolyma"; and Vorkuta, with a regime characterized by "extravagant cold," "exhaustion," and a "starvation diet" reminiscent of the Nazi camps.⁵

⁴ Both memoirists are quoted in Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 223.

⁵ Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London and New York:

My father intended to write about all the extraordinary phenomena that characterized Norillag and how the prisoners and other inhabitants of that isolated and forgotten edge of the world coped with them. He was a witness and I, who took up the task of telling his story, was only a researcher relying on the experience of others like him. Could I present the whole picture in all of its ugliness?

The story of Ivan Denisovich illustrates how prisoners were forced to work despite the freezing temperatures. When laying bricks, they had to move quickly and work fast because the mortar would freeze and become unusable. It was cruel and inhumane but true: in open-air temperatures below freezing, the only way to stay alive and not freeze to death was to keep moving and work hard, with your hands in mittens that hardly kept your fingers from freezing and your feet in boots that were often so old and worn that they couldn't prevent the snow from getting in between your toes. Only when the temperature dropped below 50 (that is, -50° Centigrade) and visibility was blocked by blizzard were the prisoners exempted from working outdoors. But that wasn't an unmitigated blessing for them. Since transportation was difficult in such conditions, food supplies couldn't reach the camp and the kitchen couldn't deliver meals. Besides, the prisoners were forced to do chores and indoor repair work, and to work on Sunday to make up for their "day off." Ultimately, the workload and the length of the

workday depended to a great extent on the mercy of the warders and the local camp administration. Some records show a regime of eleven-hour workdays and no more than three days off per month.

Warm clothes and proper boots were crucial in the subarctic climate of Norilsk where prisoners were usually out working in the permafrost fields. But the boots they were given were made of felt that became freezing wet in the snow, and most prisoners' boots were not even the right size. Only boots sent from home were warm and comfortable, but not very many prisoners had family back home who had the means and the audacity to acknowledge their relationship with a prisoner by sending him or her boots or warm clothes. Thus it was not uncommon for prisoners to steal from each other.

With eight years' dire experience in the horrible tundra, Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich knew how things worked. He would provide menial services for another inmate, such as standing in line in the cold for him or guarding his package from the other prisoners, in other words, he would bend over backwards for a fellow inmate who regularly received parcels from home, in the hope of being given a cigarette or a piece of sausage in recompense. It was simply impossible to live on the rations. My father received one parcel during the entirety of his years in exile.

I remember well, when after five years of absolutely no news of his whereabouts, of not even knowing whether he was alive or had been executed by the Soviets, we received a postcard that was supposedly from my father. It arrived

at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran and my mother was notified to come and pick it up. The postcard was written in Russian in red ink in a neat handwriting (not my father's for sure), but obviously written on behalf of my father and in his name. There was no date on the message and the dates of the posted and received stamps were illegible. How was this postcard even written? Now that I have amassed a considerable quantity of information on life in the labor camps, I know that paper and pencil were unavailable there. A character in Valter Aramyan's «Կոլիմա» gives his whole day's food ration to another inmate, a murderer who has somehow obtained a pencil and some paper, in exchange for those scarce luxury items so that he can write a letter home.⁶ What did my father sacrifice to be able to send us a message? The postcard was certainly written and mailed by someone outside the camp.

According to the message, my father was OK but he was very worried about not having received any news from us. He begged us to write to him (*in Russian*, he advised) and to send pictures of ourselves. He also asked for warm clothes, woolen socks and cigarettes. He beseeched his brother Asatur to help his wife and children and, if possible, to send him a little money.

I was too young to make a decision or advise my mother what to do, but I remember the conversations about that postcard. Many among our family and friends believed that the message was a hoax and that my mother

6 Aramyan, «Կոլիմա» (Kolyma), p. 27.

should not spend money she didn't have to send stuff to an unknown destination. But my mother was resolute. She sold the Persian rug, the sole valuable in our room, a token of our erstwhile comfortable and happy life brought from Tabriz, and prepared a large parcel of clothing, canned food and cigarettes, together with a letter and photographs. The parcel was sent through the Soviet Embassy to the address on the postcard: Krasnoyarsk Krai, poselok Norilsk,⁷ Pocht yashchik (P.O. Box) 224/b. That was the only parcel my father would receive from home, if he did receive it. We never heard back, but at least we knew we had done the right thing.

Years later, when my father returned from exile, he told us that a very kind and humane member of the camp administration—the type of person rarely met with in a labor camp—had done him the favor of writing the message and mailing it to the Soviet Embassy in Tehran. Ironically, however, the parcel my mother had sent only caused him more pain and anxiety. He did receive it but there was almost nothing left in it. That didn't surprise him. He knew it had been looted before it got to him. Of course, as he told us later, there were no photographs and no letter. Surprising for him, however, was the article of women's underwear in the parcel which became a source of anxiety. He thought it was a message, a way of letting him know that his wife had been arrested.

The idea was not farfetched. That was happening to

⁷ At that time, Norilsk was still a village (*poselok* in Russian). Founded in 1929, it was expanded in 1935 to lodge prisoners sentenced to hard labor. It was given the status of a town in 1953.

the families of imprisoned "enemies of the people" and my father knew it. Following a person's arrest, it was common practice to confiscate the house or apartment and the furniture of the arrestee and throw the family out or assign them to a single room irrespective of their number. Indeed, so many families were shattered, so many orphaned children were left in the discriminatory care of the government with the label "son of a traitor" or "daughter of an anti-revolutionary" metaphorically stamped on their forehead during the Stalinist persecutions. Nor did it matter if the family left behind officially renounced the arrestee and disowned the husband or father who was an "enemy of the people," "a poisonous weed" deserving eradication, "a saboteur," "the agent of a foreign power," as the rhetoric of Stalinist propaganda went.⁸ Children were taught to hate their imprisoned parent. Teachers inculcated the idea that, unlike the parents of other children who were heroes on the side of Stalin, their own parent was on the side of Hitler and associated enemies, and that idea took root in their childish minds.

Tales of these aftershocks are many. In the reminiscences of Hrach Simonyan, the Armenian protagonist in Arshak's novel, «ԳՆՆՈՒԻՆ» (The gypsy woman), his childhood memories are shrouded in the oppression of the Stalin era. Every night after his father's arrest, he, a young boy, accompanied his mother to the

⁸ One of the most painful of such disclaimers was that of Vahan Totovents' wife and young son. Despite renouncing her husband, Lusik Totovents was arrested and imprisoned. Their son, Levon Totovents, a promising young artist, was shot in the battle of Kerch in 1943.

Party meetings “as her shield and protector,” because,

If she didn't go to these meetings, it would prove that she had been an accomplice to my executed father and shared his enmity against the Leader [Stalin]. And they would take her too.... She took me along, so that, so that they would not take her temporarily—because she was very pretty—or take her for good, because she was my father's wife.⁹

Revik Harutyunyan's mother was arrested a week after his father was incarcerated. She was imprisoned in Yerevan for two years and denied visitation rights. Both man and wife were accused of belonging to a fictitious secret Trotskyite organization.¹⁰ Gayane Shagoyan also documents the practice of slamming the wife with the same unfounded accusation after the husband's arrest and arresting her as well.¹¹

⁹ Arshak (Sergey Arshakyan), «Գնչուհին» (The gypsy woman) (Yerevan: Vark, 1995), p. 20. This novel was written in 1977 but denied publication at the time. It was published, along with other provocative works by the same author, beginning in 1995.

¹⁰ Revik Harutyunyan's tragic story—the confiscation of his family's apartment after his parents' arrest, the four-year-old Revik with his baby sister and their aunt sleeping in the street, and all the hardship they endured—is recorded in an interview conducted by Levon Abrahamyan. This and many other interviews are transcribed in «Ստալինյան բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում, պատմություն, հիշողություն, սուրճ» (The Stalinist persecutions in Armenia: History, memory, daily life), ed. Hranush Kharatyan, Gayane Shagoyan, Harutyun Marutyan and Levon Abrahamyan (Yerevan: A “Gitutyun” Publication of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, 2015). See pp. 330–342 for Revik Harutyunyan's interview.

¹¹ Gayane Shagoyan, «Կինն ու տղամարդը որպես բռնաճնշումների թիրախ» (Man and woman as targets of persecution), in *ibid.*, pp. 192–195.

Well, my mother was not arrested. The situation was different in Iran. The Red Army finally withdrew and the central government regained control over all of Iranian territory. But how would my father have known that? The last news he had read was about the establishment of the Soviet-sponsored Azerbaijan People's Government in Iranian Azerbaijan, in an old copy of *Pravda* he had laid hands on.

Now, the parcel, in the shape in which it reached my father, taught him not to ask for any more parcels. He was in a dangerous environment with rampant crime among the prisoners. He was robbed and abused many times, especially before the segregation of the criminal prisoners in a different lager. They would simply snatch his meager ration of bread or a cigarette, and if he protested, a harsh beating would follow.

According to Vahram Alazan, mixing criminal and political prisoners was a diabolical scheme to increase the hardship of the politicals. He had experienced the heavy hand of the criminal element and he remembered with reawakened pain how, in a dire need of a smoke, he gave his last ruble to a criminal prisoner who snatched it and took off without giving him the promised cigarette. He remembered how often his ration of bread and hot soup were stolen and he didn't dare do anything about it. He remembered how a group of inmates attacked him and almost killed him because they thought he belonged to the same race as Stalin, and how he made every effort

to prove that he was Armenian, not Georgian.¹² Usually, hardened criminals convicted of murder, rape or grand theft were put in charge of political prisoners and the guards were indifferent to the abuses that ensued. "The political prisoners lived in constant fear of the criminals who seemingly had no moral or ethical boundaries.... They would force other prisoners to fulfill whatever demands or urges they had, at the threat of death...."¹³

Malnutrition and heavy physical labor took their toll on my father. One evening toward the end of a hard day's work, while lugging bricks, he fell down and fainted. A falling brick broke a bone in his foot. He was transported to the camp's hospital where he contracted jaundice, a severe illness that damaged his liver for good and had its detrimental impact at the end. He was released after a month in hospital. The good doctor, a political prisoner himself, told him that he had had no hope of saving him but had cared for him the best he could. My father remembered that doctor as a guardian angel who gave him a second life, to endure the hardship and return to his family.

While writing this book, a question has continued to perplex me. Why is it that overall we have such a small number of testimonies from Armenian survivors of Stalinist persecutions, and in particular, no first-person testimony from Norilsk? Was the fear so deep-seated as to compel silence even in freedom? Or maybe few of them survived that Siberian hell and returned. The Armenian

¹² Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering), p. 134.

¹³ Hosford et al., *GULAG*, p. 24.

memoirs I have read so far describe life in camps and prisons other than Norilsk, such as Solovetsky, Magadan, Mariinsk and Kolyma. Were there no other Armenians in that end of the world to come back and record their stories for perpetuity?

Interest in those dark and fearful years of Stalin's rule is just beginning to pick up in Armenia. Occasional articles have been published, but the archives and the documents that have long been available have only recently attracted scholars and researchers, first among them being Armenak Manukyan whose thought-provoking «Բաղաքական բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում, 1920-1953» (Political persecutions in Armenia, 1920–1953), was published in Yerevan in 1999, followed a decade later by Grisha Smbatyan's «Երկաթե վարագույրից այս կողմ» (This side of the Iron Curtain), published in Yerevan in 2009.

Here, I am intentionally leaving out works by Diaspora Armenians who spoke, wrote and published about this dark page of Armenian history under Stalin's reign. Those works were not accessible in Soviet Armenia, and even if they had been, they would have been rejected as the provocations of anti-revolutionary enemies. As to Russian historians, they turned to the documents as soon as the archives were opened during Gorbachev's *perestroika*. Dmitri Volkogonov's *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (1989) was to my knowledge the first attempt to document the horridness of the ugly reality prevailing

in the Soviet punishment system.¹⁴ Other works followed. All were almost immediately published in English translation. However, for the record, let us not forget the pioneering work by the English-American historian Robert Conquest whose study of *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (1968), together with the English translations of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1963), were to inform and educate the West about the reality inside the Soviet Union under Stalin's yoke, if the West wanted to know.

A book that just recently appeared is «Ստալինյան քոնաճնշումները Հայաստանում, պատմություն, հիշողություն, առօրյա» (The Stalinist persecutions in Armenia: History, memory, daily life), published in Yerevan in 2015 and distributed in 2016. This is a group effort, a compilation of the testimonies of descendants of victims of the Stalinist persecutions. The survivors themselves are long gone. It is too late to track their experiences. Their descendants are interviewed in this book, telling what they remember of their parents' or

¹⁴ Despite all the research carried out thus far, it is still impossible to tally the number of Soviet citizens subjected to Stalinist persecutions. As to deaths by execution or in the labor camps, the sources vary radically, from three-quarters of a million political prisoners sentenced to death between 1930 and 1953 (KGB press release, 1990), to 20 million deaths from the revolution through the 1980s, not counting the World Wars (Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism*, 1999). Anne Applebaum "reluctantly" settles on the figure of 2,749,163 deaths in the Gulag from 1929 to 1953 (citing Otto Pohl, *The Stalinist Penal System*, 1997). See Getty et al., "Victims of the Soviet Penal System," p. 1023, and Applebaum, *Gulag*, pp. 578–584.

grandparents' life in prison or labor camp. Too little, too late, but still better late than never, and I should say a worthy and commendable endeavor. As a nation, we are often late to the show, and always cautious.

As I turn the pages of this newest Armenian documentation of the Gulag, I am exhilarated to finally find a couple of stories about inmates of Norilsk: Samson Martirosyan (from an interview with his son Valodya) and Abel Ordukhanyan (from an interview with his daughter Iren), both exiled in 1937. Martirosyan served his ten-year sentence and came back. Ordukhanyan was given a life sentence but pardoned after the death of Stalin. Both interviews were done by Harutyun Marutyan, one of the co-editors of the book.

It turns out that Samson Martirosyan only spent the last five years of his sentence in Norilsk, but as a "free" worker, not housed in the barracks. He came home afflicted with chronic bronchitis. He was a quiet man, according to his son Valodya. He did not speak of his ordeal in exile and Valodya regrets not having asked him about his dreadful experience.¹⁵ Thus, no reminiscences about Norilsk and no possibility of contact with my father. Valodya admits that he was young and not interested in stories of the past. This is, unfortunately, so common. Wasn't I in the same boat? Couldn't I have learned more

¹⁵ Valodya's grandfather and Samson's father Aleksan was arrested and exiled twice, once in 1929 for his ties with Nzhdeh, thus with Dashnaktsutun, and again in 1937, right after he returned from his first exile. That time, he was executed. Aleksan's brother was also executed for the crime of belonging to the Dashnaktsutun. Valodya's younger uncle was expelled from the Red Army for his family ties with Dashnaktsakans, and his father was exiled first to Vorkuta and then to Norilsk. What a family history!

about my father's past if I had insisted?

