

Through Life's Ups and Downs

Suren Havunjian

An annotated English translation of **Կյանքի ելևէջներում**



Author portrait from source page 2

Translated from the 322-page Armenian scan supplied by the family.
Source page references and editorial questions are preserved throughout.

About this translation

This English edition preserves the memoir's first-person account, dialogue, recollections, humor, and opinions. The introduction, foreword, dedication, captions, contents, and printer's information are included. His assertions remain his assertions; editorial explanations are identified as translator's notes.

Gray numbers in square brackets mark pages in the Armenian source. A marker inside a sentence records where the printed page changes; it does not indicate missing text. Notes such as [P020-01] lead to the corresponding entry under Translator's notes. Brackets around uncertain or reconstructed wording make those interventions visible.

The scan contains 322 pages. The numbered pages align with the PDF sequence from 2 through 322; the opening cover has no printed number. No displaced or duplicated numbered page was found. A contents-page reference sends the dedication to page 4, though it appears on page 3. Several page numerals are clipped, including 132, whose place was checked through surrounding text.

Two local text-order defects are flagged: the displaced sentence fragments on page 117, and a paragraph printed inside another sentence on page 156 that belongs after Gaspar is introduced on page 157. The translation restores the apparent reading order and records the changes. Other incomplete sentences and difficult readings remain explicitly marked.

The author's name is rendered Suren Havunjian from the Armenian spelling Հաւոնջյան. Page 15 discusses earlier family-name forms. Established family spellings may differ; personal and local names that cannot be confirmed remain flagged. Historical place names are generally retained, with brief explanations where useful.

The photograph caption on page 32 is cut off. The map on page 14 contains labels too small or degraded to transcribe reliably. These source limitations are not filled in by guesswork. Original illustrations are reproduced in the plates section with translated captions or clearly marked descriptions.

Questions for family review

The foreword places the author's birth in the year after the Great Catastrophe, while his own account gives November 24, 1919 (pages 10 and 20). Other age and date differences are noted where they occur.

The preferred English spellings of family names, the missing end of the page 32 caption, and uncertain dialect terms would benefit from family knowledge.

An official is introduced as Albert Manukyan and then called Movsisyan on page 245. The names are preserved and the discrepancy is flagged.

Reading contents

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Dedication

[3] To my parents, Iskender and Dabita Havunjian.[P003-01]

[4] [Two uncaptioned photographs appear on this source page. They are reproduced in the plates section.]

Introduction

[5] A human life is a long journey that begins with birth and ends with death. Whoever sets out on that journey reaches the destination sooner or later, in the time allotted by God - or, for certain groups of people, by fate. For some, the road is smooth and level, and the journey passes almost unnoticed; for others, it is uneven and full of adventures. Some find it pleasant and interesting; others find it dull and painful, and wait impatiently for it to end.

Human life is like a long train journey. As you travel, just as in life, you meet a variety of fellow passengers. You come to know many people, very few of whom remain with you to the end. At different stations, passengers get off and others board; so it is in life, as new acquaintances enter it and, at various ages, familiar people depart.

Following this comparison, the journey of my own life is now drawing to its close. As a train journey nears its destination, you begin to gather your belongings, pack them up and put them in your suitcases, making sure you leave nothing behind. In the same way, the time has come for me to gather and pack away the sweet and bitter, the happy and sorrowful, the joyful - and sometimes also [6] memories of days filled with sorrow. Like a film, they pass across the screen of my mind, awakening noble and sweet memories of childhood, adolescence, youth and maturity. However bitter a memory of the past may be, because it belongs to younger years, it is remembered with sweetness.

More than eighty-five years of my life now lie behind me. In that time I have lived in many places, cities and countries, moved through different circles of friends, worked in different places and kinds of employment, and had many colleagues. In every circumstance, I have remained a respected, sought-after and welcome friend. My friends have turned to me for advice in times of joy and sorrow, in good fortune and misfortune; I have always remained close to them, companionable and selfless.

During the forty-two years I lived in the homeland, and especially the last thirty-five of those years, I was always surrounded by devoted friends from the arts and from intellectual circles. My impression is that many people also sought to become part of my close circle. Perhaps this had to do with my age, my work, my position or other circumstances, but I think the attraction lay more in my character, which neither the passing years nor a change of country could alter. Unfortunately, when I came to Los Angeles, everything seemed to change. Here I feel isolated. In this country only money - the dollar - has a voice and a say. My uncle had a Turkish saying that he often repeated: "Paran var, dünya âlem kulun. Paran yok, tımarhane yolun." [P006-01] In translation: if you have money, the whole world is your servant; if you have none, your place is the madhouse. In this country I feel the truth of those words very keenly. Every foolish remark made by someone with money, a rich man, is received as [7] wisdom, while every wise remark made by someone without it is dismissed as foolishness.

Throughout my life I have worked in several places at once and have always been occupied with work. In this country, the most painful thing for me has been having nothing to do. I decided to replace that torment with something more interesting and useful, and began writing down my memories, simply to leave a remembrance for my children and grandchildren. After I had written a little, I read it to a few people - relatives as well as people outside the family. They found it very interesting and advised me to continue.

I have no pretension whatsoever to regard what follows as a work of literature. It is simply the record of an ordinary man's ordinary life, a life characteristic of many Armenians who lived through a particular period of history.

I offer the reader memories of a very ordinary life. Many, many compatriots who have traveled the same road may find in them episodes from their own lives.

Foreword

[8] My impressions of Suren Havunjian, my paternal uncle, and the ideas I formed of him took shape from a distance. In 1946, when he emigrated from Aleppo to Armenia, I was barely eight years old. My last meeting with him before we parted took place in the hall of the Bethel School in Aleppo. An American film was being shown, and he was there in the role of projectionist. In my childhood imagination, that episode left a powerful impression of joy and pride.

Circumstances prevented our own family's planned repatriation, and we remained behind, homeless and destitute in the fullest sense. At that time, the bad news and letters arriving from Armenia made us still sadder and more despondent. In the early period, Suren and his family greatly appreciated the help given by fellow natives of Ekbez who had settled in Armenia, particularly in finding a place to live. Later their circumstances improved, and through higher education they attained a good economic and social position.

Deeply influenced and encouraged by Suren's abilities as a teacher and musician, and by my other uncle Vazgen's position as a lecturer at Yerevan University, I too entered the teaching profession. Both my uncles had the opportunity to visit Beirut, and I was able to renew my close acquaintance with them.

During that brief visit I also had the opportunity to explore and appreciate Suren's profound inner world and the breadth of his interests. He was truly a "Renaissance [9] man." Alongside his artistic accomplishments, he was imbued with spiritual feeling and well informed about political affairs. Despite his great store of knowledge and his lofty philosophical ideas, he had an easily understandable way of expressing himself in simple, everyday language. The reader will find that same accessible manner in the literary language of this book.

Throughout these pages the reader will surely "hear" Suren's gentle voice, feel his experiences, glimpse his inner world and take pleasure in the episodes he paints in iridescent colors. Depending on the subject and the nature of the episode, the reader may sometimes feel as if looking through a microscope, while at other times the effect is that of a telescope. Naturally, the book is written in Eastern Armenian, since the most important part of his life - including his higher education and his working career - was spent in Armenia. For the past two decades Suren's family has been settled in Los Angeles, joining his two brothers and the larger Havunjian clan. During this period, Suren's renewed spiritual awareness and depth of faith have deepened the intimacy and mutual understanding between my father and Suren. "Personally, more of his qualities..." [P009-01] Even a stranger meeting him for the first time would notice his human warmth and penetrating ability to communicate. His conversation reveals a reasoning mind together with an artist's sensitivity. His interests embrace many fields: [10] music, literature, religion, politics, humanism, the art of the toastmaster [P010-02] and so forth. All of these are beautifully reflected in the pages of the book.

Through Life's Ups and Downs is Suren Havunjian's autobiography: the story of an Armenian born in the year following the Great Catastrophe, [P010-01] whose life took root in five different countries and flourished in some ten cities. As the title's universal character suggests, the events and episodes described in the book present in miniature the life experiences of the Armenian diaspora. Armenians who repatriated to Armenia, in particular, will find many details that reflect the course of their own lives.

Yet the course of Suren's life, with all its ups and downs, has been distinctively individual and unique. As I read the book, I had the impression that he pursued no particular purpose or agenda in writing it. Like many writers, he simply felt an irresistible urge to express and communicate his feelings and ideas. Instead of merely giving information about people and events, he presents the circumstances in an "existential" sense. As a reader, you too become part of those experiences and share the emotions the situations evoke. In the imagination, the writing on the page becomes a compelling film by a distinguished director....

Guided by the author's creative impulse, everything in the book is presented with candor, precision and meticulous attention to detail. Even "provocative" and other contentious ideas, such as questions of sex and politics, are presented freely, [11] with liberty and bold courage. The bad and the good, the coarse and the excellent, what inspires pride and what brings shame: all are portrayed with the same vigor. This book is a means of "catharsis," a release from hidden feelings and suppressed emotions, in the spirit of "The truth shall set you free."... With a view to any future repatriation, national organizations could learn much from the mistakes of the past recorded here.

As one would expect, *Through Life's Ups and Downs* reflects Suren's personal experiences. In the book's first chapter, however, "A New Shoot from an Uprooted Tree," he brings together accounts of the Great Catastrophe and his earliest childhood. These he naturally heard and learned first from his parents, and later from other compatriots and relatives, particularly his maternal uncle Panos Sarkisyan. The latter also played an important part in the struggle to liberate Ekbez. [P011-01] Suren has brought together his compatriots' eyewitness accounts and, after comparing and checking them against international history, presents them as indisputable facts. For a new generation of Armenians descended from Cilicia, and particularly those from Ekbez, this part of the book offers rich nourishment for understanding their past and strengthening their ancestral roots. To this end, the Ekbez Compatriotic Union's sponsorship of the publication and distribution of the book is truly commendable. The efforts of its chairman, Michel Khorozian, deserve particular praise. Through this gesture, the Union both honors a worthy compatriot and gives others an opportunity to learn about the experiences of the people of Ekbez. We strongly encourage anyone receiving a copy of this book from the Union to make [12] a generous financial contribution to the Beirut board of the Ekbez Compatriotic Union, in support of its scholarship and/or relief work for the poor.

On behalf of Suren Havunjian, special thanks to all those who contributed in various ways to the successful printing of this book. It was a great privilege for me to stand beside my uncle and help bring this undertaking to fruition. My wish is that this foreword should pay fitting tribute to Suren's valuable work.

Hovhannes H. Havunjian (2007) [P012-01]

A New Shoot from an Uprooted Tree

[13] From my earliest childhood I heard Ekbez praised by my parents, relatives and compatriots alike. They described it to me as a paradise nestled on the eastern foothills of the Amanus range in the Taurus Mountains, likening it to Canaan, the land God promised the Israelites in the Old Testament, where “milk and honey flowed.” The abundant springs in the mountains near Ekbez were so cold that your hand could scarcely bear to gather a few pebbles from the bottom. The town was surrounded by dense forests, rich in wild fruit trees and berries, birds of many colors and kinds filling the air with song, and game and wild animals such as deer, boar, leopards and even tigers. My maternal grandfather, Grandfather Hakob, was considered one of the finest hunters in Ekbez. Among his proudest hunting achievements were the tigers whose skins adorned the walls of his home.^[P013-01] His hunting companions were Dr. Shepard and Dr. Philip Hovnanian.

Ekbez and its surroundings were considered a health resort. People came from nearby cities, especially from the hot plains of Adana, for a change of air. The Havunjian family was one of the town's well-known and hospitable families, and distinguished visitors often stayed in their home. One frequent and well-known guest was the American physician and missionary Dr. Shepard. My father often spoke about him.

[14] Dr. Shepard not only stayed with the Havunjians but carried on both his medical and missionary work in their home. He treated people without charge and also supplied the medicines they needed free of charge. For this reason, sick people from all the surrounding villages - Armenians and Turks alike - were brought to him. Once my grandfather asked him:

“Doctor, working without payment like this, do you never think of your family and children?”

“I have given my sons the education they need. If they are worthy men, that will be enough for them to make their own way in life. If they are not, the money I might give them would be of no use either,” he replied.

[Map caption: Armenian Cilicia and the surrounding countries.]

Ekbez was a large village or small town of approximately one thousand households. Most of its population was Turkish; Armenians made up about forty percent. Armenian settlement there began in the nineteenth century. Maronite Arabs from Lebanon also lived in Ekbez, chiefly engaged in making pitch. By religious affiliation, ^[15] the Armenians were divided into Apostolic, Evangelical and Catholic communities. Each community had its own church and school. Unfortunately, although the schools were called Armenian, the authorities forbade the teaching of Armenian. The children therefore learned to read and write Turkish in the Armenian alphabet. Newspapers and literature also existed in this form. As a result, although my parents were literate, they did not know Armenian. They read and wrote Turkish using Armenian letters.

The Catholic community had a large stone monastery enclosed by walls. In later years it would provide a refuge for the local Armenian population, saving many from certain death. As a boy I saw Ekbez from a distance through binoculars. The village and railway station of Meydan Ekbez lie on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Turkish border. My father had a shop there, and we often went to visit him. Since Ekbez is only fifteen miles away, it can be seen clearly on the slopes of the Amanus Mountains. My father showed me the distant roof of his family home and their vineyards.

Our ancestors originally came from Zeytun and migrated from there toward the foothills of the Amanus. Some stopped along the way and settled in Marash; the others continued to the slopes of the Amanus and made their home in Ekbez. According to my parents, and particularly my uncle Simon, our surname had been Havanjian. Those who went to Marash kept that name, but in Ekbez, an entirely Turkish-speaking environment, it became distorted into Havunjoghlu or Havunjian.^[P015-01] I was unable to discover the period, reason or date of the migration from Zeytun. All I know is that ^[16] we and the Havanjians of Marash are not merely relatives: we descend from the same family line.

My paternal grandfather, Sarkis Havunjian, had three sons and a daughter. The eldest son was Iskender, followed by Sedrak and Simon. Mariam was the youngest in the family. My father, Iskender, was born in 1885. He married Gyulanya in 1904, and a year later, in 1905, their first child, Harutyun, was born. Their second child, Yenovk, was born two years afterward.

My mother, Dabita Sarkisyan, had married Paul in 1910, before her marriage to my father. They had a son whom they named Isaac.

The peaceful life of Ekbez was shattered by the First World War, which began in 1914 and drew almost all of Europe and part of Asia into the fighting. Turkey, allied with Germany, the instigator of the war, was an active participant. All young men and men under fifty, including Armenians, were conscripted. In 1915 came the terrible, unforeseen blow. First the Armenian soldiers were disarmed; then began the mass deportation and slaughter of the Armenian people - the Great Catastrophe. The Turkish authorities had long since decided to annihilate the Armenian people. They considered the war the most favorable moment to carry out that plan, as the European countries that might otherwise have impeded them to some extent were preoccupied with their own war. They launched a savage, widespread campaign to exterminate the Armenians. No village, town or settlement with an Armenian population escaped these actions. The bloody claws of forced migration, expulsion, ^[17] deportation and massacre reached little Ekbez as well. Every Armenian was driven out, regardless of age, faith or state of health. Along the tortuous, deadly roads of deportation, the caravan of those condemned to die made its way toward the scorching deserts of Der Zor. Young and old, elderly people and children, the healthy and the sick all walked on, struggling against hunger and thirst, exhaustion and disease - and, above all, against the violence, extortion, robbery and shameless lust of the Turkish gendarmes escorting them, men who had lost all human conscience and become man-eating monsters. Even Dante's account of Hell would pale beside the scenes the Armenian people endured in those dreadful, horrifying years. Even twenty-five years afterward, my poor mother would often wake in the night, screaming. When we asked why, she answered, "In my dreams I saw those terrible days again."

Along with so many other Armenians and relatives who died on the road of exile, my father lost his parents and his wife. My mother lost her mother, her husband and her child. Unable to endure the sufferings of the journey, my paternal grandmother became gravely ill and could no longer walk. For a time they carried her on an improvised stretcher, but their wasted, exhausted arms could take her no farther. Forced by the Turkish gendarmes, they left her alive in a cave and continued on with the procession of the condemned.

The march passed through Marash, Aintab, Birejik and Suruj.... At that last stopping place my father succeeded, through bribery, in removing his surviving relatives from ^[18] the road of exile, with all its horrors, that led to certain death. From then on, theirs was the precarious life of wandering Kurdish beggars. Concealing their Armenian identity, they roamed the district as Kurdish beggars, afraid to venture farther. Hunger threatened to extinguish the will to survive in those who had escaped death

by a hair's breadth. To my father's bodily suffering was added the anguish of being unable to find a piece of bread for his two motherless children. His ten-year-old son Harutyun cleared stones from a field from dawn until dusk for one hundred grams of bread, although no one could survive on so little. Seeing my father's desperate plight, a miller offered to take his younger son into the mill, where the child might be able to stay alive. The offer plunged my father into torment. What should he do? What decision could he make? After long thought he agreed. When he told the miller, the man handed him two loaves of bread and added:

"So that you won't have given him away for nothing, here are two loaves as payment for your son."

Could a man sell his own child, a boy of only eight? Sell a child already old enough to understand, and for two loaves of bread? Yet for my desperate father, this was the only way to keep his son alive. He took the bread, cursing both the bitter fate of the Armenians and his own.

My father's younger brother Simon had been educated at the American College in Aintab and was regarded as an educated intellectual. He had worked as a teacher. After escaping the danger of deportation in Suruj, [19] he parted from his brothers in search of another means of survival and went from settlement to settlement looking for work. At Derbesiye he came upon the builders of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway, a German undertaking. Seeing his command of several languages and his education, they employed him as an office worker, interpreter and supervisor of the construction laborers. This work saved not only him from starvation and death but, later, his relatives as well.

Word of my uncle's good fortune soon reached my father. As soon as he heard, he went to the miller and demanded his son's return. Then, using every resource and means at his disposal, he made his way to Derbesiye with his children. Asking everywhere, he found the office where his brother worked. He noticed a small window and put his head through it to see whether his brother was inside. Instead, he received a resounding slap and a rebuke laced with curses:

"How many times have I told you not to poke your heads through that window, you animals!"

These insults were followed by another angry voice, but this one was dear and familiar:

"You scoundrel! Who do you think you're slapping? That's my brother!"

Those last words were my uncle's. He had caught sight of his brother's face in an instant. Their meeting was deeply moving, like a reunion of men risen from the dead.

My father was taken on as a supervisor of Kurdish laborers. A short time later, all their surviving relatives came to Derbesiye [20] and were saved from the threat of starvation and death, managing to survive until the end of the war.

In 1918 the First World War ended with the victory of the Entente powers. As one of the victorious Entente countries, France received its share of territories in various lands. Cilicia, too, was placed under its rule. This gave the Cilician Armenians who had miraculously survived deportation and massacre the opportunity to return to their native homes - abandoned, plundered and seized by Turks. Taking advantage of this enticing opportunity, they returned from every direction, hoping their hearths would burn again, smoke would rise from their chimneys, and the interrupted course of life would resume. Eager to build a new life, the survivors of the Genocide set to work rebuilding and creating. Half-ruined houses were repaired, sowing began, churches and schools reopened, new young families were formed, weddings held, births and baptisms celebrated. In a word, life seemed about to return to its former course.

It was during this rebirth of Cilicia that our relatives brought together my widowed mother and my father, who had lost his wife. Their marriage created a new family - our family, the home of my parents. I was the first child born to this newly formed family, on November 24, 1919.^[P020-01] The joy with which the new family greeted my birth did not last long.

The French authorities, who had little interest in the fate of the Armenians, entered into an agreement with ^[21] the great powers and agreed to cede Cilicia to the Kemalist Turks, receiving in exchange the more profitable offer of control over Syria and Lebanon. The Armenians knew nothing of this arrangement until it was already too late. The French wanted to carry out their treacherous decision to withdraw from Cilicia in secret, without telling the Armenians, thus abandoning them to the threat of another massacre and another exile.

At this point I think it may be of interest to relate a story illustrating French duplicity, told by my uncle Panos, who returned from exile in 1925.

When the French occupied Cilicia, a group of young Armenians, including my uncle, asked the French authorities in Adana to give them arms and ammunition so they could take revenge on the Turks. Granting their request, the French "armed" each of them with a rifle and five cartridges. Several hundred strong, this group of naive "fighters," consumed by the desire for revenge, left Adana in high spirits and headed into the countryside. They intended to do to the Turks, with equal brutality, what the Turks had done to the Armenians, and so settle the score. Once they were outside the city, a middle-aged horseman with the appearance of an educated man caught up with them and asked in Armenian:

"Where are you going, boys, so well armed and in such high spirits?"

"To kill Turks, to take our revenge," they answered in unison.

"And do you know how to shoot?" the stranger asked.

^[22] "Of course," they replied together.

"Let's see," said the educated-looking man. From his laden horse he took a chicken whose legs were tied, tossed it a few meters away, and invited them to shoot it.

Several of the young men immediately took up their rifles, aimed and fired at the chicken. Astonishingly, not a single shot hit the target. The would-be avengers were amazed that they could not even kill a tethered chicken, and looked at one another in confusion. They could scarcely believe their eyes. The "intellectual," who was apparently one of the leaders of an Armenian political party, saw their confusion and asked them to follow him to learn the explanation. After a considerable walk toward the nearby mountains, they reached a cave whose entrance was guarded by several armed fedayis.^[P022-01] The cave was large, and the torches burning inside could not illuminate its farthest corners. There the "intellectual" told the young men to open the cartridges the French had given them. It turned out that they were filled with ash instead of gunpowder and could not be used to fire at and hit an enemy.^[P022-02] That was why none of their shots had struck the target.

"Now take our cartridges. They are called 'dum-dum,' and they are deadly." Then, turning to the fedayis, he said:

"Give each man two hundred rounds."

When everyone had received his cartridges, the “intellectual” wished them well on their journey and said:

“Now you can carry out your sacred purpose.”

[23] “Remember your relatives who were butchered, raped, oppressed and bayoneted. When taking revenge, do not listen to the voice of conscience. See that you do not fall behind the Turks. Slaughter them without mercy, so that retribution for what they have done becomes an unforgettable lesson. Good luck, brave men.”

A few days later the Armenian avengers encountered a Turkish band seeking new opportunities for plunder at the instigation of the French. They immediately took up positions, and a fierce exchange of fire began. During a brief lull, someone on the Turkish side shouted:

“Gavurs! [P023-01] We can't tell whether these Franks - the French - are playing games with you or with us. They tell us, ‘The Armenians' cartridges are filled with ash instead of gunpowder,’ but you are firing dum-dum rounds at us! Perhaps they want us to kill one another so the country will be left to them.”

My uncle went on to tell of the exploits they had carried out, which could never match the atrocities committed by the Turks. The Turks had centuries of experience in cruelty without human conscience, while the Armenian avengers were making an inept attempt to resemble them. For this supposed “crime,” the French arrested the young men and hanged several of them. My uncle was among those sentenced to death, but through the intervention of Armenian religious and political figures, his death sentence was commuted to exile and hard labor. He was sent to Algeria, then a French colony. After six years of hard labor there, [24] the French wanted to hand them over to the Turkish authorities, which would have meant certain death for the exiles. Once again senior church leaders intervened, and through their efforts the men were sent to Greece and from there to Syria. When my uncle came to Aleppo from exile, I was six or seven years old.

My uncle told me all this when I stood on the threshold of young adulthood. Through these stories he wanted to prepare the road I would travel in later life. He wanted to teach me not to trust foreigners or believe their “good intentions,” their “sincerity,” their “justice” or their “pro-Armenian sentiments,” but to regard them as lies, hypocrisy and deceit. He would conclude with the Turkish proverb “You have fingernails - scratch your own head,” [P024-01] meaning: never put your trust in outsiders; try to do things yourself.

The prospect of a French withdrawal from Cilicia reawakened the Turks' savage nature, and anti-Armenian disturbances flared up everywhere. The Turks wanted to finish what they had left undone. The Turks of Ekbez and the surrounding area joined in these disturbances. The Armenian population, already tried in the furnace of deportation and massacre, was alarmed by this renewed cruelty. Sensing that new suffering was inevitable, the men capable of bearing arms decided to arm themselves against Turkish attacks. They approached the commander of the French battalion stationed in Ekbez and asked for weapons and ammunition, but met with a categorical refusal. The only remaining course was to go to Dörtöl and obtain arms there. A large group of adult men therefore set off for Dörtöl. The Turks, who were watching the Armenians' movements closely, [25] learned that the men were away and suddenly attacked the Armenian neighborhoods of Ekbez, renewing the massacre, rape, robbery and pillage with fresh fury. Realizing that it could not organize an effective defense, the French battalion stationed in Ekbez somehow managed, on March 28, 1920, to move the surviving Armenian population into the local Catholic monastery, a strong stone building enclosed by walls. At

the same time, they tried to bring in as much food as possible, so the people could eat until a means of rescue was found.

My father had joined the men who went to Dörtyol in search of weapons. Taking my elder brothers, me and a little food, my mother also found refuge inside the monastery. They had barely closed all its entrances when Turkish bashi-bazouk bands surrounded it.^[P025-01] Gunfire struck the monastery from every side. From very close by came the menacing shouts of the Turkish monsters, terrifying the people with threats that they would soon butcher them all. Among the French battalion defending the monastery were Armenian volunteers who had enlisted in the French Army's Armenian Legion to help protect their people. Inside, they organized the defense, mutual assistance and care for the elderly, the wounded, the sick and the children. The longer the unequal fighting continued, the harder life became within the monastery. The people struggled desperately to survive, resisting despair and the threat of starvation.

A French captain directed the defense of the monastery, but before long he was struck by a Turkish bullet and ^[26] killed. His French deputy assumed command. Contact with the outside world was maintained only through military couriers who occasionally made their way in.

The ring of the siege grew tighter. At night the Turks would sometimes creep close enough to throw hand grenades at the monastery. To stop them, a group of Armenian boys slipped out under cover of darkness and lay in ambush for anyone who approached with a grenade. They did not have long to wait. Soon they made out a man in the darkness approaching the monastery with hostile intent. One well-aimed shot from a boy was enough to bring him down. They then stripped the dead Turk of his bloodstained clothes and carried them into the monastery. The next morning they tied the garments to a tall pole like a flag and raised them over the monastery roof for the besiegers to see. In response, the Turks intensified their fire and set the houses in the Armenian neighborhoods ablaze.

It became harder each day for couriers to get through; few reached their destination. In these desperate days, Movses Ter-Galustyan, one of the heroes of the defense of Musa Dagħ, entered the monastery with a group of couriers. He had become an officer in the French Army and had come to assess the condition and endurance of the besieged. He judged the situation grave. Promising to report to the commander-in-chief, he encouraged the defenders to hold firm and went back.

After the collapse of the defense of Marash, the Turkish bands from there also came to join the besiegers of Ekbez, ^[27] whose numbers had already reached several thousand. The besieged, meanwhile, numbered no more than a few hundred. Their situation became catastrophic. Couriers were killed on the road. All contact with the outside world was severed, leaving those inside in a hopeless predicament with no way out. There was no remaining prospect of breaking the tightening ring. The poor people now placed their only hope of deliverance in God's miraculous power. Day and night they prayed to Almighty God to save them.

At first, in their innocence, the people believed the men who had gone to Dörtyol for arms would be able to rescue them. Before long, however, they realized that a handful of men could never break through the siege laid by several thousand monsters.

The only way out was to seek help from the French troops stationed some distance from Ekbez. To ask for help, they had to send a courier out of the monastery at night, across mountain tracks and paths, to find the military camp. The journey would take at least seven or eight hours. Only a nimble, courageous person who knew the country intimately - every track and footpath - could succeed. The commander of the monastery's defense appealed to the people for volunteer couriers. Who could

undertake such a perilous mission? Volunteers did come forward, of course, but the first two who went were killed on the way. Acting as a courier had become tantamount to suicide. Even so, a young man came forward, [28] approached the commander and volunteered for the mission:

“I will go. You can be sure I will reach them.”

