

Asbarez

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An Exclusive Excerpt

This week Asbarez exclusively features an excerpt from Dr. Rubina Peroomian's latest book "My Father: A Man of Courage and Perseverance; A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag," which as the title suggests chronicles her father, Baghdassar Baghdik Minassian's experience after he 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 hard labor in Siberia from 1944 to 1954, when he was released under the general pardon issued after Stalin's death.

The chapter excerpted here that begins on page 4, is the English translation of the abridged and rearranged version of Minassian's unfinished memoir, "Ten years, ten months and seventeen days". It is narrated in his 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.

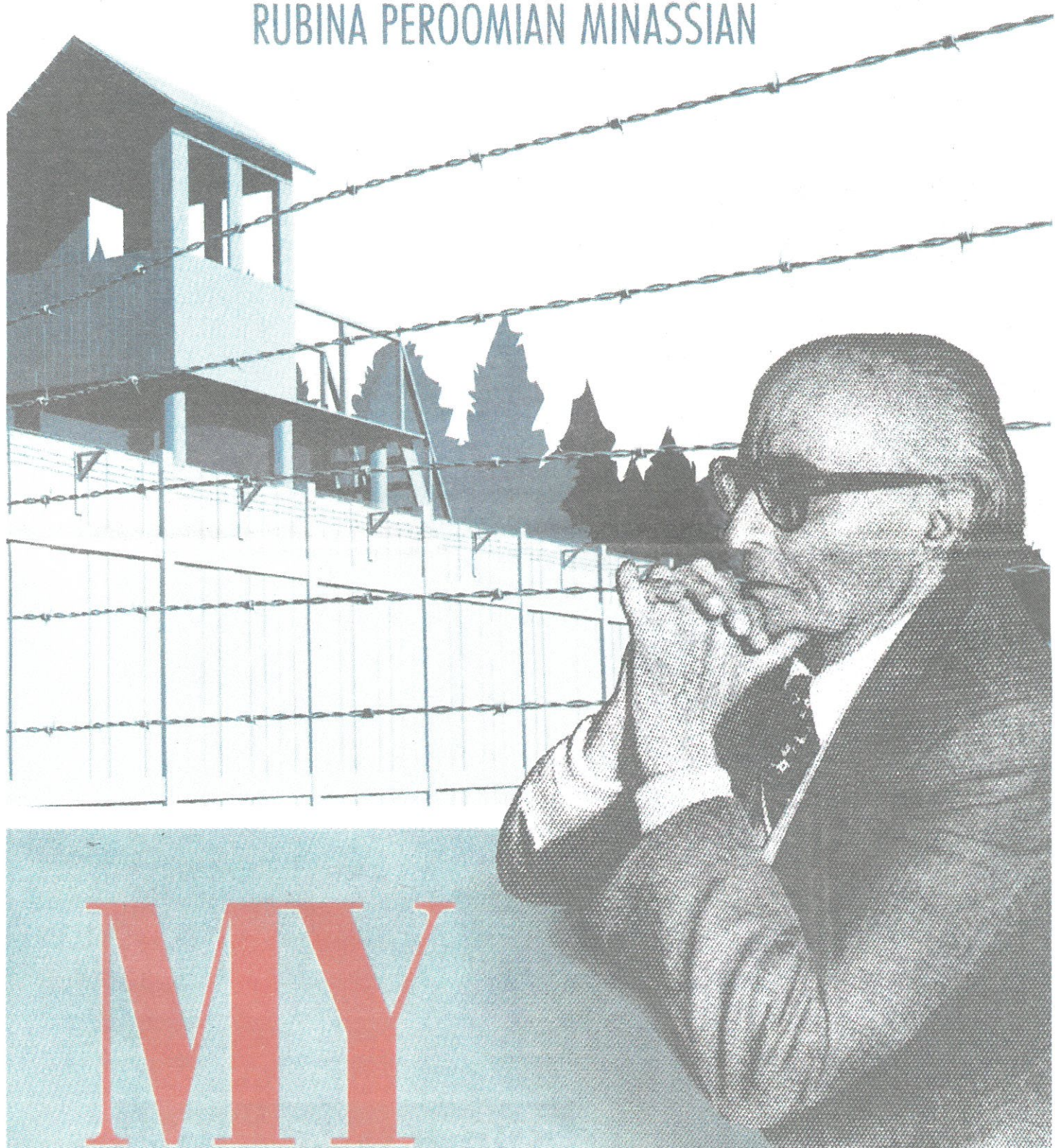
The book has also been described as Dr. Peroomian's autobiography, because she weaves her father's experiences with that of her and her family's struggle to survive during this period in history, which has not been widely chronicled or discussed as part of the post-Genocide Armenian experience.