Valodya remembers an interesting episode that took place after his father returned to his native village. Returning from work one day in 1962, Samson noticed a group of fellow villagers gathered around Stalin's statue in the main square. In reply to his query, the village chief said they had come to topple the statue but nobody dared to do it. "Let me do it," Samson said. "I suffered in Siberia for nothing I did wrong," and he threw a rope around Stalin's neck and dragged him off with a tractor.¹⁶

Abel Ordukhanyan served his life sentence in Norilsk. Did he meet my father? Did he tell him how the Cheka executioners had extinguished their cigarettes on his skin, or pushed needles under his nails to make him confess?¹⁷ Abel told his daughter about the visit of a group of high-ranking officers from Moscow. They had come to inspect the prisoners' living and working conditions and had hypocritically asked them if they were content. Abel had audaciously spoken up: "Wouldn't it be better if you shot us all at once rather than gradually starving us to death?" Once in a while though, Abel received a parcel of foodstuffs from home. Did he give a small share to my dad who couldn't even dream of receiving such things from distant Iran? His one experience of a trashed and looted package from home was enough to deter him from asking for another one.

Iren Ordukhanyan testifies that her father wrote a long

16 See Valodya Martirosyan's testimony in Kharatyan et al., «Ստալինյան բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում» (The Stalinist persecutions in Armenia), pp. 286–305.

17 See Iren Ordukhanyan's interview in *ibid.*, pp. 314–320.

letter to Stalin explaining that the allegations against him were fabricated. How naïve but significant. Significant because Abel was one of the aforementioned prisoners who believed that Stalin was unaware of the cruelties and abuse on the part of the camp administrators. Otherwise, he believed, Stalin would not have allowed those things to happen. And besides, he reasoned, when you cut a forest, wood shavings fly. What he meant was that Stalin's project was the eradication of anti-revolutionaries who hindered the progress of communism in the Soviet Union and the world at large, and during the implementation of that huge project, the victimization of some unimportant albeit innocent people was unavoidable. But when asked who the wood shavings were, you or Aksel Bakunts, Abel would nervously cut the conversation short. He and his like believed in the good intentions of the regime and the need to purge the socialist society of harmful and undesirable elements. This is psychologically explicable. It happens in societies ruled by a mastermind tyrant like Stalin or Hitler.

Many who served time under the Stalinist persecutions did so without any clear understanding of the allegations against them. Even when some of them returned home after Stalin's death, they still had no clear idea of what they had been accused of or who had informed on them. Sometimes all they had in hand was a permit to go home, not a statement of sentence completed or a certificate of discharge. Their persecution remained an incomprehensible enigma. Many families remained in the dark about the reasons for their kin's

arrest and his or her whereabouts afterwards. It was only in the 1980s and 90s, after the archives had been opened, that some pursued the truth. There were also the mass exonerations and sometimes the posthumous acquittals, and the documentation that came with those acquittals through which some cases were clarified. But again, Armenians were cautious about disturbing the hornets' nest. Perhaps this was due to their experience. They had seen the persecutions of 1929, the purges of 1937–1938, and the mass arrest and exile of entire families to Altay in southern Siberia on June 14, 1949.¹⁸ The irony is that on

18 The mass exile of 1949 was the result of a secret agreement between Stalin and Beria and the special decree that followed. It concerned the people of the three republics of the Caucasus, but the great majority of the exiles were again Armenian families, including immigrants from Greece, Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries as well as the United States. The implementation of this infamous decree was cruelly accomplished in towns and villages by Armenian bureaucrats who showed no respect for human dignity, gave families half an hour to get ready, rounded up young and old, loaded them into cargo trains and sent them off to a grim destination for good. The excuse given for this mass deportation was that the deportees were Dashnaks or Kulaks or spies or legionnaires or some combination thereof, in other words, "traitors to their homeland" and "enemies of the people." Writing in the Beirut-based periodical *Pakine* in 1989 (No. 7–12, p. 8), the Soviet Armenian writer Sero Khanzatyian put the number of deportees from Soviet Armenia at nearly 100,000, adding that about that many Armenians were also deported from Georgia, Azerbaijan and the then autonomous oblast of Nagorno Karabagh.

The same issue of *Pakine* contains several other important articles about the catastrophic events of 1949, including one by Anton Kochinyan. The future First Secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia (1966–1974) had taken part in the organization and implementation of the project in Gyumri. "That was real barbarism against patriotic people," he wrote in 1989, "people imbued with love of and yearning for the homeland who had left their homes and belongings abroad and come to Soviet Armenia from every corner of the world, only to be sent into exile just as they set foot on the paternal soil." According to Kochinyan, American Armenian repatriates suffered the most, having left comfortable situations and thriving businesses and repatriated purely out of love for the homeland.

For additional information on the 1949 mass arrest and exile of repatriated families, see also Armenak Manukyan, «Քաղաքական բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում, 1920–1953» (Political persecutions in Armenia, 1920–1953) (Yerevan: "Areresum"-Ani, 1999), and Armine Koundakjian,

the front of the train that took those families away there was a huge portrait of Stalin, indicating that they had all volunteered to work in Siberia. Having seen all that, Armenians thought there was always the possibility of similar persecutions occurring again, even in independent Armenia. It would be normal to think that it is up to the descendants of those victims to seek the justice their ancestors were denied and to remove the blot on their family history. But again, Armenians are either cautious or indifferent. The organization—still in existence—responsible for all the calamity is off the hook.¹⁹

Sometimes ex-prisoners did not have the money to travel home. They would stay on and continue as free workers if, for instance, they had lived in exile for a very long time and no longer had close family waiting for them in their hometown, or if they were able to find a paying job and shelter or a nice local woman to take them in.

In Valter Aramyan's «Կոլիսիա», Yan finally returned home after long years in the hellhole conceived and built by the diabolic architect Stalin. When he was first discharged, he was advised to get married and make a family, but was forbidden to set foot in Armenia. After Stalin's death, however, the rules changed and now he was in Yerevan with his Russian wife and children, gifts

«Հայրենադարձների բռնաճնշումները ստալինյան ժամանակաշրջանում» (Yerevan: S.p., 2010), published in English translation as *The Repression of Armenian Repatriates during the Stalin Era* (2012).

19 As a positive gesture in this regard, the Armenian Parliament in 1999 designated June 14 as the annual day of commemoration of the victims of the 1949 persecutions.

of the infamous taiga. He had a sense of absolute freedom such as he had never experienced before, not even when he was released, but there was something he was still searching for, "something forgotten, something lost and never to be found. It was his youth lost in the prisons and forced labor camps set up by the mustachioed leader."²⁰ I never asked my father how he perceived the irretrievable loss of his youth in the Gulag.

It was not easy for these "ex-convicts" when they returned home to Soviet Armenia or anywhere else in the Soviet Union. Sometimes these ex-cons were damned forever. The local authorities did nothing to help them ease their way back into society and start a new life. On the contrary, they were looked upon with some suspicion, or reservations at best. Very few were able to reestablish themselves in their former status and position in society or the workplace, or even within their immediate family. How was my father received after he returned to the family and the society from which he had been snatched away?

Reading Iren Ordukhanyan's interview made me think about our own perception of our father when he returned. Iren confesses that she and her sister did not welcome their father on his return from exile. In fact, they couldn't stand him. They argued with him about everything. Iren's analysis helped me to see another side of our complicated coexistence. Were we with our behavior, especially my sister Roozan, taking revenge for

²⁰ Aramyan, «Անխիւս» (Kolyma), p. 237.

our childhood denied to us because of our father's absence, the way Iren and her sister had? No, our case was not that drastic. After a short period of shock and adjustment to the new male/father figure in our life, we grew to love our father and appreciate his insight and his eagerness to help us in every way he could. Our heads were not filled with a state ideology that might have conditioned us see him as the enemy, had the state considered him as such.

In my search for additional material to complete my father's narrative, one episode remains enigmatic and puzzling. My father told us that before being exiled to the tundra, he was put to work in a chemistry laboratory where his working and living conditions were incomparably better than in the camp north of the Arctic Circle. But one day, he recalled, his stay in that "paradise" abruptly came to an end and he was sent to Norilsk labor camp. He believed the reason was the authorities' realization that he could have blown up the entire laboratory if he had set his mind to it. That was a risky position they had entrusted to an enemy. I couldn't find any reference to that short-lived respite among his writings or chapter outlines. My presumption is that, while evaluating the prisoners' talents and capabilities in the Krasnoyarsk transit camp, as my father mentioned in his memoir, they had learned of his expertise in chemistry, and without thinking of the consequences, simply out of the need for his professional skills, they had assigned him to that position. Exactly where that laboratory was, which according to my father carried out sensitive production, I do not know, probably somewhere in southern Siberia.

I came close to penetrating the mystery after I reread Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, this time with intensely focused attention. And there it was: isolated prison camps throughout the archipelago known as sharashkas or "paradise islands" where political prisoners—biologists, chemists, physicists and nuclear engineers—were put to work on top-secret projects.²¹ That was all I could find. Apparently, the climate in those sharashkas was less intolerable.

The Stalinist purges of 1937–1938 were proportionally the harshest and most cruel in the small Soviet Republic of Armenia. More people were arrested, exiled or executed in Armenia than in any other republic, even Russia. Speaking of the year 1937, Silva Kaputikyan said, "In our republic, we tried to cut down more people than anyone, and we cut deeper than anyone."²² Denunciation was rampant: people were falsely informing on their neighbors or coworkers out of fear, coercion or jealousy. Old Bolsheviks with a long history of leadership in the Communist Party and a record of outstanding revolutionary activism in the service of securing Bolshevik hegemony throughout the Empire, even those who had spent years in tsarist prisons, were being arrested. In his memoir, Suren Ghazaryan named the names of fellow Armenian inmates who were staunch Bolsheviks.²³

21 Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 590.

22 In the monthly *Garun* (Yerevan), 1994, No. 10, p. 22, quoted in *Pakine*, 1995, No. 7–8–9, p. 60.

23 Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated), p. 10.

Not surprisingly, however, Georgia and Azerbaijan enjoyed a certain favoritism in that time of political insecurity and confusion. According to Suren Oganessian, "All the nationalities except the Georgians and the Azerbaijanians [Azerbaijanis] were represented in the exile community. As a matter of fact, over the five years of my exile, I came across only one Georgian and not a single Azerbaijanian."²⁴ It seems that Georgians were spared because of Beria's and Stalin's nepotism, and Azerbaijanis out of a desire to win over the oil-rich republic. This observation was made in Diasporan or rather ARF papers as early as 1938. Writing in *Hairenik* monthly, Arsham Khondkarian (A. Atan) was especially apprehensive about the Armenian intelligentsia and men of letters against whom the persecution was harsher than against those of any other ethnic group in the Soviet Union. They were simply eradicated.²⁵ Of course, this kind of observation and concern in the Diasporan press was met with reservation or no reaction at all by the Soviet Armenian press. Even worse, an article in *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* offered the following assessment of the events that had unfolded in 1937: "With the leadership and direct assistance of Comrade Stalin, the leader of all the people, the Bolsheviks of Armenia destroyed the most ferocious enemy of the Armenian people, the disgusting Dashnaktsakan, the Trotskyite-Bukharinist, bourgeois-

24 Oganessian, *Under Stalin's Sun*, p. 23. His memoir, «Երջանիկ կեանքը» ստալինյան Արևի տակ» (The "happy life" under Stalin's sun), was originally published serially in *Hairenik* monthly (Boston), January–December 1966.

25 Atan in *Hairenik* monthly, November 1938, p. 151, quoted in *Pakine*, 1995, No. 7–8–9, p. 59.

nationalist traitors.”²⁶

There was a rumor that Beria and Stalin came to a secret agreement in 1936 to deport Armenians to Siberia in an attempt to bring Armenia’s population down under 700,000 in order to justify its annexation to Georgia. Even if it was only a rumor, it is surely demonstrative of the suspicion and fear that existed in Soviet Armenia at the time.

During the trying years after Aghasi Khanjyan’s assassination in 1936,²⁷ the name of the game was terrorizing the common folk, misusing power and authority for personal gain or vendetta, and above all, slavishly attempting to please the higher authorities and save their own skin. Innocent people were accused of espionage, or betraying Father Stalin’s grand ideas, or being a member of a clandestine organization, or being a Trotskyite or a nationalist Dashnak. At the first Communist Party meeting after Khanjyan’s death, held on October 2, 1936, zealous orators accused the deceased of having been the head of both a Trotskyite and a secret Dashnak nationalist organization. A. Amatuni, who replaced Khanjyan as First Secretary of

26 *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* (Yerevan), March 28, 1938, quoted in *Pakine*, 1995, No. 7–8–9, p. 58.

27 With his popularity and his defense of national interests, Aghasi Khanjyan, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia (1930–1936), was a threat to Lavrentiy Beria, then Transcaucasian regional party chief. Beria shot Khanjyan in his office in Tbilisi on July 9, 1936. Khanjyan had come to Georgia to attend a meeting of the Transcaucasian Regional Committee presidium as the head of the Armenian delegation. After his murder, the story was put out that he had committed suicide. That was highly unlikely and many lost their lives for disputing the story. After the death of Stalin and the execution of Beria, research and investigations exposed the truth.

the Soviet Armenian CP, declared that Khanjyan and his collaborators had always been “conciliatory toward dashnaks and nationalists” and were “paving the way for the dashnaks.”²⁸

Needless to say, Aghasi Khanjyan was not a member of Dashnaktsutun as he was accused of being, but he knew the history. In fact, he was quoted as having said to Drastamat Simonian, who was reporting to him about Dashnaktsutun’s stance against the Soviet regime, “Of course, if something happens, you and I will run away and Dashnaktsutun will remain as the proprietor of the Armenian nation.”²⁹ According to Vahram Alazan, one Khachik Mughdusi, Lavrentiy Beria’s henchman in Armenia, proudly announced in the October meeting that 700–800 Khanjyan sympathizers had already been incarcerated or executed.³⁰ Over the next two years, thousands were arrested, imprisoned, exiled or executed. Those were the years of Stalin’s Great Purge.

My father recalled conversations with some of the Armenian inmates at Norilsk. He said they had been close collaborators of Aghasi Khanjyan and were arrested and exiled after his assassination, but unfortunately, my

28 Amatuni’s remarks were quoted in Gabriel Lazian, «Հայաստան եւ Հայ Դատը Հայեւոյս յարաբերութիւններու լոյսին տակ» (Armenia and the Armenian Question in the light of Armeno-Russian relations) (Cairo: Housaper, 1957), p. 337. The use of the lower case initial letter in “dashnak” was a Soviet Armenian practice signifying contempt for the Dashnaktsutun. Ironically, many of those who attended this meeting and who made accusatory speeches were themselves imprisoned or executed not very long afterwards.