The volunteer was Gaspar of the Gharagyozyan family. The boy was known for his extraordinary courage and daring. He knew every bush and rock, every valley and hill in the district, every path and track. The people, too, believed that he alone could carry out this difficult task. Taking the envelope entrusted to him by the military commander, Gaspar left the monastery and disappeared into the darkness. His departure was followed by several agonizing days of waiting and uncertainty. Then suddenly, one morning, a distant roar was heard, terrifying the already overwrought people inside. The roar grew louder. Looking toward it through a crack at the window, the commander joyfully announced that it was a French military airplane. The news filled the besieged with rejoicing. The aircraft's appearance meant that Gaspar had broken through the ring and delivered the letter. Hope of rescue came alive again.

Watching the airplane through cracks in the doors and windows, they saw things like white doves falling from it. One landed very close to the monastery wall; the wind carried the others farther away. Then the sound of the airplane gradually faded. The people waited impatiently for darkness, so they could go out and look for what had fallen.

[29] As soon as darkness fell, the commander instructed several volunteers to slip out carefully and look for the white object, which he thought must be a piece of paper. Half an hour later the volunteers returned with a sheet bearing the words: “Hold out a little longer. We are coming soon to save you.” At once this message transformed the mood of the besieged, who had almost resigned themselves to death. It was as though a condemned man, moments before his execution, had been told he was free. What joy, what tears of happiness! Rejoicing broke out everywhere. Everyone began preparing to leave and take to the road.

Strangely enough, the besiegers' firing slackened the very next day after the airplane appeared. It later emerged that some of the leaflets had fallen among the Turks. After reading them, they sent part of their force to block the advancing rescue troops. This delayed the rescuers, who had to fight fierce battles against the Turkish bashi-bazouks all along the way.

At last they reached the monastery at night. They told the jubilant people to prepare quickly to leave early the next morning, taking only the barest necessities that could be carried by hand. To avoid attracting the enemy's attention, no sound was to be heard along the road. Special care had to be taken with the children, so that no crying or shouting would be heard. On hearing these instructions, my mother put me into a sack and made several holes in it so I would not suffocate. Besides me, she took [30] the bulgur left in a small bag, as food for a time of need. My brothers accompanied her as well.

It was Easter morning in 1920. The entire Christian world was celebrating Christ's resurrection from the dead. After several weeks of siege and a desperate struggle over whether they would live or die, the Armenian people of Ekbez seemed to be rising from the dead as well.[P030-01] The force that had hurried to their rescue consisted almost entirely of volunteers from the Armenian Legion of the French Army. They surrounded the column of civilians on every side to protect them, and slowly and silently left the monastery. As they went, the people cast one last farewell glance at their beloved

Ekbez, leaving behind their homes, their churches and schools, the graves of their loved ones and their sacred places.

For safety they avoided the level road, where an exchange of fire with the Turks could cost more lives. Instead they went over hills and through valleys, around rocks and bushes, along tracks and narrow paths. Their route passed among outcrops of black volcanic granite and basalt.^[P030-02] They moved slowly: not everyone could walk easily on such unfamiliar terrain. There were also wounded and sick people who had to be carried on stretchers.

After a long march along this exhausting route, they reached Meydan Ekbez railway station, which was held by the French. Following a short rest, the Armenians of Ekbez were put into open freight wagons and sent to Adana.

^[31] At that time Adana had a large Armenian population and was still under French military control. On August 4, 1920, the Armenian Republic of Cilicia would be proclaimed under the leadership of Damadian, although the city was surrounded by Turks. The proclaimed republic had an exceedingly brief life: the very next day it was dissolved by order of Colonel Brémond of the French Army. A month later the Armenian Legion, made up of Armenian volunteers serving in the French Army, was also disbanded. The French government, regarded as the Armenians' caring protector, basely abandoned the Cilician Armenians, who had sacrificed more than twenty thousand lives for Cilicia, and began courting the Kemalists. As a result, the Turks devastated Cilicia and its Armenian people scattered across the world. At first they followed the French Army as it withdrew southward into Syria. In the eyes of the trusting people, the army had not yet lost its reputation as a "savior." Later, in Syria and Lebanon, the French colonial rulers would use these Armenian refugees as a counterweight to the Arab peoples' national liberation movements.

During these same years, the First Republic of Armenia was established in Eastern Armenia. It lasted only two years and, unable to withstand Bolshevik pressure, became Soviet Armenia. Thus a new path opened for the liberation and survival of the Armenian people. Unfortunately, the Western countries branded it a modern hell, a "land of lies and crime." Consequently, instead of heading ^[32] toward Soviet Armenia, their homeland, the Armenian refugees looked to countries and corners all over the world in search of life and a future. The overwhelming majority of the surviving Cilician Armenians settled in the Arab countries of the Middle East. My parents, reunited in Adana, took up the wandering refugee's staff for a second time and traveled along the shores of the Mediterranean, hoping to build a new family nest. First they went to the port of Iskenderun, and then to Latakia.

My earliest childhood memories begin in Latakia, when I was about three years old. I remember our white refugee tents. Our tent stood beside a cemetery, which frightened us at night. I understood nothing of it myself; I was frightened by the fear I saw in the grown-ups. At that age I had no conception of time, so I do not know how long we stayed in Latakia. But one memory has remained, deeply impressed on my childhood mind. I had been dressed in a little gown with nothing underneath. One day, as I walked barefoot, my feet suddenly began to burn. Instinctively I sat down at once, only to feel my bottom burning too, and I began to scream. By the time my mother came and picked me up, I must have suffered burns, for I was ill for a long time afterward. The reason I had been burned was that, to bake bread, they had ^[P032-01] ^[33] lit a fire there and then cleared away the embers, but the ground where the fire had burned was still scorching hot. An innocent, unsuspecting child, I had stepped barefoot onto that very spot.

Our next home was the city of Aleppo.

My earliest memories of that city are of a dim basement where I lived with my parents and my brother Tigran, who was about a year old and just beginning to walk. The basement swarmed with mice, which frightened us. They even ventured into our bedding. We had no beds; we slept on bedding spread over the earthen floor. I cannot remember how long we lived there, but I know we were desperately poor. The following incident bears witness to that poverty. It is so deeply impressed on my memory that it might have happened yesterday.

For a dining table we used a round table barely fifteen centimeters high, sitting cross-legged around it to eat. One evening, as we sat down to supper, I noticed a bowl of rice pilaf beside the usual bread and cheese. One of our relatives had brought it to us. Seeing it, I longed with a child's eagerness to taste it, and said, "I want some pilaf." I had scarcely finished speaking when a violent blow struck my head. I fell face-first onto the table, and blood gushed from my nose. It was my father who had struck me. He had never hit me before.

At that age I could not understand the meaning of the blow. I could not enter my father's inner world or grasp how painful it was for him to have other people send food to his table as charity, and then see his child, who knew no food but bread and cheese, [34] suddenly reach for the meal brought to them because they were poor. How deeply this must have hurt a man who had once helped the poor himself, but who now, unemployed and without an income, could not meet his family's most basic needs. Who knows how far he had wandered that day in search of work? After a long, fruitless search, he had come home empty-handed and burdened with worry, only to hear his tiny child's innocent words as if they were a protest against those desperate conditions.

Syria was an Arab country, and its language was Arabic. Arriving there as a refugee, my father knew neither the local language nor the customs and ways of life. The only language he knew was Turkish. He did not even know Armenian. The overwhelming majority of Cilician Armenians spoke Turkish. This was another of our people's tragedies: they had been forbidden to speak their native tongue. How difficult it now was for a man without the language to find work in this foreign country! That slap seemed to be an eruption of everything he had suffered that day. Its impact and its memory were indelibly stamped upon my tender childhood soul. It also strongly influenced my later development as a person, making me more restrained, teaching me to keep my wishes and needs to myself instead of expressing them openly. These traits had both positive and negative effects on my later life. They contributed to my successes and advancement, but often also delayed changes for the better.

Of course I do not remember how long we lived in that basement, [35] but I do remember the house we moved to afterward. This was more like a proper home, and our circumstances had improved. My father was working by then, though I had no idea what he did. Later, when I was older and understood more, I learned that he undertook contracts to supply wood and charcoal.

We were living in this house when an "uncle" appeared among us. He was indeed my mother's brother, Panos, just returned from exile in Algeria.

Our neighborhood was called Hamidiye and lay very close to the Armenian quarter known as the "Camp" or the "Barracks." It was a settlement built by Armenian refugees from Cilicia. The "nests" that served as homes were shacks pieced together from scraps of timber, sheet metal, cardboard and other materials, lacking even the most elementary sanitary provisions. There were no streets, only narrow passages between the huts. One comparatively wider path nevertheless served as the "main street," and even had shops and workshops. Drinking water and water for household use came from several wells dug in the settlement. It was drawn up in buckets, and queues were always forming beside the

wells. The toilets were communal and had no sewers: when a pit filled, it was covered with earth and a new one dug. Passing them, especially in summer, you had to hold your nose tightly against the disgusting stench. The Camp was divided into neighborhoods or sections named after the people's former homes in Cilicia, such as the quarters of those from [36] Aintab, Marash, Kilis, Zeytun and so on.

One day my parents took me to a large wooden building in the Camp. So many people were inside that there was nowhere to sit. Somehow we squeezed onto the end of a bench. My attention was drawn to an older man standing on a raised platform, saying something loudly in Turkish. I understood none of it. After speaking for a long time, he closed his eyes and went on speaking with them shut. As he spoke, the people periodically answered, "Mm..." I did not understand what was happening and studied everyone intently, including my mother, who was joining in the "Mm..." When it was over and we had left the building, I asked her what the exclamation meant. "During prayer they say 'Amen,'" she explained. A few years later I learned that this was a "Portestan" - a Protestant - church, and that my parents belonged to the Armenian Evangelical faith. In Turkey the Evangelicals were called "Portestan" to distinguish them from Apostolic Armenians.

A short while afterward, my mother told me one day that I was six years old now and must go to school. Taking me by the hand, she led me to a small brick room beside the large wooden building in the Camp and enrolled me as a future first-grade pupil. Some time later she brought me back, handed me over to a young woman and left. The young woman took me into a room and began talking to me, but I understood nothing she said. She was speaking Armenian, and I did not know a single Armenian word. Once she realized this, she switched to Turkish, asked my first and last names, and wrote them in a notebook. Then she took me to another small room, where there was an older woman and about [37] twenty children my own age. A mat was spread over the earthen floor, and the children sat on it. The wooden benches we had sat on at church served as desks. The older woman in the room - the teacher - told me to sit in a place behind the first bench. All the pupils spoke Turkish, just as I did, so I immediately felt at home among my classmates.

My first "textbook" was a piece of wood shaped like a table-tennis paddle, with a sheet bearing the Armenian alphabet pasted onto it. My first assignment was to learn the alphabet by heart. The teachers were not trained education specialists. They were women and young ladies who had completed seven years of schooling or, at best, secondary school. Only rarely was there a male teacher. It would have been unreasonable to expect more of a people trying to recover from the sufferings of the Genocide and exile. The centuries of Armenian history are filled with calamity, expulsions, massacres and migrations; yet scarcely has the danger of physical annihilation passed before our people begin thinking of establishing and building a church and a school. The same story was repeating itself in this Arab country. The school offered six years of schooling and was called Bethel. Its principal was Haytos Khoja - that is, Mr. Haytostyan.^[P037-01] The church was the Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church. Although the school was Evangelical, its pupils - or more precisely, their parents - belonged to various denominations.

I have described my first classroom, but to complete the picture I should add that children whose families could afford it, [38] brought cushions from home rather than sitting on the bare mat. During breaks the cushion fights began, and we struck one another over the head with the dusty cushions. So much dust rose that we could not see one another a few meters away. When the teacher came in for the next lesson, she had to leave the door and window open for a long time until the air cleared.

Winters in Aleppo are bitterly cold. It does not snow every winter, but there are severe frosts and the water freezes. On cold days a small mangal - a charcoal brazier - was brought into the classroom for warmth. Sometimes the half-burned charcoal smoldered and gave us all headaches. As a reward, the teacher seated the good pupils nearer the brazier to keep them warmer.

The upper grades held their lessons in the large wooden building used for worship on Sundays. Thick curtains divided it into six classrooms. Since only a curtain separated one class from the next, the lessons disturbed one another. To prevent this, they were conducted in whispers.

The overwhelming majority of the pupils were poor and came to school barefoot. This little verse was very popular in those days:

Splish-splash through the muddy way,
Off to school I go each day.
Father bought no shoes for me,
So barefoot is how I have to be.

We loved to sing it, and it was a great favorite among the pupils.

[39] My father's business was going well, and by the standards of those difficult days our family was fairly comfortable. Compared with the other pupils, I was considered an "aristocrat." My mother dressed me very neatly and put an apron over my clothes, filling its pockets with raisins, walnuts and similar treats. This led other children to rob me, and to beat me if I resisted. I became friends with one of those boys who robbed and beat me, and that friendship has remained unbroken to this day.

Another unforgettable episode belongs to my memories of Bethel School. I was in first or second grade when, one day at noon, all the pupils were assembled in the schoolyard. We waited impatiently to see what would happen. The boy beside me said:

"There's going to be a falaka."

"What's a falaka?" I asked innocently.

"You'll see," he said with his characteristic smirk.

A little later they brought out a boy named Sarkis and tied him to the trunk of the tree in the center of the yard. The boy was notorious at school for his misdeeds. Although he was barely twelve, people spoke of him as an incorrigible criminal. After they tied him to the tree, I watched his face closely. Its chief expression was contempt and indifference toward the punishment awaiting him.

The principal, Mr. Haytostyan, was a powerfully built man of forty or fifty. He came out of his office into the center of the yard, pointed to Sarkis and said:

"This boy is thoroughly insolent, shameless, unruly and disobedient. He defies not only the school's rules but his parents and the order of his home. He runs away not only [P039-01] [40] from school but also from his own home, disappearing for days. Thieves and robbers attract him more than his family, his home, his parents, school or church. He has forgotten God and Jesus and become a servant of Satan. Today, therefore, in front of all of you, he will receive the punishment he deserves: the falaka. Everyone who serves Satan as he does will be punished in the same way."

When he had finished speaking, Haytos Khoja took the broad leather belt he was holding and struck Sarkis with such force that the red fez flew from his own head to the ground. My eyes were fixed on Sarkis's face. It tightened for an instant with the sharp pain of the blow, then resumed its

contemptuous expression. The principal's powerful blows followed one after another, while the boy bore them without complaint. Red patches began appearing on Sarkis's shirt. Suddenly he shouted:

"What right have you to beat me? How can my parents let you beat me? I am a free person and I need no one's help or guardianship. I'll do what I want, however I want..."

Despite Sarkis's protests against the violation of his human rights, the blows continued until the principal was exhausted and Sarkis had fainted.

The boy beside me, affecting an air of knowledge, asked:

"Do you understand now what a falaka is?"

The school's circumstances and school life gradually improved. In the upper grades we now had desks with attached benches. We had no children's toys of any kind. The games the pupils played were chiefly ^[41] limited to marbles, chellik-deyneke, and spinning tops, also called frik. Marbles was the most accessible and widespread game, but it gradually began to take on the character of gambling. We cut little stars from paper and played for them, winning or losing them.

Chellik-deyneke consisted of a short piece of wood sharpened at both ends and a longer stick used to strike it. A spinning top had to be bought, so it was considered a luxury - one beyond the reach of many. The school authorities forbade playing marbles for paper stars, to keep it from turning into a game of chance.

During my first five years at school I was always one of the best pupils, although there was no one at home who knew Armenian and could help me prepare my lessons or do my homework.

These were the years in which I first became acquainted with the Bible, Sunday worship and spiritual instruction. I began to feel a sense of responsibility and to fear the consequences of sin, wrongdoing, disobedience, falsehood and injustice. Of course I committed offenses, but fear of sin always pursued me.

After I completed fifth grade, my parents took me out of Bethel School. I learned the reason indirectly from their conversations: they wanted to send me to a French military school. I do not know why they eventually gave up the idea. I think the proposal originated with my uncle Simon. He worked as chief accountant at the French military hospital in Aleppo, while ^[42] my father held the contract to supply the same hospital with wood and charcoal. The idea had arisen from this close contact with the French military. To this day I do not know why it was never carried out. In any event, I think it was fortunate that I did not receive a military education. Although I greatly admire military discipline and have always aspired to strict discipline in my own life, I am certain I could not have been a military man. For one thing, I lacked the necessary physical toughness; more importantly, I did not like fighting. I avoided needless clashes and preferred a peaceful, quiet life. I would gladly have struggled for a peaceful life. I had opponents, but I did not like having enemies. Given these traits of my character, I do not think I was suited, in those years, to preparation for a military career.

A Wandering Adolescence

[43] I was eleven when the familiar course of my life changed. After I completed fifth grade with high marks, my parents transferred me to another school: the Armenian Evangelical Emmanuel School in Aleppo, in the neighborhood called Muballat. Compared with Bethel, its pupils came from more prosperous and affluent families. I was admitted to sixth grade, the graduating class, while my younger brother Tigran was placed in third grade. This school was much farther from home, and our journey to school grew longer. We went on foot and in groups, so that we would not get lost or come to any harm.

The change of school had a negative effect on my progress. At my old school I had been a leading pupil and, in that setting, a child from a well-to-do family. Here the picture was suddenly reversed. At the old school the children sought my friendship, and I was always surrounded by kindly companions. Here I felt looked down upon. Most of my classmates were the children of doctors, architects and merchants. Their clothes were entirely different from those of the pupils at my former school. They brought toys and writing materials I had never seen before.

The academic demands were different too. Here they were much stricter and more exacting. All my classmates had someone at home to help them prepare their lessons, while I, [44] as before, had no one to help me. All this affected my progress. At Bethel I had been a leading pupil and a favorite of the teachers; here I became an average student, met with indifference by the teachers.

Because the old school was close to home, we had gone home for lunch during the one-hour midday break. The new school was too far away for that. Each morning my mother therefore gave us a parcel of food to eat at noon. It added to the already heavy load of my books, and as the elder brother I had to carry it. We were delighted whenever, instead of the lunch parcel, she gave us a few coins to go to a full shop in the market in the nearby Jdeideh quarter.^[P044-01] Going there in a group and eating full together was a great pleasure. We felt grown-up, able to go to an eating place on our own, without an adult to help or guide us.

I do not know why, but in those years my father changed his line of work. He gave up contracting and opened a cloth shop at Meydan Ekbez station on the Syrian-Turkish border. It was probably more profitable, but there was one drawback: he had to be away from home for long periods. He stayed in Meydan Ekbez, coming home once a month for a few days before going back. The entire burden of the family fell on my mother. My brother Vazgen had been born two years earlier, so there were now three of us brothers.

[45] In those years my brother Yenovk also came from the orphanage on the Greek island of Corfu. Including my brother Harutyun, there were now five children. Yenovk had been taken to the orphanage in 1920 and had lived and been brought up in orphanages for about ten years. There he had learned the pleasant and useful pastime of stamp collecting. I found his stamp album fascinating and alluring. I missed no chance to leaf through it and study it, whether with my brother's permission or behind his back. Before long I too caught the enthusiasm for this educational pastime. With his help I began collecting stamps and arranging them in a homemade album by country, continent and so forth.

Thanks to this hobby, geography and history became my favorite subjects. They were directly connected with stamps, or rather stamps drew on history and geography. For a boy, it was an absorbing, useful and instructive hobby. I collected only stamps that had been used, but later I saw the

pastime take a new direction. Many people collected new, unused stamps, which involved considerable expense. To enlarge a collection, one had to buy new stamps instead of exchanging duplicates as we had done. I continued in my old way, adding to my collection and keeping it until I passed it on to my children. Unfortunately, it did not awaken in them the interest I had hoped for.

But let us return to my childhood.

[46] During the summer holidays, it was customary to send children to a workshop as apprentices to keep them off the streets. For this reason I was sent to a tailor. His shop was on Nelyel Street, not far from our house.^[P046-01] I spent the whole day there, although I did no work beyond sweeping the shop and the pavement outside and bringing water. I felt hurt that they would not entrust me with any real work. I wanted to do something too. I simply watched them and remembered how each task was done. It angered me that they taught me nothing of the trade and used me as a servant. One day I found myself alone in the workshop. Eager to seize the chance to try or do something, I picked up the heavy iron with both hands and, as I had seen the master do, tried to shake out the ashes so the fire inside would not go out. In doing so, I carelessly let the hot iron touch the inside of my right knee. I was wearing short trousers, and the skin immediately rose in a blister, leaving a large burn. Complications followed, and I was bedridden for two months. I missed the beginning of the school year and could not return until a month after classes had started.

In 1931 I completed the six-year Armenian school. Neither my parents nor I could be satisfied with that amount of education. There were three possible paths for further study: a French, American or Arab school. The last was not really considered, since there was no interest in Arabic language and culture, either in our family or in Armenian circles generally. A certain contempt prevailed, a view of the Arabs as a lower, backward ^[47] people. At the Armenian school every subject was taught in Armenian. Because we lived in an Arab country, a few hours of Arabic were compulsory each week. As this was a French colony, several weekly hours of French were compulsory as well. The Evangelical schools, with their orientation toward Aleppo's American College, also devoted a few hours a week to English, alongside Arabic and French.

The American College of Aleppo was the continuation of the college in Aintab. Following the deportations, it had moved to Aleppo, a major center of Armenian population. In Aintab it had been founded for Armenians. At first it continued in the same direction in Aleppo, but gradually its character changed.

As an Evangelical family, we chose the American College for my further education. In 1931 I entered its first class. That year the college stood beside the Homenetmen and Vaspurakan sports grounds. Seeing little twelve-year-old boys like me in our class, the older pupils said, "The college has become a kindergarten."

At first we faced great difficulties. The English we had learned at school was wholly inadequate. We had studied it for two or three hours a week, and as an ordinary foreign language, not a spoken language. At the college, however, every subject was taught in English, and we had to answer our lessons in English too. The obstacle seemed insurmountable. To resolve it, the college administration ^[48] immediately took action. Its principal measure was to require us to speak English during breaks. To enforce this, it used the following system. During the first lesson in the morning, the form teacher secretly gave one pupil a token and instructed him to listen to his classmates' conversations during the breaks. As soon as anyone said even one word in a language other than English, he was to hand the token to that pupil. The new holder then had to listen to the others. Over the day the token passed

through many hands. At the end of lessons, the teacher assembled the children and asked who had it. Once the final holder was identified, he was asked which word had earned him the token and who had given it to him. The questioning continued until the token's whole journey that day had been traced. Everyone who had held it was kept after school and required to write two or three pages repeating the English equivalent of the word they had used because they did not know it in English.

I do not know how sound this method was pedagogically, but if the result is positive, then the method must be right. Properly applied, it soon enabled us to answer our lessons fairly fluently in English.

Several decades later, at an educational conference in Armenia, the discussion turned to the fact that even after ten years of Russian at school and another two years at an institute, most young people still had difficulty speaking it freely. I took the floor and described the method and its results.

[49] Those present greeted it with smirks and called it a “capitalist method for training spies.”

To show just how young and immature we were for college, let me tell the following story. Beside the college playing field a deep, square pit had been dug as the foundations for a new building, each side some ten to fifteen meters long. On days without classes we gathered there to play “war.” We turned the heaps of earth on opposite sides into trenches, took up positions behind them, and began throwing stones at one another - “fighting.” The bleeding would not stop for a long time.[P049-01] To stop it, one of the boys suggested scraping the inside of his leather belt with a knife and putting the scrapings on the wound. We did as he said, the bleeding stopped at once, and we resumed our “war.”

Among my teachers in the first class at college, I remember the French teacher, whose name I cannot recall. He was an Armenian from France who knew no Armenian at all. The only Armenian he knew was the Lord's Prayer, which he loved to recite. I also remember Mr. Matosyan, whose son was in our class and often took me home with him.

There were many books in their house. Nothing interested or attracted me more than books. I loved leafing through them and studying everything within the reach of my knowledge and understanding. Naturally, the pictures in illustrated books were my first object of interest. I also remember the music teacher, Sarkis Kanimyan. He walked with a limp, and we often made fun of his gait. I have never forgotten [50] a slap he gave me. While I was singing in the boys' choir, my changing voice prevented me from singing in tune, and I was rewarded with a slap.

To improve our English, our form teacher was instructed to introduce us to interesting stories and adventures in simplified English in the library. Through these books I first encountered Greek mythology. In the same period I also read in English the wonderful tales of Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, as well as the finest examples from the world's treasury of fairy tales. Through my close relationship with the library, reading became my favorite occupation. I missed no opportunity to read. I read even while eating, and sometimes while walking. I was doing well in my studies, and both my parents and teachers were pleased with me.

I consider it a great misfortune that I never had an Armenian teacher who awakened in me a love of Armenian literature, especially poetry. As a result, I was deprived of the boundless joy of savoring the treasures of our classical literature. I learned a little about literary analysis and entering into the emotions a work expresses only in Armenia, when I was already a grown man, and rather late. The demands of work and supporting a family were so great that little time remained for devotion to literature. I continued reading in that period, but less regularly.

As I have mentioned, my father's work kept him away from home for long periods. He had a cloth [51] shop in Meydan Ekbez, and business was going quite well. Trade there was chiefly with Turks who came from Turkey, crossing the border freely to shop in Meydan Ekbez before returning home. The Turks of our native Ekbez made their purchases at my father's shop.

Meydan Ekbez consisted of a railway station and several stone buildings belonging to the railway company and the customs office, built along the line used by the express train to Istanbul. Behind these buildings stood a few dozen wooden houses and shops. From there the lofty Amanus Mountains rose like an imposing wall. Their highest summit was called Mighir.[P051-01] Behind the station, on the Syrian side, another range was visible, but on a much smaller scale. These mountains were called Kurd Dag, or the Kurdish Mountains. Here and there, Kurdish villages and orchards could be seen on their slopes. Their inhabitants also came to shop in Meydan Ekbez, regarding it as a major commercial center. In their idle hours, the Armenian shopkeepers often mocked these naive and backward villagers, and sometimes played tricks on them simply for amusement.

Meydan Ekbez had one main street running straight from the station to the edge of the village, about one hundred and fifty meters long. Several smaller, shorter streets crossed it. The eating houses and cafés and most of the shops stood on the main street. There was also a large well used by the villagers and those who came to trade. Besides the ordinary shops, [52] the village had a barber's shop - the barber was deaf and unable to speak - a jeweler's workshop, a tailor, a shoemaker and a pharmacy. In summer even a "doctor" came to provide medical care for those who needed it. He was Ogostin Hovnanian, the son of our family physician, Dr. Philip Hovnanian. He was a medical student at the American University of Beirut and came during the summer holidays, working as a doctor and providing useful care to the Armenian and Kurdish population of the district. The young doctor often asked me to help him during minor surgical procedures.

During the summer holidays our whole family went to stay with my father, spending the entire summer there. One of our favorite boyhood pastimes was swimming in the Kara Su River, which formed the border between Turkey and Syria. Sometimes the grown-ups exploded dynamite in the river to catch fish and told us to gather the fish floating belly-up after the blast and throw them ashore. We performed this task with pleasure. One charge killed so many fish that everyone received a share. They were quite large, weighing one or two kilograms.

Summers in Meydan Ekbez were very hot, and mosquitoes were plentiful. Wide cracks opened in the soil of the surrounding fields. There were many kinds of snakes, which sometimes even entered the houses. Not a day passed without our seeing one. Killing snakes was among the heroic deeds of our boyhood, and we did it often, although the grown-ups warned us that snakes took revenge.

[53] All the villagers were armed with military rifles and pistols. Gunfire and killings were common on both sides of the border, so the French authorities permitted everyone to carry arms for self-defense. To us children, weapons belonged to the world of grown-ups, of "men," and we were greatly drawn to them. We missed no chance to carry a weapon or play with a rifle. With a gun in my hands I imagined myself already a grown man. I often went to my uncle's house when he was out, took his Mauser military rifle and played with it, loading cartridges into the magazine and then unloading them, practicing my aim in different positions - lying down, standing, kneeling on one knee, and so on. Of course, I refrained from firing.

One day, while I was occupied in this way at my uncle's house, I suddenly heard his voice:

"Suren, quick! Take the rifle and come outside!"

Sensing agitation in his voice, I was frightened at first, wondering what had happened. Then I gathered myself, picked up the rifle and ran out. My uncle snatched it from my hands and ran toward the open fields. I followed him. A few hundred meters outside the village I saw a group of people staring intently at something. Running up to them, I caught sight of what held their attention and felt as though I had been hypnotized. Two black snakes, each more than a meter and a half long, had raised half their bodies from the ground and were entwining and writhing together in courtship. So absorbed were they ^[54] in their reproductive instinct - or passion - that they took no notice of the people gathered close around them.