The book also becomes an homage to a generation of Armenians who sacrificed so much for the sake of the Armenian Nation.

Rubina Peroomian was born in Tabriz, Iran. She received a BS in Civil Engineering, 1960, Tehran University, an MA in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, specializing in Armenian Studies, 1983, University of California, Los Angeles and a Ph.D in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, specializing in Armenian Studies, 1989, University of California, Los Angeles.

Her publications include: "Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience (1993)"; "Armenia in the Web of the ARF-Bolshevik Relationship, 1917-1921" (1997), in the Armenian language, also translated and published in Russian; "And those who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915, The Metamorphoses of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature" (2008 and 2012); "The Armenian Genocide in Literature, Perceptions of Those who Lived through the Years of Calamity" (2012, 2014); and "The Armenian Genocide in Literature, The Second Generation Responds" (2015).

RUBINA PEROOMIAN MINASSIAN



MY FATHER

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

An Introduction to Dr. Rubina Peroomian's Book, 'My Father: A Man of Courage and Perseverance, A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag'

BY SHAKEH KAFTARIAN, Ph.D.

Editor's Note: During a book presentation on March 1 of Dr. Rubina Peroomian's recent book, "My Father: A Man of Courage and Perseverance, A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag," Dr. Shakeh Kaftarian made a moving presentation of not only the book but also its author. The event was organized by Sardarabad Bookstore and Asbarez, and was sponsored by the Hamazkayin Western Regional Executive. In addition to Dr. Kaftarian, Prof. Richard Hovannisian discussed the book and his experiences with Dr. Peroomian via a video message. The closing remarks were presented by Western Prelate Archbishop Moushegh Mardirossian.

I'm honored that Dr. Rubina Peroomian has asked me to introduce her recent book about her distinguished father, Dr. Baghdasar Minassian, or Baron Baghdik to many who knew him. He was a well-known intellectual, teacher, social and political leader in the Iranian-Armenian Community; a self-made man of exceptional intellectual talent and dignity; an honest broker of his people's political and social interests; and a man from humble beginnings, who achieved great highs in his life. He was a modest man with an unassuming nature, always faithful to his ideological values, and as Rubina puts it "...appreciated by many, unappreciated by many." And perhaps most importantly, he was a significant role-model in Rubina's life.

As many of you know, the author has written several books, all of them about the tragic history of her people, all of them about the Armenian Genocide. As far as her decision about writing this book is concerned, in the forward of the book she writes that after her last book came out, her son Oshin admonished her by saying "Don't you think you have to stop here and tell your own story?"

Thus began another literary journey for the author, which lasted two years of careful research about her father's life, and which she turned into a biography titled "My Father, A Man of Courage and Perseverance, A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag." Indeed, throughout the book the reader is impressed with this man's eventful story, which illustrates his courage, perseverance, and resilience. Tonight, I'll reflect on these qualities with the aim of validating the title of this book.

When the author decided to write about her father, a disturbing fact she faced was the serious informational gap pertaining to her father's life story that spanned his hard labor years in Stalin's Gulag. Evidently, after coming back from that ordeal, it took Baron Baghdik a long time to be able to confront his traumatic experience, and start speaking or writing about this tragic episode of his life. And sadly, that traumatic episode remained untold, because of his untimely death.

True to form, Rubina set out to learn about this period of her father's life through the works of Solzhenitsyn, Guren Mahari, Suren

Oganessian, Suren Ghazaryan, Mkrtich Armen, Vahram Alazan and many other non-Armenians, who were able to describe their similar ordeals after return from Stalin's hard labor camps. I consider this a clever scholarly approach, which helped lend context and depth to her father's biography.

Although I often take my time in reading literature that is not directly related to my profession, I must confess that I read this book very fast. Somehow Rubina's candid vignettes about her father's life, and her illustrations of heart-rendering hardships and the quiet suffering of herself, her mother and her sister brought out a deep level of empathy in the reader for the victims of physical and ideological wars, almost turning this biography into a historical novel, and a page-turner for me.