29 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 336. This remark was published as an indictment in *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, October 30, 1936.

30 Alazan, «Տառապանքի ուղիներով» (Through the roads of suffering), p. 5. Khachik Mughdusi was later imprisoned when Stalin was getting rid of Beria’s collaborators. Those people had served their purpose and were no longer needed.

father did not mention their names or else we, inattentive and careless, failed to register them. He said that he had explained to them what Dashnaktsutiun is and laid out the Party's position against the Soviet regime in Armenia. He proudly recalled their response: "We were accused and exiled for being dashnaks without even knowing what a Dashnak was. But if Dashnaktsutiun is what you describe, then we are proud of having been condemned as Dashnaks." Would my father have written about those rare moments of pride in the Gulag? Who were those people? Did they make it to freedom or had they perished and been forgotten in unnamed graves?

The purges of 1937 may have been the high-water mark of the persecutions in Soviet Armenia—and in the entire Soviet Union. But in reality, at least as far I am concerned, 1937 is just a symbol. The purges had no beginning and no end. Siberian prisons were thriving in the Tsarist Empire. The Gulag system was established in 1918 during Lenin's rule. Stalin expanded and perfected the system with unjustified arrests and banishments, creating the atmosphere of terror and suspicion that continued even after his death, at least until the arrest and execution of Beria. In her analysis of the rise and fall of the deadly labor camps in relation to the tides of war and ideology, Applebaum concludes, "The Great Terror left its mark on the mentality of camp guards and prisoners alike."³¹ And the system of government was built upon that mentality.

³¹ Applebaum, *Gulag*, p. 93.

Ironically, even during the relative thaw at the beginning of Khrushchev's rule, when the people of the Soviet Union found the courage to speak out, self-censorship was comparatively more severe in Armenia, as discussed earlier: people were still afraid to touch on that sore subject. "The leaders of Armenia during that period were extremely subservient vis-à-vis the Անդրերկրկոմ [Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic] and the Center," writes Armenak Manukyan, referring to the absolute obedience they showed toward Beria, Stalin's right-hand man in Transcaucasia.³² But that subservience and that caution lingered on long after the destalinization period and it was only in the late 1980s and the 1990s that the shackles came off.

Thus, when the partially implemented course of destalinization came to a halt, Soviet Armenia was ready to cringe. In a closed-door meeting, the Communist faction of the Armenian Writers Union decided not to publish anything on the subject of 1937, and the manuscript memoirs of Armenian survivors of Stalin's Gulag were routinely rejected for publication.

Nayiri Zaryan's «Հարթագողի ճամբան» (The Milky Way), an autobiographical novel written in 1963 that only briefly touched on the purges, was suddenly put on hold, even though it had already been greenlighted for publication after several sessions of cutting and censoring.³³

³² Manukyan, «Քաղաքական բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում» (Political persecutions in Armenia), p. 56.

³³ Nayiri Zaryan's novel was published in 1989. However, an excerpt alluding to the horrors of 1937 was published under the title «Ծանոթ պողոտա» (Familiar

Thus the inhibition against speaking freely about the Stalinist terror lingered on until the 1980s. Silva Kaputikyan said that she had ventured to write about it in 1973 in her «Խճանկար» (Mosaic), but those segments were censored before the work was published.³⁴

Suren Ghazaryan was actually one of the first Armenians to give a full account of the Gulag in his groundbreaking memoir written in Russian, *Eto nie dalzhno pavidaritsa*. He initially offered the manuscript to the Russian literary journal *Novi Mir* in 1967. The response he received from Alexandre Tvardovsky, the famous Russian poet and the editor of *Novi Mir*, typifies the mindset then prevalent throughout the Soviet Union. Tvardovsky praised Ghazaryan's courage, his determination to endure the tortures and live to tell the world about his ordeal. He complimented the author's style, his clarity of diction and his vivid imagery, but concluded that publication of the work was out of the question. Nevertheless, he condemned the harsh and unacceptable methods of punishment described in Ghazaryan's memoir: "Those who fight for the sake of forgetting [the past] and 'not reopening the wounds'—and there are many who think that way—are saving those 'methods' for themselves for tough times." He added that "Someday, this memoir and many others like it will be

street) in *Grakan Tert* in 1964.

³⁴ Silva Kaputikyan, «Էջեր փակ գրողներից» (Pages from locked drawers) (Yerevan: Apolon, 1997), p. 10. The reference is to her book, «Խճանկար հոգու և քարտեզի գույներից» (A mosaic composed of the colors of the soul and the map) (Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1975), a travelogue containing memories and impressions of her visits to Diasporan Armenian communities in 1962–63 (Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, France) and 1974 (North America).

published." Ghazaryan's memoir was finally published some two decades later.³⁵

Here the reader should be reminded that Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was originally published in that very journal under the same editor in 1962. No doubt, soon afterward the reins were sharply pulled up on the headlong pace of destalinization—Khrushchev was removed from power in 1964. In fact, the Union of Soviet Writers condemned and rejected Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* which was submitted for publication in 1967. Thus, with the exception of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and a few essays, all of his work was published outside the Soviet Union. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970, he was afraid to travel outside the country lest he not be allowed to return.³⁶ He was finally expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974 and lived in the West for two decades. In 1994, with his citizenship restored, he returned to Russia where he died in 2008. He was born on December 11, 1918, exactly 18 years before I was.

Beginning from Gorbachev's *perestroika*, and especially after the establishment of the Memorial society in Moscow in 1989, and with extensive research into the newly opened archives of the prison camps, the world has come to know much more about that hidden

³⁵ Tvardovsky's letter was published in translation in Ghazaryan's «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated) in 1988.

³⁶ Remember Boris Pasternak, the author of *Dr. Zhivago*, who was forced to decline the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958.

reality. Many memoirs and personal narratives about life in the Gulag as well as archival research illuminate the structure, function, aims and atmosphere of this Soviet system of punishment that proved to be more fiendish, more horrible than Nazi methods of killing, because this was a prolonged process, killing every day a little at a time.

Indeed, during the last decade or so, valuable archival materials on the Gulag system have been published in Moscow under the general title of *Istoriya Stalinskogo Gulaga. Konets 1920-kh—Pervaya Polovina 1950-kh Godov. Sobranie Dokumentov v 7 Tomakh* (The history of Stalin's Gulag: From the late 1920s to the first half of the 1950s. Collection of documents in seven volumes). This massive publication documents and describes the Soviet policy of repression and punishment as well as all aspects of life in the prison camps. It is too little, too late to bring the main culprit and the petty perpetrators to trial for their crimes against humanity.

Yes, it is important to remember, to speak openly about that dark period of history, and particularly important for me, about that dark period of Armenian history, when Stalin and Beria, his head honcho in the Caucasus, viewed Armenians as a "threat" to their interests, and when the *crème de la crème* of our nation was systematically eradicated on the basis of a mere decree. The Stalinist persecutions in Armenia stripped the nation of its intellectual potential and halted the cultivation of the future generation of concerned leaders/intellectuals, because, in the words of Armenak Manukyan, those purges paved the way for "all the sycophants, bootlickers,

and those who have lost their human and national characters to rise to leadership."³⁷ Armenia was utterly beheaded by Stalin's purges.

The details of the thirty years of Stalin's reign of terror are now relatively better known in the world, although what is unearthed, studied and published cannot reveal the whole picture of all the Soviet citizens incarcerated, executed, or exiled en masse as "enemies of the people." A great deal of work has been done in the former Soviet Republic of Armenia since it regained its independence, especially during the past decade as the archives of the National Security Service and Internal Affairs have become more accessible.

In spite of all the evidence exposing Stalin's heinous crimes, why aren't the leaders of the post-Soviet republics ready to deal with the past and render justice to the victims, or even put up a monument in their memory? Is the KGB still in power? Ironically, the only monument Gurgun Mahari witnessed was that of a young prisoner who was made to stand on the frozen hill outside the camp. He was drenched with cold water that froze immediately and turned him into an ice sculpture.³⁸ I take note of Memorial, the civil society organization founded before the collapse of the Soviet Union by former prisoners of the Stalinist regime and human rights activists to collect

37 Manukyan, «Զարգացական բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում» (Political persecutions in Armenia), p. 59. Manukyan categorizes the victims of Stalinist purges in Armenia and provides detailed information on their incarceration. They were scientists, literati, artists, clergy, laborers and peasants, military men and lawyers, in fact, they were men and women from all walks of life.

38 Ajemyan (ed.), «Սիբիրական» (Of Siberia, or The Siberian), p. 329.

documents and erect monuments to the victims of the regime (Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov was the first president of Memorial). But the heyday of that organization has passed and it faces the danger of suppression. Oblivion is still the name of the game. I asked around in Armenia to see if there is such a monument. I wanted to visit and pay my respects to the memory of those who shared my father's destiny. My friend and colleague Harutyun Marutyan's explanation clearly showed that the treatment of this subject in Armenia is in line with all post-Soviet republics and especially the Russian Federation. Upon popular request, he explained, a headstone-like monument was somehow incorporated into the huge memorial complex dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Soviet regime in Armenia. The inscription on that memorial stone, a line from Yeghishé Charents «Բոլոր նրանց հոգիներին...» from his famous poem «Ամբոխները խելագարուած» (The Frenzied Masses) is still in reference to the Bolshevik Revolution. There are others, most of them personal initiatives in the memory of a grandparent, a victim of Stalinist purges or a collective one dedicated to the victims from the same village.³⁹

"Don't talk about it," we are admonished, because

³⁹ For a discussion of such monuments as reminders of the Stalinist terror in Post-Soviet Armenia, see «Ստալինյան բռնաճնշումները Հայաստանում. պատմություն, հիշողություն, արժեք», pp. 24-25, 258-268.

At this point, although I have already made several references to this publication, I'd like to take note of a sentence in the title page I have never encountered before. "Views expressed in this book may not coincide with those of the publishers." What is the meaning of this disclaimer? Is it the fear and self-censorship of the Soviet era still lingering in the free and independent Republic of Armenia?

every time the reins have been loosened since the Khrushchevian thaw, the outpouring of facts and evidence of Stalin's punishment system has spun out of control. As Solzhenitsyn put it, "If we start to recall the sufferings of millions, we are told it will distort the historical perspective! If we doggedly seek out the essence of our morality, we are told it will darken our material progress!"⁴⁰

My father began writing what became this book in order to let at least Armenians know about what the Soviet regime had been, what Stalin had done when he ruled over millions of people who were shackled by fear and apprehension at best, or isolated and condemned to gradual death in the hard labor camps, far from the eyes of humanity. My father knew who Stalin was. Dashnaktsutun knew who Stalin was. As early as 1931, a typical characterization in *Droshag*, the ARF organ, was the following: "Stalin is the most notable chemist in the Soviet Union. He can turn a human being into dirt, as he did with Trotsky. But he can also turn dirt into a man, as he did with Mikoyan."⁴¹ Now, my father was penning his memoir at a time when some Diasporan Armenian leaders were attempting a "rapprochement" with the Soviets, believing in the post-Stalin transformation of Soviet policies. They were playing it "safe" and they

⁴⁰ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, p. 94.

⁴¹ Anastas Mikoyan, a famous Armenian communist, was a close collaborator of Stalin who played a dirty role when it came to escalating repression, arrests and persecution in Soviet Armenia. His visits to Yerevan were always the harbinger of ominous events. He was instrumental in the implementation of the 1937-1938 purges in Armenia. For this quote from an article in *Droshag*, 1931, No. 12, p. 318, see *Pakine*, 1995, No. 7-8-9, p. 75.

admonished him not to criticize the Soviets so harshly.

My father's writings, his editorials in *Alik*, his political analyses raise the question of what the reaction would have been to his book if he had had the chance to complete it and publish it in the late 1970s, if he had had the chance to shed light on the diabolical Soviet judicial system, the harshness and inhumanity of the methods of punishment kept hidden behind the Iron Curtain. The world outside knew very little, preferred not to know, pretended not to see. Glowing Soviet propaganda disguised the reality. Soviet ideology—social justice, equality for all—continued to attract the naïve. The world praised the changes Khrushchev had introduced and his criticism of Stalin's "personality cult."⁴² My father did not believe in that. It was impossible to hold one person responsible for all the atrocities committed in the course of thirty years, for the millions of victims who were cycled in and out of the Gulag. Silva Kaputikyan was right to call "Stalin's personality cult" a Khrushchevian euphemism to cover the magnitude of Stalin's terror.⁴³ Indeed, the great and the petty executioners were guilty of inflicting unimaginable tortures on innocent people and spreading terror across the land. Stalin was blamed and Beria and a few other butchers were executed, but the hundreds and thousands of National Security agents were left free, unpunished and unharmed.

⁴² "Personality cult" was an epithet for the worship of Stalin and the era of his authoritarian rule. It was popularized during Khrushchev's time when the trend was to blame all the brutal persecutions of that era on Stalin and the cult built up around him.

⁴³ Kaputikyan, «Էջեր փակ զորոցներից» (Pages from locked drawers), p. 35.

And after the Khrushchevian thaw came to an end, did the world ask why the rehabilitation of the Old Bolsheviks and the exoneration of the innocent intelligentsia did not continue as they had enthusiastically begun? The reins were tightened and the process was curtailed. The watchword became "let us not open old wounds."

Anne Applebaum encountered this attitude during her journey to the sites of former Gulag prison camps in the late 1990s. She sensed resentment in conversations with many Soviet citizens, especially when she as a Westerner showed interest in the Stalinist persecutions. "Why don't you talk about the victories and achievements of the Soviet Union instead of that painful topic?" I experienced exactly the same thing in Armenia before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The tide of open but cautious discussion of Stalin's reign of terror in Armenia, briefly risen under Khrushchev, died away with his downfall. I suppose that was how Soviet Armenians were programmed: "Let bygones be bygones. Always look to the future." That was how they were taught to view the painful experience, the massacres and the deportation of the whole nation not so long ago. And whoever dared to dwell upon that past was labeled a masochist. I was called that once by a highly respected Soviet Armenian intellectual because of my deep involvement in the study of the Armenian Genocide.



My sister Roozan and I, late 1945. On the back, my father noted, "This picture was sent to me in Narilsk. Obviously, I did not receive it — February 22, 1955, Tehran."



A statue of Josef Stalin in Moscow and a memorial to his many victims



"The Golgotha" Gulag Memorial in Norilsk



Gulag Memorial in St. Petersburg



To the memory of innocent convicts,
Arajadzor Village, Kapan Region, Armenia



The memorial complex dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Soviet regime
in Armenia with Stalin's victims monument incorporated, Yerevan
- picture, courtesy of Harutyun Marutyan

Chapter Seven

A “widow” and two orphan girls

A “widow” and two orphan girls, that was what we were, residues of Soviet persecution. A happy marriage, two little girls growing up in the most caring family atmosphere, and suddenly one night, we found ourselves sleeping alone in fear and agony. Our father did not come home.