It was a remarkably beautiful sight, but this was no time to stand admiring it. My uncle dropped to one knee, aimed and fired. One snake was cut in two; the other froze for an instant in surprise, then slipped into one of the many cracks in the field and disappeared. The severed tail continued to writhe, while the half with the head tried to attack us. The onlookers, now armed with sticks, immediately crushed its head. Until then I had not noticed my brother Tigran among the crowd. He was usually very afraid of snakes. This was his account of what had happened:

He had taken his beloved little goat out into the fields for a walk and to let it graze. While he was busy with the kid, two black snakes chasing one another had shot past his feet. He was so terrified that he could not even shout for help. Neighbors standing at the edge of the village noticed his strange, frightened movements. Realizing something was wrong, they ran to help, calling others as they went. In this way ten or fifteen people had gathered without the amorous snakes noticing them.

Afterward, the grown-ups warned us always to be careful when passing that place: the snake that escaped might take revenge.

At the edge of the village, about a hundred meters from the Turkish border, stood its Armenian school. It was run by Mr. Arsen, who was also its only teacher. In a single classroom, pupils from different ^[55] grades studied together under the same teacher. Although the school lacked the most basic equipment and conditions needed for schooling, it played an important and valuable educational role. Thanks to it, the children who lived permanently in the village did not remain illiterate and uneducated. Despite the wretched conditions, Mr. Arsen succeeded in awakening in them a love of learning, their people and their Armenian identity. Their parents wanted only to keep them from being wholly illiterate: to learn a little reading, writing and arithmetic. Yet the wonderful lessons of Mr. Arsen have remained unforgettable to those who attended that school.

I should like to draw the reader's attention to an incident from those years which left an indelible impression on me as an act of heroism. Samvel Efendi, once one of the wealthy men of Ekbez, came to Meydan Ekbez. He sought a brave and fearless man willing to cross the Turkish border, go to Ekbez, dig up a small chest of silver coins he had buried in the yard of his former house, and bring him its contents. As a reward, he promised half the treasure to whoever retrieved it. Gevorg Kchoyan and Manvel Gasparyan responded to the proposal. Both were young, fearless and daring.

One night Kchoyan secretly left Meydan Ekbez without telling anyone and set off for Ekbez. He knew the paths and tracks well from the days when he had lived there. He arrived around midnight without incident. Fierce barking greeted him, gradually setting off all the village's ^[56] dogs. Fortunately, the Turks, already asleep, paid no attention, and no one came out to discover the cause of the uproar. Kchoyan easily found Samvel Efendi's house and the tree he had described, beside which the treasure was buried. Feeling his way in the dark, he found the exact place and began digging the soft earth with the utmost care and silence. At a depth of about a meter he felt he had reached the chest. Tense

and cautious, he worked it free. Realizing that the chest itself would be too heavy and awkward to carry on the long walk home, he emptied its contents into the sack he had brought and arranged it to carry strapped to his back. Considering his mission accomplished, he set off on the return journey. The lights of Meydan Ekbez guided him through the darkness like the North Star. He arrived at dawn, buried his load outside the village, and only then entered. Before full daylight, he slipped into his house and went to bed.

No one learned anything of this heroic deed until several days later, when Turkish villagers from Ekbez reported that someone had dug in a house's yard during the night and unearthed a treasure, for silver coins were scattered everywhere. By then Kchoyan had already divided the proceeds of his adventurous - or, more accurately, heroic - expedition with the treasure's owner.

During my time at the American College, it moved to the district around Baghdad Station. There were changes in the leadership as well. The new director was Dr. Merrill, assisted by Carlton. After later obtaining a doctorate, Carlton became the college director himself. These [57] are some of the teachers I remember from that period: Mr. Pazgalyan, who taught mathematics, wore a red fez and loved to mock every new development; Mr. Saatchyan, who taught Armenian and liked telling how he had met Yervand Odian; and Mr. Krauser, who taught physical education. I also remember Mr. Dorman. The college authorities planned to build a large campus. They had purchased an extensive tract on a hill at the northern edge of the city, and work on the construction plans had already begun. Unfortunately, I was not destined to enjoy studying in the new buildings.

Although my father was engaged in trade, he was not a businessman by nature. He was excessively honest and incapable of deception. He trusted people's word and integrity, never suspecting cunning or treachery in others. Whenever he sold something, he told the customer the truth about it. My maternal uncles mocked his way of trading: "Doing business like that, you won't merely fail to make money - you'll lose what you already have." My father sold the same goods much more cheaply, yet customers believed the person who deceived and persuaded them more readily than my father's innocent honesty. All this, together with the closing of the Turkish border and the ban on Turks crossing it, led to his bankruptcy. He had sold a great deal on credit to Turkish customers whose route was suddenly cut off. He thus lost, irretrievably, the value of those goods - a considerable sum.

My father's bankruptcy had very distressing consequences for our [58] family, both financially and emotionally. We fell heavily into debt. The familiar pattern of family life had to change at once. To save the rent, our family moved to Meydan Ekbez. It was spring, with several months remaining in the school year. I stayed with my uncle Simon until the end of term. I had no hope of being able to continue my studies the following year. In these circumstances my father could not pay the fees, and I was condemned to leave my education unfinished. My younger brothers, Tigran and Vazgen, met a similar fate, though they attended Mr. Arsen's village school for a time.

When the school year ended, my parents decided to send me to Beirut to stay with my aunt Gyulenyra and learn tailoring. I left for Beirut in 1935. My aunt had spent her girlhood in our home, and we thought of her as our sister. From our home she had gone as a bride to Beirut, marrying an honest and patriotic young man named Sedrak Melkonyan.

[Photograph caption: Beirut, the 1930s. My friends.]

Although the newlyweds lived in a small hut in the Armenian camp in Beirut's Karantina quarter, they welcomed me with open arms. Were I to describe that camp, the picture would be worse than the one I have given of the camp in Aleppo, [59] so I prefer not to describe it. Let me only say that many

families there survived solely by salvaging useful things from the city's rubbish, which was dumped into the sea, and selling them. Misery was everywhere. The circumstances of the relatives who sheltered me were hardly comforting either. Sedrak was a modest, sensible and kindly young man, the son of parents from Sasun, and worked as a shoemaker. Patriotic in his convictions, he was a fervent Dashnak in political allegiance.^[P059-01] His modest income scarcely supported the two of them. Despite their straitened circumstances, they received me as a brother and did everything possible to make me feel at home.

A tailor known to Sedrak, called "Bolshevik Suren," took me on as an apprentice. After I had worked for a time without pay, learning the basic elements of sewing and acquiring some skill, my master began giving me a very small weekly wage. It was so little that it would not even have covered my lunches. The shop was in the city center near Burj Square, in the market quarter called Souk Sursock, four or five kilometers from the Karantina camp. I walked that distance every morning and evening. Going home for lunch was impossible, so each morning my aunt sent me off with a little parcel, usually bread and fried eggplant. My tiny weekly wage remained mine to spend as pocket money.

About a year later, thinking of his children's future, my father decided to move the family to Beirut.

^[60] And so, in 1937, our family moved to that great city.^[P060-01] My father continued to stay in Meydan Ekbez. After about a year in Beirut, our family's difficulties had doubled. I went on working as a tailor, while my brothers attended school. The youngest member of the family was my sister Meline, who was not yet of school age.

Accustomed to life in Aleppo, our family found it difficult to live in this city. Moreover, when we had lived in Aleppo, my father had been able to come home every month and spend a few days attending to our needs and worries. Beirut was too far away and much harder for him to reach. During the whole year he managed to visit us only once. It was true that the families of my uncle Sedrak and my aunts Esther and Gyulenia lived there, along with many other relatives, but they themselves could scarcely earn their daily bread and were burdened with large families. They could do little to help us. Thus, a year after coming to Beirut, we were forced to move back to Aleppo.

The most significant event of my last year in Beirut was an operation on my leg. A bony tumor just above my right knee was removed. It had developed and was gradually growing. Although it did not bother me, the future doctor Ogostin Hovnanian advised me to have it removed before complications arose. He himself took the initiative and succeeded in arranging a free operation at the American University Hospital. The operation went well, but to ^[61] prevent the tumor from growing back, the operated area was irradiated for about three weeks. In those years science was not yet so advanced, and radiation was regarded as harmless. Only four decades later did its terrible consequences make themselves felt. I shall tell of that later.

A year's experience showed that, as long as my father remained in Meydan Ekbez, moving our family to Beirut had been a great mistake. Aleppo was much more suitable, being far nearer his place of work. Compared with Beirut, life there was also much easier, more favorable and more practical. So, after somehow enduring a year of hardship in Beirut, we returned to the city we knew so well.

Our first night back in Aleppo is memorable. With friends' help, we rented a large room on Suleimaniye Street. It was an old house that still had no electricity. By the time we had cleaned the room and settled in, it was dark. The only way to light it was to obtain and light a kerosene lamp, which we did. We ate supper by its light. Since the surroundings were new and strange, and the neighborhood and its people still unfamiliar and therefore suspect, we decided not to extinguish the

lamp at bedtime. Instead we lowered the wick a little and went to sleep in its dim light. We spread our bedding on the floor, firmly closed every window for safety, and lay down. Toward dawn I woke to the sound of groaning, with a severe headache and nausea. My mother was the one groaning. I called to her and [62] asked why. She said her head ached and she felt sick. Our voices woke my brothers and sister too. My mother said we had probably been poisoned by the fumes from the lamp's lowered wick. Then she added:

"If you can, one of you open the window."

I tried to rise but immediately grew dizzy and fell. Seeing this, Tigran tried to get up and fell as well. Then I crawled to the window and somehow opened both shutters. Fresh air rushed in, and with it, it seemed, new life. Of course we still could not get up at once. We lay there for several hours until daylight. Only when we rose that morning did we understand the mortal danger we had escaped. In fact, our whole family had been saved from certain death by poisoning.

After living carefully in that house for a month or two, to ensure the same thing did not happen again, we moved to another home, on the second floor of a three-story building. It was a good place. Best of all, the family of my childhood friends - or, more precisely, part of it - also lived there. Three brothers and a sister from the Panjarjyan family lived in the house. Their father and stepmother, with their younger children, were in Ras al-Ayn in northeastern Syria. The three brothers, Nubar, Aram and Suren, worked on Bustan Kleb Street near Aleppo's Bab al-Faraj Square, an area known for its automobile repair shops. Nubar and Suren were mechanics, while Aram was a lathe operator. Although Aram and I were the same age, I was closer to Nubar, and together we began the adventures of the passage from boyhood to [63] young manhood. Those were blessed years: full of dreams and optimistic plans for the future, an age of overestimating our strength and abilities, of feeling all-powerful, of fantasies wrapped in bold but impossible allurements. Our warm friendship grew so strong that it survived life's countless trials unbroken. Our bond with the Panjarjyan family has traveled a road of sixty-five years and remains firm and intact.

In Aleppo, Tigran and I both worked as tailors. Tigran worked for an Armenian, and I for a Christian Arab. My workshop was on Tilel Street. There were no other workers besides the master and me. My master loved praising himself, especially his skill as a cutter. As a young man he had emigrated to Venezuela and lived in its capital, Caracas, where he learned the cutting techniques he praised so often. He would frequently repeat:

"There is no cutter in this city to match me. My method can be adapted to every kind of body. I learned tailoring from the finest master in Caracas."

He had plenty of customers, but he was lazy and disliked work. He spent the whole day in the café next door, leaving the workshop entirely in my charge. Sometimes, when a customer came for a fitting and the necessary adjustments, I went to fetch him from the café. He did not want to come and entrusted even this responsible task to me.

[64] Working under these conditions helped me make considerable progress in mastering the trade. I had learned all the secrets of sewing clothes and could readily make trousers, suits and overcoats. The only thing I did not know was cutting. Cutting was never taught freely. To learn it one had to pay a large sum, in cash. This was a principle accepted throughout the trade.

Taking advantage of my master's constant absence, I decided to teach myself cutting - and specifically the method he praised so highly. When he took a customer's measurements, he entered them in a

ledger, then used them to cut the cloth and handed it to me to sew and prepare for fitting, while he went off to the café. In his absence I began comparing the recorded measurements with the pieces he had cut, looking for the principles and rules behind them. Before long my investigations bore fruit. "Eureka!" I had found it. This was a great success and a great joy, but I still needed to test whether my discovery was correct.

Late on Holy Saturday before Easter - or, more precisely, after midnight - my master and I were still at work, trying to finish the clothes promised for the next day. I was pressing completed suits, while the master drank arak and did some light work. After a while, perhaps feeling a pang of conscience, he turned to me:

"Suren, you're worn out. Let me do some of the pressing, and you rest."

He rose, took the iron from my hand and began [65] pressing. Seeing a chance to test the cutting method I had discovered, I took a large sheet of paper and drew a pattern for a man's suit on the second table beside us. When I finished, I showed it to the master and asked whether it was correct. At first he gave it an indifferent glance; then he suddenly became serious and examined it closely. I sensed his displeasure. When he had finished studying it, he said:

"The pattern is correct. This is my cutting method. Where did you get it?"

My innocent explanation infuriated him and led to my dismissal. After a short pause he gave me my week's wages and told me not to come back on Monday.

This incident gave me the occasion to leave tailoring, which I had come to hate, once and for all. I swore never to put a tailor's thimble on my finger again. I was unemployed. I did not look for tailoring work and had no hope of any other job. My desire was to continue my education, but for the time being that was impossible. For a while I wandered about without work.

My father remained in Meydan Ekbez, running his shop, this time with someone else's capital. He had hernias on both sides and suffered greatly from them. The severe pain interfered with his work, and he needed surgery. My idleness provided an opportunity for him to have the operation in Aleppo while I took his place in the shop. He suggested that I come to Meydan Ekbez and spend some time learning the details of his work before the operation, [66] so he could leave the shop in my hands and go to Aleppo for surgery.

Among the Kurdish tribes of northern Syria, the so-called "Murid" movement had begun. [P066-01] In character it appeared nationalist. Its leaders incited the Kurdish people against both the French colonial rulers and Arab nationalists, while also arming them. After this movement, resembling an uprising, had continued for several years, it emerged that those behind it were Turkish intelligence operatives. Having easily acquired the Sanjak region, the Turks' appetite had grown, and through this movement they wanted, in the name of the Kurds, to carve more territory out of Syria and attach it to Turkey.

When I went to Meydan Ekbez to take my father's place, the Murid movement had reached its height. Not a day passed without the sound of gunfire from the Kurdish districts. Despite the tension in the region, the people of Meydan Ekbez were not yet in danger.

A few words about my father's work and the nature of trade in Meydan Ekbez generally. Most of the business was with smugglers from Turkey who slipped across the Turkish border under cover of darkness, made their purchases from Armenian shopkeepers, and stole back into Turkey. It was an

extremely dangerous occupation. Turkish border guards lay in ambush at the crossing points and, when they encountered smugglers, killed them on the spot without trial. Every night exchanges of gunfire could be heard from the Turkish border districts. The Turkish border [67] guards sent spies into Meydan Ekbez to find out which districts the smugglers came from and lie in wait along their routes home.

The smugglers were armed too, and the exchanges of fire often lasted a long time, taking lives on both sides. They were forbidden to enter Syria with weapons, so before coming to us they buried their arms in a safe place near the border on the Turkish side. On the way back they retrieved them and continued home armed. The dangers of smuggling were enormous, but the prospect of selling their purchases for ten times the price, and their hunger for profit, made the risks seem smaller.

The smugglers arrived after dark. We crowded them into a small room behind the shop, set aside for them, where they slept and rested until morning. Only after waking and eating their favorite breakfast - bread broken into sugar water - did they begin trading. Business was conducted behind closed doors, so the spies could not see them.

I should like to relate one of many similar incidents from my trading days in Meydan Ekbez.

Like all the shops there, ours was built of wood and divided into two parts. One was the shop itself, with shelves of various fabrics, clothing, footwear, perfumes and other goods. I traded there by day and slept there at night. Beside it was another wooden room reserved for customers. I received them there, and they slept on mats spread on the ground. During the day we moved into the shop [68] to do business. When their purchases were complete, we tied the goods into bundles that could be carried like backpacks. At departure we fastened these securely to their backs, making it easier to walk and leaving their hands free to use their weapons.

One night I woke to loud knocking on the door of the room behind the shop and heard my father's name being called. I immediately got up and went to open it, armed with a pistol and a battery torch. In the beam I saw unfamiliar faces. Startled, they asked whether this was Iskender's shop. When I said it was, they asked who I was. Learning that I was Iskender's son, they came in confidently. They were rough, half-wild men, speaking a Turkish dialect characteristic of backward districts and seasoning their sentences with curses. I spread some empty sacks over the mat on the floor and told them to lie down until morning. There were eight of them. Although my father trusted them, I kept my pistol ready for anything unexpected. After all, they were Turks, and trusting them was not considered wise.

When they woke in the morning, their first demand was for sugar and bread, which I had prepared beforehand. They ate the bread soaked in sugar water with loud smacking and cheerful exclamations. When they were satisfied, we went into the shop to begin trading. First they asked my name. On hearing it, they complained in annoyance that it was terribly difficult. They struggled to pronounce or remember it.

My customers were thirty to thirty-five years old, with one exception.

[69] That man was about fifty and had no money. Instead he had brought his wife's gold jewelry to sell and make his purchases with the proceeds. He asked me to take it to the jeweler and sell it. The jewelry did not bring a large sum - barely half what his companions had brought - but he was satisfied.

Trading began behind closed doors and lasted almost the entire day. While we worked, the men frequently went to the cracks in the shop door to examine the people passing in the street and see whether anyone resembling a spy was about.

When we finished, I tied each man's purchases into a backpack-like bundle, gave each a small gift and sent them into the room at the back. There they deliberated and argued for a long time over when to set out. Some proposed leaving after midnight; others insisted on an earlier departure. Some even suggested waiting until the next day. One man offered to go into the street and discreetly look for anyone from their villages who might be a spy. With everyone's agreement he went out, but soon returned in agitation, reporting that he had seen Hussein from such-and-such a village. Hussein could only be there to spy. Another argument followed, and in the end they decided to leave early, believing the spy would expect them to depart after midnight.

It was already dark, and I prepared to see them off. Armed with my inseparable pistol and battery torch, I led them along the road toward the border, [70] beyond the village, stopping about a hundred meters short of the frontier. I wished them good luck and a safe crossing and sent them on their way. After they had gone, I decided to stay a while, listening as the sound of their footsteps gradually receded. It was a night of full moon. The mountains stood out clearly on the horizon, and one could see quite far. In the stillness even the smallest rustle was audible. Everything seemed mysterious.

My customers had told me they had buried their weapons on the bank of a little stream near the border. I strained my ears, hoping perhaps to hear them digging up the arms. Suddenly shouts erupted, followed by the flashes and reports of gunfire. I could clearly hear: "Don't move or I'll kill you!" "Get the rifles out!" "Shoot!" "Ah!" The cries mingled with the gunshots and the pounding feet of running men. I cannot say how long the confusion lasted; I was too absorbed and agitated as I followed this drama in the night. Stone silence suddenly succeeded the tumult, and darkness and stillness seemed at once to conceal everything that had happened only minutes before. Still I was in no hurry to leave. I waited, thinking my trapped customers might return this way. Time passed, but they did not appear. Realizing that waiting was useless, I went back to the village. Near our shop, the neighbors told me a group of men had come to the room at the back asking for "Suryal." I immediately understood that these were the customers I had seen off and ran to the shop. There they were, huddled in fear behind it. I opened the door, [71] let them in, lit the lamp and saw that there were seven. The older man was missing. When I asked why, they said he had been killed. In reply to my questions about what had happened at the border, they said:

"That Hussein had followed us on the way here and even seen where we hid our weapons. When we went back for them, he and four soldiers were lying in ambush at that very spot. As we approached, they attacked. We barely managed to get out one pistol and kill one of them. But our Mustafa" - that was the older man's name - "was killed by the first shot. At least we managed to escape without losing our loads."

After another discussion, they decided to leave after midnight and cross at an entirely different place. I saw them off again and waited a long time. Hearing nothing from the border, I concluded that they had crossed safely. How they later entered their village and what happened to them, I cannot say. I can only suppose they were caught there and imprisoned.

I had another memorable experience while standing in for my father. It involved an attack on our village by the Kurdish Murids. Before telling it, I must describe how the men spent their evenings in Meydan Ekbez. Almost all of them passed the evening in the cafés and eating houses. After dinner and

several glasses of arak, they played backgammon or cards. Those addicted to gambling played for money. Usually they played poker, giving the gambling a more pleasurable, sociable form. When their passions rose too high, poker gave way ^[72] to basma. This was a very simple game based entirely on luck, but one could win or lose a great deal in a short time.

Usually four people began playing, but the number gradually grew. The spectators outnumbered the players, and several groups gathered around tables in the café.

Although I was still young, I too often spent my evenings in such company as a spectator.

It was just such an ordinary evening. After dinner I was sitting in the station buffet, closely watching the gamblers around a table. Before each player lay a pile of the money he had brought to the game and currently possessed. Among the piles one could make out large-denomination banknotes and yellow gold coins. The café was crowded. There were also Algerian soldiers from the French Army, who had arrived a week earlier to protect us against possible Kurdish attacks.

At about nine that evening, a soldier came in and whispered something to the soldiers inside. They all went out and disappeared. Around the gaming table passions were mounting. The money staked on the current game in the center had gradually grown into a great heap, a considerable sum. Not only the players themselves but innocent spectators like me were caught up in the excitement. We could neither contain nor conceal the turmoil the daring game aroused in us. At the very height of this tense moment, deafening gunfire suddenly crackled. Shots came from every direction.

^[73] For a moment pandemonium broke out inside. Tables and chairs overturned. Someone shot out the large, brilliantly burning lamp that lit the room, and everything was plunged into darkness. Only the flashes of gunfire could be seen. I had seen war only on cinema screens. I was utterly inexperienced and helpless in such a situation and did not know what to do. I reasoned that to avoid the bullets I should first lie flat on the ground.

The firing continued with the same fury, joined by the rattle of machine guns. It seemed that the village was surrounded and being fired on at close range. Lying on the ground, I realized that the café's wooden walls offered no protection. I decided to crawl into the brick kitchen. It was built of mud bricks, which the bullets could not penetrate. Feeling my way, I crawled toward it, only to find that experienced adults had already crowded inside and there was no room to enter. I had to turn back. I decided to leave the café and seek refuge in the station's stone buildings, ten or fifteen meters away. To reach them I had to cross that open, unprotected space. Sometimes crawling, sometimes running under the continuing fire, I reached the station building. I entered the communications office, where several railwaymen were trying to contact a nearby station or headquarters by telephone or telegraph to report the situation and ask for help. Every attempt failed: the attacking Kurds had cut all the lines beforehand. Considering the station the safest place, I stayed there until the gunfire ^[74] had completely ended. It lasted about an hour and a half. The victors in that brief military action were the Algerian soldiers of the French Army. With fierce and bold machine-gun fire, they silenced the Kurdish raiders and put them to flight.

The attackers had gone, but the villagers were deeply shaken. Some were wounded, and they feared another attack. It was decided to move the population into the station buildings. All the men armed themselves. Guard posts were assigned and night watches arranged. I too was included among the armed guards. I considered it a great honor to be treated as a grown man. It felt as though I were crossing the boundary of boyhood and entering young adulthood. Everything resembled a state of military emergency, organized by experienced adults. My night watch passed without incident; to me

it was interesting and full of responsibility. When the posts were inspected toward dawn, they found me awake and alert and praised me, saying that I could be trusted with even more responsible duties.

When daylight came, it emerged that several people had been slightly wounded in the night's "war," but there were no serious injuries or deaths among us. We went to examine the attackers' positions. Spent cartridge cases lay scattered everywhere. In various places we saw bloodstains, sometimes pooled and clotted. I think the soldiers' machine-gun fire had not been in vain.

The following day, a few hours before sunset, we heard the loud roar of aircraft and all came out, [75] looking toward the sound. An extraordinary sight opened before us: thirteen French military biplanes - the kind of warplanes used in those years - were heading toward the Kurdish villages of Kurd Dagħ. Reaching them, they began dropping bombs. I believe these were punitive strikes in response to the previous day's Kurdish attack. To me the spectacle was fascinating and exciting. I had seen war and aerial bombing only on a cinema screen; now I was witnessing a real bombardment, from the air at that. The political objectives and interpretations of the events did not interest me at all. In those years I was simply a naive seeker of adventure, watching everything for whatever excitement I could find. The bombs were small and were probably dropped by hand by the pilot, yet each explosion raised clouds of dust. The sound reached us only after a considerable delay, for the villages were ten or fifteen kilometers away. Hearing of these events, my father did not wait to recover fully. The very next day he came to the village and sent me back to Aleppo, saying:

"My son, go home. This is no place for you."

Finding My Way in Youth

[76] Back in Aleppo, the dull, uninteresting days of unemployment and aimless wandering began again. I spent most of my time reading, devouring anything that came into my hands - in Armenian, French, English and even Turkish. My brother Tigran was working in a tailor's shop. He was passionately fond of cinema and missed no film, making a point of seeing everything shown in Aleppo. At the same time, he eagerly sought every scrap of information about actors. Our home became a reading room full of illustrated magazines about films and film stars. He spent all his pocket money on the cinema and magazines, usually in English or French, though Turkish magazines were also sold. We both read them all.

I read a great many adventure novels, swallowing them "in one breath." Sometimes I read a book of five or six hundred pages in a single day. My favorites then included Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, *Ninety-Three* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*; Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Lady of the Camellias* and *Twenty Years After*; [P076-01] Raffi's *The Fool*, *The Cross-Stealer's Memoir* and *Samvel*; Tserents's *Theodoros Rshtuni*, and others....

Summers in Aleppo are hot, and many people sleep on the roofs during those months, which is very pleasant. Sometimes I became so absorbed in a book that I continued reading on the roof at night by the brilliant light of the full [77] moon.

Besides reading, a new occupation appeared: my attempts to teach myself the mandolin, to which I devoted a great deal of time. It began with a mandolin at my uncle's house. Whenever I visited, I picked it up and tried to play familiar tunes. Noticing my interest, they gave it to me. A new world opened before me - the fascinating, pleasurable and moving world of sound and music. At the time I could not imagine that this would be the first key to unlock the door to my later successes. I took up the instrument and, without anyone's help, sat for hours trying to play a familiar melody, searching endlessly for the right places for my fingers. It was like groping in the dark. From my college years I knew the rudiments of musical notation, but I could not see how to locate those notes on the instrument. My attempts on my own came to nothing. I concluded that I needed a specialist - a teacher - to help me master the fundamental elements. When I approached a well-known instructor, however, the fee he asked for each lesson was more than I could afford. Resorting to a little cunning, I agreed to his terms and, during the very first lesson, managed to obtain precisely what I needed: the finger positions corresponding to the notes. I paid for that lesson and did not return. Thanks to that one session, my independent practice became more effective and interesting. Gradually I acquired [78] a playing technique, and before long I could play freely, accurately work out written tunes from the notation, and play and sing them.

Our neighbors in the house were the Panjarjyan family, whom I have already mentioned. I had befriended their children back at the camp school. After a ten-year interruption, that friendship was not merely renewed but grew so close and strong that it became a lifelong bond. I was closest to Nubar, who was two years older than I. We took the first daring steps of young manhood together. He would slip away from his younger brothers and always seek my company.

While we occupied ourselves with trifles, dizzying events were unfolding in international politics. The danger of another world war had gathered like black clouds over Europe. The Spanish Civil War had scarcely ended when new acts of aggression began, not only in Europe but in Africa and Asia as well.

Hitler's Germany had already swallowed Austria, the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia, and was now baring its predatory teeth at Poland, demanding the Danzig corridor. Italy had seized Ethiopia; in the East, Japan had seized Manchuria. These events were far from Aleppo and seemed to have nothing to do with us. Yet tension among the people kept rising, since they were driving prices up and making life more difficult. The newsreels shown before the main films in the cinemas displayed the French defensive works along the German border, [79] praising the strength and impregnability of the Maginot Line. Believing it invulnerable, France was not greatly troubled by the growing military power of Nazi Germany. It felt secure and strong against the possibility of attack by its age-old enemy.