The author describes the deep impact of her father's abduction, imprisonment and disappearance, and the injustice of it from a personal perspective. She writes about the absurdity of ideological and political struggles, which have a way of crushing not only targeted political opponents, but hordes of innocent bystanders alike, producing many categories of victims, including wives, children and entire communities. She describes the loss of valuable time and happiness, loss of family stability, and the cruelty of politically unsettled times.

This book is not just the story of the author's father, as the title may suggest. This is a book about a family, and an entire community. This book provides the history of a slice of time in the life of the Armenian people around WWII living in the north of Iran. This book contains several intertwined personal stories, conveying the spirit, traditions, and the social conditions of a period of major international tumult. This work is rich in its intrinsic content, context, and value.

As a psychologist, I always pay close attention to the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the protagonists of a story; the context within which they are born, raised, educated; and the impact of all the desirable and undesirable experiences they go through. In this book Rubina is able to provide a rich understanding of life as it was lived by her father, herself, her mother, sister, and her community.

Interestingly, the author's truthful, unabashed, and proud story of her father parallels her own uncanny and unapologetic story of childhood and adolescence, which was also froth with economic and social hardships and risk factors. Such an environment could have easily led to helplessness, hopelessness, melancholy, and academic failure. Instead, much like her father, she too was able to overcome all of the negative experiences thrown at her through resilience, flexibility and strength of character.

Both Baghdik and Rubina were able to use their extraordinary scholastic and social achievements as solutions for staying the course. This father-daughter duo has demonstrated that sometimes nature can overcome nurture, thus confirming the old adage "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger."



Dr. Shakeh Kafarian (left) presents Dr. Rubina Peroomian's (right) book, 'My Father: A Man of Courage and Perseverance, A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag' during an event in Glendale on March 1



"This book is not just the story of the author's father, as the title may suggest. This is a book about a family, and an entire community. This book provides the history of a slice of time in the life of the Armenian people around WWII living in the north of Iran. This book contains several intertwined personal stories, conveying the spirit, traditions, and the social conditions of a period of major international tumult. This work is rich in its intrinsic content, context, and value."

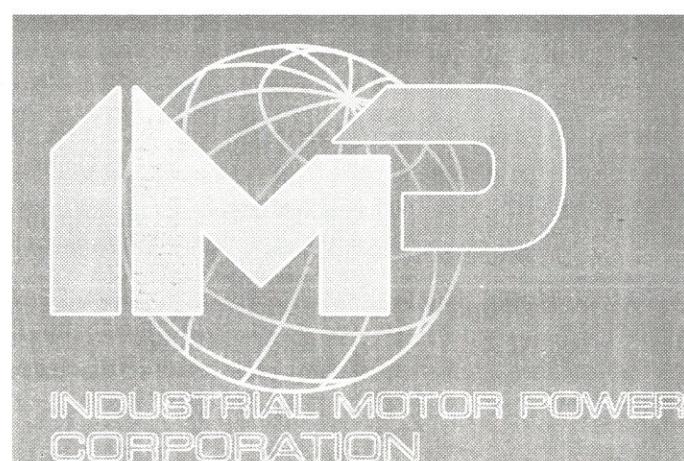
I empathized most with the author's mother, Digin Parik. She also comes across as a hardy personality, with great endurance. After the traumatic loss of her partner she found herself in the position of an "independent" widow, a single mother with no financial support in wartime Tabriz, confronted with a judgmental society, where her only options were hard work and quiet suffering. Rubina tells us how her mother was able to create a dignified space for herself and her girls with her hard work and balanced decisions.

I was most touched by Parik's struggles after her husband's return, and her painful adjustment to her new circumstance as a wife, who was now supposed to step back into a previously established and traditional role, readjusting her mental and emotional reality to the presence of her newly returned husband after so many years. I was moved by the predicament of this strong woman, who handled the brutal loss and absence of her husband courageously, but who needed more tenderness in returning to her previously established "feminine" position in a limited and traditional society. Rubina describes a significant psychological predicament, which in many cultures would lead to a breakup, but which evidently Baghdik and Parik Minassian were able to handle with grace, mutual understanding, and an unwavering investment in family.

The author also tells us about her younger sister Ruzann, who was a sensitive child, and who was severely impacted by her father's absence. She was very young when her father went missing from their lives, thus leaving her with not many established memories to draw strength from. Such a loss at an early age, we know, may have long lasting effects. This vignette demonstrated yet another direct translation of political and ideological struggles into human suffering.