The date was January 3, 1944. I was only seven and unfortunately I have little recollection of the turbulent days and months that followed. But I could feel the inexplicable anguish that suddenly cast a dark shadow over our existence and would hold us in its grip for eleven years, a long, long time.

The futile search for my father began. Although there was almost no doubt about who was responsible for his disappearance, we had to find out what had happened. Had he been assassinated? Abducted? Imprisoned? Exiled?

My Uncle Asatur and a few ungers who were still around advised my mother to write to whomever she could and inquire about her husband's disappearance. What I mean by “ungers who were still around” is that

many preferred to keep a safe distance from our family. In the prevailing atmosphere of fear, an association with the family of an enemy of the communist regime was quite dangerous, almost like exposing yourself as a potential candidate for arrest. Today, when I read about Stalin's reign of terror, I see that same atmosphere pervading the entire period between 1937 and 1953. The families of those arrested found themselves isolated, helpless and alone. The consequences continued reverberating in their lives even beyond the proclamation of general amnesty after Stalin's death. Compared to life behind the Iron Curtain, our situation was far better, of course. At least we had a government in place, albeit weak and not well represented in the province of Azerbaijan. So my mother began her inquiry.

Preserved in her papers, I find copies of the letters she wrote to the Ministry of Education and even to the Queen of Iran (Fawzia Fuad). By way of response, there is a letter from the Ministry of Education in Tabriz, signed by the Minister himself, to police headquarters in Tabriz, dated 16/12/1322 (March 7, 1944). In it, the Minister urges the police to launch a thorough search for Dr. Baghdassar Minassian who is reported missing, and to inform the Ministry and Dr. Minassian's wife about the results of the search. There is also a recommendation from the Minister to continue paying Dr. Minassian's monthly salary to his wife. Oddly, his salary, our only income, was cut off the day my father was absent from class and it was never restored, thus the Minister's recommendation had no effect.

My mother knocked on every door she could, without

result. The copy of another petition, dated 16/5/1324 (July 7, 1945) and addressed to the Minister of Education in Tehran, is also kept in my mother's file. She described her husband's abduction by unknown persons and requested financial assistance to extricate her and her two children from the life-threatening destitution they were facing. I don't believe there was any response to that petition.

Uncle Asatur in Tabriz, Cousin Vachik and Uncles Alexan and Vahan in Tehran were helping us financially. I believe the local ARF too allocated a small monthly stipend to help our family. Looking back on those days, I wonder how my mother kept her sanity. She was a proud woman, she never asked for help. The letters from our relatives in Tehran, the letters she kept from those days, reveal that she never complained about her situation and avoided answering their probing questions. They persisted in writing that they had heard from here and there that our family was in a state of poverty, but my mother didn't ask for help. I am amazed at her courage and determination. Is it the case that highly critical situations inspire extraordinary conduct?

There is not an abundance of testimonies to the courage of the wives of Armenian victims of the Stalinist terror. Suren Ghazaryan described his one and only visit with his wife Lyuba, weeks after his incarceration: "Where did she get so much courage to treat me as if everything was normal, that she was in charge, that everything was under control?"¹ She did not even take

1 Ghazaryan, «Դա չպետք է կրկնվի» (That should not be repeated), p. 99.

fright at seeing his bleeding, misshapen face—he had been subjected to torturous interrogation earlier that day. But the impression she left on her husband was deliberately false. Lyuba was the target of moral, financial and physical persecution she could not long endure. She finally gave in and committed suicide. In her suicide note, she begged that her husband not be told of her action, and indeed, for years and years in exile Suren did not know what had happened. Their two little children were left in the care of his mother, and for seventeen years she did every possible kind of work to earn a living for them. She never doubted that her son would return. In the few letters she was able to send him, she never mentioned Lyuba's suicide, lest her son lose his morale and the will to survive. She died a year or two before his exoneration. In other cases, the wife was forced to renounce her husband and sever their ties.

So our family was in a better situation. Unlike most wives and families of the victims of Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union, we were never persecuted or discriminated against, but pitied and respected.

Yet without a steady income, life was getting more and more difficult in Tabriz and my mother was coming to the realization that my father's mysterious disappearance was an abiding reality and there was no solution in sight. Meanwhile, letters from Tehran insisted that she move the family to Tehran because Asatur in Tabriz and other relatives in Tehran were simply unable to help systematically and indefinitely. By that time, I assume, everyone was convinced that that was the end

of my father, that the situation was permanent and a fundamental change and lasting arrangements should be made for his family. My mother hesitated. She was reluctant to abandon her nest and move to an unknown destination. But she finally gave in. We left Tabriz in late 1944, ten months after my father had disappeared, and moved to Tehran where we were given a room in Aunt Almast's house.

My mother's first concern was to enroll us in school. I had left my class and my friends in the Catholic Sisters' French-medium school in Tabriz, as well as the group of children of all ages learning Armenian in the Abovian School, an extracurricular program run by Hayk Ajemian.² The school year had already begun, so my mother took my sister and me to the local Armenian school and asked the administration to enroll us without paying tuition. Obviously, we did not have the money to pay. They were kind enough to accept my sister in kindergarten but could not exempt both of us so I was left out. I had to attend public school where I entered a class of all Persian children without knowing a word of Persian. The teacher thought I was retarded because, when he spoke to me in Persian, I looked at him with eyes and mouth wide open like an idiot. My nightmare began at Tamaddon School on a campus housing a co-ed elementary school and a high school for boys. It was the first major challenge in my life and I had to overcome. At the end of that school year, my grades were

² My father's good friend Hayk Ajemian had been a child-hero in the defense of Van in 1915 who became a respected teacher and intellectual in Tabriz. He is mentioned in chapter 3 above.

the highest in the class. Fortunately, I did not continue at Tamaddon which was quite crowded with much older boys repeating their classes, making it a rather dangerous environment for a little girl to feel safe and happy.

I cannot forget the Basil family, especially Seda, their daughter-in-law, who helped my mother like the kind of sister she never had. Seda taught her the art of embroidery with a sewing machine and gave her paid work. She was the daughter of Keri Sargis (Harutiunian), a well-respected intellectual who worked as a proofreader at *Alik* newspaper. The whole family took us under their wings. I still remember Tikin Astghik's delicious meals we sometimes enjoyed in their house, and Ebi, their oldest daughter, a kind and goodhearted woman who owned a shop that specialized in young children's clothing with colorful machine-embroidered decorations. She paid my mother to do some embroidery for the shop.

The Basil family belonged to the Persian Protestant Church of Tehran, and Seda's mother-in-law Tikin Basil and her sister Mrs. Mazlumian were members of the board of the church-owned Mehr School (*mehr* meaning "affection"). And indeed, that was what it was all about, with their Christian doctrine and the atmosphere they tried to create. It was a nice elementary school and they arranged for me to attend tuition-free.

But in order to remain exempt from paying tuition, I had to do well in school and attend Friday school every week.³ I could fulfill the first provision, no problem,

³ Since Friday is the day of rest (leisure) in Muslim countries, Friday School is the equivalent of Sunday School in predominantly Christian countries. In

but spending my Fridays in Bible study class while my classmates played and had fun was a tough commitment for a young girl. However, in the long run it turned out alright. At least I learned about Jesus Christ, his life and his ideas, and I learned to sing Christmas carols, in Persian of course. I would never have had the chance to do those things otherwise.

My good grades eased my way into Reza Shah Kabir, one of the best high schools in the country. There the only condition imposed on my tuition-free acceptance was that I had no choice among the foreign languages offered at school. Since English was very popular, there was no room for a tuition-free student in the class, so I had to take French. I reluctantly complied and pretended to my classmates, who asked me why on earth I was taking French, that it was my own choice. I was embarrassed to admit that I was a non-paying student. However, looking back, I see that it was a blessing, an enrichment of my educational experience.

My sister continued in Armenian school all through the elementary and high-school grades, and I always envied her Armenian books, Armenian teachers and all-Armenian classmates. And I read and I read more Armenian books than anyone of my age. I read to learn the Armenian denied to me. At a young age, I read and fell in love with Raffi, Aharonian, Shirvanzade and Armenian literature as a whole. I believe it was that zeal that made it possible for me to take up university-level

Iran, schools were closed Thursday afternoon and the whole day Friday, so our extracurricular religious activities were held on Friday.

Armenian studies later in life without a formal education in Armenian.

My mother tried to raise us without a complex about having no father to guide us. In the meantime, she made sure that we did not forget our father. To keep his memory alive in our minds and hearts, she would tell us stories of his past and inspire us with the hope that he was alive but far from us. Of course, I was old enough to remember my father's affection and the special treatment I had received from him, the special gifts he used to bring me from his trips to Tehran. One of those gifts was a doll with a porcelain head and blue eyes that moved. I had never seen a doll like that. When I laid her down to sleep she closed her eyes and when I picked her up she opened them. Curious to find out how that worked, I took a hammer and hit my poor doll on the head. The porcelain head broke and the little eyes fell off. My childish curiosity was satiated. I had discovered the mechanism. But my doll was dead. I cried for her but it didn't help.

Roozan was too young to have any recollection of our father, and when I bragged about having seen him in a dream, she would cry and whine, "I haven't even seen the tip of his finger." I cherished the snapshots I had of my father with myself as a little girl in his arms, which I kept in a special photo album of my own. I still have that album, small in size with a burgundy cover and a gold tassel. But somehow there was no picture of Roozan and dad together. It was wartime, I imagine, and my father was deeply preoccupied and involved in community and

Party affairs and had no time to join family outings. That was another source of anguish for little Roozan. So my mother and I took one of the photos and convinced her that the little girl in the picture was her, and she was happy.

Wartime troubles had not given our parents a chance to baptize Roozan. My mom had said they were waiting until the war was over, and then they would have a big baptism celebration like the one they had had for me. After my father was gone, mother didn't have the heart to think of baptizing Roozan in his absence. We used to make fun of her, calling her the heathen in the family, whereas she was the most religious among us. Roozan was baptized the day before her wedding, with my husband Neshan as her godfather. Our church would not wed unbaptized Armenians.

My mother did her best to fill the emptiness my father's absence created in our lives. We were poor but we were happy and content, or at least I believed we were. I remember every New Year's Eve, when Armenian children go to bed in the hope and expectation of finding a present under their pillow in the morning. We knew we would find a bunch of raisins and walnuts wrapped in colorful paper and tied with a ribbon. Sometimes there would be a pencil or a little tiny doll, if others contributed to my mother's Christmas shopping spree.

At a young age, I began attending the "Ararat" organization which at that time was called Հայ Երիտասարդական Մշակութային Միութիւն (Armenian Cultural Youth Association). As a member of the junior auxiliary, I sang in the choir and borrowed

books from the library. I loved writing poems, or rhymed verses, or childish utterances in verse, whatever you want to call them. I showed one of my “poems” to the advisor of our junior auxiliary. It was about my father, how I missed him, how I wished to have wings and fly to him, and how I promised never to betray the creed, the ideology that steered his path in life.... She liked it and had it published in the poetry section of the “Eros” calendar for 1949. However, my inclination to become a poet when I grew up did not sit well with my mother. According to her, that was not what my father would want me to become. So one day, when I was scribbling lines, she opened the window and called out, «Բըշ, քըշ, Ուրիի մուսաներ, փախէք» (Shoo, shoo, go away Oobi’s muse). That was the end of my poetry writing and my career as a poet.

My sister and I were surrounded by friends of our age whose parents took extra care to make us happy, who took us to their homes to play and invited us to their children’s New Year and birthday parties. One of those parties remained imprinted on my mind and I remember it to this day. I was ten or eleven and my friend Iren was turning twelve. Her mother had invited all her classmates and friends, as well as some of their parents. Iren and I were always singing Armenian songs and I usually accompanied her soprano voice in alto, so on this occasion, her mother asked us to get up and show off our talents to the other children. The rest of the story came back to me years later in the United States when a friend of my husband, Herand, told a story from his childhood in Tehran. When I married Neshan, we became good

friends with Herand and his wife Stella, and it was during one of our outings together that Herand reminded me of that birthday party. He had been there among the children, many of whom I did not know. He said that Iren and I got up and started singing «Զիւնունի երգը» (The soldier’s song): “If I could fly home in my dream....” But half-way through the song I began to cry and ran away, leaving everyone wondering what was wrong. According to Herand, one of the adults explained that my father was exiled in Siberia and the song reminded me of him. Yes, it was because of the song, but maybe also because of the presence of the other children’s parents that day. My father’s absence and my being an orphan had suddenly hit me with full force....

Our relatives tried to be nice to us. Of course, we had moved out of my aunt’s house when I was still in elementary school—she told my mom she needed the room. Seda mediated with her mother-in-law to give us a special discount on a room in the big house the Basils owned. They had many rooms which they rented out to families like ours. I remember that our poverty was a family secret we kept from the people around us. When we were playing outside in the yard with other children, if they asked us what we had for dinner, we would lie and name a fancy dish. We decided that if we had bread and cheese with sweetened tea, we would say it was *ghormé sabzi*, and if we had bread, cheese and watermelon, it was *fesenjan*. Why should they know what was going on in our home, that we could not afford a hot meal? Anyway, life went on.

While we went to school, my mom worked at the Singer Company, teaching machine embroidery to those who bought a sewing machine. Of course, she commuted on foot which was extra-tiring, especially when the only pair of shoes she owned, which a neighbor had given her, were high-heeled and at least a size too large. They kept coming off when she walked, so she kept a small bottle of water in her purse and every few steps she would wet her heels to make them stick to the soles. She didn't mind. We even laughed at the idea and her ingenuity in finding such a solution to the problem.

My mother was not the only one with just one pair of shoes. Once a year, usually at Easter time or Novruz (the Persian New Year, the first day of spring), she bought each of us a new pair. By that time the old ones were so dilapidated that we usually cut off the backs and used them as slippers. One year, my new shoes were two-toned red and navy-blue. I loved those shoes and I proudly wore them to school. But one day I lost one of them in the mud puddle under the potable water tap (*abé-shah*, literally "shah's water") in the dark basement of Mrs. Basil's house. Amazing and unlikely? Well, this is how it happened. In those days, there was no system of piped water distribution to individual houses in Tehran. Special vendors called *abi* (*ab* meaning "water") went door to door with their horse-drawn tanks, selling potable water by the pail. But we were luckier at Mrs. Basil's house. The man-made underground canal that carried *abé-shah* toward south Tehran ran beneath her house, and with special permission, she had been able to dig down to the

level of the canal and tap into it. The steep stairs to the deep "basement" were always poorly lit. I was in charge of fetching water for our household, so it was my job to run down the dark, slimy and slippery stairs every day, fill the bucket and carry it back to our room on the second floor. And one day, I slipped and fell down the stairs. My shoe fell off and landed in the mud puddle. There was no way I could salvage it. Imagine my distress. The next day, I had to go to school wearing my old shoes which were worn out and already too tight. I still remember those beautiful two-toned red and navy-blue shoes and my embarrassment at having to wear my old shoes until my mom was able to buy me a new pair.