Watching all this, I too, as a resident of a French colony, felt safe and thought of no danger. That was why, unwilling to miss out on the adventures of war, I even tried to enlist in the French Army.

One day I met school friends in the street who, like me, were unemployed. They told me they had decided to enlist and were on their way to the barracks, and invited me to join them. Without hesitation or asking my parents, I went along. We were accepted without difficulty. They merely tested our French and, after a brief medical examination, pronounced the results satisfactory and told us to return the next day with our identity papers.

When I came home and told my mother - my father was out of town - she was horrified and raised a tremendous outcry. She said she would summon my uncles, and my father from out of town, to stop me from joining the army. Then she added, "I have hidden your identity papers in such a secret place that you will never find them." I felt deeply insulted that they should treat a grown man like a child. Furious, I left the house and did not return all day, until late that night, [80] causing my mother great anxiety and distress.

Looking back across the years and recalling that day, which I then considered so humiliating and tragic, I now understand the fateful mistake from which my dear, precious mother saved me. What a fool I was to contemplate a step that, at that age, seemed so exciting and adventurous! Most of the schoolmates who enlisted then died in the battles of North Africa.

On September 1, 1939, the whole world was shaken by the dreadful news that Hitler's troops had invaded Poland, the signal of the approaching war. Until then the German aggressors had taken many countries without bloodshed or with only slight resistance. This time they attacked Poland with the full might of the Wehrmacht. The newspapers printed the ominous, terrifying word "WAR" in heavy black type across their front pages. The radio and every other means of communication announced: "All Poland is being bombarded from the air and on the ground"; "The capital, Warsaw, is in flames"; "The Poles resist resolutely against an enemy superior in many respects"; "Fierce battles rage across the whole of Poland," and so forth.

People followed these reports anxiously and predicted what might happen next. Everyone became a military commentator. The first consequence of war was a doubling of food prices. Two days later, fresh news threw the city into turmoil: Britain and France had declared war on Germany. This meant that military operations would [81] spread throughout Europe. Since Syria was a French colony, we felt the unwelcome consequences that very day. The army requisitioned all radios, horses, mules, and motor vehicles, as well as certain buildings and hospitals.

Although military service was not yet compulsory, every day people expected the young men to be rounded up and conscripted. All parents with adult sons were frightened and searched feverishly for ways to save their children. Among the relatives in our family, I alone faced this danger. I thought the

parents' fears were unnecessary: I still saw participation in the war only in terms of adventure and romance. As in the films, it was the beauty and romance of it that attracted me.

Food prices rose so high that the government introduced a ration-coupon system. With these coupons, food could be bought at much more reasonable prices. At first, most people were reluctant to use them because the food supplied through the system was of poorer quality.

I do not know by what means, or through whose intervention, my father found a way to spare me from possible military service. It was early November of that same year when he suggested that I go to the *Électricité d'Alep* power company in Aleppo and apply for a job. When I arrived, they asked me to write my application in French. I did so and handed it in. After testing my handwriting and command of the language, they gave me a sheet of paper on which [82] four-digit numbers were arranged in ten columns. They asked me to add them both horizontally and vertically, so that the totals could be checked against one another. I had to do it mentally, without a calculating machine. Arithmetic had always been my best subject at school, and the task presented little difficulty. I finished quickly and handed the sheet to the French engineer to be checked. After looking it over, he told me I had been hired.

My father's purpose in having me employed there was to remove the danger of conscription. The power company was French and was considered a military installation; its employees were not liable to be called up.

When I reported for work the next morning, I was sent to the archive room in the basement, where all the company's customer records were kept. They explained the filing system and asked me to sort and arrange the folders that had been scattered about and thrown into disorder for a long time. The archive room, its walls, its shelves, and its door were all made of iron, as a protection against fire.

After completing the assigned work in three days, I reported to my superior, the French engineer. He checked what I had done and found it satisfactory. When I asked for another assignment, he told me that, for the present, I was in charge of the archive and responsible for it. Until I was given further work, I was to look after the records, keep everything in good order and clean, find any folders that were requested, and deliver them promptly to the appropriate place, while [83] putting returned folders back in their places at once. The work resembled running a library.

The archive took up no more than an hour a day, and I was entirely free to spend the rest of the time as I wished. At first I devoted my free time to reading. But then I thought that if anyone noticed, I might be reprimanded or dismissed. So I began looking for ways to find something new to do. I decided to compile monthly statistics showing changes in the number of the company's customers, whether increases or decreases. The company supplied the city with electricity and drinking water, and also operated the regular tram service. Its customers fell into these three groups. I had no experience of compiling statistics, but after several unsuccessful attempts I settled on a method of drawing statistical graphs that seemed to give a more accurate picture of the changes in customer numbers for each month.

Five months had passed since I was hired when I drew my first graph, using pencils of different colors, and presented it to the chief engineer. He examined it with interest, then asked me to leave it with him so he could study it more closely. Two days later he called me in and said, "You have prepared a very interesting and useful graph. I did not know you had these abilities. From now on, please prepare one every month, and at the end of each quarter, make a graph comparing it with previous quarters."

I carried out this assignment conscientiously and on time. I enjoyed work of this kind. It not only [84] gave me no fatigue but brought me pleasure. I believe it was because I distinguished myself in this work that I soon received a promotion and a pay rise. I was transferred to the customer department, where my main task would be dealing with customers.

This work brought me into contact with people from different social groups and different nationalities. I needed to speak not only Arabic or French but other languages as well, depending on the nationality of the person before me. It should be said that in those years Aleppo was a city of many peoples.

Aleppo has a history stretching back four thousand years. According to tradition, Abraham, the forefather of the Arabs, milked his flocks here, and the origin of the city's name is associated with the word "halib," meaning milk, and with that tradition. Aleppo is mentioned even in Shakespeare's Othello. Founded approximately four thousand years ago, it became a stopping place and trading center for caravans traveling from east to west. The khans, or caravan inns, and the covered market that served as a center of trade have survived to this day.[P084-01]

The city lies on a plain some four to five hundred meters above sea level. The climate is generally mild, though freezing winters and hot summers also frequently visit this city of medieval character.

The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim Arab. There are also large numbers of Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, Druze, Turks, and Jews. Each people has its own quarter. For example, [85] the Armenian neighborhoods covered enormous areas and had names of their own: Nor Gyugh, Ajur Tarlasi, Bostan Pasha, Khortlakh Dag, Bolshnik Dag, and others.[P085-01] There were also Assyrian and Jewish quarters. Aleppo was distinguished by its markets, each concentrating on a particular trade: goldsmiths, coppersmiths, ironworkers, silk, textiles, grain, and so on. Crafts flourished, especially jewelry making, textiles, pottery, and mother-of-pearl work. The city was also known for its grain, butter, and cheese.

Throughout its history, the city was conquered by Egyptians, Persians, Mongols, Crusaders, Turks, and also Armenians, in the reign of Tigran the Great.

In 540 the Persians razed the city to the ground. Its rebuilding began in the tenth century, and it became an important center of commerce. Anyone entering Aleppo is struck by its great medieval citadel, which played an important part during the Crusades. Another outstanding historical monument is the Great Mosque, also called the Mosque of Zechariah. It was built in 715. According to tradition, it was built over the tomb of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and is named for him. The Turks ruled the city from 1516 to 1920.[P085-02]

At work I associated with colleagues from different peoples and communities. My close circle included not only Armenians but Christian and Muslim Arabs, Greeks, Jews, and others. One of my friends was a son of the Neyel family, one of the city's wealthy families. A street in the city bore their name. His name was Fakhri Neyel.[P085-03]

[86] He loved a lavish, extravagant life of pleasure, eating, and drinking. He spent without restraint and was always in debt. On payday, after paying his debts and the interest on them, he had barely a third of his salary left, though our salaries were enough to support a family. He would spend the remainder in two or three days and then turn once more to the moneylenders to borrow at interest. One day I asked him why he worked. What need had he to work when his father was wealthy, owned many properties, and had a large income? His answer was quite convincing and logical.

"My father is rich and clever. This is how he sees it: if I work, I will be occupied for most of the day and will have no opportunity to spend money. Besides, since some of what I spend comes to me as a salary, I will squeeze less money out of him. That is the point of my working."

Fakhri did not want to deny himself a single pleasure, and he would stop at nothing to obtain what he wanted, even a dishonorable act. Let me give an example. One day he came up to me and said that one of the Arab world's famous female singers had arrived on tour. He was determined to attend her concert and asked whether I had enough money for us to go together. Then he added, "If you don't want to come, lend me the money so I can go." When I rejected both suggestions, saying I had no money, he seemed to have anticipated that answer and immediately made another proposal. He would collect charitable donations from our colleagues on the pretext of helping a sick young student, and use the money to fulfill his [87] wish. This proposal was not only dishonest but against my conscience, and I flatly refused to take any part in such a heartless fraud. He, however, prepared a letter appealing for charity, collected a substantial sum, and satisfied his insatiable desire. The next day he reproached me: by refusing to cooperate, he said, I had missed a great pleasure.

At heart this young man was kind, but he had been brought up to expect every whim to be fulfilled. From childhood he had grown up extravagant, spoiled, and fond of a life of indulgence. It was enough for him to want something; it simply had to happen.

Despite our closeness, after this last incident I gradually withdrew from a friendship that seemed dangerous and without a future for me, putting some distance between us.

It was during this period that, at my mother's urging, I began attending the Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church near our home on Sunday mornings. There I met several old friends whom I had known at the school in the Camp. It was the third Sunday I had gone to church. There was still some time before the service, and people were gathered outside the door, talking. Among them I noticed Hovhannes Aharonyan, the brother of Gersam Aharonyan. He told us that Germany had attacked the Soviet Union and a new front had opened, stretching from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean. It was Sunday morning, June 22, 1941. Hitler, committing his greatest mistake and seeking to carry out his greatest feat of conquest, had attacked his short-lived ally, the Soviet Union.[P087-01]

[88] By this very act he began digging his own grave. The news shook the whole world. About a year before these events, as a consequence of the signing of the German-Soviet pact, Syria and Lebanon had become a center for the concentration of Allied forces, especially French troops. Soldiers swarmed everywhere. In the streets, shops, and cinemas, most of the crowds were in military uniform. Much later we learned that this concentration of troops had been preparing an attack on the Soviet Union through the Caucasus. The plan was never carried out; the troops were gradually transferred elsewhere, and life returned to its former normal course. Germany's attack on the Soviet Union was followed by events that drew the Middle East, and Syria and Lebanon in particular, into the fighting.[P088-01]

France had been occupied by German troops, and Marshal Pétain, appointed as the country's new leader, was pursuing a treacherous policy of collaboration with, and submission to, Hitler. French people outside France had formed a government in exile headed by General de Gaulle. As a result, the French authorities in Syria and Lebanon split into two camps. Some wanted to obey the authorities in their homeland, while others regarded Pétain as a traitor and sympathized with de Gaulle's government and his forces of liberation. The latter enjoyed the support and military alliance of the Allies, especially Britain. The division between Pétain's supporters and de Gaulle's led to military [89]

operations that grew into a real war. Gaullist and British forces began advancing from Palestine toward Lebanon and Syria, where the colonial authorities were subject to Pétain's government. The latter put up serious resistance. Newspapers even carried cartoons and articles claiming that before the Gaullists could conquer Syria and Lebanon, German troops would conquer all of Russia with their lightning offensive.

The fighting in the Middle East had not yet reached our city, and we continued to feel safe. It was summer. My cousin Abraham, my paternal aunt's son, and I slept on the roof of our three-story building. One night a tremendous explosion woke us. We saw bombs falling on different parts of the city. The terrifying roar of aircraft filled the air. The crack of antiaircraft guns made the scene still more dreadful. Fires where the bombs had fallen reddened the sky and the whole horizon. Powerful searchlights swept the heavens, seeking the bombers so that the antiaircraft guns could destroy them. This was very different from the bombardments we had seen on cinema screens. It was real and threatening. Frightened, we had to leave the roof, for we were in danger not only from bombs but also from fragments of antiaircraft shells. I was twenty-two, and the spirit of adventure boiled within me.

[P089-01] Unwilling to miss the spectacle, I ran back to the roof to watch and determine which part of the city was being bombed. As I stared, I heard a violent blow against the wall very close to where I was [90] standing. That blow seemed to warn me that war was no game and that I must not risk my life needlessly. To tell the truth, this time I was afraid and went downstairs at once. In the morning, when things had quieted down, I climbed onto the roof to find out what had struck during the night. I found a piece of metal and a large hole where it had hit. It was probably a fragment of an antiaircraft shell.

The next day, most of the inhabitants who had the means fled the city and found safer places for their families in the countryside. All the residents of our building left, including my family. As an employee of a military installation, which my workplace was considered to be, I was not permitted to leave my job. The only person remaining in the three-story building, I also watched over its safety and security. Under such conditions, naturally, burglaries of deserted houses become more frequent.

The air raids continued every night, filling the population with terror. Yet all this seemed more like a game than a real war. Imagine a bomber carrying out its night raids with its lights on, its movements plainly visible in the sky, while the antiaircraft guns were unable to hit it. During ten days of bombing, only one aircraft was shot down. Its pilot parachuted to the ground and was captured near the Armenian neighborhood of Nor Gyugh.

The war did not last long. A month and a half after it began, British and Gaullist troops entered our city. The British army consisted mainly of Australian, [91] New Zealand, and Indian soldiers. Their arrival changed the course of life at once. The first thing one noticed was the trade in goods stolen from the army. Almost everything was for sale: canned food, soap, sweets, blankets - in short, everything, even weapons. A little later the arrests began. Anyone who had had any connection or cooperation with Pétain's supporters, or had spoken in favor of Hitler's Germany, was arrested and sent away to an unknown destination. One of those arrested was my younger maternal uncle, Minas. When he was released and returned a month later, he told us about concentration camps set up near the border with Palestine. There the detainees were subjected to various forms of torture to extract confessions. The principal method was to place a funnel in the accused man's mouth and pour in dozens of liters of water. When I asked why he had been arrested, my uncle said he was alleged to have been in contact with a Turk who had arrived from Turkey and was considered a German spy. During questioning it emerged that there had been a misunderstanding, and he was released without being tortured.

The Australian soldiers, who had passed through the furnace of the war in North Africa, behaved with extreme recklessness and lack of restraint. Going out at night had become very dangerous because murders, rapes, and robberies committed by them were so frequent. A curfew and blackout had been imposed in any case. Many restaurants displayed notices stating that military personnel were forbidden to enter, [92] but the soldiers ignored them, came inside, and demanded drink in a threatening manner. It had become commonplace to see drunken soldiers lying on the ground in the streets. Military police collected them in jeeps and drove them away. The range of stolen goods for sale gradually expanded. There were abundant supplies of chocolate bars, canned meat, cheese and fish, toothpaste, woolen blankets, vehicle wheels, and even artillery pieces. The soldiers sold whatever they could lay their hands on in order to drink. Once I witnessed the following incident.

An Australian soldier came into a restaurant, took off his new shoes, sold them, and bought drink with the money. After drinking it, he went out barefoot to return to his unit. Many jobs opened up for people who knew English, most of them connected with supplying the army. Restaurant orchestras multiplied, and new repertoires developed, made up of songs much in demand among military customers. One of their favorites, frequently requested, was "Begin the Beguine."

In Search of Ideal Love

[93] I was not a handsome young man, and in my adolescent years I kept away from the fair sex, believing that women could be attracted only by outward beauty. Later, when I noticed that I could awaken their interest in me, I grew bolder and discovered that quite a few attractive girls wanted to get to know me and form a romantic attachment. My first adventures in love began while I was still very timid, even fearful, in such matters. My first experience came far from home, in the small town of Kırıkhan. I had gone to visit my maternal aunt. While I was there, a young woman from Egypt came to stay with my aunt's neighbors. She was [age unclear] years old.^[P093-01] In this backward rural setting, she immediately recognized me as a city dweller and, to some extent, a kindred spirit, and openly sought a close relationship with me. Much older and more experienced than I was, she managed to captivate me completely and bring me under her influence. To attract me further, she often gave me pocket money. When the time came for her to return, she insisted that I be among the relatives seeing her off from the port of Alexandretta. That gave me my first sight of the sea: the extraordinarily blue and beautiful Mediterranean. Strangely enough, my next adventure in love also took place in Kırıkhan. I was eighteen and had gone there to obtain my first identity document.

[94] The reason for obtaining it there was this: Turkey was demanding that this part of Syria be annexed to Turkey as a "Turkish-populated" region. In fact, the Turks were a minority. To help increase the number of Armenian inhabitants recorded for the area, our family decided that I should obtain my first identity document as a resident there. Unfortunately, such efforts proved fruitless, since the European powers had already decided to surrender these territories to the Turks. Thus, in 1938, it was handed over to Turkey, forcing the local Armenians into another exodus, leaving their flourishing homes, productive orchards, and cultivated land to the Turks.^[P094-01]

On arriving in Kırıkhan, I noticed a young bride whose looks and manner toward me were very promising. As I became close to her, I learned that she had been married against her will to a man incapable of satisfying her conjugal needs. After we had spent several very pleasant moments together, she openly proposed that I take her away with me to Aleppo. Of course I was in no position to do such a thing, for the consequences could have been disastrous for us both. I simply told her that her proposal was impossible and that she had better reconcile herself to her fate. A few days later I left for Aleppo. Years afterward I met her there. She was no longer that pretty, rosy-cheeked girl. She seemed to have aged before her time and changed completely. The first lines of wrinkles had appeared on her face. She had separated from her husband but had been unable to find another. Seeing no desire in my eyes to revive our memories of the past, she walked away dejectedly, ^[95] without looking back, while I watched her despondent, uncertain steps for a long time. That was our last meeting. I never learned what became of her.

The years of coming of age bring many adventures in love. This is true of everyone, and I was no exception. There is no point in recounting fleeting, brief, frivolous affairs. I want to tell only of an experience that was more serious and had more substance.

We were still living on the second floor of the same three-story building. Two families lived on the third floor. One consisted of a husband and wife and their sixteen-year-old daughter. She was quite pretty, tall and rather plump, with a proud bearing. She caught my attention by looking straight into

my eyes when we met on the stairs. When I smiled in response, I received a smile in return. As Hagop Baronian says, "A girl's first 'yes' is in her smile."

That smile led me to seek opportunities and ways of becoming better acquainted with Hasmik, as she was called. Before I could act, her family came to visit us one evening. While the adults were absorbed in lively conversation, I sought Hasmik's gaze, hoping for the pleasure of her lovely smile. More than once that evening I received the look and smile that said "yes." The signal had been given; the entrance to the besieged fortress seemed to have been found. All that remained was to use a more forceful yet subtle strategy to capture it - just like hunters who, to catch their prey, rely on the particular habits of the animal, [96] avoiding above all any action that might frighten it away. I do not remember the author, but somewhere I read these words: "Like all wild creatures, all women can be caught. One need only know the right method of hunting."

I felt that what drove me was not simply the excitement of the chase. It seemed a spark of love had been kindled in me for that blessed creature. My thoughts were constantly occupied with Hasmik. I was looking for opportunities to approach her, speak to her, and declare my love when, one Sunday morning, her mother came to our home on some errand and was busy with my mother. Hoping to find Hasmik alone, I decided to go upstairs. I did so and knocked on the door, my heart pounding. It was opened by the adolescent son of the neighbors on that floor. Now it was awkward to ask for Hasmik. I asked the boy to borrow Hasmik's mandolin and bring it to me. He went away, and a moment later Hasmik herself appeared, flushed and wearing her lovely smile. She had brought the mandolin. Handing it to me, she said I could keep it as long as I liked. I thanked her and left with it. Under the circumstances I could say nothing more.

I went downstairs and played a little, but playing was not my purpose. About half an hour later I decided to return the mandolin, using it as a letter box. On a small card I wrote a declaration of love in French and tucked it among the strings, then went upstairs and returned the instrument. I had barely come downstairs and entered our home when I heard Hasmik calling her mother from above:

"Mama... come up quickly!" Her cry startled me, and I immediately guessed the reason. It was my [97] note. Hasmik wanted to tell her mother about my declaration of love. I was terrified at the thought that her mother would now come downstairs, furious, and complain to mine that I had done something intolerable by trying to seduce her daughter. Foreseeing the consequences of my action, I took my swimming trunks and left for the swimming pool before the storm could break. I found no friend or acquaintance there. Absorbed in my thoughts, I tried to work out what might follow from my boldness that day. What could happen? What position would my mother take? How would my very conservative father judge what I had done? I could already hear him shouting, "You have stained our family's good name!" He might even throw me out. Neither swimming nor the scorching sun could calm the storm in my mind. After burning in the sun for more than five hours, I decided to go home and examine the situation from a distance.

When I reached home, instead of opening the door at once, I listened to the conversation inside. I imagined they would be discussing what I had done. My secret listening yielded nothing. The talk was lively and cheerful, frequently punctuated by loud laughter. I realized we had guests. Most importantly, my name did not come up.

I boldly opened the door and went in. Besides our own family, the families of my paternal and maternal uncles were gathered around the dining table. They greeted me with cheerful cries: "At last he's here! Where did you disappear to? Why are you so red? Why are you late for dinner?" and so on.

Still tense, I waited for the serious conversation and accusations to [98] begin. My expectations were not fulfilled. No one mentioned my heroic exploit of the day. It turned out that my fear and agitation had been needless. My suspicions that Hasmik would tell her mother about the note, and that her mother would come and complain to mine, proved unfounded. Fool and coward that I was, I had tormented myself, worried, and roasted in the sun for nothing.

Some time passed before I could meet Hasmik again. As though nothing had happened, she answered my greeting with a warm smile and a pleasant voice. Unfortunately, the circumstances allowed no chance to begin a conversation of any kind. We were both surrounded by friends. As I have mentioned, in Aleppo it is customary to sleep on the roof in summer and enjoy the cool, truly pleasant nights that follow the heat of the day. I was usually the first to begin sleeping on the roof, from the middle of April.

It was May. A few days after my last encounter with Hasmik, her family also began spending the nights on the roof. I slept on its western side and Hasmik's family on the eastern side, ten or fifteen meters away.

Our two families had grown closer, and visits back and forth had become more frequent. When we happened to go up to the roof at the same time - or, more accurately, when I arranged for us to do so - we had an opportunity to talk for a while before going to bed. My purpose was not to converse with her parents but to observe Hasmik during these conversations and see how she responded to the topics under discussion. In her parents' presence she was reserved and hardly [99] took part.

The roofs of Aleppo's houses, especially the taller buildings, were flat, and we spread our bedding on a carpet laid on the roof. In the full moon, I could clearly see all the movements of Hasmik's family from where I lay. They slept side by side: her father at the far end, her mother in the middle, and Hasmik nearest to me. Not one of her movements escaped my attention. After lying down I would watch her for a long time, losing myself in imaginary dreams. My watching continued until she lay still - that is, until she had fallen asleep.

One night I went up to the roof a little later, when they had already gone to bed and were asleep. I quietly spread out my bedding and lay down. After a while I found that I could not sleep. An inexplicable force drew me and would not let me rest. It was both explicable and inexplicable: an inward impulse, a magnetic force drawing bodies of opposite polarity toward each other. My heart beat restlessly, and fantastic thoughts arose in my mind. I fought them with reason, lost in a maze of accepted customs, what was permitted and forbidden, actions and consequences. Instinct and reason were at war.

At last instinct overcame reason and drove me to a very daring step. An inner force drew me toward the being lying a few meters away, who seemed like a fairy promising eternal happiness, pulling every string of my body and soul toward her. The temptation was irresistible. Suddenly I decided to go quietly and get into Hasmik's [100] bed. Fortunately, the night was quite dark. I rose into a sitting position. My breathing had quickened, and my heartbeats sounded like hammer blows.

Ignoring all this, I crept silently toward her bed. In the stillness of the night I could hear Hasmik and her parent breathing quietly and evenly, a sign that they were asleep.

Certain that everyone was asleep, I slipped under Hasmik's blanket and felt the intoxicating tremor of her body's warm touch. She woke at once and would have cried out in fright had I not stopped her by covering her mouth. Realizing that it was I who had dared to come under her blanket, she immediately

grew calm. But she covered our heads with the blanket and whispered that her father had not yet come and might arrive at any moment. Even with this alarming warning and the risk of the unpleasant consequences of being caught in the act, I did not leave at once. After about half an hour of happy caresses and kisses, we heard footsteps on the stairs. I sprang out and ran to my own bed. I had barely pulled my blanket over me when Hasmik's father appeared in the rooftop doorway and went toward his bed.

Our lovemaking had been very brief, but it held promise. I felt happy, above all because my love had not gone unanswered and seemed to be returned. That meant she loved me too. This happiness drove me out of my mind. Sleep would not come. I could not sleep, but neither could I repeat the daring step I had just taken. I put it off until the next night. Hasmik said that her father would be out of town the following day and would not be there that night. Her mother's ^[101] presence she apparently disregarded, or else she was not afraid of her. All the next day I lived in dreams, building castles in the air. Everything looked beautiful, and I wondered why I had never noticed that beauty before. I saw only the lovely, rosy side of human life and of the world around me. At work my spirits were so high that my friends asked what had happened to me. But I did not want to share my secret with anyone. Although my working day was only six hours, it seemed very long that day. Even after I came home, the sun seemed in no hurry to set, as though it had stopped in the sky. In short, I waited impatiently for darkness, my heart beating restlessly. Though the time to go up to the roof had come, I decided to wait until later so that Hasmik's mother would already be asleep.

At ten that evening I went up and looked toward Hasmik's side of the roof. Despite the darkness, I could see that mother and daughter were lying down. I got into my bed and stayed still for a while, waiting for her mother to fall asleep again if my footsteps had woken her. After waiting long enough, I crept toward Hasmik's bed as I had the night before and slipped under her blanket. This time she was awake, waiting for me. What I found was very different from what I had expected, almost unbelievable. Hasmik wore a thin nightdress against her bare body, quite different from the nightdress of the previous night. By touch I discovered that she was wearing nothing else beneath it. She had also made the sort of hygienic preparations for the night that brides make before entering the bridal bed ^[102] on their wedding night. Everything suggested that Hasmik had prepared to surrender herself to me completely. The moment was tempting, but I guessed that these preparations were not her own idea but her mother's, who had probably singled me out long before and was doing everything she could to bind her daughter to me.

While looking for a prospective husband for her daughter, she had probably decided that I would be suitable. Keeping my wits about me despite the situation, I recalled the preceding events in a flash - especially how, on receiving my first note, Hasmik had immediately called her mother to report that the plan was taking shape. From all this I concluded that what lay behind it was not Hasmik's true, honest, sincere love, but her ignorant mother's plot and the trap she had laid. The idea was that, enticed by her daughter's caresses, I would have intercourse with her, willingly or otherwise, after which marriage would be compulsory.

I felt our relationship was still far too new for sexual violation or intercourse.^[P102-01] The realization that all this was dishonest and contrived, serving ulterior purposes of which I was becoming the victim, shocked me. I felt deeply disappointed in Hasmik. I managed to restrain my passion and left her in anger.

I could no longer believe in Hasmik's sincere love. Perhaps she too was the victim of her ignorant mother's treacherous, mean-spirited plot. I found it deeply insulting that they should play with my tender feelings and use them for their ^[103] own interests. Her mother probably considered me a highly suitable son-in-law and would stop at nothing to achieve her purpose.

How many mothers make their daughters unhappy through such foolish behavior!

Several decades later, when I was a lay assessor at the People's Court in Leninakan, we heard a divorce case in which the wife was a former student of mine. I had known her as a modest, sensible girl. Her husband said in his statement, "My wife and I could live together in love, harmony, and happiness if that woman did not interfere," and pointed to his mother-in-law. At once the image of Hasmik's mother came before my eyes. Indeed, mothers often "put out the eye while trying to shape the eyebrow."^[P103-01]

To return to our story: after escaping the trap prepared by Hasmik's mother, I abruptly broke off all relations with Hasmik. Thus I put an end to the dreams that had grown in my mind over several months and collapsed in an instant, destroying my castles in the air and the fragile palaces of imagined love. I continued at my old job, trying to fill the emptiness in my soul with something. My desire to study grew stronger and drove me to seek opportunities. On a friend's advice I applied to the correspondence course in electrical engineering at a British technological institute in Jerusalem and received my first lessons and assignments. I studied enthusiastically. To some extent these studies filled the emptiness that had opened within me.