A polished narrator of stories, the author combines the traditions of research, scholarship, and her own recollections to impart lessons in history, and explore the parameters of human nature in terms of endurance, resiliency, loyalty to principles, and responsibility towards family and community. Most importantly, she keeps coming back to the themes of courage and perseverance, thus showing the appropriateness of the title of this book.

The author has written this biography as a tribute to her distinguished father, and has dedicated it to his memory. I would like to submit to the reader that this book can also be categorized as an autobiography, which reads like a historical novel. This volume is a valuable addition to Dr. Rubina Peroomian's significant body of work, and a fulfillment of her "filial" duty to her father. This book is indeed a befitting tribute and testimonial to the memory of a valuable man.



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Excerpt: 'My Father: A Man of Courage and Perseverance, A Survivor of Stalin's Gulag'

In the Flames of World War II: Abducted and Jailed in Tabriz (Chapter 3)

BY DR. RUBINA PEROOMIAN

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 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 Dashnaksutun (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 Dashnaksutun.

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 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



Baghdik Minassian in Prague in 1927

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

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Armenian students in Prague in 1924: From left, Baghdassar Minassian, Andre Ter-Ohanian, Gaspar Hakobian, Hambartsoum Grigorian, Haik Yeghanyan

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 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 Salmas 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 Zanjan 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 Dashnaksutun, 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 *mohajees* 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 Dashnaksakan.

The Cheka was undoubtedly behind all these shenanigans, frightening Armenians and keeping them at bay, and at the same time provoking Dashnaksutun 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, Dashnaksutun would remain firm and present a united front. The decision was also taken to lend protection to Archbishop Nerses Melik-Tangian, the Prelate of Atpatakan. 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 Dashnaksutun. They were spreading disinformation and spying on the Armenian community. Dashnaksutun 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 Dashnaksutun changed camp and became Cheka informants. They

DISCOVER THE BEAUTY OF ARMENIA

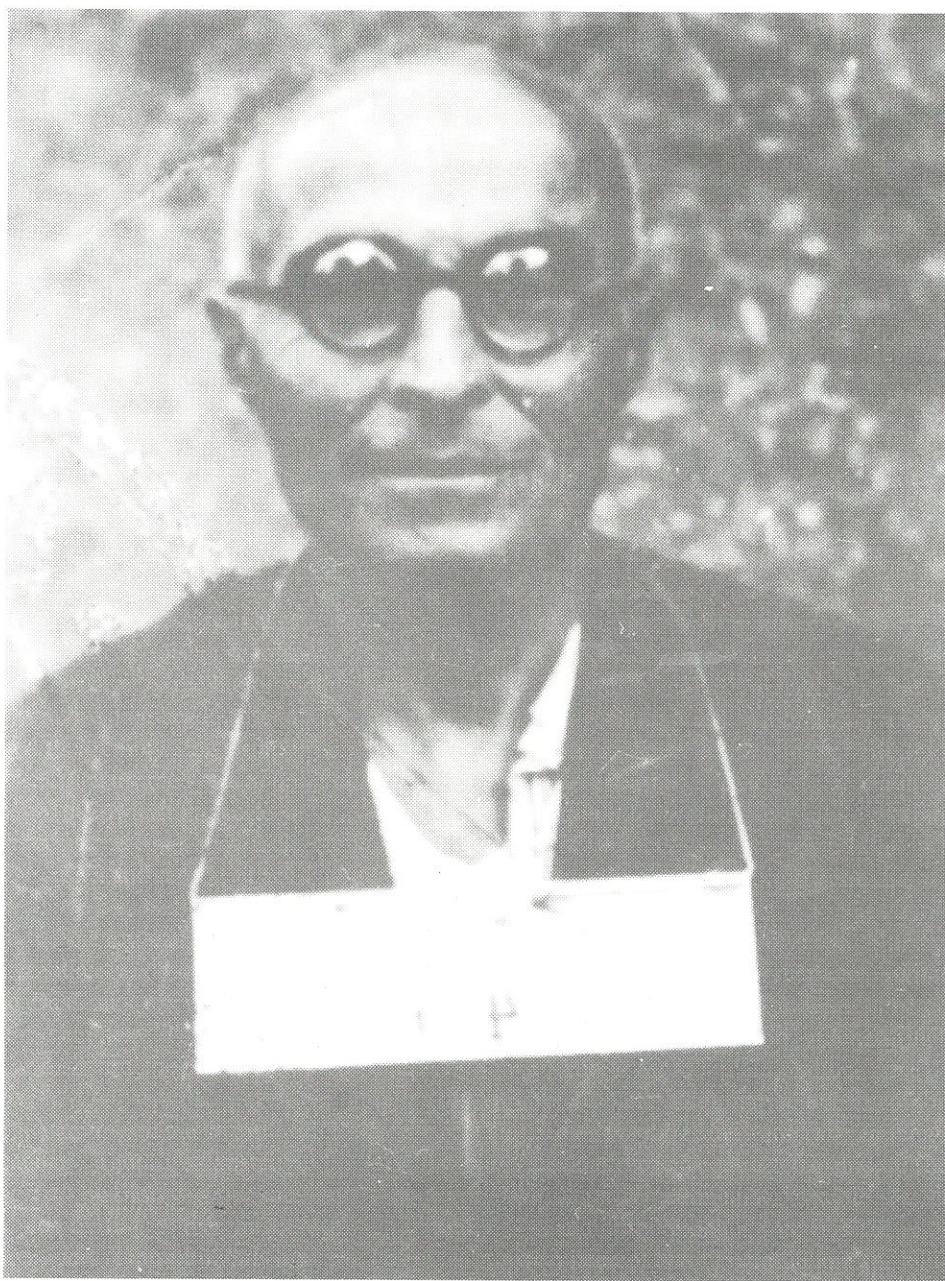
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Baghdik Minassian in the quarantine camp near Mashhad, Iran