Anyway, life went on.... In the evening, we usually got home earlier than our mother and I always tried to play big sister, for example, helping to prepare "dinner" by boiling rice which we ate with cherry preserves, our version of the fancy Persian dish, *albalu polo*. That was an alternative to bread and cheese. I also tried to help my mother with extra sewing projects, like special orders for a newborn baby's layette or a set of appliquéd sheets and nightgown for a bridal dowry. I can never forget how once, when I was eleven or twelve, I was using a special pair of very small, sharp, curved scissors to cut out the edges around the white floral appliqué on a pink satin nightgown and I accidentally made a small cut in the fabric. It was a disaster. I cried and cried until my mom got home. She was frantic. There was no way to fix the cut. The next day, the bride-to-be and her mother came to pick up the order. Oh, how terrible it was. They shouted

and hurled insults at my mother, chastising her for doing such a poor job. She could only apologize and offer to replace the material they had bought for the nightgown, but they were furious and they just kept shouting. Finally they left, taking the whole order, the appliquéd sheets and all, and paid nothing. That night I heard my mom silently weeping in bed.

As I say, life went on.... But my mother was losing her health. An unattended cold and cough turned into bronchitis and soon chronic bronchitis impossible to cure. Her smoking didn't help and she refused to quit. To her that was her life's pleasure. The worst time of the day was when she lay down to sleep. Cough syrups didn't help, so she kept a piece of dry bread under her pillow. Somehow, the bread scratching her throat would ease the itching and the cough. In such conditions it would have been selfish of me to hang on to my big dreams and have her work my way through a university education.

My mother never fully recovered or regained her erstwhile happy and lively nature, even after my father returned. Years of constant anxiety and uncertainty, malnutrition, long hours of hard work and smoking had taken a heavy toll on her physical health and her spiritual well-being. Of course, there is no denying that my father's return and his inspirational zest for life somehow stimulated her to become a happier person. The Minassian couple had a large circle of friends. My mother would accompany my father on his lecture tours around the country, and she was always received as the heroine who had raised two orphan girls and had never

betrayed her husband's memory. She was seen as the gracious and elegant wife of a Dashnaktsakan hero who had not succumbed to the intolerable hardship of life in Siberia. With the arrival of her grandchildren, she became a dedicated and loving "grandma," always there to help.

The forlorn effects of widowhood, however, remained with her all her life. Her physical health gradually deteriorated. Years after my father's death, after she had moved to the United States to be with us, her incurable chronic bronchitis was compounded by emphysema. She succumbed to her illness on June 6, 1987. She was seventy-three years old.

Were my sister and I immune from the effects of orphanhood in our later life? My mother and I admitted often times that Roozan was always overly sensitive and over-protective toward those she loved most, to the extent of hurting herself. Our fault: we had babied her too much. A psychologist might have a better explanation....

But me? I was the strong one, so I think. I was my mother's pal, sharing her pain and loneliness. But after my father came back, I threw off the cloak of every sad thing that comes with being an orphan. I pursued my dream of higher education, of being a woman civil engineer in Iran. I married and enjoyed a happy marriage. Even the Iranian revolution of 1979, a turning point in our lives, did not affect me drastically. What had started as a two-week vacation in the United States just before the revolution turned into a permanent residency. We found ourselves staying in the USA for good. Maybe it was meant to be. And although we had to rebuild our lives

and our finances in America, I took that too as a good omen. Չկայ չարիք առանց բարիք or, as the French say, “*un mal pour un bien*,” that is, if something bad happens, something good will come of it.

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) was there, luring me to realize another dream of mine to become an Armenologist and I grabbed that opportunity. I went back to school and resumed my studies in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. I worked hard, combining the duties of mother, wife, partner in the construction firm that my husband and I had established, and full-time graduate student. And when it was time to write a dissertation, the topic was clear in my mind. I wanted to explore the impact of the Armenian Genocide on every aspect of Armenian life, and my primary resource was the artistic literature written in response to that great catastrophe. To the dismay of my husband, family and friends, I immersed myself in an intense reading of Genocide literature—memoirs, novels, stories and poetry. I also did interviews with survivors. It was depressing, to say the least, but it came naturally and I did it. I remember how my husband Neshan used to say, “Imagine how pleasant and enjoyable your research would have been if you had chosen something like the theme of ‘rose and nightingale’ and compared its manifestations in Armenian and Persian poetry.” Nonetheless, he supported me all the way. He never complained, except in casual remarks during conversations with friends when he would say something like, “If other Armenians have one April 24 every year, in our house every day is April 24.”

That was shocking for me, to realize that he suffered with me, that he shared the change of mood cast in our home by the shadow of the Armenian Genocide.

Genocide literature became my forte, my field of research for life. I lectured, I made presentations in conferences and I published. One day, I received an invitation, as a female Genocide scholar, to participate in a panel titled “Connecting Biography and Research.”⁴ I was astonished. Was there a relationship? The question itself was a revelation to me. I had never thought about my inclination toward the Armenian tragedy, my predilection to expose myself to the tragedy that others had lived. I began to ponder, to look into my past, my childhood. And there it was, the psychological reason for my inclination, for my choosing the Armenian Genocide as my field of research, for my examining literary responses to extreme cases of violence against the Armenian people, and for my speaking out for the victims of the Genocide, venting my rage against the victimizer the best way I could. The whole thing was a catharsis I sought for my own painful past.

My psychoanalytical introspection led me to the conclusion that I had been a victim too, the victim of a violation of a basic human right, the right of a child to have loving and caring parents and not to have to close her eyes at night and think of her father who is not there for her, who is himself suffering in the torturous labor camps of Siberia. I had grown up with the consciousness of belonging to a victim nation. The violence committed

4 The panel was a part of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association Congress of May 25–30, 2001.

against me and my family was not only personal but also collective, a collective punishment for daring to rise against a powerful Soviet Union and aspire to a free Armenia. With my background, I was subconsciously drawn to the literature of atrocity and predisposed to absorb and comprehend it.

I was ready to accept the invitation to join that mind-blowing, consciousness-expanding panel. I believe the paper I presented stirred some interest. I published it only much later as "A Personal Note in Lieu of a Preface" in my book, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature: Perceptions of Those Who Lived through the Years of Calamity* (2012). I felt that was the proper place for the piece. I felt that it could help my readers to better understand my work and my perspective.

Now, if you ask me again, was I immune to the effects of orphanhood in my later life? My answer would be, "No, I was not." The effects are there in my individual and social identity, in my emotional and intellectual relationship with my work, my life. The inexplicable sadness nested in my soul never lets go of me even in the happiest moments of my life. I feel alone even when I am surrounded by those who love me.

The effects of those horrendous Stalinist persecutions have rippled into my soul.... And this book is my outcry against the unredeemed injustices done to my family and my people, just as my previous books were for the victims of the Genocide, my outcry, my rage against the victimizer, the Ottoman perpetrators of that great calamity we call *Metz Yeghern* (Մեծ Եղեռն).



Hayk Ajemian's Abovian School, October 11, 1944 (back row, left to right: Archbishop Nerses Melik-Tangian, Professor Ashot Abrahamian visiting from Soviet Armenia, Hayk Ajemian; I am the second child from the right)



My mother, my sister and I in Tehran

تاریخ ۱۳۳۴/۵/۱۶

جناب آقای وزیر فرهنگ

با کمال احترام معروض می‌دارد . عویر این چایه دکتر باغداسار میناسیان که دبیر علمی دبیرستانهای تبریز بوده در تاریخ ۱۶ دیماه ۱۳۳۴ ساعت ۱۱ صبح در خیابان پهلوی تبریز مفقودالامر میشود و تا کنون هیچ خبری از مکان و حکومتی آن نرسیده است .

مشارایه مدت ۹ سال مستخدم قراردادی وزارت فرهنگ برده و سه ساله تقدیرنامه از مقام محترم وزارت به عنوان مشارایه صادر شده بعد از مفقود شدن او اداره فرهنگ تبریز با وجود دستورات مرکز حاضر نشده چگونه کمک و مساعدتی به خانواده مشارایه ننماید . کارمندیکه با کمال صداقت مدت ۹ سال برای آن وزارت خانه کار کرده است و بر سر کار نیست تا مصلوبی مفقودالامر شده امر نامطلوب و طاقت فرسای فقدان او از یکطرف و رفتار اداره فرهنگ تبریز از طرف دیگر وضعیت زندگی که ما را یکای مخفی نموده است اداره فرهنگ تبریز با وجود دستورات وزارت متبوعه حاضر نشده حقوق سال تحصیلی ۱۳۳۴ و حتی حقوق ۱۶ روزه دیماه و اشاقد حقوق ششماه معویه مجلس شورای ملی را بهر دانه .

اینها که مادر طفل صغیر خود تا گریه و بیهوشی با عرض مراتب فوق تقاضا دارم چنان اینجانبه و در اولاد م که تا کنون با هزار سختی و مشقت با فروش مختصر اقامه و توانم زندگی و کمک چند نفر از اعضایان با عاقله خویش زندگی نموده ایم و بعد از این کوچکترین اسیدی نداریم رسیدگی فرموده و در صورت امکان دستورات مقتضی صادر فرمائید تا بلکه به مساعدت جنابعالی در این موقع که مشکلات زندگی و گرانای محبت اینجانبه و دو طفل عزیزم را تهدید به مرگ مینمایند حتی نیز به زندگی بر سرست خود ادامه داده تا بلکه به لطف خداوند تعالی از گم شده خود بیست آورده و مثل سایرین -

دو کار بهتر در رفاه و آسایش بکراتم . با تقدیم احترامات خاتمه

بانو یاربت میناسیان



وزارت فرهنگ

اداره فرهنگ استان سوم

شعبه کارگزینی

آموزش شهرستان

اداره کل شهریات

ن-۶

تاریخ ۱۵/۱۲/۳۲

شماره ۳۰۳۵۲

پیوست

موضوع

با ارسال رونوشت نامه بانو یاربت میناسیان دایر اینک شوهر او دکتر باغداسار میناسیان دبیر دبیرستان فردوسی تبریز از ۱۳۳۲ مفقودالامر شده خواهشمند است دستور فرمایند در این قسمت تعقیبات لازم بعمل آورند و هرگونه اطلاعی بدست آمد وزارت فرهنگ را آگاه نمایند

از طرف وزیر فرهنگ - محدود -

رونوشت تضمین رونوشت نامه با میناسیان به اداره کارگزینی فرستاده میشود که دستور فرمایند نسبت به پرداخت حقوق آقای میناسیان دستور مقتضی به اداره فرهنگ استان سوم صادر شود

از طرف رئیس اداره آموزش شهرستانها

رونوشت تمام به اداره فرهنگ استان سوم فرستاده میشود که بانو میناسیان را از اقدامیکه شده مطلع سازند

از طرف رئیس اداره آموزش شهرستانها

۱۱۶۰

۱۳۳۴/۱/۱۷

رونوشت برای آگاهی بانو یاربت میناسیان ارسال میشود

رئیس فرهنگ استان سوم

Letter from the Minister of Education to Tabriz police headquarters to search for Dr. Baghdassar Minassian

Copy of my mother's petition to the Ministry of Education

Chapter Eight

A God-sent gift that remained with us for twenty-two years

My father's return was truly a gift for us all. He was physically dilapidated but his stamina and high spirit helped him to regain his old self. He was well aware that he faced many challenges in terms of adjusting to society, to his immediate and extended family, to the job market and to the Party milieu, none of which remained the same eleven years on.

We had visitors all the time, family, friends, well-wishers and ARF ungers. Among them was a man who visited my dad several times and who, unlike other visitors, always spoke with him in private. From conversations between my parents, I gathered that he was a US Embassy employee with quite an attractive offer, that is, immigration to the United States for our family with all expenses paid and living conditions guaranteed. Then his visits stopped. My father had turned the offer down. Eleven years of coexistence with the crooks of

the world had not changed him. Eleven years of heavy sacrifice for his ideals and his creed had not made a dent in his principles or his discipline. The offer from the US government—or from the CIA, for that matter—was made in exchange for all the information my dad had mustered about how the Gulag system operated, its political prisoners, dissident ideology and anything else the CIA might want to know in the Cold War atmosphere then raging between the two superpowers. My father's response was, "I have suffered because of my allegiance to the ARF, because of being an ARF leader. I will give my report to the ARF and only to the ARF."

I really don't know how properly and efficiently that report, if any, was channeled.... But I remember Unger Gabriel Lazian visiting my dad in 1955, several months after his release.¹ Apparently, my father had written three pieces on three issues of major concern to him titled «Գալիքը եւ Հ.Յ.Դ.» (The future and the ARF), «Անելը» (The impasse), and «Հ.Յ.Դ. եւ Ատրպատականի Կազմակերպությունը» (The ARF and the Atrpatakan organization). Unger Lazian took those three essays to Vahan Navasartian, the editor of *Housaper*, who acknowledged their importance to future discussions of crucial issues in a letter to my father dated March 9, 1955.²

¹ Gabriel Lazian, a member of the ARF Bureau and a founding editor of *Housaper*, the ARF organ in Cairo, had, in addition to his activism and leadership in the Party, rendered valuable service in the army of the free and independent Republic of Armenia (1918–1920). He was an academically trained historian and the author of many important volumes on the history of the Armenian Question and the Armenian national struggle.

² Unger Navasartian's letter was included in the brochure printed for a commemorative event on the first anniversary of my father's death.

My father relied on his own zeal and determination to get back on his feet and get his family back on track with a normal life. I remember how long and arduous the process was to get his previous service recognized and his teaching position restored by the Ministry of Education, but he saw it through, and soon he was teaching chemistry at Elmieh High School in Tehran, quite far from our house.

I found the Elmieh High School yearbook for 1334/35 (1955/56) in his papers and there he is, pictured among the school's outstanding teachers. A biographical sketch by one of his students highlights his aptitude and quality as a teacher:

Although we have only had Dr. Minassian in our school for about a year, he has been able to demonstrate his profound knowledge of the subject he teaches. His class is always very interesting and engaging, especially when he explains chemical formulas in his semi-Persian accent. He is always available to his students, willing and able to help solve their problems, whether in or outside the classroom. And this is because of his strong belief in developing the student's personality and love of learning. He is always amiable and gentle, very disciplined too, and he tries to teach his students how important it is to be disciplined in their work and respectful of their own and others' time.

I also found a letter of appreciation from the Ministry

of Education in Tehran dated 11/3/1342 (June 1, 1963).