A Voluntary Exodus into the Unknown

[104] The Second World War, which broke out toward the end of the first half of the twentieth century and spread across the globe, was unprecedented in history in its destruction, human suffering, and number of victims. It claimed more than fifty million lives and left more than thirty million people disabled. Beyond measure were the dreams it destroyed and the youthful hopes it shattered.[P104-01]

During that war, the peoples of the world, especially those of Europe and Asia, suffered terribly. The Soviet Union suffered most of all. For it, the war was a struggle for existence, a matter of life and death, of being or not being. When this vast country, thrown into confusion by the surprise attack of Hitler's forces, surrendered its most valuable territories to the invaders, it disappointed the whole world. The myths of its power, already badly shaken during military operations against tiny Finland, now vanished into thin air. Everyone predicted that the Soviet system would collapse within a short time, in only a few months. Yet the so-called "land of workers and peasants" managed to halt the enemy's advance and even go over to the counterattack. Of course, all this was achieved at the cost of countless human lives.

After passing through one or two years in the terrible furnace of war, [105] and with help from the Allies, the land of the Soviets managed to reorganize, recover its strength, and unleash a counteroffensive that could not be stopped. The offensives launched in 1944 not only liberated Soviet territory but overran Eastern Europe and destroyed the fascist beast in its own lair.

In those days the whole world admired the heroism and exploits of the courageous Soviet army. News and reports in the world press and other media helped foster this admiration. Soviet commanders and soldiers were celebrated as heroes. Among them were representatives of little Armenia, especially General Hovhannes Baghramyan, later a marshal, Admiral Isakov, or Isahakyan, the soldier Hunan Avetisyan, and others.

Armenians in the diaspora rejoiced and took pride in the deeds of their homeland's sons. Of course, Soviet and local Communist propaganda played a large part in all this. Those acts of heroism were presented as the fruit of the "humane system" prevailing in the country. Soviet soldiers were sacrificing their lives to preserve and defend the "paradise" that had been created and the Communist ideology responsible for it.

The war ended on May 9, 1945, in a crushing victory for the Allies.[P105-01] Toward the end of that same year, Armenian circles began to discuss the possibility of repatriating Armenians to Soviet Armenia. The Soviet authorities, victorious in the world war, [106] were opening their country's ironclad doors to those who longed for their homeland. The news caused great excitement among Armenians. Armenian refugees who had found shelter in the hospitable Arab countries had settled in quite well. They had built homes and workshops, established schools, churches, and cultural centers, opened medical, architectural, and legal offices, and created manufacturing workshops and factories, even surpassing the local Arab population in the pace of their development. Yet this news caused an upheaval among Armenians living abroad. Although an Armenian was treated as being at home in these countries, enjoyed all the rights of citizenship, and found every door to success open, he still felt himself a refugee on unfamiliar soil. He felt a powerful pull toward the country long celebrated in song as "Armenia, land of paradise": the land where our history as a people began; where the soil of our mothers and fathers lies under the protection of majestic Ararat; the country where, at last, one is no

foreigner or refugee, but belongs as a rightful master by origin, history, and law - in short, by every bond that ties a person to his native soil.

The great deeds of the glorious sons of our small Armenian people, who had contributed to the Soviet army's victory, did much to nurture these hidden human feelings and this reasoning. A small people had given the world generals, admirals, marshals, and many heroes. Naturally, Soviet propaganda, active always and everywhere, [107] spared no effort to paint the people's achievements in brilliant colors, consigning to oblivion the hardships through which victory had been won: the devastated state of the country and of a people bled dry in a war of life and death; the desperate economic condition of a depleted people, barely surviving and deprived of everything. Instead, newspapers constantly wrote of the homeland's "paradise," of the blessings and pressing necessity of repatriation. It was presented as the sole path to the salvation of the Armenian people and to their continued existence as Armenians.

The wave of this movement grew and spread through every country with a large Armenian population, through every Armenian community abroad. Its strongest force, however, was in Syria and Lebanon. There it swept through every social class: intellectuals and workers, rich and poor. It reached even people who had never learned Armenian, who used the hated Turkish language as their mother tongue and still wore the red Turkish fez.

Nevertheless, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation was among those who opposed repatriation.

[P107-01] In its newspapers the party exposed Communist lies while also describing the actual conditions in Armenia. Propaganda against repatriation condemned the Soviet system, and Armenia, being Soviet, was viewed not as the homeland but as an enemy country. Against it, the army of the well-known Dashnak leader Dro had fought, weapons in hand, allied with the German Nazis, in the hope of "saving" Armenia from the yoke of Communism.

[108] The majority of the people, well aware of the Dashnaks' position, would not believe even the truths they sometimes brought to light, dismissing them as slander. It all remained "a voice crying in the wilderness." The repatriation movement had gathered such momentum that nothing could halt or restrain it. No one wanted to reason that in a country which had spent four years fighting on the edge of an abyss, everything could not possibly be as splendid as it was portrayed. All that mattered to them was going to the country that was theirs, where they would face no discrimination, and where broad opportunities would open for their children's development. In short, the Armenian people were caught in a great storm.

In those days, when I took a few days' leave from Beirut and went home to Aleppo, I was stunned to see that the storm of repatriation had swept up my father too. [P108-01] He knew no Armenian and had no allegiance to any political party, yet his whole soul was absorbed in the prospect of returning to the homeland. His conclusion was that there was only one road for our family: the road home. His conviction was so strong that he was ready to go with his family even if no one else went. I regarded this intention as a passing notion and was sure he would change his mind. So we did not hold a serious family discussion, and I returned to Beirut without great concern.

In the spring of 1946, talk of repatriation began to take a serious form. Delegates were soon to arrive from Armenia to make preparations [109] and organize groups of repatriates for the journey home. This news gave a practical shape to the people's dream of repatriation. Everywhere the main subject of conversation was whether to go to the homeland or stay. Many reasoned along these lines:

"The only way for the children of the Armenian people to remain Armenian is to gather in Armenia."

"But we don't live badly here. My income and livelihood are good. How can I leave all this and go there to start again? As the proverb says, 'Where there is bread, make your home.'"

"Do you think you will live worse in the homeland than here?"

"I have struggled here for so many years. I have built a house, furnished it, and sent my children to school. If I go there, who will give me a house? Can the state possibly provide homes and work for so many newcomers?"

"Brother, you forget that the Soviet Union is the only country in the world with no unemployment, where everything is for the people. As soon as you arrive, the state will give you the key to your apartment, and the next day it will assign you a job."

"Those are all promises. They seem impossible to me."

"People like you will regret it when it is too late. This opportunity to return to the homeland will not last forever."

Conversations of this kind were not very numerous. More common were exchanges such as these:

"How are you?"

"Very well. I have decided to register to go to Armenia at the first opportunity."

[110] "I have decided too, and I am already thinking of putting my house up for sale."

"You're right. It is better to sell early. Later there will be so many sellers that house prices will fall, and it will be hard to find a buyer."

"I have already found an Arab buyer, but we have not yet agreed on a price."

"Don't drag it out. If you leave it too late, he won't even offer what he is offering now."

Conversations among younger people took a somewhat different form.

"You have finished school. Where do you plan to continue your studies, at a French college or an American one?"

"Neither a French nor an American college."

"I can't believe you want an Arab education."

"Why an Arab education, when I have the chance of an Armenian higher education?"

"Now I understand. You want to go to Armenia."

"You guessed correctly."

"But as far as I know, your father is against going. How will you go, then?"

"For now I am still trying to persuade my parents that we should all go together. If they remain stubborn and refuse, I will go alone."

"Alone? Where will you live? Who will support you?"

"I have found out everything in detail. Students are housed in dormitories, and the state supports them by providing a special stipend."

"I didn't know about such wonderful conditions. If that is [111] true, I would like to continue my studies in the homeland too."

"But you are already studying at an American college here. Would you leave it unfinished?"

"Why not, if there is an opportunity for an Armenian higher education, and free of charge at that? Why should I stay here?"

"In Armenia you can not only get an education but earn advanced academic degrees and become a world-famous scientist. In short, only there can our prospects flourish and come true. And have you heard about Armenia's girls, those graceful deer and gazelles?" [P111-01]

"We'll go and win ourselves one of Armenia's deer and gazelles."

Representatives of Dashnak circles put this argument to people wishing to go to Armenia:

"That country has an entrance but no exit. Going to Armenia is like dying and going to the next world, from which no one has ever returned. Only a very few have escaped the harsh life there, crossing the currents of the Arax River into Persia."

"The Soviet Union occupies a sixth of the world. Why would I need to come back when I can travel freely through a sixth of the earth? Living here, how far do we ever go that we should worry about restrictions on our movements?"

"But listen to what the people who escaped say about the inhuman conditions there."

"Those people fled out of fear because of their activities against the state, and to justify their escape they have to say [112] only bad things."

It was during these days that church delegations from all the major Armenian communities abroad went to Armenia to attend the blessing of the Holy Muron at Etchmiadzin. [P112-01] They included delegates from Syria and Lebanon. When they returned a short time later and met large gatherings of people, their descriptions of Armenia's achievements raised the already excited public's spirits to new heights. They praised the perfect cleanliness of Yerevan's streets: after lighting a cigarette, they said, one was at a loss where to throw the match. They praised the handsome policemen, always ready to help, the hospitable Armenian people, the view of majestic Masis, the air and water, and so on. [P112-02] These delegates had not only entered the homeland but had returned, demolishing the Dashnaks' argument that "there is an entrance but no exit." Even an empty packet of Armenian cigarettes brought back by a delegate was snatched from hand to hand and passed from house to house like a sacred relic. Some kissed it and pressed it to their foreheads. A handful of soil brought from the homeland was preserved as the most precious sacred treasure.

All this contributed to an enormous increase in the number of supporters of repatriation. The psychological preparation was complete, and the time was ripe for the arrival of the delegates from Armenia who would organize the immigration. They came and established offices to register those who wished to return. Not everyone who wanted to register was accepted. Some individuals or families were refused without a specific explanation. This circumstance only enhanced [113] the prestige of repatriation. People began seeking all manner of intermediaries to secure their registration. Soon it became clear that registration alone was not enough to obtain a place in a departing group: those who would make up each group were selected from the lists.

This was how matters stood when I successfully completed my first year at the theological seminary, advanced to the second year, and went home to Aleppo for the summer vacation. There I was taken aback by my father's unshakable position on repatriation.

Because his work kept my father away from home almost all the time, it had not been possible for us to develop a normal father-and-son relationship. My mother handled all matters as our parent. As the eldest, I in turn played a father's role for my younger brothers and sister. They stood more in awe of me than of our mother.

Now, for the first time, the whole family had to discuss a serious question. My father did not like prolonged arguments or disputes. He stated his position once, and after that it was impossible to change it. This was how he put it:

"Regardless of who goes and who stays, our family must go to Armenia. Even if only one family returns, it must be ours."

"What will you do in Armenia?" I said indignantly. "You don't even know Armenian, and you have no idea about the system there."

"It is true that I don't know Armenian. But everyone there will speak ^[114] Armenian, and I will soon learn. Didn't I learn to speak Arabic here? I don't need to know about the system there. It is enough that I am going to my homeland, from which there is no longer any danger of having to migrate to another country. We will have the same rights as the local people: to live, to work, to vote, and to stand for election."

"Don't you consider your children's wishes and future?" I objected.

"It is precisely because I am considering my children's future that I want to go. There you will have every opportunity to study and hold high government positions. Here your future causes me great concern."

"I think you are more worried about the way your business is going and afraid of the disgrace of bankruptcy. You are choosing the easiest way to avoid it," I said, stinging him.

"I have made my final decision: to seize this opportunity and go to our people's permanent and final home."

My mother and my brother Tigran remained neutral about our father's decision. My sister was young and had no vote. His other sons, Harutyun and Yenovk, were already married, living separately, and had families of their own, whose affairs they decided independently. My brother Vazgen and I were categorically opposed to repatriation. I objected because I had only just found a way to obtain a higher education and did not want to leave it unfinished. Vazgen's reasons were much the same: his educational prospects here were very promising.

For the first time in our lives, Vazgen and I had joined forces ^[115] against our father's wishes and argued with him. He was not accustomed to anyone in his own house, in his own family, daring to contradict him. Usually immovable in his decisions, he did not continue the argument. He rose abruptly and left the house. An unpleasant atmosphere settled over the family. My father avoided meeting me and did not want to speak to me.

Soon we learned that he had already registered our family and was waiting for the card authorizing us to join a departing group. Evidently he had discussed my position in various places, especially at the coffeehouse, for acquaintances who met me in the street reproached me for refusing to obey his sound decision and tried to persuade me. Dr. R. Jebejian, Aleppo's well-known ophthalmologist, made a particular effort to change my mind. He was regarded as very progressive and was a strong advocate of repatriation. After hearing my reasons for refusing, he said:

"You are going to a country where the doors to education are open to everyone. There even members of the government, older people, study by correspondence alongside their work and gain professional qualifications. Don't worry about that. Go with confidence." His argument shook the foundations of my position somewhat, but I still gave no final decision or consent.

Meanwhile, we heard that my paternal uncle Simon, who lived in Beirut, also opposed repatriation, and that the question had produced opposing positions between father and son in his family too. Compared with our family, the situation [116] was the same, with the positions reversed. There the one who wished to return was my cousin Edward, a medical student at the American University of Beirut, while my uncle refused to go. On hearing this, my father rushed to Beirut and put the matter to his younger brother in these terms:

"I am going. That means you and our sister Mariam must follow me. Whether things turn out well or badly, we will all be together."

Everyone stood in awe of my father, especially his brother and sister. When he put the matter that way, it meant they had to obey their elder brother's decision. My father returned to Aleppo victorious and gave us the news, making it clear that our opportunities to refuse repatriation were narrowing. By then the first group had already left for the homeland, and the next groups were being prepared. In early August we received our departure authorization card. In other homes, receiving the blessed card was celebrated with a feast; in ours it was very sad. On one side, the bustle of departure preparations had begun. The belongings and furnishings we would take were being tied up and packed into trunks. On the other, I was separating out my own possessions and trying to convince my weeping mother that, after finishing my studies in two years, I too would come and we would be reunited. Many regarded my stubbornness as foolishness, a mistaken attitude toward the path of happiness opening before our family. They accused me of being heartless for parting from my family at such a grave, decisive moment in its destiny. That last reproach affected me deeply and pricked my conscience. Finally, to my parents' joy, [117] I decided to sacrifice the plans I had made for my future and follow my loved ones. Wherever they went, whatever circumstances awaited them, I would be with my family on this journey whose prospects were still so uncertain and doubtful.

We were to join the fifth group departing for the homeland. The steamship carrying us was to leave Beirut in mid-September. There was still a month before departure.[P117-01] So I took my sister to Beirut, promising to join the family there when they were brought to the city. My first business in Beirut was to go to the theological seminary, inform them of my departure, and collect my papers. The director of studies, Professor Leonyan, received the news with great indignation. Then, in grave and serious terms, he added:

"Why do you let yourselves be deceived and led astray by Communist propaganda and go to that godless country, a starving land bled dry by years of war? Give up the idea while there is still time. In two years, when you graduate from the seminary, we will send your whole family to America."

"Everything has already been decided, and we will soon be leaving. I ask you to give me my documents."

"You have a contract with us: to study at our expense and, after graduating, work wherever we send you. Now you have decided to break that contract and abandon us. Consequently, we cannot give you any documents. Go. The Lord be with you."

That was his final answer. My appeals elsewhere met with the same response, leaving me in an impossible position. I was going to an unfamiliar country without a single [118] document proving my education. Thus the study and schooling of past years would disappear without a trace, leaving me only the knowledge I actually possessed. I comforted myself with the hope that perhaps God would open some other door to success in the future.

My sister Meline and I spent a month of pleasant, unforgettable days and moments with our relatives, my friends, the members of the youth organization at the Nor Marash church, and my dear friends of the Panjarjyan family in Bhamdoun, with whom I had been bound by brotherly ties since childhood. The unforgettable, heartfelt farewells of those sincerely happy days would remain impressed on my memory for a long time. We were surrounded by the affection of relatives and friends when someone announced that the steamship for our group had arrived and anchored in Beirut harbor. We went immediately to the port to see the ship on which we would travel.

The harbor was crowded, especially around an enormous white steamship at anchor. The red Soviet flag flew above it. Its name was written in Latin and Russian letters. This was the first time I had seen Russian writing. Comparing it with the Latin letters, I tried to work out how the letters sounded. The ship was called Vyacheslav Molotov, after the Soviet Union's foreign minister. It was a splendid vessel, built with the latest modern technology. Most of the crowd gathered at the harbor were Armenians who had come to marvel at the power of the victorious Soviet [119] land. Dazzling white in the sunlight, the ship seemed like a dove of peace that had come from the glorious land of the Soviets, from Armenia, an inseparable part of it, to carry fortunate Armenians to the paradise of their centuries-old dreams. No detail escaped the eyes of those admiring the ship. Everything was interpreted through a fantastic imagination.

That same day, the members of our group from Aleppo, including our family, arrived in Beirut by train. After meeting them at the station, my sister and I joined them. The transfer to the harbor was well organized. The quayside, always crowded, could not contain the throng assembled to wish us a safe journey. The people surged like a stormy sea. They had gathered to say a final farewell to their loved ones, relatives, friends, neighbors, brides-to-be, and bridegrooms-to-be. Many of those leaving were young people traveling alone, without their parents. Those seeing them off were not only their parents...[P119-01] Their final, heartbreaking cries of farewell were drowned out by the shouts of stallholders who had turned the waterfront into a fair. Everywhere there was noise and commotion, final embraces, promises to write, arrangements for coded messages revealing whether conditions in Armenia were good or bad, promises to reunite there soon, joy, and tears of parting. Such an outpouring of human emotion moved me as it moved everyone. It was as though the world were ending. My entire past was being torn from my soul, with no promise for the future. I was going not with happy [120] dreams, but to face a serious ordeal. Though my own spirits were not high, the people's excitement was intoxicating. The storm of patriotism accumulated over centuries had reached its height and swept everyone along. In that charged atmosphere, the crowd suddenly began singing "Ay Karavan." Everyone sang: old and young, those leaving and those staying. The whole quayside rang with the song.

At last the passengers had all been received aboard and settled. The ship shone with exemplary cleanliness. Some thought it reflected the cleanliness of the Soviet land, and of Armenia in particular. It was a luxurious passenger steamship, equipped with modern amenities, captured from defeated Germany.[P120-01] There were more people aboard than the cabins could accommodate, so some were placed on the upper deck under the open sky.

It was time to leave, but those on the quay and the fortunate travelers continued exchanging good wishes.

On September 15, 1946, at approximately five o'clock, the ship weighed anchor and began to glide slowly and gracefully away from the quay. Tears of joy and parting mingled among the passengers. My own feelings were somewhat different, like those of a dying man saying goodbye to his loved ones and the world he had grown used to, and setting out into the unknown. We had moved a little way from shore toward the open sea. I cast one last look at Beirut and the beautiful mountains of Lebanon [121] and murmured, "Will I ever be able to see them again...?" Tears choked my voice.

The ship was alive with cheerful activity. Everyone seemed in high spirits, especially my father. He felt himself in seventh heaven.

Traveling on the same ship with us was my cousin Luther, the son of my paternal uncle Sedrak, with his family. To obtain permission to immigrate to Armenia, he had written an article in Aleppo's daily *Yeprat* entitled "Forgive Me, Homeland," publicly renouncing his membership in the Armenian Revolutionary Federation. He was a cultured and educated man, but love of the homeland had closed his eyes to every kind of report or publication exposing its darker side.

Caught up in the general mood of the immigrants, he too now rejoiced that he would soon reach the homeland of his dreams.

On the very first night of the voyage, I was assigned to stand watch on the open upper deck. I was to make sure that none of those sleeping on deck accidentally fell overboard. The happy passengers slept peacefully in the bedding they had spread out. Loudspeakers mounted on the masts broadcast speech and songs in Russian at great volume. Not only was it all entirely incomprehensible to us, but more importantly it disturbed the people who had already gone to sleep on deck. A way had to be found to silence the loudspeakers. But how could I communicate with the Russian crew? I began leafing through the small English-Russian phrasebook I had bought for the journey. I soon realized that it did not contain the expression I [122] needed. I decided to find someone in the crew who knew English. In the phrasebook I found "Govorite li vy po-angliyski?" - "Do you speak English?" - and repeating it constantly to myself, I set off to look for a crew member. It was midnight and the corridors were deserted. At last I found a door marked "Radio" in English. I knocked, went in, and saw a young man. When I repeated the Russian words I had memorized, he smiled and asked in Armenian:

"What do you want, young man?"

"Oh! Are you Armenian?"

"As you can see, I am. What do you want?"

"The loudspeakers on the masts are disturbing the people sleeping on deck. Please turn them off."

He looked at his watch and said:

"There is half an hour left. In thirty minutes they will stop."

I thanked him and left. Sure enough, half an hour later they fell silent, and peace descended at once. Under the star-filled sky, accompanied by the gentle hum of the steamship, one could hear the sleepers' steady breathing and occasional snoring. At one in the morning I handed over my watch and went to our cabin to sleep. But sleep had fled my eyes, leaving room for heavy thoughts. I did not sleep at all that first night.

In the morning we learned that an elderly immigrant had died during the night. In accordance with maritime practice, he had been wrapped in a sheet and committed to the sea. His relatives grieved that he had departed this life without seeing his native land.

The immigrants ate from the four or five days' supply ^[123] of food and preserves they had brought with them. Each family took its food to the dining hall whenever it wished to eat. There were tables and chairs, and attendants kept the room clean.

On the second day of the voyage, Nubar Sngryan, a student at the American college who had learned something of choral conducting while studying at the Melkonian school in Cyprus, gathered the young people and organized a choir. Vazgen and I took part. We began learning two songs, "Karavan" and the Russian "Volga, Volga."

The following day an amateur concert was organized in the ship's hall. The program included recitations, solo songs, instrumental music, and dancing; the choir sang at the end. The concert lifted the people's already high spirits even further. It was a very happy evening.

When I went on deck the next morning, I saw that we were entering the Dardanelles. A Turkish motorboat came alongside, and a Turkish officer boarded to guide our ship through the strait. Almost all the passengers gathered on deck and stood motionless, studying the Turkish shores on either side. The strait was less than five kilometers wide, and the defensive fortifications on the banks were clearly visible. We moved very slowly, almost imperceptibly. This was the place where the Entente forces had made their landings during the First World War. Fierce battles had been fought, and in the end the Entente forces had been compelled to withdraw. The Turkish commander who especially distinguished himself in those battles was ^[124] Kemal Pasha, later Atatürk.

The passage through the Dardanelles, a distance of forty-five kilometers, took about five hours, after which we entered open water again: the Sea of Marmara.^[P124-01] Though it looks very small on a map, to us the land vanished beyond the horizon and there was nothing but blue sea on every side. All day we advanced northward, and only toward evening did land begin to appear in the distance. The name "Bolis" spread like lightning among the passengers. Yes, we were approaching Constantinople, center of the Ottoman Empire and capital of the sultans, or Istanbul, as it is called in Turkish.^[P124-02] The passengers crowded onto the decks again to see the world-famous city. We slowly entered the Bosphorus, and Istanbul's buildings and palaces became distinct. Hagia Sophia sat magnificently on its hill, the beautiful sanctuary guarded at its four corners by four Muslim minarets. Many of the splendid architectural monuments visible on both shores had been designed by Armenian architects. The passengers stared, afraid to miss a detail. They examined and discussed what they saw, often criticizing and haughtily mocking the "backward" Turks. The strait bustled with ferries, sandals, rowboats, and motorboats crossing from bank to bank.^[P124-03] Darkness had fallen, and the lights along both shores and on the passing vessels created a marvelous spectacle. Often, between passengers on ferries passing very close and those on our ship, unfriendly exchanges and arguments broke out, ending in threats and curses. Some Armenians ^[125] even threatened that they would soon return to slaughter all the Turks.

The passage through this nineteen-mile strait took approximately four hours. It was late evening when we left Istanbul's sea of lights behind and entered the darkness of the Black Sea. Our journey was drawing to a close. Many said we would be in the port of Batumi by morning.

I spent that night in great restlessness and hardly slept. The day's impressions had been powerful. The fortifications of the Dardanelles and the beautiful, illuminated views of Istanbul would not leave my

eyes. Another cause of my troubled sleep was that the next morning the folds of uncertainty and the unknown would begin to open: the people, intoxicated by the stupor of propaganda, would gradually awaken. What surprises awaited us? Comforting myself with the saying, "Let morning come, and good will come with it," I tried to sleep.

Early in the morning I went on deck. First I looked at the sea and saw that its water was much darker than the Mediterranean's blue. That, I thought, explained the name "Black Sea." Looking toward the horizon, I noticed that land was very close. The ship was already heading for Batumi harbor. As passengers woke, they gradually claimed good positions at the deck railings, waiting impatiently to see the gates of the "Promised Land" and to set eyes on Soviet people.

The ship entered the harbor slowly. The immigrants rejoiced that at last they had reached the country of their dreams. Among them were elderly men who wore ^[126] red fezzes. One threw his fez into the sea, and all the others wearing them followed his example. Some, believing they had reached a land of abundant bread, threw their remaining bread into the sea as well. This example too proved contagious. As the ship approached the quay, great clusters of water-swollen loaves and red fezzes floated alongside. Tears of happiness shone in many eyes.

At last the steamship stopped. On the quay a small group of people waved to welcome us. There was also a five-piece brass band, which began playing lively dance tunes. A red banner on the harbor building read "Glory to the Great Stalin." Another, smaller red banner said "Welcome." The first thing that caught my attention was the musicians' clothing. It resembled military uniform, but sun, sweat, and wear had robbed it of its color. It was impossible to tell what color it had once been. Several outfits also had large patches of dark fabric. The sight made a very unpleasant impression. Then I noticed that most of the workers and porters on the quay were pretty, fair-haired women. Why were such beautiful women doing this heavy work? Were they being forced to? The thought shocked me. While I was absorbed in studying what I saw, several couples began dancing to the band. The women's clothing deserved attention. Their dresses looked twenty years out of date and were in no condition to be worn in public, much less displayed on such a ceremonial occasion.

^[127] Their shoes were half worn-out and had lost their color. In short, our first impressions promised nothing good.

The time came to disembark, and people were led into a large empty warehouse nearby. There, for the first time, I saw bunk beds. The cleanliness of the bedding and linen was questionable, and they gave off a strong, unpleasant smell of DDT disinfectant. Our family of six was allotted three bunk beds and a small space for our belongings. My next shock came when I went to the lavatory. First of all, the Armenian word *zugharan* was new to me; it seemed to be a translation of the European word *toilet*. What surprised me was that inside there were no dividing cubicles with doors that could be closed. Whatever one had to do had to be done before other people's eyes. It seemed very strange and shameful, until we were forced to grow used to it.

It was about five o'clock when we were invited to the dining hall. As we waited outside the door to be admitted, my thirteen-year-old sister noticed dark brown objects on the tables that looked like pastries and whispered to our mother, "They're going to give us cocoa cake." What a disappointment! Who could have imagined that those things we took for cake were simply sliced bread? We had never even imagined such bread. We were invited in and sat at the tables. White bean soup was served. Though one had to dive like a deep-sea diver to find a bean in it, we ate it with appetite, for we had not had a hot meal in five or six days. We could not eat the so-called bread: it was black and wet like mud, and

grains of sand crunched between our teeth. Even during the worst food shortages of the war, [128] we had never seen or eaten such bread. We were forced to turn once more to the remaining food and bread we had brought for the journey, thanking God that we had not thrown it into the sea as others had.

We were being held in quarantine in Batumi. There was no contact with the outside world or the city's inhabitants. Our dealings were mainly with people involved in organizing the immigration. They were, of course, Armenians, most of them from Armenia. I listened carefully to their conversations and the thoughts they expressed among themselves. I was surprised by the men's uninhibited, uncensored jokes with the women and by the women's responses in the same vein. The expression "The Party sent me" suggested to me a new, unfamiliar way in which this country was organized.