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 Dashnaksakan 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 Dashnaksutun, 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 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.

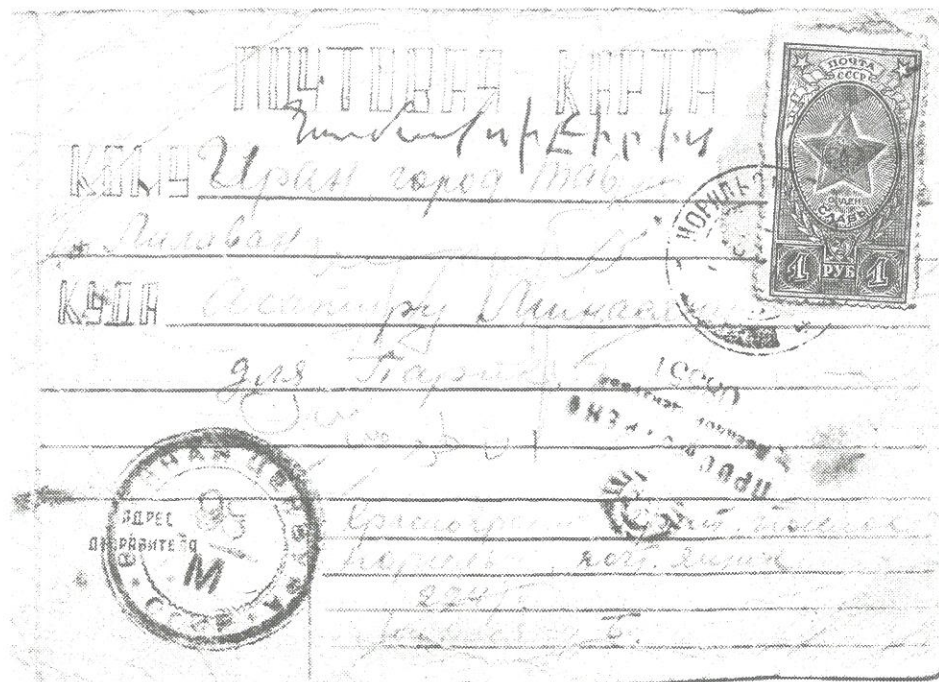
The Party leadership in Tehran was shaken by Varos Babayan’s abduction. Disagreement and even stark opposition among the members of the Central Committee threatened the solidarity of the rank and file, especially when their disputes and clashes became the talk of the town and threatened the Party’s prestige. 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 talk some sense into our ungers. Zangezursi 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,

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 *mohajees* 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



A letter/postcard from Siberia

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 Dashnaksutun, 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 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

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



Prisoners in Norillag

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.