My father worked hard and he loved his work. I found a sheet of paper on which he had jotted down his weekly schedule: eleven hours at Elmieh, three hours at Mir Afzali, plus twelve hours at the Armenian High School, all of which is quite amazing, especially considering the distances between the three schools. And when he came home, it was not the end of the workday, no time for relaxation. He meticulously corrected papers and prepared the next day's lesson. Yes, that was a principle he followed faithfully and he advised young teachers to do the same. For him, a good teacher always reviewed the next day's material, regardless of years of experience teaching the subject.

My father chose to be the sole breadwinner in the family. He performed the best he could in his role as an educator, which was his calling and the source of his financial means.³

His dedication to the Armenian nation through Dashnaktsutiun remained the focus of his life, the center stage of his activities. He worked with youth groups, lecturing about Armenian history, but more importantly, ARF history and ideology. He also contributed political analysis to *Alik* (which he signed Bagin or Atrushanian, both names referring to heathen Armenia and both meaning "temple of fire"). Besides his original articles, he translated articles from *Le Monde* and *Figaro* on

3 In an interview in the June 1976 issue of *Hai Tad*, a publication of the Armenian National Committee of Sydney, he said he considered his profession «նրպէս ապրուստի միջոց» (as a source of income or livelihood).

current events and the burning political issues of the day. He followed that schedule for ten years, after which he retired from teaching and devoted himself to *Alik* as editor-in-chief and to the ARF, serving on various committees including the Central Committee, as well as going on lecture tours to Armenian communities in various cities of Iran.

He effectively raised the standard and put the ARF print media in Iran where it belonged. Letters of appreciation from the ARF bodies in Beirut were encouraging. In one such letter, dated June 26, 1964, Garo Sassuni praised his alertness, his astute analyses and the direction in which he was taking *Alik*. Sassuni said he followed my father's writing day by day.

Not all of my father's ideas were easily accepted and digested, but he was sincere, unyielding and adamant. In particular, he was challenged and vilified by the other Armenian political parties, sympathizers of the Soviet regime in Armenia, for his conviction that Russia (meaning the Soviets) was the number one enemy of the Armenians. Turkey was the second. They also ridiculed his firm belief in the possibility of one day realizing a free, independent and միացեալ (united) Armenia. Those readers today who would recognize the ultimate goal of the ARF in that phrase may remember how the non-ARF sector of the Diaspora rallied against the idea. But it is better to stop here and not talk about such expressions in the anti-ARF media, about those who came around after independence in 1991 to accept and loudly voice their aspiration for a free, independent and

ամբողջական Armenia (i.e., "total"—not "united"—a nuanced alternative to the ARF motto).

Unfortunately, antagonism toward my father came not only from the opposition camp. In the beginning, when he first returned, a few ungers, especially reinstated Dashnaktsakans who had changed colors during the wartime Soviet occupation of northern Iran, were a little jittery lest he reveal their subversive activities during that period. I remember how they "magnanimously" tried to mediate with the ARF Bureau to secure a suitable job for Dr. Minassian outside the country, away from the Armenian community in Iran. There was a proposal to transfer us to Aleppo where he would take a position as principal of the Armenian school there, but he was reluctant to leave his familiar environment. My father was under economic pressure and he was being taken advantage of. Apparently the ARF Bureau was aware of ulterior motives behind those attempted mediations and also the disquiet of some ungers in Tehran. Vahan Navasartian in the aforementioned letter expressed his warm feelings for my father and advised him to stay in Iran and work for the good of himself and his family. The suspense died down as he established himself in the community and it became quite clear that he was not going to reveal the ugly activities of those cowardly Dashnaktsakans during the war. He was above such trifles. He remained a man of high moral principles to the end.

My father's firm direction of the ARF organ was grounded in his solid political convictions which also motivated his implacable attitude toward undisciplined

conduct or personal ambitions placed above the common interest. His moral bearing made him a vulnerable target as a fundamentalist or a hardliner and he was admonished to tone it down, take it easy. Unger Sebouh Hovannissian's comment reflects that reality: "He never expected recognition or appreciation and he demonstrated the utmost forgiveness and an unwavering attitude toward all the injustice that was done to him."⁴ In the same vein, Unger Anushavan Grigorian, one of my father's colleagues in school and a close friend, wrote in his memory, "He saw and heard many things and he patiently endured, as if to say, let the cup of my destiny fill to the brim."⁵

And the cup was filling up. The atmosphere at work grew increasingly tense and suffocating for my father. After serving as *Alik's* editor-in-chief for more than a decade, he offered his resignation in a letter dated March 1, 1970. A lot of convincing and negotiations went on, but he was unwavering. The ARF Central Committee of Tehran finally accepted his resignation and conveyed its decision in a letter dated September 18, 1970. In the same letter, the Central Committee invited my father and his family to an appreciation dinner. My father declined....

In fact, he turned down many propositions from different organizations to honor him in some way. Of course, he could not refuse the Mesrop Mashtots Medal bestowed on him by His Holiness Khoren Paroian,

4 Sebouh Hovannissian, «Դոկտ. Բաղդիկ» (Dr. Baghdik), in *Alik*, July 13, 2006, the commemorative issue dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of my father's death.

5 Anushavan Grigorian, «Բաղդիկ» (Baghdik), in the special commemorative issue of *Alik*, August 21, 1976.

Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, in recognition of his years of dedicated service as an educator.

Despite his having resigned as editor-in-chief, the direction and content of *Alik* and the well-being of the establishment continued to be my father's main focus and concern. In a long letter he wrote in March 1976, he expressed his views and made suggestions for the improvement of the paper's content, staff and structure. Reading that letter fills me with awe. How accurate and straightforward his criticisms were and how pragmatic his suggestions. Did the letter have any effect? I cannot say.

My father was well respected in the ranks of the ARF outside Iran as well. On September 28, 1963, he received a warm letter from the ARF Bureau inviting him to come and contribute his valuable input to the Party's 18th General Congress which was to take place in Lebanon. In that letter he was characterized as "an ARF member who served the Party with dedication, who could not be crushed by the horrifying Bolshevik torments, who returned with unbroken faith and unending vigor and threw himself into the round of perpetual struggle as the flag bearer of Hay Tahd." He also attended the Party's 19th General Congress in Beirut in 1967, and the 20th in Vienna in 1972.

My father returned to Beirut on another occasion when he was invited to take part in the celebration of Mushegh Ishkhan's fortieth literary anniversary on December 8, 1974, which was organized by the Hamazkayin Cultural Organization. His remarks, which were published in *Alik* on December 25, 1974, reflected

his views and convictions and were a fitting tribute to that outstanding poet and writer.⁶ In very brief strokes, he painted the current unfavorable situation and the difficult conditions for all Armenians and asserted that,

In this situation and in these conditions, only an Armenian can be an Armenian, live as an Armenian and remain Armenian.

In this situation and in these conditions, only an Armenian writer, an Armenian poet, an Armenian artist, an Armenian educator, an Armenian political activist can work, fight and stand to the end on the ramparts of his people's struggle to preserve their national identity and political freedom.

He concluded his speech on an emotional note, offering the honoree the grandeur of Mount Ararat, the bouquet of Mount Aragats' colorful wildflowers, the immortal waters of the pure, cold and pellucid springs of Byurakan, the beauty and fecundity of the Ararat Plain and the blessings of the Aratsani and Mother Arax Rivers calling for freedom.

My father's month-long lecture tour in Australia was

⁶ Mushegh Ishkhan (1913–1990), a survivor of the Armenian Genocide, was the author of exquisite prose and poetry that reflected his generation's struggle to cope with the consequences of that cataclysm. His childhood, which in his own words was "like a shadow that slipped through the roads of deportation," was replete with horrible experiences that became indelibly imprinted on his mind. I have studied his work in *The Armenian Genocide in Literature: Perceptions of Those Who Lived through the Years of Calamity* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2012, 2014).

his last trip abroad, his last mission as a scholar and an ARF activist. The June 1976 issue of *Hai Tad*, published by the Armenian National Committee of Sydney, reported on his lectures and his visits to community organizations and spoke in admiring terms of his erudition and his preternatural stamina and the excitement and enthusiasm his visit inspired in the Armenian communities of Sydney and Melbourne. He returned home from that journey spiritually exalted, but with a dangerous illness camouflaged by the hasty medical treatment he had received at a hospital in Sydney. He never had a chance to tell us about his trip, but from the photographs we received later on, we could tell how warmly he had been received by the Armenian community and what a great time he had had. He passed away in hospital in Tehran on July 13, 1976, succumbing to the acute ulcer he had brought back with him from the Gulag, an ailment that had remained dormant for twenty-two years, giving his family that much time to enjoy the God-sent gift.

Baghdik Minassian was a torrent of emotions, a fount of knowledge and information, a vault of unlikely experiences locked behind a door we did not care to open wide.



Happy days, when the four of us were together again



My father with his brother Asatur and sister Almast, in the 1960's in Tehran



Left to right, Uncle Alexan, his wife Manoush, their oldest daughter Rita, and my father (circa 1956)



Mom and Dad visiting Nor-Jugha, Esfahan



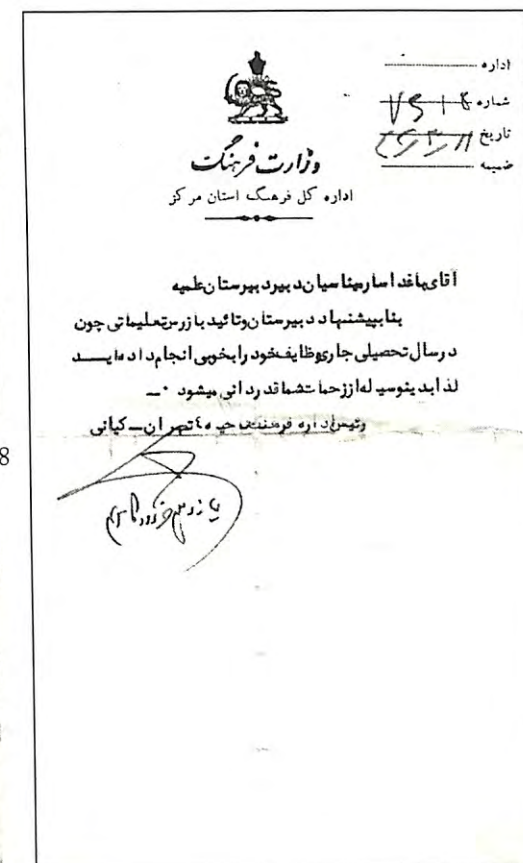
Mom and Dad on a pilgrimage to Sourb Tadeos Arakial Vank (Monastery of St. Thaddeus)



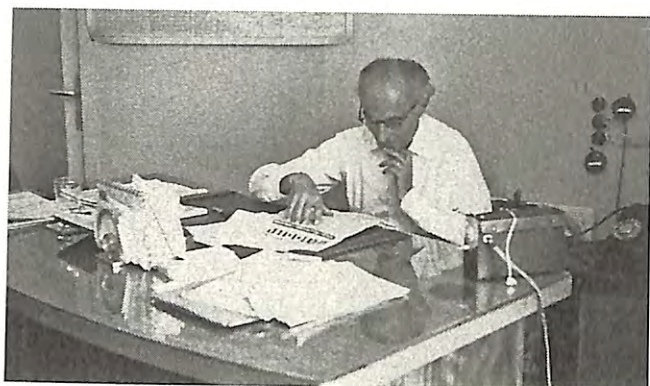
In the classroom at Elmieh High School, 23/8/38 (November 15, 1959)



Faculty and students at Elmieh High School, 23/8/38 (November 15, 1959)



A letter of appreciation from the Iranian Ministry of Education, 11/3/42 (June 1, 1963)



Baghdik Minassian, editor-in-chief of *Alik* newspaper,
August 1961



Garo Sassuni visiting the office of *Alik*



William Saroyan visiting the office of *Alik*



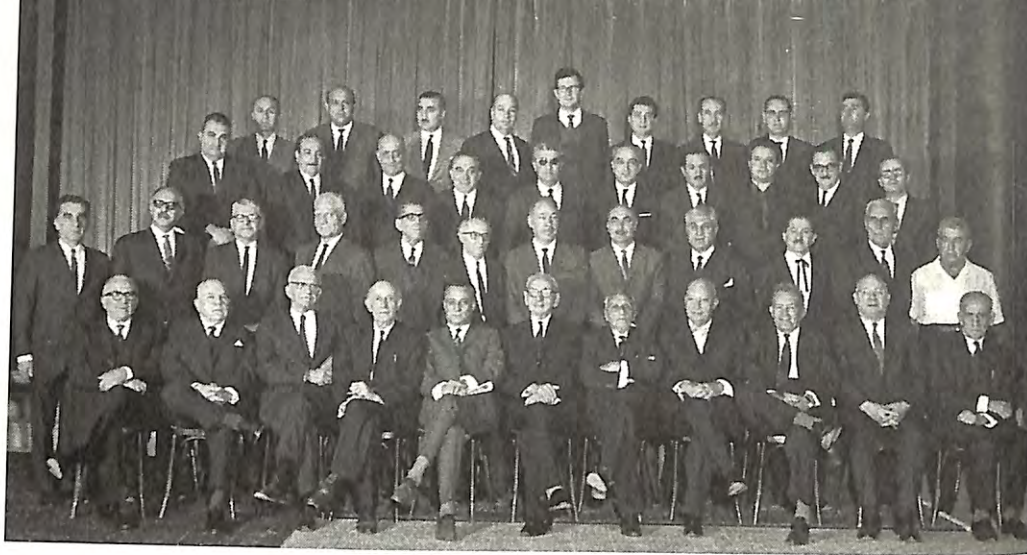
Welcoming Baghdik Minassian at the start of his lecture tour of
Abadan and Ahvaz, February 19, 1966. Unger Ashot Mouradkhanian,
Principal of Abadan Armenian School, at the left of Baghdik Minassian



During a lecture



A happy grandpa with his first grandson Vahé



The 19th General Congress of the ARF, Beirut, 1967



At Ali's 40th Anniversary Banquet, 1971



Baghdik Minassian,
editor-in-chief of *Alik*,
June 1968



His Holiness Khoren Paroian,
Catholicos of the Holy See of
Cilicia, giving my father the
Mesrop Mashtots Medal,
April 1973



Baghdik and
Parik with their
grandchildren Vahé,
Oshin and Zareh,
1970s



Baghdik Minassian entering the lecture hall in Sydney



Victory for the solution of the
Armenian Cause



In the company of the Armenian Relief Society ladies, Willoughby Armenian Center



Meeting Armenian university students in Sydney



Together with the Armenian Youth Federation, Juniors and Seniors



Visiting the Saturday School in Willoughby

Chapter Nine

A finale to a precious life

My father's passing made a deep impact not only on our family but also on the Armenian community in Iran.