We were astonished by smokers who threw away their long cigarettes after smoking barely a third. Such remnants lay everywhere. Given the price of cigarettes, failing to smoke them fully seemed to us an inexplicable waste. We eventually found the explanation. They were smoking not ordinary cigarettes but what were called papirosy. Only a third of each papirosa was filled with tobacco; the rest was a hollow tube. Once they had smoked the tobacco, it was the empty tube they threw away.

The next morning the contents of our trunks were to be inspected. One person checked each family's possessions, while several others supervised the whole operation. The inspectors were customs officials. They checked whether we had brought weapons. They set aside all foodstuffs except canned goods and [129] confiscated them, saying they had to be destroyed. It was hard to believe that food would be destroyed in a country living in such near-starvation. I think they took it for themselves. They spent a long time examining our English-language books, and especially my stamp collection. It became clear that their knowledge of foreign languages was not very good, and they asked Vazgen and me to help if foreign-language books turned up while they were inspecting other people's belongings. They wanted to understand what the books were about. The inspection of our own possessions ended with the confiscation of the food and the appropriation of a few stamps.

It was on the second or third day after our arrival in Batumi that we were told we would be taken to the bathhouse to wash. The bathhouse was in the city, and an open truck was provided, without even seats. Holding on to one another or squatting, we somehow fitted in. As we drove through the streets, I watched the people, the shops, and the activity carefully. At a corner where the truck slowed down, I jumped off. I wanted to look more closely and gain some idea of where we had come. Everyone stared at me as I walked along the street. Perhaps my clothes set me apart. Ignoring the looks directed at me, I studied shop windows that were mostly empty, apart from faded plaster imitations of fruit, vegetables, white bread, and pastries. In one window I saw bottles resembling perfume bottles. I looked to find out their prices, but could understand nothing on the white label - probably it was written in Georgian. There were numbers too, [130] but I could not tell whether they meant rubles or some smaller unit of currency. Having learned nothing to add to my earlier impressions, I decided to return to the quarantine quarters. On the way, two people walking behind me were speaking Armenian. I stopped immediately and asked:

"Are you Armenian?"

"Yes, we are."

"You must be among the immigrants."

"Yes. Are you from Armenia, or do you live here?"

"We live here. We are Armenians from Batumi."

"If you are Armenian, why do you live in this foreign country? We have come from so far away to live in our homeland, while you are so close to Armenia and yet live outside it."

"You won't understand all that now. You are new here. Go to Armenia and live there a little; then you'll understand."

"There is nothing not to understand. You are Armenians living abroad when Armenia is only a few hours away."

"My dear boy, you are still far too green to understand everything. Go on your way. Good luck."

With that they left. It seemed to me that they were afraid to say more. I remembered the route well and found the harbor quarantine quarters without losing my way. As I arrived, the loudspeaker was announcing that anyone with foreign currency had to exchange it for rubles. A queue had already formed at the exchange counter. I had ten Lebanese liras with me and joined the queue to change them. In Lebanon ten liras could buy an excellent pair of shoes. At the exchange counter, for that sum they gave me ^[131] twenty rubles and forty-six kopecks. I gave the kopecks to my cousin Luther, saying they might be useful for the children.

Then began the allocation of families: who was to go where in Armenia, to which town or village. An uproar broke out. Families who were close or related wanted to remain together, wherever they were sent. But no one took such requests into account. The people knew nothing of Armenia's geography. Whenever they asked the official making the assignments what their destination was like, the answer was always the same:

"Oh... it's a very large town, forests, a lake, and so on, and so on."

We were assigned to Ani Pemza. When we asked what it was like, we received the same answer. Our fate had already been decided. Good or bad, we had to go.

A ship bringing another group of repatriates had reached the quay, and we had to be sent off quickly to make room for them. Each family received several days' provisions: the bread by now familiar to us, cheese, sausage - which smelled - and sugar. We were packed into closed freight wagons like animals being taken to slaughter, five or six families to a wagon. There were no arrangements for sleeping or relieving oneself. A man of about forty had come to escort us to Ani Pemza, wearing a faded military uniform with many medals on his chest. They called him Comrade Galstyan. Fifty-four families were to go to Ani Pemza.

The train, made up of fifty or sixty wagons bearing their human cargo, set off toward the Promised Land - Armenia. Through the half-open wagon door I watched our route ^[132] intently, but we could see little besides rows of trees. Being a freight train, it moved as though it were carrying lifeless cargo. The jolts were extraordinarily frequent and violent. My father was the first to complain:

"If the train to Meydan Ekbez gave even one jolt like that, the driver would be dismissed on the spot."

Late that evening we reached a large city. They told us it was Tiflis. It was poorly lit, half in darkness. Our attention was drawn to a string of lights rising into the sky, ending in a great cluster of lights high above. We could not make out what it was. Finally we concluded that it was an airship and the ascending string of lights marked the steps leading up to it. Imagination always supplies an explanation for the unknown. It was after midnight when we left Tiflis.

In the morning we reached a small station and the train stopped. Word spread like lightning that we had entered Armenia: the mountains and fields before us were Armenian soil. The station was Ayrum. The homesick people poured out of the wagons and gazed around with moist eyes. Some kissed the ground; others embraced tree trunks. Believing their dreams fulfilled, they hugged one another, exchanged congratulations and wept with happiness and emotion. It was a deeply moving sight. Despite my reserve and skepticism, I too was moved.

It was time to leave, but they could not get the people back into the wagons. At last, with great difficulty, everyone was gathered and the train resumed its journey. Several hours later we reached our first large Armenian city: Kirovakan.

[133] A large crowd had gathered on the platform: repatriates who had arrived with earlier groups, hoping to find relatives or acquaintances among us. The people on the train asked about their circumstances. Amid tears and lamentations, they described their wretched, hopeless conditions. They cursed the organizers of the repatriation and those who had deceived them, adding:

“You’ve been burned too! You too have fallen into the trap, with no way out and no hope of escape. Cursed be those who deceived us and drove us into this fatal mistake, into tragedy.”

Their weeping spread to the people on the train. This was the opposite of Ayrum station. In place of the earlier joy, fear and horror were stamped on every face. According to those who had come before, they had fallen into a hell from which there was no hope of deliverance, condemned to perish here. Prominent in these utterly bleak accounts were hunger and starvation, food rationing, low wages, the worthlessness of the ruble, a daily bread allowance of five hundred grams, the stable-like houses they had been given to live in, and so on. During a stop lasting more than an hour, this terrifying news caused great distress among the repatriates continuing their journey.

[Photograph caption: Our family, 1948, Gyumri (Leninakan).]

[134] My cousin Luther’s family parted from us at Hamamlu station, from where they were to be taken to a village called Spitak. After that station the train traveled through the mountains and passed through a long tunnel. We reached a station called Jajur - an interesting name. Beyond it a vast plateau opened before our eyes, with a large city in its center. We were told it was Leninakan. It looked close, but the descent from the mountains to the plateau was winding, and it took a long time to reach the city.

A large crowd awaited us on the platform. Among them I noticed our compatriot Misak Mghdesyan, who was my age and had repatriated before us. Seeing us, he approached the wagon. After we embraced, we asked about his circumstances. Unlike the repatriates in Kirovakan, he wisely confined himself to saying:

“Things are not good, but whether you like it or not, you must grow used to them, adapt and work, trying to survive without losing heart.”

When he learned that we were being taken to Ani Pemza, he advised us to get off here. We said such a step would be unlawful. Pointing to a man strolling on the platform, he said:

“That is Comrade Gyodakyan, the mayor. Go and ask him to let you get off here.”

Following his advice, I approached the man to present our request. While I was speaking to him and being refused, our escort, Comrade Galstyan, shouted, his face red with anger:

“What is this provocation? Get back into the wagon immediately, and do not come down again. We will be leaving shortly.”

What astonished me was less his anger than ^[135] the word “provokatsiya.” Was this Armenian - a word I had never heard? What did it mean? Was it an accusation of political wrongdoing? Troubled by these thoughts, [I returned. He] continued for a long time to answer our questions, lifting the veil from the unknown page by page and leaving us in profound anxiety.^[P135-01]

Our wagons were uncoupled from the rest of the train and moved to another track. From there we set off for the last station on the fateful road assigned to us. Late that evening we reached Ani Pemza.

The Unknown Revealed

[136] It was about nine in the evening when we reached the final station of our long journey, Ani Pemza. In the dense darkness, beneath a few feebly glowing lamps, nothing could be seen. Only Comrade Galstyan's powerful voice was audible, issuing commands and directions on every side. Wrapped in uncertainty and darkness, we waited to learn where we would be taken.

Under Galstyan's direction, the local people were quickly assembled, and with their help all the wagons were emptied within an hour or two. Each family was taken to its allotted place. After the move, many families complained of missing belongings and questioned the honesty of the locals who had helped them. Our family, together with three others, was assigned the kindergarten hall. Each occupied a corner. Using our unopened suitcases as partitions, we settled into our allotted space and prepared for a night's rest. After two days of traveling in abnormal conditions and enduring great emotional strain, we desperately needed sleep. We spread something on the floor and lay on it, covering ourselves with quilts or woolen blankets. Unfortunately, our dark thoughts were stronger than our exhaustion, and sleep did not come easily.

The agonizing, sleepless night seemed very long. Nevertheless, daylight came. I dressed at once to go out, when a delegation representing the fifty-four [137] families interrupted my plans. Addressing me as the leader of the group sent to Ani Pemza, they declared that they refused to stay and demanded that I present their grievances to the authorities. From what I had read about the Soviet Union, I knew how the authorities treated the leaders of such organized movements. I therefore refused to act on their behalf and advised each to look after his own affairs as he thought best. Apparently my answer did not surprise them, for they left without a word.

On leaving the hall, I first looked toward the horizon. Mountains rose on every side, with snow-covered peaks a little farther off. Although in Batumi they had assured us that the place was full of trees and forests, there was not a single tree. Everywhere there were stones and rocks. The settlement was a large village with a few urban-style buildings. Several hundred meters away a quarry gleamed white, and the roar of various visible machines could be heard. They told us it was a pumice quarry and that the urban-style buildings housed its workers. It emerged that we had been brought here to work as quarry laborers - a prospect far removed from our aims, our abilities and our calling.

The village had a secondary school, a kindergarten, a bread shop and another shop that was almost empty, despite the sign declaring it a shop. On the western side of the settlement lay a deep gorge with a small river flowing through it. Pumps raised the river water and [138] supplied it to the village, including for drinking. The water from the village taps was often mud-colored or mixed with mud.

On the other side of the gorge was Turkey. Hearing this, I became more alert, and a bold, reckless thought began turning in my mind: might we cross into Turkey there and escape the nightmare into which we had walked of our own free will?

At nine in the morning our family of six was given six kilograms of bread. This was far more than the ration allotted to each person. At the time we did not understand this or even notice it. We had not yet imagined that finding bread was the question of all questions in this country. To those distributing it, this was a great privilege and an act of generosity, intended to make a favorable impression on newcomers just discovering the country.

After breakfast I continued my exploration. The village had a public toilet that was impossible to enter: before reaching it one had to tread over accumulated filth and dried excrement. Seeing this, I decided to relieve myself at the edge of the gorge facing Turkey, using the opportunity to study possible ways and paths down into the gorge and up the Turkish side. The slopes were so steep that ropes and some mountaineering skill would be needed. Even so, I continued my daily investigations and secretly took notes. The difficulty seemed insurmountable, especially for my parents, and this troubled me deeply.

[139] On our third day in Ani Pemza, Nuritsa Harmandayan came to see us. I had known her at Bethel Church, and we had been classmates at the theological seminary. Having learned of our arrival from people in our group who had gone to Yerevan, she had come at once and found us, hoping to keep us from losing heart. She offered advice on what to do immediately and in the longer term. She had arrived several months before us and had gained some experience of life here. Conditions were very difficult, she said, but we must adapt as quickly as possible and look for ways to survive. She advised us to leave the village and move to Yerevan or Leninakan. For the time being, she added, we would have to sell some things to feed ourselves. Above all, we must not despair. She gave me her address in Yerevan and said that if I came, she could help me approach the Repatriation Committee for permission to move away from Ani Pemza. Then she took her leave.

At a family council we decided that the urgent matter of leaving must be addressed the very next day. I would go to Yerevan, and my father to Leninakan, where our relatives, the Mghdesyans, lived.

The next morning I divided my twenty rubles with my father. With these Russian rubles, I was to go and settle our affairs. I reminded my mother of Nuritsa's advice about selling a few things and asked her to give me something to sell in Yerevan. Like all mothers, she had long been putting together a dowry for her daughter. From it she took two dress lengths of fabric and gave them to me to sell. Despite our desperate circumstances, a vague excitement had taken hold of me: the excitement of my first encounter with Yerevan, the capital of our people, of Armenia.

[140] In the afternoon my father and I set out on foot for Ani station, where the trains for Yerevan and Leninakan stopped. The station was six or seven kilometers away, and since there was no other means of transport, we had to walk. That was no hardship for me, but it was difficult for my father, who had a hernia on both sides; walking any distance caused him great pain. It took us two hours, and by the time we reached the station it was dark. We learned that the Leninakan train would arrive in two hours, and the Yerevan train at half past midnight. After two hours' waiting, the Leninakan train came. I saw my father off, explaining again and again how to find the Mghdesyans' house from the directions Misak had given us. After he left, I waited a long time for the Yerevan train; it was past midnight when it arrived. In those days repatriates were not required to buy train tickets. I boarded without one and squeezed into a carriage. There was nowhere even to stand, let alone sit. It was impossible to move, but some kind people, seeing that I was a repatriate, made a little room for me to sit - not so much to help me as to get me talking, to hear about life abroad and learn what lay beyond their country. I had scarcely settled in before the questions began. When they heard how we had lived abroad, they asked whether we had been threatened with extermination, to make us leave such a life and come to Armenia. I answered that we had faced no danger there; it was simply patriotism that had prompted us to leave everything and repatriate to Armenia. They found this explanation unbelievable and unconvincing. Skeptically, they said:

[141] "Would anyone leave such a peaceful, comfortable life and come here to shoulder this agonizing struggle to stay alive?" In the end they consoled me by saying, "You'll get used to it" - meaning that

we would learn to endure the harsh life here. Then, with a smirk, they added, "It'll turn out well in the end."

The air in the carriage was suffocating and unbearable. Almost all the men were smoking "cigarettes" rolled in newspaper. Smoke and the smell of sweat mingled into a stench that left me uncomfortable and sweating despite myself. My journey of about six hours ended at daybreak, when we reached Yerevan.

I got off the train, followed the crowd out of the station and crossed the square outside. My heart was pounding. This was a Yerevan morning. However strongly I had opposed repatriation, a patriotic Armenian heart beat within me; I could not be indifferent to my first encounter with Armenia's capital. Unfortunately, my excitement was gradually to give way to disappointment.

None of our relatives lived in Yerevan yet - or, if any did, I knew nothing of their whereabouts and had no way to see them. Besides us, my uncle Simon's family, my aunt Mariam's family, the family of my cousin Bertha, my mother's sister's daughter, and that of my cousin Luther, my father's brother's son, had all repatriated. But each had been sent to a different part of Armenia. Raised in the traditions of the extended family, these relatives had always been accustomed to living near one another, helping and caring for one another, remaining inseparable. Now, in an unfamiliar homeland, they had been scattered and had no news of each other.

There was only one place I could go: I had to find the home of Nuritsa ^[142] Harmandayan. I walked along unfamiliar streets, asking passersby the way to the central square. The streets were muddy and dirty, torn up in many places. Was this our capital? Was this the cleanliness praised by the delegates who came for the blessing of the holy chrism? ^[P142-01] At every step one felt deceived. The uncertainty and the unknown were gradually dispelled, giving way to disappointment.

After a sleepless night, the cold morning air made me shiver a little - a shivering of the spirit as well as the body. Passing a bread shop, I realized that I was hungry. I approached the shopkeeper and asked for half a kilogram of bread. He answered rudely:

"Get in the queue."

"What queue?" I asked. Again he replied rudely:

"Can't you see the people standing in line?"

Looking where he pointed, I did indeed see forty or fifty people standing one behind the other, stretching out of the shop door into the street. An old man in the queue asked:

"My dear boy, do you have a check to buy bread?"

"What's a check?" I asked. He showed me a little slip of paper in his hand.

"Where do you get one?"

"At the Kaghsovet."

"What's the Kaghsovet?" ^[P142-02]

My ignorance provoked laughter and mockery among those in the queue. I left in shame, thinking how much we did not know, how much we had to learn in a hurry. How much time and anguish it would take to grow accustomed to this life ^[143] and its ways.

A little farther on I came to a kiosk selling small pastries, rather like börek, called “boreshki.”^[P143-01] I wanted to buy two to ease my hunger. When I learned that they cost five rubles each, I gave up the idea. This gave me some sense of the ruble's purchasing power, though I still had too little information to form a complete picture. I was astonished that the money with which I could have bought an excellent pair of shoes in Beirut would buy only four “boreshki” here - and leave me hungry. What more could one say about the country's economy, when at every step one felt its ruin and hopelessness?

These thoughts made me forget my stomach's protests. I continued toward the city center, asking passersby for directions from time to time. At last I reached a large square with a long, imposing building whose architectural beauty and radiant pink stone immediately caught my attention. I was enchanted and could not take my eyes off it. To the left of this building, on a magnificent pedestal, stood an enormous black statue. I recognized it at once: Lenin, seemingly watching over and dominating the square. The square was empty. The occasional car went around its perimeter. Pedestrians were forbidden to cross the empty center, but a pack of dogs played freely there. On the right stood a large two-story building; opposite were relatively small, single-story buildings. This must be the main ^[144] square Nuritsa had described, and their home must be somewhere nearby. Here was Abovyan Street, which Pushkin Street should cross. Nuritsa and her family lived in a small basement room in the Institute of Foreign Languages on that street. Now I found the house easily. Mother and daughter greeted me joyfully and invited me in. Despite their straitened circumstances, they offered me a modest breakfast of bread and cheese. I was so hungry that it seemed a royal feast. Afterward Nuritsa took me to the Repatriation Committee, in Shahumyan Square. Its head was Tsaghikyan. After a long wait we managed to see him. He flatly refused my request for permission to leave Ani Pemza, saying that those sent there had to remain there; no one was allowed to move away. All my objections were rejected.

While I was speaking to Tsaghikyan, a man came up, brushed against me, spoke to him and left. He had scarcely gone when Nuritsa came over and said in horror:

“Take off your jacket - quickly!”

Bewildered, I took it off. Nuritsa practically snatched it from my hands and ran out onto the open balcony. Following her, I asked what had happened. She replied:

“While you were talking to Tsaghikyan, lice came onto you from the man who brushed against you. We must kill them at once.”

“Don't hurry,” I said. “First let me see what this thing called a louse looks like. I've never seen one in my life.”

In that brief contact, six lice had passed onto my light-colored wool jacket. Nuritsa killed them.

^[145] It was my first encounter with that loathsome and dangerous insect. One of our acquaintances used to joke that a louse was the equivalent of a passport in this country: everyone had to have one.

My mission to Yerevan had failed. All that remained was to sell the dress fabrics I had brought so that we would have a little money in hand. I asked my friend where I could sell them and what price they might fetch. She explained where to go and told me not to accept less than eight hundred rubles for each. Thanking her for her invaluable help and hospitality, I said goodbye and set off for the place she had recommended. After much walking and asking directions, I noticed people selling various things in a street. I took a place beside them, but I was ashamed to pull the fabrics out from inside my

clothing. Standing in the street selling things seemed disgraceful. After watching the others for a while, I grew a little bolder, brought out one piece and stood holding it in my hand. My courage still faltered: whenever I noticed someone who looked like a repatriated Armenian, I tucked the fabric away again and stood as though I had no business there. Only when they had passed did I dare bring it out. This happened many times. Eventually I managed to sell the pieces for nine hundred rubles apiece. I had eighteen hundred rubles in my pocket. It seemed an immense fortune, and I was afraid of pickpockets, afraid of being robbed. Pickpockets were everywhere; people were always warning us to be on our guard.

On the way I noticed a large market and decided to buy some vegetables and fruit, which we had gone without for the past two weeks. The market occupied a large space furnished with raised ^[146] wooden platforms like long tables. On them the peasants - or "kolkhozniks," as they were called - displayed the fruit and vegetables they had brought to sell.^[P146-01] There was no order to the selling. Every vendor shouted the praises of his goods and called customers over. The fruit and vegetables were not arranged in containers or baskets, but simply heaped on the platforms. The clamor and noise were tremendous, yet the loudspeakers mounted on tall poles in different corners of the market were louder still. As I entered, they were playing Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody," that immensely popular work. But who was paying any attention to its beauty? There seemed to be a great contradiction between reality and its outward presentation, something I could not yet understand. For a moment my thoughts wandered far away; I even forgot why I had come to the market. At last I came to myself and returned to reality.

I bought a small basket and put into it the cucumbers, tomatoes, potatoes, eggplants, apples and cheese I had purchased. All this had cost me fifteen hundred rubles. I had three hundred left, plus the ten I had brought with me. Carrying this burden, I set out for the station. After walking about five kilometers, I arrived. I waited several hours for the train, then somehow squeezed into a carriage. Conditions were the same as on my journey to Yerevan. A Russian passenger asked me through an interpreter whether five times five also made twenty-five abroad, or whether it was different there. That innocent question spoke volumes about how little the people knew of the world beyond their country and ^[147] of conditions there.

It was my third night with almost no sleep. We reached Ani station at eleven at night. At that hour I still had about seven kilometers to walk, exhausted and drowsy, with a heavy basket in my hand. Heavier still were my thoughts about the future awaiting us. I had gone to Yerevan with high hopes of success and was returning empty-handed. The contents of my basket were the only comfort I could offer the family waiting impatiently for me in Ani Pemza, and I knew those things would be of little interest to them. When I got home and reported the failure of my mission, a sad wave of despair passed over every face. Seeing it, I tried to give them some encouragement. "This isn't final," I said. "We must keep trying until we wear them down and wrest permission from them." Without a word, each retreated into a private world of thought. I lay down. I was so exhausted that I fell asleep at once, and when I woke in the morning the sun was already high.

We were still living in the same corner of the kindergarten hall. They had begun telling us to clear out of the hall and move into the dwelling allotted to us. Our resolve to leave Ani Pemza was unshakable. We did not even unpack our belongings, so that we would always be ready to leave.

My father returned the following day and reported on his mission:

"In Leninakan the Mghdesyans made inquiries about the possibility of moving there. According to them, we will be allowed to move to Leninakan if one of the family finds employment there, on one [148] condition: that we make no demand for housing."

"If they don't give us somewhere to live, where will we stay?" I asked.

"Misak suggests that the boys should go first, find work and stay at their house until the housing question is settled."

"In such difficult times, when every family can barely keep itself alive, would it be wise to take such a thoughtless step?" I objected.

"It is in hard times that the sincerity of human relationships reveals itself. These people are showing their kinship by generously offering to share their cramped quarters with us as a temporary refuge. In my opinion we should accept their offer. Later we will repay their kindness," my father insisted.

My father's way of seeing the matter persuaded us all, for in our present circumstances accepting that offer was the only way out.

Meanwhile the local authorities continued to pressure us to agree to leave the kindergarten hall and move into the accommodation they were offering, and to work in the pumice quarries. I should explain that pumice is a mineral used in the chemical and construction industries. It is a very light, porous stone of volcanic origin, which, remarkably, floats on water instead of sinking.

We remained unmoved by these proposals and firmly rejected them. To force us to work in the quarry, the minister of the mining industry came in person. He said plainly that we had been brought here to work in the quarry [149] and ordered us to start the very next day.

"We are not going to stay here or work in your quarry, and we are not suited to such work. If you are so badly in need of workers, bring your own family and make them work here," I answered bluntly.

My rude reply infuriated him. He shouted something I did not even understand.

Like a wild animal caught in a trap, I kept searching for ways out of our predicament - ways of escaping not only Ani Pemza, but the Soviet Union itself. I continued exploring a possible route into Turkey by going down into the gorge on the pretext of relieving myself. One day, while I was squatting there, I noticed someone approaching. It was a border guard. Pointing his rifle at me, ready to fire, he asked:

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you see? Relieving myself."

"Why don't you use the village toilet for that?"

"The toilet is so filthy you can't even go near it," I explained.

"It's no concern of mine whether it's clean or dirty. If you show yourself here again, you'll be arrested and put in prison."

So my hope of escaping by that route vanished too. Nevertheless, my longing to escape the country, to save ourselves, burned ever more fiercely and took clearer shape. I was not thinking only of saving myself. My aim was to save the whole family.

[150] That was what made it so difficult to find a possible solution. It was impossible to find or obtain a map of these regions.

No maps were sold anywhere; they might as well not have existed. In desperation I began looking in school textbooks. The maps in them were tiny, vague outlines that told one nothing; they could be of no use whatever for my purposes. Postponing the question of our escape, we had to deal with the most urgent matter: leaving Ani Pemza. We decided to send Tigran and Vazgen to Leninakan to find jobs, while I would continue knocking at the doors of the Repatriation Committee in Yerevan in my fruitless attempts to obtain permission to move. During these visits I also explored Yerevan, looking for relatives and friends.

The architecture and monumental appearance of Yerevan's State Opera building filled me with admiration. Beside the low buildings around it, that mass of black granite suggested the pyramids of Giza in the Egyptian desert. The pyramids had been built by slaves. The servile conditions in which the people here lived suggested that these monuments, too, could be regarded as the work of slaves.

There was still so much we did not understand, so much we had to comprehend, make sense of and grow accustomed to. Most of the folds of this unknown world remained closed and obscure. Gradually we had to unfold them and learn what lay within. For the moment, only one thing seemed certain: we saw nothing [151] good, and even the occasional positive thing appeared bad to us and was interpreted that way. At every step I saw confirmation of the evils I had read about in American magazines. The shops were mostly empty. They stocked only goods for which there was no demand, or things people could not afford after buying the most essential food. There were plenty of tins of various kinds of caviar, but who could think of living on those? More than a year had passed since the war ended, yet military men were everywhere. The prevailing color of people's clothing was the drab khaki of military uniforms. Civilians discharged from the army wore it too, because they could not afford civilian clothes. The struggle was for a piece of bread. Enormous numbers of disabled men filled the streets: men who had lost an arm or a leg, often both arms or both legs, while defending their homeland, and who now begged in the homeland they had saved. Pickpockets were everywhere. One could fall victim to them in the street, on a train or a bus, in a bread queue or in the market. They did not merely slip their hands into your pockets; often they used a razor to cut away the part of a trouser or coat pocket where they thought money or something valuable was hidden. They could rob you without putting a hand into your pocket. There were far too many drunken people in the streets, especially after midday. At any hour one might come across a drunk lying in the street.

In Yerevan I found my cousin Eduard. To arrive in time for the beginning of the academic year, he had parted from his [152] family in Batumi and come to Yerevan, where he was living in a student dormitory. He complained of the abundance of lice.

In those days bread came first; the next necessity was soap. It was hard to find and quite expensive, so people used it sparingly. Homemade soap was often sold, but instead of cleaning, it created favorable conditions for lice to multiply.

One day in Yerevan I met a friend whose name I prefer not to give. It was a heartfelt reunion. After embracing, we began recalling the memorable, happy days of the past, comparing and contrasting them with our present circumstances. At the end of our long conversation, my friend suggested that we go to his house, continue talking there and that I stay the night. His mother and sisters would be happy to see me too, he added. I accepted, and his family gave me a warm welcome. Our pleasant

conversation went on much longer than we realized. It was already very late when my friend whispered to his mother:

“Bring us something to eat, even if it’s only bread.”

“Don’t you know the bread never lasts until evening? There’s no bread at all,” his mother answered.

“Then boil a little beetroot and bring that,” my friend suggested.

His mother left and returned a few minutes later.

“We’ve run out of kerosene. We can’t boil the beets, and there’s no way to find kerosene at this hour.”

To cut this exchange short, our meal ended with a bowl of sliced raw beetroot set on the table. After each gnawing at a hard piece of raw beet, ^[153] we lay down to sleep.

That was how most of the population lived.

At every level, our complaints about such conditions received the same answer:

“Never mind... you’ll get used to it... It’ll turn out well in the end.”