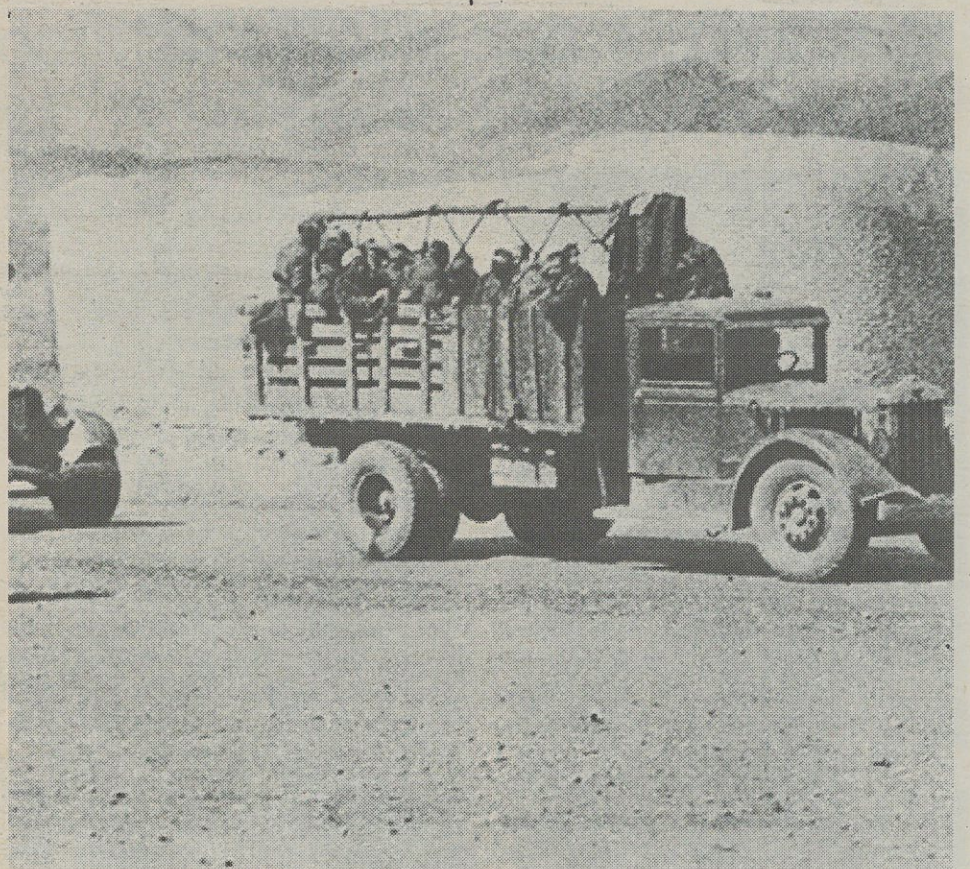
Azerbaijan had indeed become a hub of

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



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



Soviet troops crossing the Iranian border

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. 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 Dashnaksutun?
— Who were you looking for and who did you arrest?
— The Central Committee representative of the Atrpatakan Dashnaksutun.
— 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.

Notes

¹ As noted in the introduction, the content of this and the next chapter is the English translation of the abridged and rearranged

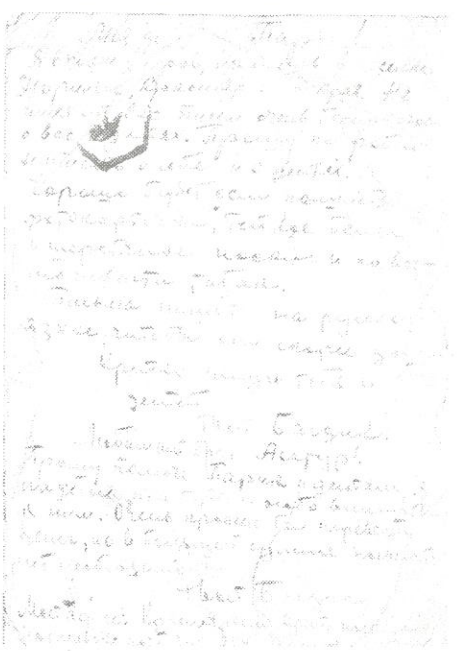
version of Baghdik Minassian’s unfinished memoir, “(Ten years, ten months and seventeen days...”. It is narrated in my father’s voice and reflects his views and analysis of the situation in Tabriz before his abduction, the events in the Yerevan prison, his indictment and sentence of exile to Siberia, 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.

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.

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.

⁴ Varos Babayan, born in Alexandrapol (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 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



Another letter

sent to the Soviet Union. It is also assumed that he died in prison in Moscow.

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

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.