My mother was devastated. Her soulmate, lost and then found only twenty-two years ago, was now lost forever. Our children lost a loving and caring grandpa who would have been a true mentor to them and an exemplary guide as they grew up.

Our community shared our loss. The pages of *Alik* were inundated with messages of condolence, memories and reminiscences, articles and biographical accounts.

My father's funeral, overflowing with people from all walks of life, was a display of love, awe, support and respect for him. Dirges were sung and fiery but solemn eulogies delivered.

A lively soul who had led a difficult but productive life, from Gharadagh to Tabriz, Paris, Prague, Tehran, Ghazvin, and back to Tehran, then Tabriz again; a weary soul who had experienced the anguish of solitary confinement in Yerevan and the misery of the Soviet

Gulag; a hopeful soul who had miraculously returned to serve his people and bring joy to his family was now on his last journey to his resting place, appreciated by many, unappreciated by many....

Aboyents Derik, one of his young ungers, wrote a poem in his memory, a simple but expressive poem that is engraved on his tombstone:

Բոց լեզուների
Ասմունքով սնուած
Հասնոգումն էր նա... ոգեղինացած,

Շանթող մտքերի
Անմեռ կրակով
«Հրկիզուածն» էր նա... իղձերի հնոց,

Հինը վերյիշող
Ցասումը արդար... Նոր ուղիների
«Հրկիզողն» էր նա....¹

On the occasion of the first anniversary of his death, a memorial event was organized with a fitting program. The Hay Tahd Committee published a brochure containing the program, a dedication note by the organizing committee, a brief biography of my father, and transcriptions of his lectures in Australia. It also contained a number of photographs from his past, excerpts from his editorials, and a few thoughts

¹ The following is a loose translation: "Nurtured by the eloquence of blazing tongues, he was conviction ... spiritualized. With the undying fire of thundering thoughts, he was the 'burnt offering' ... a crucible of ideals. Remembering the old, his anger fair ... He was the 'blazer' of new paths...."

and remarks about him by well-respected ungers. The following is a rough translation of reflections by the Hay Tahd Committee:

HE

An entire life that began with an untimely adulthood forced by a dire reality and continued through years of convicted exile inhaling the suffocating air of the prison cell, and on to the jagged roads of political struggles and ideological disputes. He always remained on the ramparts until his merciless death. He had one passion: he lived for Hay Tahd alone.

And

With chivalrous selflessness, he offered everything he had at Hay Tahd's sacrificial table, everything that belonged to him.

Therefore,

"He was ours," the community's, the nation's entirely, and so he will remain, his name and his great work an undying memory and legacy.

Among the short reflections by individuals, Unger Avedis Boulouzian's remarks stand out for me. An old Western Armenian fedayee (*haydouk*) Dashnaktsakan himself, he characterized my father as a selfless haydouk, a perfect human being, a conscious Armenian, an honest and truthful Dashnaktsakan with an unbreakable will

and determination when it came to his principles.

The evening's slogan, which also appeared in all the publications related to the commemorative event, was «Մարդը, Հայը, Յեղափոխականը» (The man, the Armenian, the revolutionary). This is how my father's superb qualities were characterized and defined:

արդարամիտ մարդու, անաղարտ նկարագրի
տէր հայի եւ Հ.Յ. Դաշնակցութեան
գաղափարական դրօշի տակ պայքարող
յեղափոխականի կեանքի համագումարը

(The total sum of the life of a fair-minded, unbiased man, an Armenian of incorruptible character, and a revolutionary fighting under the ideological banner of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation)

The keynote speaker representing the ARF, the Hay Tahd Committee and *Alik* newspaper was Unger Norayr Pahlavuni, a well-known young intellectual and community and Party leader. His lengthy speech was published in a later issue of *Alik*. Reading it today, forty years after that solemn evening and some five years after Unger Pahlavuni has passed, I am gripped by the sincerity, the emotion and the authenticity that reverberate in his beautifully composed Armenian diction. As a representative of the younger generation of leaders, he vowed to follow the path my father had blazed. He expressed the wish that my father's remains would one

day be transferred and laid to rest in the earth of Free and Independent Armenia. Did he believe in the possibility of the Soviet Empire collapsing and Armenia regaining its independence? We were all inculcated with the belief that that day would come. That was the great hope, the ultimate goal, the *raison d'être* of Dashnaktsutiun.

Even years after my father's passing, he was not forgotten. Anniversaries of his death were commemorated by editorials in *Alik*. Excerpts of his writings appeared in the paper now and then, and they were reprinted in other Armenian papers in the Diaspora. He was presented as a symbol of incorruptibility, righteousness, idealism and infinite sacrifice. In February 1978, the Hay Tahd Committee announced the establishment of a competition in honor of and in the name of "Dr. B. Minassian." Entrants were asked to submit an original, unpublished work of scholarly research with documentation on the Armenian Question, of about 120–150 pages, in Armenian, Persian, English, French, Russian or Turkish. The winner would receive the equivalent of \$1,500, a substantial sum at the time, and the manuscript would be published.

In 2006, both *Alik* in Tehran and *Asbarez* in Los Angeles dedicated pages to commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of my father's death. The most significant article in those pages was that of Unger Sebouh Hovannissian who recalled the life and work of his older comrade as a symbol of the geopolitical conditions forced upon the Armenian nation during a critical period. To him, Unger Baghdik with his penetrating mind was

among the few who thoroughly comprehended the warp and weft of the ARF. He believed in the ideal of the ARF and dedicated his whole life to the realization of its goals. Hovannissian remembered the ARF General Congress of 1972 in Vienna and the impact of my father's short intervention in support of a top-secret agenda item. My father's words embodied his perception of the Armenian Question, his ideals and his exemplification of it in his own life:

Today, of course, we do not reject the idea of peaceful struggle, that being based on documents and analysis and not expressed in cursing, provocations and demagoguery. However, alongside that struggle, we need to reinstate the idea of the iron ladle. We need to adopt "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" as our motto; otherwise, we will be regarded as immature. We will be given nothing.

According to Hovannissian, the resolution reached by the Congress was very close to my father's thoughts, and he recalled how my father's face radiated with subdued joy and satisfaction when it was passed. "I'm glad that real work is going to replace political onanism," my father said to him during the break.

In an overview of *Alik's* history and its past editors published in honor of the newspaper's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2007, Sebouh Hovannissian reviewed my father's time as the paper's longest serving editor. He

characterized his editorials as taking a sharply defined political position which brought a breath of fresh air to the journal's pages. "He was extraordinarily modest," Hovannissian recalled:

During *Alik's* fortieth anniversary celebration in 1972, when everyone was trying to have their picture taken with this and that personality, he was nowhere to be found. When he was invited to make his remarks, he approached the podium, expressed a few congratulatory words, thanked the guests and sat down.²

Now that I have come to the last pages of this book and perhaps it is time for a sigh of relief, I look back to assess my effort and I am humbled. Writing a book about my father's life and work was the least I could do to repay my debt to this great man who was more than a role model for me both in his absence and after his return.

I reread this book again and I think: If my father had had the chance to finish his memoir, what message would he have wanted to convey to his readers? Have I managed to echo that message in this book on his life and work? Enclosed in a frame within the special commemorative issue of *Alik* on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of his death, I find what I am looking for. This is from one of his editorials, but I heard him express the same thought

² Sebouh Hovannissian, «Կարօտախան բարեւագիր» (Greetings mixed with yearnings), in «Ալիկի 75 ամեակը» (The 75th anniversary of *Alik*), Tehran, 2007, p. 71.

many times in various forms in private conversations and in his lectures, though never in oratorical style; he hated oratory. He believed in this desideratum and considered it the meaning of his life and work. Rather than risk losing something in translation, I present it here in Armenian with an approximate translation in the footnote.

Զգաստացիր, ուրեմն, սիրելի ժողովուրդ հայոց, եղիր իրատես եւ իրապաշտ ու մի կողմ թող արդարութիւն, մարդկայնութիւն, մարդկային օրէնք ու իրաւունք աղերսելու Զո մտայնութիւնը: Վերջ տուր նաեւ օտարի վրայ յոյս դնելու Զո հոգեբանութեան եւ ապաւինիր ինքնդ քեզ եւ դու ինքդ լուծիր Զո Դատը:³

This thought or wisdom, expressed decades ago, still sounds fresh and timely. Let it be the message of this book, especially to the younger generation. And let this book be acknowledged as a genuine effort to add the life story of a modest soldier to those of thousands of devotees in the Armenian struggle for freedom and justice, the life story of Baghdik Minassian who sacrificed his youth, his health and his entire being but never his convictions and principles.

For practical reasons, I made the decision to write this book in English. But to appease my scruples, I wanted to finish it with a piece in Armenian, as if speaking to

³ "Therefore, be aware, my dear Armenian people. See reality and be realistic. Put aside the mindset of pleading for justice, human rights and compassion. Cast off the psychology of hanging your hopes on someone else. Rely on yourself, and you resolve Your Tahd."

my father in our mother tongue. I did not need to write anew. I wrote this piece on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of his death, and it was published in the special issue of *Alik*, July 13, 2006, and later reprinted in *Asbarez*.

So here it is, a monologue, if you will, titled “I am indebted to you.”

Երախտապարտ եմ քեզ հայր Տօրս՝ Բաղդիկ Մինասեանի յիշատակին

Երախտապարտ եմ քեզ հայր, կեանքում առած հրաքանչիւր դրական քայլիս համար:

Երախտապարտ եմ այն հաւատի, մղումի ու պարտազգացութեան համար, որ ներշնչեցիր ինձ քո օրինակով:

Այսօր, քո անսպասելի մահից եռեսուն տարի անց, մտորումներս քեզ հետ են նորից. մտովի ապրում եմ կեանքդ եւ փորձում եմ իմ ընտրած ճանապարհի մեկնակէտի ու հանգրուանների գուգահեռը գտնել քո կեանքի պատմութեան մէջ: Բայց միթէ կարող էի տոկալ այն բոլոր տառապանքներին, որ քո կեանքի տաժանքը եղան. կարո՞ղ էի այդքան տառապանքից ու մարդկանց քո դէմ թոյլ տուած հսկայ դաւաճանութիւնից ու անարդարութիւնից յետոյ այդքան բարձրագի, այդքան լուսամիտ ու յուսալից նայել աշխարհին:

Վերջերս միայն, քո թղթերի մէջ ինձ ուղղուած նամակդ գտայ: Մի փոքրիկ թերթիկ էր, 1943-ի Յունուար 1-ին գրուած, նոյնիսկ ժամն էլ էիր նշել՝ 17:10: Գրել էիր առեւանգումիցդ մէկ տարի եւ երկու օր առաջ ու վերնագրել էիր՝ «Իմ անուշիկ բալիկս՝ Ուրիկ, Կարդա՛ երբ մեծանաս»: Հիմա կարող եմ վստահ ասել, որ նախատեսում էիր ձերբակալուելու, նախատեսում էիր, որ պիտի չկարողանաս երկար ինձ հետ լինել, ընտանիքիդ հետ լինել: Ու պատգամում էիր, «Հետեւիր պապին, որ արհամարհեց փառք ու հարստութիւն, քայլեց ընտանիքի եւ հայրենիքի վեհ գաղափարի ճամբով»:

Այո, առիթ չունեցար հայրական պարտականութիւններդ իմ հանդէպ կատարելու: Այն ժամանակ երբ քո ջերմութեան, քո հայրութեան կարիքն ունէի, դու խորհրդային դրախտի սառցապատ լագերներում հացի, լոյսի, արդարութեան ու ազատութեան կարօտ՝ սառուցեալ հողն էիր փորում ու աղիւս կրում: Այնուամենայնիւ, դու իմ ճամբան քո բացակայութեամբ իսկ գծեցիր: Երախտապարտ եմ:

Վերադարձդ նոյնքան անսպասելի էր, որքան առեւանգումդ: Այդ վտիտ մարմինդ ինչպէս էր տոկացել տաս տարիների տաժանակիր աշխատանքին, քաղցին, ցրտին, հիւանդութեան: Եւ վերադարձել էիր նոր յոյսերով, մարդկային, քաղաքական ու կուսակցական անհամեմատելի փորձառութիւն ուսերիդ շալկած: Արդեօք ընկերներդ օգտուեցին այդ փորձառութիւնից, ակամայ ամբարած տեղեկութիւններից: Վերադարձար

ընտանիքիդ, եռեսուն տարեկանում «որբեվայրի» մնացած կնոջդ ու «որբ» աղջիկներիդ: Մեզ երջանկություն բերեցիր ու մենք էլ փորձեցինք հոգուդ վերքերը դարմանել, տառապալից անցեալիդ ցաւագին յուշերն ամոքել:

Դատապարտուել էիր ու պատժուել՝ Ն.Յ.Դաշնակցութեան պատասխանատու անդամ լինելուդ եւ զազազած քննիչներիդ որեւէ տեղեկութիւն չփոխանցելուդ համար: Ու վերադարձից յետոյ էլ պատրաստ էիր միայն կուսակցութեանդ վերին մարմիններին փոխանցելու գիտցածդ: Տակառակ կրածդ չարչարանքին, տեսածդ անմարդկայնութեան, լաւատես էիր աշխարհի նկատմամբ, լաւատես էիր մեր ժողովրդի ու մեր հայրենիքի ապագայի նկատմամբ: Տաւատում էիր, թէ համաշխարհային քաղաքականութիւնը իր վերիվայրումների մէջ հայ ժողովրդին վերածնութեան առիթ պիտի տայ. հաւատում էիր Տայ Դատի արդարութեանը եւ դրա լուծման կարելիութեանը՝ Ազատ, Անկախ եւ Միացեալ Տայաստանի իրականացման մէջ: Այդ հաւատքով վարակեցիր ինձ: Կարողացայ արդեօք Տայ Դատի պայքարի ու ժողովրդականացման քո հաւատքի ճամբան շարունակել այնպէս ինչպէս դու պիտի ուզէիր: Դաւանեցիր այն համոզման, թէ «Պատմութիւնը ազգերի համար հայելի է: Այդ հայելու մէջ, ապրող սերունդները տեսնում են իրենց անցեալը՝ ըստ այնմ վերագնահատութեան ենթարկելու իրենց ներկան եւ ապա մտածում գալիքի մասին»: Որքան էլ փառաւոր էր անցեալը, ներկան տառապեցնում էր քեզ, «մշակութային ու քաղաքական արժէք...