At the Repatriation Committee, Tsaghikyan remained unyielding, and his replies grew ruder and more threatening. My brothers had found work in Leninakan. Tigran, being a tailor, had been taken on at a military supply warehouse. Vazgen had no trade and was obliged to take a laborer’s job in the weaving department of the Leninakan textile combine. Several thousand workers were employed there. A large part of the city was known by its name: Textile. After teaching for a year at the American College, how difficult it was for my brother to become a laborer in a factory like that. What an irony of life! What a collapse of my father’s dreams! Fortunately, we regarded it as temporary. We had resorted to this expedient in order to move to Leninakan.

The rest of the family remained in Ani Pemza. Seeing that we could not be made into quarry workers, one day they compelled me to teach English in the local secondary school. In a single day, I simply introduced pupils in four different classes to the English alphabet.

A month had passed since our arrival in Ani Pemza. I had already made eight fruitless visits to the Repatriation Committee in Yerevan. This was the ninth, but this time I was “armed” with certificates proving my brothers’ employment. With those documents ^[154] and my persistence, I finally obtained a document authorizing us to move to Leninakan. How much time, anguish and money I had spent obtaining that piece of paper!

I presented the documents to the local authorities in Ani Pemza. They not only allowed us to leave but provided a freight wagon bound for Leninakan to transport us. Getting our possessions and trunks into that wagon was an enormous problem. My father could lift nothing heavy because of his double hernia. My mother was frail and equally unsuited to such work; my sister was young. In short, the whole burden of moving fell on me. It was the end of October. In that settlement high in the mountains it was already very cold, and it looked as though it would snow. Under the strain of the move, I was drenched in sweat. I had never done physical labor in my life and had thought myself quite incapable of it, but the moment and its demands seemed to give my muscles new strength. My father, mother and sister all helped, yet their help served chiefly to encourage me to accomplish even the impossible. At last the work was done. We climbed into the same wagon and sat on our trunks. While we waited for the train to move, snow began to sift down. It was our first snow in Armenia. We wondered: if it snowed and was this cold at the end of October, what would the winter months be

like? How would we grow accustomed to such bitter winters? The wisest course was to find a way to escape this country as soon as possible.

[155] Throughout all our difficulties I watched my father: his reactions, what he was going through within. By temperament he was a grave, quiet man, slow to speak. Alongside his own disillusionment with the country, the sight of our hardships made him feel guilty. At every moment he expected our accusations and reproaches. He expected us to rebel against him for having forced us, against our wishes, to come and fall into this misery. Yet we never tried to blame him. He had taken this step wishing us well, hoping to secure our future, but he had fallen victim to Communist propaganda and its lies.

When he saw my suffering and exhaustion as we moved our possessions, he seemed to catch his breath and then let out a deep sigh.

The train did not leave until after dark. An hour later we reached Leninakan. Our wagon stopped on the farthest of the seven tracks facing the platform. My father went to fetch the boys to help us. After he left, railway workers warned us that our wagon would soon be leaving for another town and ordered us to empty it at once. This meant another ordeal. With my mother and sister helping, I had to lower the heavy trunks from the wagon. We had to be careful: if a trunk fell, useful things inside might break. To this day I marvel at the almost superhuman strength that circumstances and necessity gave me, enabling me to get five large trunks out of the wagon so quickly and successfully. We had scarcely finished when the wagon moved off. After a short wait, the boys came to help. Moving our belongings [156] [P156-01] from the seventh track to the platform was difficult, since three of the six intervening tracks were blocked. Lines of wagons stood everywhere. We had to lift our possessions into each wagon obstructing the way and lower them on the other side. Of course, with the boys' help the work was easier. There were five young men to do it. Even so, it took a long time, and by the time all our belongings were collected on the platform it was ten at night. At that hour it was impossible to find any means of transporting them to the Mghdesyans' house. I undertook to spend the night on the platform guarding our belongings. Everyone left. Wrapped in a blanket against the cold, I sat on our trunks and waited for daybreak. Passersby stared curiously, trying to make out what sort of person I was, sitting there at night wrapped in a blanket.

Dawn was slow to come, and I shivered with cold. By the time my family [157] arrived, I was blue with cold.

Unable to find any other means of transport, we hired a cart and took our belongings to the Mghdesyans' house. After resting a little, we went out to look for a room to rent. Finding accommodation was not easy. The overwhelming majority of the local population lived in extremely cramped, unhealthy conditions. Five to ten people shared a small room. Not every place had running water or sewer connections. Moreover, in preparing for the repatriation, the local authorities had inspected all the houses and requisitioned every available space in which to accommodate the newcomers. Several days of searching brought us nothing. Seeing our hopeless predicament, the Mghdesyans suggested another possibility. The family of Gaspar Gharagyozyan, from Ekbez, lived in Leninakan; they had arrived with the first group of repatriates. This was the Gaspar who, acting as a messenger, had managed to get out of the besieged monastery in Ekbez, break through the Turkish encirclement and reach the French forces with the besieged people's plea for rescue. I did not know him, but my father knew him very well.

Seeing our distress, Gaspar made an offer that even one's closest relation might not have made, in good times, let alone such hard ones. As a large family, they had been allotted two small rooms, one opening through the other. Gaspar offered to empty one and give it to us; all eleven of them would squeeze into the other small room. Having no alternative, we decided to accept his generous self-sacrifice for the time being and moved into that little room. The inconvenience was that to reach our room or leave it we had to pass through the room where Gaspar's family lived. Hard times are the touchstone of humanity.^[P156-01]

Although it was a good stone building, it had not been built as a dwelling and had no toilet. We had to use a public toilet twenty meters away. Its sanitary condition was almost the same as that of the toilet in Ani Pemza. In the winter months the wet floor froze solid, and one had to be extremely careful not to slip. Little by little we grew accustomed to our circumstances and adapted.

^[158] Once we had settled in, we began exploring Leninakan. Each evening, when we gathered, we reported what we had seen and discussed it from our own point of view. My father, who knew Aleppo's market well, compared it with the market here. In this little city, he said, as many potatoes were sold in a single day as in a whole week in Aleppo, with its four hundred thousand inhabitants. That was natural, for potatoes - called "kartoshka" here - formed the main part of people's diet. My father also brought us this piece of news:

"Here they count the people going into and out of the market."

"That can't be. How could they count everyone who goes in and out?" Vazgen and I objected skeptically.

"Come to the market and see for yourselves," my father said with confidence.

To investigate this incredible news, we went to the market the following day. In a narrow street nearby were small workshops: some made stoves from black sheet metal; others were tailoring shops or watch-repair shops; still others made railings for graves, farming implements and various other things. Beside the market entrance stood a kiosk selling permits to trade there. Several dozen people were selling their wares outside the entrance, shouting and praising them to attract the attention of those going in. They cried, "Sinkaa! Shpichkaa! Papiruu! Kerasinkaa! Kasinkaa! Plastinkaa! Nerik... nerk! Buy one, [I say] - a good plastinka!"^[P158-01] All these names were utterly unfamiliar to us. We understood only "nerk" - dye. It turned out that my father ^[159] had heard "nerk" as "mek" - "one" - and assumed that the people entering and leaving were being counted one by one. We turned this into a family joke. For a moment we forgot our countless worries, laughed and retold it to our friends and acquaintances.

Inside the market were stalls with goods carelessly heaped on them. The range of produce was pitiful: potatoes, cabbages, carrots, cauliflowers, onions and garlic. There were no fresh herbs, for it was late autumn. Along one side of the market, prepared tobacco was laid out on the counters and sold by weight. The overwhelming majority of smokers rolled it in newspaper. Wheat, barley, flour, bread, pickles, wine and homemade spirits were also sold. Everything around us was dirty. As in the Yerevan market, loudspeakers mounted on tall poles talked or played music continuously. Most of the broadcasts were in Russian.

Our first observations of the country revealed the following: a year and a half after the end of the war, the economy remained at its wartime level of devastation. All food and clothing were supplied through a ration-card system. The ruble's purchasing power amounted to nothing. Goods obtained

with ration cards were not especially expensive - if one could get hold of them. The rationing system itself was stratified according to one's place of work and position. There was not even a trace of the equality we had dreamed of.

As a rule, the true value of any commodity is determined by ^[160] market prices. In the market, a kilogram of bread cost sixty to a hundred rubles; a box of matches, three rubles; a cake of soap, sixty to seventy rubles. A month's wages were three hundred fifty to six hundred rubles. Under the ration system, a kilogram of bread cost three rubles. The daily allowance was half a kilogram; those who did not work received only three hundred grams. The fixed ration was wholly inadequate, since in the absence of other sources of food, bread was the only thing within reach.

The country's accepted principle was, "He who works shall eat." If you wanted to eat, you had to work for the state. Otherwise you had to steal or endure hunger. Many chose the easier course - stealing - without regard for its dangers or the threat of imprisonment. The threat of prison, whether for a political or a criminal offense, hung over everyone like the sword of Damocles. Having been imprisoned - or, as the locals put it, having "sat" - carried no disgrace; it brought prestige. To praise someone, people would say, "He's a fellow who's sat and come out," meaning that he was trustworthy. The longer or more often you had been imprisoned, the greater your standing.

The misery of trying to live honestly was that your wages scarcely covered one person's daily bread and a few potatoes. Local people explained that to survive, one had to find a way of doing "papakh" alongside one's main job. A good job was one that offered opportunities for "papakh" - that is, an illicit income on the side. At the textile ^[161] ^[P161-01] mill where Vazgen worked, the 'papakh' consisted of stealing the calico the factory produced. He told us that, at the end of the working day, every worker would wrap several dozen meters of cloth around his body, put his clothes on over it, and leave the factory. It was by no means easy: the workers were searched at the exit, and anyone caught stealing was sentenced to several years in prison.

For Vazgen, stealing was unthinkable. He would come home from work and complain to our parents: 'You brought us up badly. Everyone else steals dozens of meters and provides for his family, while I cannot bring myself to steal even a single meter.'

Workplace discipline was extremely strict. You could be imprisoned for arriving late or being absent from work. It was regarded as a political offense. My two brothers' wages were so meager that we lived chiefly by selling our possessions. On Saturdays and Sundays, at what was called the 'black market,' we would spread a cloth on the ground and arrange our clothes and other belongings on it for sale. The entire market was occupied by repatriates. There you could find goods from any country, because the sellers, who had immigrated from different countries, had brought with them products from almost every country whose goods had been sold where they lived. Many of the things on sale were completely unfamiliar to the local people; they were seeing them for the first time. Once, for example, we sold a woman a bathrobe made of toweling. Immediately after buying it, she put it on and walked proudly home through the streets.

Because my brothers were working, the local authorities ^[162] ^[P162-01] issued us bread coupons. These entitled our family to 2.2 kilograms of bread a day. To buy bread with the coupons, we went at five in the morning and stood in line outside the still-closed bakery. The shop opened at seven, and the bread arrived at seven-thirty. As it was unloaded from the truck into the shop, it passed from hand to hand or fell on the ground - but who paid attention to that? What mattered was getting the bread you were

entitled to. Once you had it, you had to hold on to it tightly: someone might snatch it from your hands and leave your family without bread for the entire day. I witnessed such incidents many times.

One of the serious difficulties of those first days was language. We had thought that, by coming to our homeland, we would at once resolve the language difficulties we had faced in foreign countries. It turned out that there was a great difference between the Armenian we spoke and the Armenian of the local people. We could not understand them, and they could not understand us. Here we had to learn our own mother tongue all over again. Even the letters of the Armenian alphabet were pronounced differently from what we knew.

The greatest difficulty, however, was holding one's tongue: not saying everything one thought, and pretending not to have seen what one had seen. You had always to feel the threat of prison and exile hanging over your head. You could not exchange thoughts freely and honestly with anyone. Prudence demanded that you be wary of everyone, even your own relatives. This state of affairs convinced me all the more that we had to find a way out of this country as quickly as possible.

Despite our straitened circumstances, we bought a radio so that we could follow events in the world. The local radio and newspapers said almost nothing about the outside world except to denigrate it. With the radio we had bought, it was possible [163] to receive news from Western countries as well - or, failing that, from Turkey. Through the radio we learned that relations between the Soviet Union and its former allies had grown quite tense and might lead to armed conflict. Our situation seemed so desperate that we even pinned our hopes of salvation on the possibility of another world war - a third - without considering the horrors that every war brings. We thought the United States would simply come and save us. As the saying goes, 'A drowning man will cling even to foam in the hope of rescue.' How naive and politically ignorant we were!

I was still not working. Almost every day, a group of us young men gathered in the city park to discuss our situation. All dissatisfied and half-starved, we recounted our troubles and worries and compared them with the good, happy days of our recent past.

Not everyone could endure such an abrupt change. Cases of suicide and mental breakdown were far from isolated. Little by little, the unknown was revealing itself, but full understanding remained a long way off. It still had hidden, incomprehensible layers even for those who had been born and raised in this country, held important posts, and died without ever unraveling it. It was a way of life that ran contrary to human reason, yet everyone was obliged to submit to it. You had no right to think for yourself; that right had been taken from you. The 'Party,' or the ruling elite, was to do your thinking for you and issue decisions determining your fate and future - decisions you had no right [164] to criticize, but were obliged to accept as 'wise.'

That regime, that system, the Soviet Union - that vast and powerful imperialist country - has ceased to exist. The exposure of its true nature and the uncovering of its secrets continue. Former political figures, artists, military men, and even generals and intelligence officers from the security organs, once considered the country's 'holy of holies,' are taking part in this process. The revelations continue at a tremendous pace; yet however much comes to light, a great deal still remains unknown and awaits disclosure.

Back from the Brink

[165] [P165-01] The cold weather had begun, and we were not very well prepared for it. The local people wore something called a telogreika: a garment rather like a short coat, padded with cotton and stitched in broad strips, well suited to keeping out the cold. Our own coats were thin and light, not intended for a freezing winter. It was still late autumn, and already so cold! We wondered: if it was like this now, what would winter bring? We had installed a stove made of black sheet metal to heat the house, and obtained fuel with coupons issued at Vazgen's and Tigran's workplaces. The house was reasonably warm.

My sister Meline was going to school, which, to our surprise, charged fees. In those years, seven years of schooling were compulsory and free. Since Meline was in the eighth grade, she was required to pay tuition. Fortunately, they agreed to admit her free of charge because she was a repatriate.

It was the middle of November when one of my friends, Mihran Chapkinian, took me aside and confided:

'There is someone who offers to take people across the border into Turkey. He wants four thousand rubles a person. We have decided to take the opportunity.'

'Whom do you mean by "we"? Your family?' I asked.

'Not the whole family, for now. Me and a few friends, including two brothers and their family. The man organizing it is a repatriate; the guide is an Azerbaijani. Would you like to [166] join our group?' Mihran offered.

'I think I will, but first I must discuss it with my family,' I replied.

The proposal was both tempting and unexpected. When I spoke of it at home, everyone was excited at first. But after weighing it carefully, we became frightened at the prospect of the whole family taking such a momentous and dangerous step - and of all of us being ruined if it failed. I remained adamant: I was determined not to let this opportunity pass. My father was powerless to hold me back, because it was he who had forced me to come to Armenia against my will. He therefore invited my uncle Simon from Yerevan, hoping he would persuade me to abandon the plan. After hearing my reasons, my uncle refrained from intervening. This was how I explained my position:

'If I turn down this opportunity, by spring I will either have tuberculosis or have killed myself. If I get across successfully, perhaps you can follow me, or perhaps I will be able to arrange your escape from the other side of the border. And if I am caught, I am already a dead man; I have nothing to lose. "A dead donkey has no fear of the wolf."'

And so it was decided that I would take part in this reckless venture. I told Mihran and asked for details: who was going, and how many people were there? There were eight of us. I proposed splitting into two groups, with the second to leave only after the first had crossed successfully. The participants discussed my proposal and approved it. The first group comprised Mihran, Nazar, Grigor, and Grigor's brother. The second consisted of me and the two brothers' parents and sister. The first group was to [167] leave on Saturday, November 30. We agreed that, once they had crossed the border safely, they would give the Azerbaijani the red tie we had chosen as a signal. He would bring it back to us as proof

that the crossing had succeeded and as the signal for us to leave. With this arrangement in place, the first group departed on the appointed day, the last day of November.

I waited impatiently for Monday, when I would learn how their journey had gone and what had happened. From Saturday night until Monday morning I was in a state of extreme tension. I barely slept for two nights. My thoughts would not release me for even a moment so that I could fall asleep. At last Monday came. At nine in the morning, I went to the two brothers' house. Their sister answered my knock, opened the door, and, smiling happily, showed me the red tie. The sight of it brought an enormous sense of relief. So the crossing had succeeded, and the red tie was giving us the green light to go. Deliverance was close at hand. We had a week to prepare, and then we would race toward freedom.

The week that separated me from deliverance was full of anxiety and tension. I had not only to prepare to leave my family, but also to prepare them for my absence: what they should do, what preparations they should make, whom they should approach if they wished to follow me, and how we would find one another abroad. If I failed and was arrested, what position should they take? They must blame me for having acted without their knowledge. And so on, and so on...

To protect myself against unforeseen dangers, I bought a dagger, as well as a camera, which I intended to sell.

[168] [P168-01] For the journey I took my New Testament with its bookmark, a gift from a young woman I knew. On the last day my father gave me two Turkish gold coins. I sewed them beneath the sleeves of my undershirt. That was all I had as I set off on an adventure whose outcome was unknown.

And so, on the evening of Saturday, December 7, 1946, deeply moved and with tears in my eyes, I said goodbye to my family and left the house with my mother's prayer. Vazgen accompanied me to the agreed meeting place - the house where we were to gather before setting out. I said farewell to him and joined the group, ready to leave. It was nine in the evening, bitterly cold. Something like snow was sifting down. An icy wind penetrated to the very marrow of our bones. Five of us set out; the fifth was the Azerbaijani who was guiding us. Because of the cold, the streets were almost deserted. We walked quietly, without a word, following the Azerbaijani in front, each of us sunk in his own troubled thoughts. Time seemed to crawl, and the city's streets seemed to have multiplied and grown longer.

At last we reached open, deserted ground. We had left the city. Here the wind and cold grew stronger: in the city, the buildings had broken the force of the wind, but out here in the open its penetrating power was felt all the more. We walked along a rough, uneven road. Thick darkness lay all around us. There was no traffic on the road. We met neither a person nor a vehicle. We had gone several kilometers beyond the city when a passenger car came up behind us, passed us, drove a little farther, and stopped. At the time we did not yet know that there were only [169] two passenger cars in Leninakan: one belonged to the textile mill and the other to the Security Committee. Seeing the car stop, our Azerbaijani guide said, 'Wait here a moment,' and [ran toward it]. [P169-01]

He returned shortly afterward and told us to continue. The car also drove on and soon disappeared from view.

We walked faster to warm ourselves and keep from freezing. We had gone only a few kilometers since that stop when suddenly about ten men emerged from both sides of the road, and one of them commanded:

'Stop! Stop! Where are you going?'

I had often read in books about the cold sweat that comes in moments of extreme danger and fear, but had never understood how sweat could be cold. Now I felt it on my own skin. A cold sweat did indeed break out over my whole body, and I knew that everything was over. Under cover of darkness, I dropped my dagger so that it would not be found on me. Then I regained my composure and answered boldly:

'We are going to Yerevan.'

'What do you mean, the road to Yerevan? This road leads to the Turkish border. You get to Yerevan by train, from the station.'

'We have only just arrived, and we do not know the way. We were told that trucks travel to Yerevan along this road and take passengers if they have room,' I explained.

[170] [P170-01] 'Enough of your fairy tales. You will come with us now, and we will find out where you were going,' said the same commanding voice.

They surrounded us, and we began walking back along the road we had come. They took us to the municipal police station near our home. Our initial questioning and searches began. I waited tensely, bracing myself for beatings, suffering, and torture. They put me alone in a room. A captain first inspected the contents of my bag, then ordered me to undress. As I took off my clothes, he searched my pockets and clothing, repeating all the while:

'Take out the gold you have hidden! Take out your gold!'

Although I was under terrible strain, outwardly I remained very calm and answered indifferently:

'I have no gold. If I had any, you would have no difficulty finding it.'

Fortunately, the beatings and torture I had awaited with such fear and dread [did not take place]. But this was only the beginning, and I expected many more surprises. Amazingly, they failed to discover the two gold coins sewn beneath the sleeves of my undershirt. They remained with me until I left prison. I cannot say how long they kept us at the municipal police station. It must have been after midnight when border guards in green caps arrived, brought the five of us together again, surrounded us, and, armed with submachine guns, took us out into the street.

During the few hours we had spent at the station, heavy snow had fallen, covering the streets and everything around them with a thick layer. The snow crunched pleasantly beneath our feet. Forgetting our tragic circumstances, I marveled at the enchanting scene. For the first time in my life [171] I was seeing so much snow. In the darkness of the night, it seemed to give off light.

The border guards led us to their Leninakan garrison. There they put me, the two brothers' father, and the Azerbaijani into a small cell, scarcely four or five square meters. It contained a bare wooden sleeping platform without any covering. A ten- or fifteen-watt bulb lit the room so dimly that we could barely see one another's faces. The three of us sat side by side on the platform. The cold grew worse, and to warm ourselves we had to move about, stamp our feet, or walk. We did not exchange a word before dawn. It was useless even to think of sleep, for several reasons. To begin with, even if we had been capable of sleeping, there was no room: the platform barely held the three of us sitting. The chief obstacle, though, was my inner turmoil. I was thinking less about myself than about the anguish my parents, brothers, and sister would feel when they learned of my arrest. How my poor mother and

sister would weep! The news of my misfortune would make my loved ones' knees buckle - both at the thought of the suffering ahead of me and because their last hopes of escaping to safety had vanished.

I was tossed about by these thoughts when I heard rusty doors opening and iron chains clanking. The sound came from outside, not far from our cell. To see what it was, I climbed onto the platform and looked through a narrow gap at the top of the door. Dawn had broken, and everything was clearly visible. But what I saw struck me like lightning. It was so unexpected that, for a moment, I thought I was hallucinating or imagining it.

Two soldiers armed with submachine guns were bringing several men out of the prison cells - [172] none other than our friends who, a week earlier, had sent us the agreed red tie as proof that they had crossed the border safely. Enraged, I sprang at the Azerbaijani, who was sitting there unconcerned, seized him by the throat, and shouted:

'Is this what you call crossing the border? The men you took across have been caught and are in prison! Speak! Explain! Tell me how they came to be here! Talk, explain yourself, you lying, cheating dog!'

He freed himself from my grasp and answered, gasping:

'I took them across, and I brought you the token proving that they had crossed safely.'

'Then how is it that they are imprisoned here now?' I insisted.

'Perhaps the Turkish authorities handed them back.'

After saying this, he began knocking on the cell door. It soon opened, and he said something in Russian - which we could not understand - to the Russian soldier who answered. A short time later the door opened again, and they took out the Azerbaijani and the other man, leaving me alone with the storm raging inside me. The incident had shaken me completely. My mind worked feverishly to find an explanation: how had the men we thought were safe been caught? Relations between Turkey and the Soviet Union were hardly friendly enough for the Azerbaijani's explanation to be credible. What, then? Had we been followed? Had someone who knew of our intentions informed the Security Committee? Was this Azerbaijani one of their men? Had he laid a trap for us? If so, why had they arrested him along with us? Such thoughts set every cell of my brain [173] to work. It was operating at full capacity, yet I could reach no logical conclusion. There were still too many unknowns to solve the mystery. I must have brooded for a very long time, forgetting even the protests of my empty stomach. Suddenly the door opened, and a serviceman brought in a bowl of food and a cup of tea. I was extremely hungry and thirsty. Eagerly I picked up the aluminum cup, but it smelled so bad that I could not take even a sip. The smell probably came from its not having been washed properly. The bowl smelled much the same, but hunger forced me to eat its contents: mashed potatoes, a piece of salted fish, and two thin slices of bread. I suppose we were given the same food as the border guards. After eating, I grew drowsy. I had not slept for more than forty-eight hours. I knelt and prayed to my God, surrendering myself to His will and asking for a way out of my predicament.

I must have slept deeply and for a long time when I felt someone pushing me. I opened my eyes and saw a soldier. Not knowing what he wanted, I sprang up and looked at him questioningly. Armed with a submachine gun, he gestured for me to come out, then ordered me to keep my hands behind my back. I had no idea what hour of the night it was. It was dark, and all around was still and silent. Obediently following his gestures, I walked toward some steps visible at the far end of the open yard. Shivering with cold, I reached them and climbed to a door. I opened it and went inside, finding myself

in a clean, carpeted corridor filled with pleasant warmth. I continued along it until, at my escort's signal, [174] I stopped before a leather-covered door. My escort opened it and led me in. I had entered a brightly lit room. Behind a huge desk sat a mustached officer of about forty. Several telephones and a desk lamp with a large shade stood on the desk. Above the officer's head hung a photograph of Lenin in a handsome, broad frame. His face seemed to smirk at me. A little farther along the wall, a clock showed twelve-thirty.

Speaking Armenian, the officer invited me to sit in the chair on my side of the desk. When I sat down, he said:

'My name is Major Stepanyan. I had you brought here so that you could tell me a little about yourself.'

'You mean, tell you my life story?'

He answered:

'Not your whole life story. Tell me what your profession is, what education you have, what you were doing before you immigrated, where you worked, and what sort of work you did.'

'I was studying at the theological seminary in Beirut,' I answered curtly.

'You are a grown man, and you concern yourself with such nonsense? Those are lies invented to deceive simple people. That explains the Gospel among the things found on you. What I do not understand are the little dolls woven from woolen yarn inside the book. What secret recognition signal are they, and to whom were you supposed to show them after crossing the border?'

'I had no intention of crossing the border,' I answered indignantly.

[175] 'Then what were you doing at night on the road to the border?' the major continued.

'I wanted to go to Yerevan. I was told that trucks go to Yerevan along that road and take passengers. We were walking there in the hope of finding such a truck,' I explained calmly.

'That explanation is very naive and cannot conceal your true intention to escape,' Stepanyan said, his tone hardening.

'I am telling the truth - only what I know. I am hiding nothing.'

Until then, Stepanyan had spoken very politely and somewhat gently. But my last remark angered him. Suddenly raising his voice, he shouted:

'Suren, we are not going to play cat and mouse with you. The sooner you confess the truth, the better it will be for you. I advise you not to be stubborn or waste time. We are not so naive that you can deceive us.'

I listened, paused briefly, then replied:

'I have told you what I know - in other words, the truth. If you find it unacceptable, what can I do?'

He stood up angrily and said:

'Did they teach you to lie and conceal the truth at that theological seminary of yours?'

Pretending to be angry myself, I replied:

'No. The seminary does not teach people to lie. It fights against lies and falsehood, regarding them as the devil's work.'

[176] 'Understand this: sooner or later you will have to confess the truth. The sooner you confess, the less you will suffer. Go and think it over carefully. Tomorrow I shall summon you to hear the truth.' With that, he pressed a button, and my escort came in. It was three in the morning. He led me back to my inhospitable, freezing cell and secured the door with several locks.

The words 'The sooner you confess, the less you will suffer' [stayed with me].^[P176-01] Was this a hint that I would be tortured if I did not confess? The thought gave me no peace until morning. Still, I decided not to yield, but to stand by my earlier statement.

With minor variations, the interrogation I have described was repeated every night, always after midnight. I continued to hold stubbornly to my original account. Fortunately, no physical pressure was used against me.

On the fifth day after my arrest, the cell door opened during the daytime, and a Russian soldier held out a bundle. The sight of it moved me so deeply that for a moment I stood frozen. The cloth in which it was wrapped was intimately familiar: it was one of the cloths we used at home. This meant that my family had learned of my misfortune and, after searching, had discovered where I was imprisoned. I burst into tears despite myself and snatched the bundle from the astonished soldier's hands. I opened it with great reverence and found the food I had known since childhood, our home cooking, which I had gone without for five days. There was my favorite bulgur pilaf, two slices of black bread, and a little sweet grape molasses in a small container. Knowing my habit of eating something sweet after a meal, my mother had tried to meet even that need. I wondered where she had managed ^[177] to find that molasses, and how dearly she had paid for it. Hungry though I was, what had come from my beloved family seemed sacred, and I hesitated to eat it.