փառք ու արժանապատուութիւն» ունեցած մեր ժողովուրդը ինչո՞ւ է դարձել «թափառական, գաղթական»: Մտորումներիդ մէջ տեսնում եմ ինքնաքննադատութեան այն գիծը որ առկայ է մեր շատ մտաւորականների մէջ՝ մեր ժողովրդի գլխին եկած որեւէ աղէտ մեկնաբանելիս: Եւ դու էլ ես մտածում, «եթէ երկպառակտուած չլինէինք, եթէ ներքին պայքարների մէջ չբռնուէինք...»: Բայց այդ բոլորը չէր արգիլում քեզ հաւատով կրկնելու «Մենք մեր զոհաբերութեամբ, մեր արիւնով միայն պիտի կարողանանք տիրանալ մեր արդար իրաւունքներին»:

Կատարեցիր քո բաժինը, տուեցիր աւելին: Տիմա տես, որ քեզ յաջորդող սերունդներն են շարունակում: Տայ Դատը դեռ կեանք է, ցաւ է, զոհաբերութիւն է, արիւն է. ու նրա արդար լուծումը միակ կարելի հեռանկարը հայ ժողովրդի ապագայի:

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Ռուբինա Փիրումեան Մինասեան

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Index

Names that appear very frequently or are intertwined
in the story are not indexed
(Underlined page numbers indicate captions of photographs)

- Abovian School, 201, 215
 Aboyents, Derik, 237
 Acharian, Hrachia, 31
 Aftandilian, Dr. Armenak, 71
 Agaronov (Aharonyan), 57, 64, 65, 70, 74, 78
 Ahar, 28
 Aharonian, Avetis, 203
 Aharonyan, see Agaronov
 Ajemian, Hayk, 79, 201, 215
 Ajemyan, Grigor, 4
 Alazan, Vahram, x, 132, 134, 136, 145, 146, 167, 181
 Aleppo 223
Alik, 5, 7, 16, 24, 30, 42, 190, 202, 221, 222, 224, 225, 230, 232, 233, 236, 239-242, 244
 Allied Powers, (Allies), 42, 43, 57-59, 74-76, 79, 93
 Altay 174
 Amatuni, A., 180
 Applebaum, Anne, 127, 142, 156, 159, 182, 191
 Aramyan, Valter, 131, 134, 147, 163, 175
 Ararat Armenian Cultural Organization, 23
 Arasbaran, 28, 47
 Arax (Aras) River, 28, 85
 Arctic Circle, 97, 158-160, 177
 Arctic Ocean, 99, 117
Arevik 44
 ARF 18th General Congress (1963), 225
 ARF 19th General Congress (1967), 225, 232
 ARF 20th General Congress (1972), 225, 241
 ARF Bureau, 2, 6, 58, 69, 83, 108, 223, 225
 ARF Central Committee of Atrpatakan, 8, 43, 57, 58, 64, 66, 70, 71, 79-81, 94, 108, 112
 ARF Central Committee of Tehran, 70, 71, 222, 224
 ARF Dro Committee (Australia), 5
 ARF Committee of Rezaiye, 73
 Armenian Cultural Youth Association, 205
 Armenian Primary School Alumni Cultural Society, 21
 Armenian school in Ghazvin, 39
Armenian Weekly, 141
 Armenian Writers Union, 183
 Arshi (Arshaluys Babayan), 30
Asbarez, 240, 244
 Ashkhabad, 121
 Atropatene, 27
 Atrpatakan, see Azerbaijan (Provence)
 Azerbaijan (Province), 2, 27, 28, 32, 33, 41, 43, 55, 59, 60, 63, 68, 70, 73, 75, 76, 116, 121, 141, 167, 198
 Azerbaijan People's Government, 76, 167
 Azerbaijan (Soviet Republic of), 43, 68, 75, 141, 179
 Babayan, Varos, 69-71, 79, 83, 108
 Badalian, Gurgun, 62
 Baghdassarian, Tigran, 16
 Baikal Lake, 99
 Baku, 59, 68, 85, 97
 Bakunts, Aksel, 173
 Balkans, 56, 121
 Bardach, Janusz, 159
 Beglari, Colonel, 60, 62
 Beirut, 222, 225, 232
 Belgium, 56
 Beria, Lavrenti, 145, 179-183, 186, 190
 Bessonov, Sergei, 144
 Boky, Gleb, 149
 Boston, Massachusetts, 9
 Boulouzian, Avedis, 238
 Budugechak, 136
 Butinsky Prison, 144
 Caspian Sea, 20
 Catholic Sisters' French-medium school, 201
 Caucasus, 57, 59, 63, 186; Transcaucasia, 57, 183
 Charents, Yeghishé, 188
 Cheka, 3, 44, 64, 66, 67, 80, 81, 86, 89, 94, 95, 100, 106, 144, 146, 172
 China, 121
 Chitjian, Onnik, 72
 Conquest, Robert, 170
 Conway, Allan, 114
 Czechoslovakia, 56
 Dalstroy, 136
 Dashnaksutun youth organization, Tabriz, 33
 Davtian (Kooshesh) High School, 41
 Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Tabriz, 37
 Dro, 5, 93
Droshag, xi, 2, 189
 Drounk, 28
 Dudinka, 160
 East Prussia 128
 Elmieh High School, 220, 221, 229
 "Eros" calendar, 206
 Farazmand, Khanum, 18, 19
 Ferdowsi High School, 41, 55
Figaro, 221
 France, 56
 Fuad, Fawzia, Queen of Iran, 198

- Gagen-Torn, Nina, 127
 Ganca (Ganja), 141
 Gandzak, see Ganca
 Georgia, 179, 180
 Germany 42, 57, 59, 69
 Gharabagh, 28
 Gharadagh/Ghara Dagh, 27-29, 31, 46, 236
 Ghazaryan, Ruben, 87, 88, 90-93, 95, 108, 112
 Ghazaryan, Suren, 8, 124, 125, 130, 131, 135, 147, 178, 184, 185, 199
 Ghazo, Dali, 66, 67
 Ghazvin (Qazvin), 8, 37, 39, 236
 Gorbachev, Mikhail, 169, 185
 Grigorian, Anushavan, 224
 Grigorian Hambartsum, 50
 Grigorian, Khachatur, 74, 79
 Gurgun, V., 41
Hairenik, 106, 179
Hai Tad (Sydney), 227
 Hakhnazarian, Hovhannes, 36, 54
 Hakobian, Gaspar, 50
 Hamadan, 39, 43, 72
 Hamazkayin Cultural Organization, 225
 Harutyunyan, Revik, 166
 Haykazian High School, 41
 Hay Tahd Committee of Tehran, 237-240
 Herling, Gustav, 138
 Hitler, Adolf, 56, 165, 173
 Hochschild, Adam, 160
 Holland, 56
 Hosford, David, 127
Housaper, 42, 219
 Hovannissian, Sebouh, 224, 240-242
 Hovsepian, Hovhannes, 28, 46
 Iranian Secret Police, 17
 Ishkhan, Mushegh, 225
 Japan, 121
 Jirlakhd labor camp, 141
 Jones, Adam, 160
 Julfa, 65, 85
 Kachurin, Pamela, 127
 Kalmyk, 99
 Kaputikyan, Silva, 178, 184, 190
 Karaj, 63
 Kara Sea, 99
 Kazakhstan, 129
 Keri Sargis (Harutiunian), 202
Keyban, 15
 Khachikian, Samson, 78
 Khanjyan, Aghasi, 180, 181
 Khondkarian, Arsham (A. Atan), 179
Khorhrdayin Hayastan, 179
 Khrushchev, Nikita, 183, 185, 189-191
 Kirovabad, see Ganca
 Klochkov, First Sergeant, 106
 Kolyma, 133, 136, 158, 160, 169
 Krasnoyarsk, 3, 97, 99, 100, 103, 121, 126, 160, 164, 177; transit camp, 100, 101, 126, 160, 177
 Kuper, Leo, 160
 Lamont, Thomas, 127
 Lazian, Gabriel, 219
Le Monde, 221
 Lebanon, 225
 Leninakan (Gyumri), 141
 Lermontov, Mikhail, 90
Lusaber, 106
 Magadan (prison), 136, 169
 Mahari, Gurgun, x, 4, 129, 131, 134, 187
 Makunts, Ghazar, 80
 Manukyan, Armenak, 169, 183, 186
 Maragha, 73
 Mariamian Armenian School, 19
 Mariinsk, 169
 Martirosyan (Minister of National Security), 87, 88
 Martirosyan, Samson, 171
 Martirosyan, Valodya, 171, 172
 Marutyan, Harutyun, 171, 188, 196
 Mazmanyany, Mikayel, 157, 158
 McGuire, Caroline, 159, 160
 Mdivani, First Lieutenant, 106
 Medekh Prison, 140, 141
 Mehr School, 202
 Melbourne, 5, 227
 Melik-Tangian, Arch. Nerses, Prelate of Atrpatakan, 32, 66, 77, 80, 215
 Melkonian, Hayk, Dr., 73
 Meneshian, Knarik, 141
 Metz Hayk, 27
 Metz Yeghern, 214
 Mikoyan, Anastas, 189
 Ministry of Education of Iran, 37, 41, 55, 198, 217, 229
 Mir Afzali High School, 221
 Mirzoyan, Sona, 7
 Mohammad Reza (Pahlavi), Crown Prince, 42
 Mongolia, 121
 Moscow, 96, 97, 99, 109, 110, 112, 115, 120, 121, 129, 172, 186; Butinsky Prison, 96, 101; Moscow News, 128; Memorial Society, 185; Troika, 148, 149; Special Council, 96, 101; Stalin's statue and victims' memorial, 195
 Mossadegh, Mohammad, 16
 Mughdusi, Khachik, 181
 Narilsk, see Norilsk
 National Security Service of Armenia, 8, 14, 91, 101, 105, 187
 Navasartian, Soviet Consul, 80
 Navasartian, Vahan, 219, 223
 Nenets, 116
 Norillag, see Norilsk
 Norilsk, labor camp complex, 5, 6, 97, 100, 103, 104, 115-118, 122, 126, 137, 142, 156-162, 164, 168, 169, 171, 172, 177, 181, 194, 195
 Nor-Jugha, Esfahan, 229
Novi Mir, 184
 Nzhdeh, Garegin, xii, 33, 93
 Oganessian, Suren, x, 131, 140-142, 179
 Okhots, Sea of, 136
 Ordukhanyan, Abel, 171, 172

Ordukhanyan, Iren, 172, 176
 Pahlavuni, Norayr, 239
 Paris, 236
 Paroian, Khoren, Catholicos of
 the Holy See of Cilicia, 224,
 233
 Parspatunik, 27, 28
 Passian, Nerses, 85
Perestroika, 169, 185
 Petrossian, Shahen, 41
 Pionian, Karapet, 31, 34, 48, 49
 Poland, 56
Pravda, 76, 167
 Prague, 236
 Prelacy Central High School
 (Tabriz), 35, 48
 Raffi, 203
 Rasht, 8, 37, 39, 74; School
 Faculty, 53; School
 Chemistry Lab., 53
 Red Army, 2, 33, 57-61, 63, 64,
 67, 91, 93, 128, 141, 167
 Reza Shah (Pahlavi), 41, 42
 Reza Shah Kabir High School,
 20, 203
 Rezaiye (Urumieh), 63
 Roosevelt-Stalin-Churchill
 conference, 76
 Rossi, Jacques, 128
 Rostov, 96, 97, 99; prisoners'
 distribution center, 125, 126
 Russia, 115, 117, 178, 185;
 Federation, 188; Soviet, 97,
 178, 222; Russian Armenia,
 32
 Sakharov, Andrei, 188
 Salmast, 63
 Saroyan William, 230
 Sassuni, Garo, 222, 230
 Shagoyan, Gayane, 166
 Shirvanzade, Alexandre, 203
 Siah-Kouh, see Parspatunik
 Simonian, Drastamat, 181
 Sinanian, Arshak, 73
 Slavine, Andrei, 134
 Smbatyan, Grisha, 169
 Solovetsky prison 130, 169
 Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, x, 4,
 119, 125, 128, 129, 135, 137-
 140, 146, 148, 149, 162, 170,
 178, 185, 189
 Soraya, Empress of Iran, 20
 South Africa, 42
 Soviet-British invasion of Iran,
 42, 59, 63
 St. Thaddeus Monastery, 229
 Stajner, Karlo, 118
 Stepanian, Aslan, 17, 18
 Stepanian Hayk, 72
 Sultanyan, K. K., OKR Smersh,
 106
 Sydney, 5, 227, 233; Armenian
 University Students, 235;
 Armenian Youth Federation,
 234
 Syunik, 28, 33
 Tamaddon School, 201, 202
 Tahkent, 141
 Taymyr Peninsula, 97, 99, 100,
 116
 Tbilisi, 97, 125, 140, 141, 157
 Ter-Ohanian, Andre, 50, 74
 Tiflis, see Tbilisi
 Transcaucasian Socialist

Federative Soviet Republic,
 183
 Trotsky, Leon, 143, 145, 189
 Tudeh Party, 76
 Tumanian, Hovhannes, 30
 Tungus, the people, 116; the
 language, 136
 Turkey, 42, 57, 58, 65, 75, 92,
 222,
 Turkmenistan, 121
 Tvardovsky, Alexandre, 184
 Union of Soviet Writers, 185
 United Kingdom, 42
 United States [of America], 1,
 81, 141, 206, 211, 218
 University of California, Los
 Angeles (UCLA), 212
 Ural mountains, 97
 Uzbekistan, 122
 Van, 32
 Vasiliev, 149
 Vasminj, 60, 61
 Vaspurakan province, 27
Vatan Yolenda, 68
 Vienna, 225, 241
 Virabian, Amatuni, 8, 110
 Voghan, 27,
 Volkogonov, Dmitri, 169
 Vorkuta, 158, 160
 Vul, 149
 Vyshinsky, Andrey, 143
 Willoghby (Australia),
 Armenian Relief Society,
 234; Saturday School, 235
 Yenisei River, 5, 6, 97, 99, 103,
 117, 160
 Yerznkian, Aramayas, 102
 Zangezurtsi Grigor, 71
 Zanzan, 63
 Zarod, Kazimierz, 159
 Zaryan, Nayiri, 183
 Zhamharian, Panos, 79

1500

ՀՀ Ազգային գրադարան

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This book relates the life story of Baghdassar (Baghdik) Minasian, who was abducted by the Soviet NKVD from Tabriz, Iran, during the waning years of World War II. The book reconstructs his incarceration, interrogation, and sentence of 10 years hard labor in Siberia from 1944 to 1954, when he was released under the general pardon issued after Stalin's death to war prisoners and all victims of Stalinist purges. The book contains the English rendering of unfinished memoirs he began to write late in life when he felt himself ready to relive and relate his traumatic experience of the GULAG.

Baghdik returned physically broken, fraught with the effects of years of unspeakable suffering in the notorious Norilsk hard labor camp, but in good spirit. He returned to his family, his "widowed" wife and two orphan girls, to rebuild his own and his family's shattered life, but not everything went smoothly. He had more challenges to overcome as he reintegrated into the society he was forcibly removed from more than a decade before.

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