The following day, they came for me in daylight to take me for questioning. I did not know why they had departed from their usual hour, and I expected some surprise. When I climbed the steps and entered the corridor, I met the two brothers' family. They seemed to have been waiting for me. I concluded that this was no chance encounter. As soon as they saw me, they came over and began speaking to me. Strangely, the soldier guarding me did not stop them, which further convinced me that the meeting had been deliberately arranged. They told me:

'We have confessed and told them everything, so they are releasing us. There is no point in being stubborn. You should confess too, so that you can get out soon.'

'So you told them you were escaping to Turkey? Did they not ask whom you were going to see there?' I asked.

'They did, but we answered that we knew no one in Turkey. We were escaping the hardships here.'

My escort followed our conversation with astonishing indifference, although I thought such a conversation should have been forbidden. It seemed clear that Major Stepanyan had arranged the meeting. After this brief exchange, the soldier gestured for me to enter the interrogation room.

Major Stepanyan invited me to sit down, then asked:

'How are you, Suren?'

It was the first time he had inquired after my well-being - or perhaps ^[178] he simply wished to appear more humane.

'How can someone in my position be? Thank God, I am well.'

'Do not start with God again. Have you thought carefully about your answers today? Are you going to tell the truth or not?'

'I have always told the truth.'

'Then are we to waste our time again today? Can you not see that, now your companions have confessed everything, your stubbornness serves no purpose?'

'What have my companions confessed?'

'They have confessed that they wanted to cross into Turkey.'

I had decided not to give in too quickly, but to maintain my earlier account.

'I did not know that the road led to Turkey. I joined them without realizing it.'

'How could a learned, educated, literate man like you follow those barely literate people without realizing what he was doing?'

'Hardship, difficult living conditions, and constant hunger can deprive a person of the ability to think rationally,' I said in my defense.

'So it was your living conditions that drove you to take this step?'

'The people who organized the immigration said nothing about the severe economic conditions here. Instead, they did nothing but praise the "paradise" we would find and the life we would lead. When a person feels deceived and is desperate to find a way out of a terrible situation, he may resort to anything - even a reckless venture or suicide. You demand the truth from me.'

[179] 'You should have told us the truth in the first place, when you brought us here.'

'So you finally admit that you wanted to cross the border into Turkey to escape the harsh living conditions?'

'Turkey? I was prepared to go even to hell!' I answered angrily.

'Now tell me: once you had crossed the border, whom were you going to see? Which Turkish city were you going to, and whom were you to meet? What assignments were you to take with you from here? What information had you been asked to collect and pass on? Do not answer these questions now. Think carefully. Tonight, when I summon you again, you can answer then.'

'Neither now nor tonight do I have anything to add,' I answered sharply.

'I told you not to answer now. Just think and gather your recollections. Bear in mind the consequences of lying, and give your answers at our next meeting.'

That ended the day's questioning. Back in my cell, I fell into deep thought. What did they expect me to tell them? I had already admitted that harsh living conditions and the bleak, hopeless prospect of the future had driven me to try to escape reality. What assignments were they hinting at? They must suspect that I had been sent to Armenia on a special espionage mission and was now trying to carry it out by crossing the border. Such an accusation might not only prevent my release but cast a shadow over my future. I wondered how [180] I could convince them that I had no connection with espionage and that, even if I had wanted to engage in it, my character made me incapable and unsuited to such work. My only basis for convincing them might be my Christian faith and religious activity. I decided to seek evidence and arguments in that sphere to refute Stepanyan's assertions. My mind strained to

find a way out. At last I decided always to steer the questioning toward my religious and theological work. These thoughts kept me awake. When, according to their custom, they came around midnight to take me for questioning, I had still not slept.

Major Stepanyan received me with a very polite and respectful greeting. He asked how I was, then turned to his purpose.

'As we agreed, I hope you have decided to tell me everything and conceal nothing. Let me tell you in advance that any connection you may have with an espionage group could be useful to us. So do not be afraid that it will make your position worse. On the contrary, for helping us you will be released and may even be rewarded.' He spoke persuasively and with assurance, as though everything were already clear to him and only my confession remained.

'I believe I have already told you that I have said everything I know. I repeat: I do not know, and have never known, any espionage group or individual spy. I have had no dealings with any such organization or person. My only work has been in God's service.'

After hearing me out, Stepanyan took the shoulder bag I had packed for the journey from a desk drawer and [181] emptied its contents onto the desk. From among them he picked up my little comb, which had a piece broken off one end, and held it up.

'Where is the missing piece of this comb? Is it not with the man you were supposed to meet in Turkey or somewhere else? Was it not to serve as a token by which you could recognize one another?'

Hearing this explanation, I could not suppress a smile. With a wry grin, I said:

'It takes quite a vivid imagination to interpret a broken comb like that. Such things are far removed from my life. Does the fact that I was a theological student tell you nothing? My concern is to lead people to God. I have nothing to do with politics.'

'And you do not consider secretly crossing the country's border at night a political act? I suppose that, too, is a way of leading people to God. Perhaps your God is in Turkey,' he said mockingly.

'In that matter, I am guilty first of all before God, rather than before you. Unable to bear the hardship, I was fleeing the mission He had entrusted to me. I am like the prophet Jonah in the Old Testament. God sent him to Nineveh to preach His word, but Jonah fled the mission the Lord had given him and boarded a ship for Tarshish. A terrible storm arose on the voyage. Terrified that they would perish, the passengers and sailors concluded that there was a great sinner aboard and that they would all be destroyed because of his sin. They cast lots to discover the guilty man, and the lot fell on Jonah. They seized him and threw him into the sea. The storm immediately subsided, and a great fish swallowed Jonah.'

[182] 'Inside the fish, Jonah prayed and pleaded with God to save him so that he could go and carry out His mission. God commanded the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land. Saved in this way, Jonah immediately obeyed God's command and went to Nineveh. Like Jonah, I wanted to flee God's mission. But you swallowed me as the fish swallowed him, and I am still in its belly. When I am released from here, I shall carry out my mission as Jonah did.'

'You tell a good fairy tale and hope to persuade me with these legends. All the same, you admit that you had some sort of mission. What mission was it? Once again I warn you: the sooner you tell the truth, the better it will be for you.'

The interrogations continued along these lines for several more days. In the end, they must have realized that I had no espionage purpose or serious political objective. On the last day of questioning, Major Stepanyan asked me to read and sign the interrogation records. After I had done so, he gave me some admonitory advice as he said goodbye:

‘You will probably be released soon. But if you want to live and succeed in this country, first of all you must give up that false God and your futile religious activity, which has no future. Otherwise you will face very great difficulties. You are an educated, capable young man. Choose a proper profession and work. Do not lose heart. You know foreign languages; you could work as a foreign-language teacher. Yes, there are difficulties, ^[183] but they are temporary and will gradually disappear. Life will not always be like this; it will improve little by little. You must accept the demands of present conditions, adapt to them, and grow accustomed to them. Do not regard yourself as an outsider. Think and act as an inseparable part of this people and this country.’

These words proved very useful during the first years in which I was finding my bearings.

After this final lecture, they returned my belongings and took me downstairs. Instead of returning me to my cell, they put me in an open vehicle and, accompanied by two armed border guards, drove me into the city center. We passed through the gates of a large building, got out, and approached a door. They opened it and ordered me inside. I entered a large room and, to my surprise, found the other four young men - the ones who had set off to cross the border a week before me. At the sight of me, they cried happily:

‘They have brought Suren too!’

I asked where we were. They said it was the State Security Committee building. This was the organization that made the entire country tremble, responsible for all the deportations, political imprisonments, and executions. Even its name inspired terror. Many people avoided walking past the building. At the time I did not yet know these things. To me it was merely a change of cell - and a pleasant one. This one was larger and warm. Best of all, I was no longer alone: there were friends with whom I could talk, laugh, and consult.

I asked the young men the question that remained a mystery to me:

^[184] ‘Explain to me how you ended up in prison after sending us the red tie. Were you deceived and taken somewhere else instead of to the border?’

Talking over one another and filling in each other’s account, they told me what had happened:

‘After walking quietly and cautiously for about ten kilometers in the darkness, the Azerbaijani stopped and said, “We have arrived. This is Turkey. You are now on Turkish soil. I must turn back here.” We were in open country. It was dark all around, and we could see nothing. In our innocence, we believed that we were safe and already in Turkey. So we gave the Azerbaijani the tie we had agreed upon, for him to deliver to Grigor’s house. He took it, hurried away, and disappeared into the darkness. In high spirits, we walked on briskly in the same direction. We had gone barely a few hundred meters when men armed with submachine guns and searchlights sprang out on every side, shouting, “Stop!” In the beams of their lights, we could plainly see that we were surrounded by Soviet border guards in fur coats. It was as though they had been lying in ambush, waiting for us. They immediately arrested us all, brought us into the city, and imprisoned us.’

'Judging from what you have told me, the whole thing was an organized trap, deliberately set to ensnare us,' I reasoned.

'That is what the facts suggest. They laid a trap for us innocents, and we foolishly walked straight into it, just as they had planned. The Azerbaijani was probably one of their employees and helped to [185] set the trap.'

'We are in serious trouble. Getting out of one prison was difficult enough. Let us see how things end here. How and when will we manage to get out of this place?' I concluded.

Compared with my previous cell, this one was heated, and it was pleasant to be with others who shared my fate, able to joke and talk together. The young men were in good spirits and optimistic about the future. They thought they would soon be released. The trouble was that we were given no food here. When we complained to the guards, their answer was curt:

'We have no kitchen here. If you have money, give it to us, and our man will go to the market and buy whatever you want.'

We pooled the money we had. It was not much - barely enough for two days of plain bread. Indeed, the bread bought with it was gone in two days. On the third day we went hungry, searching the corners of our pockets for breadcrumbs.

Questioning continued here too, according to the established custom, in the middle of the night or toward dawn. We were taken separately. The questions were almost the same as before, except that here they also asked us about one another. Each of us had to describe the other four: their strengths and weaknesses, their pasts and interests. Apparently they were preparing an individual file on each of us and trying to fill it with as much information as possible.

On the third night after my transfer here, when they took me for questioning, [186] they led me to the chief's private office. Besides the chief who questioned me, there was another man in civilian clothes. As I entered, this man looked me up and down.

'Do you know this man?' the chief asked.

'No,' I replied. I truly did not know who he was.

'This is Comrade Savoyan, secretary of the city Party committee,' the chief introduced him.

I merely shrugged. I did not know what a 'city committee' was, or what its 'secretary' did - what kind of post it was or what duties it involved. I had never heard his name either.

'Now tell him everything you have told us about why you were escaping to Turkey.' I had repeated those words so often that I knew them almost by heart. Without hesitation I launched into my 'indictment.'

'We came to our homeland hoping to find the best possible conditions for living. That was what we had been led to believe: that we would suffer no hardship here. When we arrived in Armenia, we discovered that we had been cruelly deceived. Instead of ideal living conditions, we found hunger. Instead of the comfortable homes we had been promised, we found shacks, with eight or ten people crammed into tiny, cramped rooms. Without knowing Russian, it is almost impossible to find suitable work. I have been left idle, without a job and without food. My brothers work, but their wages are not enough even for plain bread. We live by selling our possessions and clothes, and even those are nearly

exhausted. These unbearable conditions drove me to take an impermissible step. I admit that I made a mistake...'

[187] Comrade Savoyan, who had been listening attentively, interrupted:

'It is true that conditions are somewhat difficult. We must endure and be patient for a little while. Think of the hardships we endured to defend our homeland! You, too, must bear a little and be patient. Should an Armenian flee to Turkey - to the land of his age-old enemy - for a piece of bread?'

The phrase 'for a piece of bread' angered me, and I replied:

'I was not fleeing for a piece of bread. It was so painful to see my poor parents half-starved that I was prepared to go not only to Turkey but even to hell, so that I would not have to see them in that state. But I admit that I have made a great and irreparable mistake.'

'You will be released tonight. Tomorrow morning come to me on the third floor of the city council building, and I will have you assigned a job,' Comrade Savoyan concluded.

And indeed, at one in the morning we were released. The moment we emerged from that notoriously terrifying building, we tasted the breath of freedom. It was bitterly cold outside, but, warmed by the feeling of freedom, I scarcely noticed it. I could hardly believe that we had escaped so quickly from this reckless venture, with all its dangers of torture and terror. I hurried home, eager to share the joy of my release with my family. At that late hour, my mother was the first to answer my knock. What tears of joy filled those eyes that had longed for me! All at once, everyone sprang up and embraced me as though I had been dead and come back to life. And truly, whenever I think of that adventure, [188]

[P188-01] I am all the more convinced that I had come right to the edge of an abyss and returned almost unharmed. Our relatively easy release was probably connected with the fact that the security organs themselves had set the trap. To avoid exposing that fact, they released us without further complications, having simply frightened us and those around us. Later, many others fell into that abyss and suffered for long years. For us, however, it left a great black mark in our personal files, one for which we would suffer considerably and have to work hard to avoid serious consequences. For decades, they followed every step I took, every word I said, every opinion I expressed. How much restraint and vigilance it required to keep some innocent act from becoming a pretext to arrest me as a suspect! Twenty-six years after these events, when they gave me permission to visit Beirut as a tourist, Security Committee officers admitted that they had watched me for a long time. Having found no wrongdoing, they had classified me as a 'harmless man.'

Nevertheless, it greatly hindered my subsequent advancement and prevented me from obtaining higher and more responsible work and positions. Perhaps all this accorded with God's far-sighted plan, so that, in striving for high office, I would not slip into the Communist ranks and forget my religious past entirely.

We Learned - but Slowly

[189] [P189-01] When they heard our complaints about the hardships, the local people would say:

'Never mind. You will get used to it. Things will be all right in the end.' We were taking our first steps toward 'getting used to it,' driven less by any deliberate wish of our own than by the relentless demands of life.

True to his promise, Comrade Savoyan, first secretary of the city Party committee, had me employed as a cashier at the LenKosh artel, at a salary of 360 rubles a month. That would buy six kilograms of black bread at the market; that was the market price. Bread bought with coupons at the state shop, within one's daily allowance, cost three rubles a kilogram. Wages were calculated according to state-shop prices. Bread was the only thing one could buy every day in those shops - and only one's allotted amount - provided one joined the line early enough and managed to get it before supplies ran out. Once a month, coupons were also issued for meat and sugar. Instead of meat, they gave us obrezka: waste scraps of animals' stomachs, lungs, and other parts, frozen together into solid blocks that had to be chopped with axes. Instead of sugar, they gave us povidlo: fruit that ought to have been thrown away, boiled with a little sugar. To obtain such 'meat' and 'sugar,' one had to queue for about twenty hours. Queuing did not mean standing quietly and gradually approaching the counter. It was a wrestling match. When you finally emerged, your whole body ached and was covered in bruises. Worst of all was when, despite all that suffering, you failed to obtain these desperately [190] needed supplies, and that month's coupons went to waste as well. Every family needed someone whose job was to stand in lines. When I began working, this duty fell to my elderly father, who was often crushed in the crowd or robbed while waiting. More than once, thieves stole our entire family's bread, meat, and sugar coupons for the month.

My colleagues welcomed me and willingly helped me in everything. My first experience of paying wages was revealing. Beside each name on the payroll was the sum I had to pay and obtain a signature for. My colleagues advised me to round the payment down in my own favor - that is, to withhold the last few rubles and kopecks. I regarded this as outright robbery and rejected their advice. They suggested:

'Sit beside us, and we will do it for you. Without some income on the side, how will you survive on your salary alone?'

In my presence, the office girls did exactly as they had said. What astonished me was that not one of the people receiving wages complained that he had not been paid the full amount due. Perhaps I had been assigned this job precisely so that I would have a source of extra income. Unable to tolerate the work, after a month I gave up the cashier's position and became a bookkeeper.

I worked at this artel for about eight months. During that time, a young man would visit several times a month, go in to see the Party secretary, talk at length, and leave. From my female colleagues' whispers, I gathered that he worked for the Security [191] Committee. After he left, the Party secretary would summon me and ask me to write my autobiography. This happened several times. She would instruct me to make it longer and more detailed, then add that it was necessary for my admission to the Party. At the same time, Comrade Katya tried another way of influencing me, which I believe was also at the security officers' direction. One of the office employees was a young local woman named Arus. Katya tried to bring us together, but her attempts came to nothing. After that, Arus took the

initiative herself and invited me to the cinema. I declined, explaining that the films were in Russian and I could not understand them.

We were still living in Gaspar's family's home. Almost every day, my parents went to the municipal offices and demanded housing in their broken Armenian. They would not let me get involved, fearing that, after my attempted escape, it might harm me. They kept going day after day, wearing the officials down in the hope that they would finally be compelled to allocate us somewhere to live.

One morning, someone came early and said:

'We are going to give you a home. Pack everything you have and be ready. A truck will come shortly to take you.' My father came to my workplace and hurried me home to help with the packing.

While we were bundling our things, Major Armenakyan of the Security Committee, who lived in our building, came in and asked:

'What are you doing?'

'They told us they were giving us a home, so we are packing [192] and getting ready to move.'

'Unpack everything immediately. They are not giving you any home. They have deceived you. I will go now and straighten it all out,' he said, and left.

We soon learned that, that very day, many repatriate families had been deported to remote districts of Armenia. Armenakyan, who had saved us, returned later and told us not to keep going to demand housing. He advised us to make temporary living quarters in the basement of the same building and move there. The basement was in a dreadful state. First it had to be cleared of filth accumulated over decades. The walls were pitch-black; they needed washing and then whitewashing. In short, we set to work. After a week of hard labor, we had put it somewhat in order and built a wooden floor about half a meter above the ground. What resulted was a dwelling far below even the most elementary requirements for habitation. After six months in Gaspar's family's room, we moved into our new 'apartment.' The basement had two windows at pavement level. To enter, one had to go down five or six steps from the street.

Everything around us was so disheartening that we had become skeptical of everything. One day we decided to go to the theater. Until then, we had been accustomed to amateur theatrical groups, with acting and directing of a very low standard and almost no stage machinery or scenic design. What we saw at the Leninakan theater astonished us. To us, it was a miracle, in stark contrast to the reality of life outside the theater. The first production we saw [193] [P193-01] was a staging of *In Honor of Those at Sea*. In many respects it fell short of productions we saw later, but that first experience overwhelmed us: the acting, the subtlety of the direction, the stagecraft, and the lighting effects. In short, to us it was a miracle. We resolved not to miss a single play. Among the wonderful productions we later saw were Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Hagop Baronian's *Honorable Beggars*, Ara the Beautiful, *The Twins*, and others.

The theater was our first consolation in those difficult days. Vardan Ajemian was its director at the time.

It was during this period that, one day in the street, I met several young repatriates I knew. They told me they were working as choristers in the Philharmonic's song-and-dance ensemble, earning five hundred rubles a month. I asked whether singers were still needed. They said they were. This job had many advantages over my present one, so I decided to change employment and asked the artel

management to release me. My request was refused. The Party secretary was particularly unwilling to let me go. When she learned that I wanted to work elsewhere, she postponed her final answer until the next day. The following day, after informing the security officers, she said:

'First go and get accepted there. Only if they accept you will we release you from this job.'

I successfully passed the ensemble's audition and was accepted. Then I was released from the LenKosh artel.

The nature of my work changed at once. Now I had more [194] free time and could attend to family matters. Vazgen was still doing manual labor, suffering more in spirit than in body. He wanted to continue his education, but they would not release him from his job. If he left of his own accord, he faced several years in prison. In my spare time, I went almost every day to the textile mill's personnel department, explaining, asking, and pleading for my brother's release. Each time I was refused. After several weeks of wearing them down, I finally succeeded. Vazgen immediately applied to the pedagogical institute. After successfully completing its preparatory course, he entered the physics and mathematics department. Fortunately, he received a stipend roughly equal to the salary I had earned at LenKosh.

From repatriates we knew, we learned that we could install a loom at home and weave cloth. Vazgen worked especially hard: as soon as he returned from classes, he sat down at the loom and worked until late at night. My father sold what we produced. Although we worked in fear and tension, after about a year of using this production method from the distant past, our financial situation improved a little. We could regularly buy barley flour and potatoes at the market. My mother boiled the potatoes, mixed them into the barley-flour dough, shaped it into loaves, and cooked them on the stove. We ate them with such relish that they might have been the most delicious food in the world. They met our need for bread, and that meant we had enough to eat.

[195] [P195-01] [P195-02] At first the local authorities turned a partly blind eye to this kind of illegal cottage industry. But that did not last. They began frequent house inspections to put an end to it, and before long we lost this source of income too. My work in the Philharmonic's song-and-dance ensemble was interesting and enjoyable. We were regarded as artists and often attracted attention as we walked through the streets. This was especially so after the ensemble's artistic director, Minas Krishchyan, assigned me to recite the prologue to *The Soldier's Return*. To develop my recitation skills and change my Western Armenian pronunciation to Eastern Armenian, he sent me to Tamara Temuryan, a well-known reciter then living in Leninakan. She liked my delivery but worked on my Eastern Armenian pronunciation. This was understandable: the Armenian we spoke differed considerably from the local variety. Temuryan's work was not in vain, and I learned to recite like a local.

The ensemble often toured nearby villages and towns. Our first concert in Jukhan, a village ten kilometers from Leninakan, deserves mention. We went there in open trucks. When we arrived toward evening, the crowd gathered outside the club caught sight of us and shouted:

'The givers are here! The givers are here!'

They meant the people who gave concerts. The club had a small hall, packed with villagers. A large crowd had also [196] remained outside because they could not afford tickets. We were astonished to learn that many people who had no money bought their tickets with eggs or lavash instead.

The village had no electricity. Kerosene lamps were lit on either side of the stage, providing its only illumination. Because the stage was small, only a reduced group from the ensemble had come, but the

concert was well received. Afterward, as we climbed into the open truck for the journey home, the young men who had been unable to afford admission began pelting us with stones. We barely managed to shield our heads with our arms, and some of us were injured nonetheless. Art demands sacrifices...

The ensemble's employees, and especially its choir, consisted almost entirely of repatriates. With a few exceptions, the dancers were local Armenians, although there were some repatriate male and female dancers too. Many choristers had immigrated from Bulgaria, where they had gained considerable experience singing in choirs.

As time passed, we grew more skillful at adapting, at understanding the conditions and opportunities around us, and at putting them [197] to our advantage. While working at the Philharmonic, I learned that one could also study at the music college housed in the same building and receive a student stipend. This opportunity encouraged us, and my sister, Vazgen, and I all enrolled at once: my sister and I in choral conducting, and Vazgen in the instrumental department, studying the oboe. My dream was to become a conductor and lead a choir. Academically, all three of us were among the college's best students. We struggled with Eastern Armenian and Russian classes but managed to overcome those difficulties. For me, the demands of the piano lessons posed a particular challenge.

I was older, and my fingers had already grown stiff. The piano required long hours of practice. I had neither that much time nor ready access to a free instrument. The college pianos were always occupied. Sometimes I waited until nine or ten in the evening for my turn, to prepare for the following day's lesson. For these reasons, I still feel very inadequate at the piano even now.

While I worked and studied, the Security Committee continued its close surveillance of me. They were particularly interested in why, at my age, I had not married. Probably they interpreted this as a desire to remain unattached so that I could attempt another escape. The management of both the Philharmonic and the college often raised the subject with me. Some young women even approached me themselves, suggesting dates or trips to the cinema. Among these [198] [P198-01] young women were even Russians. Sensing the Security Committee behind it all, I avoided becoming involved with local women. My distrust of their morals was another obstacle. As generally happens, war reduces the number of men, and consequently women's morals decline to some degree. Afraid of falling into a trap, I was always wary of girls and women who took the initiative in approaching me. At the same time, I was thinking of ways to escape the Security Committee's pressure and pursuit. I began to consider marriage more seriously, although I still had no financial basis for taking such a step. Our family's resources barely kept us alive. What would I do about housing? To marry, I needed at least one small room. Where could I find it, and with what means?

Some young repatriates solved this problem more easily, and to their own advantage. They married local girls whose families were comfortably off. Such marriages had several advantages. First, the local authorities and security organs regarded these men as more trustworthy, because by marrying they bound themselves inseparably to the country. Second, they gained better living conditions and a home. Third, they acquired local relatives and a wider circle of acquaintances who knew all the secrets of making a living and earning money in that country, and could offer useful [199] [P199-01] advice. Finally, those connections could help them advance at work.

There was a Bulgarian Armenian girl named Viki in the ensemble's choir. She was cheerful and fond of jokes; compared with the others, she seemed especially reserved and trustworthy in her conduct. One day she introduced me to her sister, Aghavni. Aghavni made a pleasant impression on me: she

was serious, quiet, and pretty. Her silence came from not knowing Armenian. Even the few Armenian words she did know she used cautiously, afraid of making a mistake and becoming an object of laughter. Over several months, our acquaintance grew into a close friendship. When we spoke together, we often resorted to Turkish or French, which she understood better than Armenian. In Bulgaria she had attended Bulgarian and French schools and completed her secondary education. She lived with her father, mother, and Viki, and worked as a laborer in the rope-making artel. During the eight months of our acquaintance, I came to the conclusion that Aghavni could become my companion for life. After obtaining her parents' consent, she accepted my proposal. The chief difficulty still remained unresolved.

Meanwhile, my diligence and conscientiousness at work had brought me notice, and I was appointed the ensemble's organizer, with a higher salary. Taking advantage of my new position, I had Aghavni employed in our choir. She was also to learn to play the qanun, a traditional instrument.

In the summer of 1948, the ensemble was preparing for a major [200] [P200-01] concert tour of Tbilisi and other parts of Georgia with large Armenian populations. With this in mind, Aghavni and I decided to marry a few [days] before departure and turn the tour into our honeymoon. On June 11, we went to the civil registry office to register our marriage. On the way, I explained to Aghavni that we would face many difficulties in life - poverty, illness, misfortune, and suffering - and asked whether she was prepared to love, respect, and care for me through them all. Since we were not yet having a church wedding, I was filling the pastor's role myself. We registered as husband and wife, but had nowhere to go. We went to my family's home. My mother baked a small cake and served it to us with tea. That was our wedding feast. Afterward we went to a third-floor room we had obtained with great difficulty in the city hotel. Intoxicated with happiness, we got into bed. Before long, reality warned us that it was too soon to sing of happiness. It reminded us of the country and circumstances in which we were founding our happy family. We had scarcely lain down when an army of bedbugs attacked. These were no isolated insects: dozens crawled over the bed. We would clear away those we could see and settle back into bed with relief, only for it all to begin again. And so it continued until morning. When I complained to the hotel manager the next day, he smiled and said:

'It is the same in every room. I advise you to leave the light on at night. They come out more in the dark than in the light.' When I asked whether it might be possible for [201] [P201-01] [P201-02] us to change rooms, he replied:

'I have already told you: changing the room will not change the situation. We cannot get rid of the bedbugs. Besides, I have no other room available.'

After four nights of warfare against the bedbugs in that small hotel room, we retreated. On June 15 we set off on the concert tour. Our transport consisted of open trucks fitted with benches. We were heading for Akhalkalaki. The route crossed a high plateau at an altitude of about two thousand meters, with valleys and gorges. We covered the hundred kilometers without noticing anything of particular interest and reached Akhalkalaki, the capital of Javakhhk. The overwhelming majority of its inhabitants were Armenian. The region was known for its butter, cheese, and potatoes. We were lodged in the town's small hotel. Our honeymoon was only now beginning.

Our first performance that evening was enthusiastically received. People snapped up all the tickets for our four days of concerts. They asked us to stay longer than planned, but that was impossible: tickets for our performances in the next towns had already been sold. The celebrated ashugh Havasi attended all four concerts. Many people invited us into their homes in small groups simply to offer hospitality.

Their longing for Armenian art, music, song, and dance was striking. Living outside Armenia, they lacked opportunities to develop their national arts.

From Akhalkalaki we traveled to Akhaltsikhe, the birthplace of Vahan Teryan. Seventy-five percent of the town's inhabitants [202] [P202-01] were Armenian, and numerous Armenian villages lay very close by. Our concerts were received just as warmly as in the previous town, and people were sorry to see us leave.

Our next stop was Borjomi, the resort famous for its mineral waters. Its Armenian population was smaller than that of the previous two towns, so only two concerts were planned. Both were warmly received. From this picturesque town we went on to Gori, Stalin's birthplace. Our reception there had been poorly organized. First, there was no room for our group at the hotel, and we had to spend two nights in the House of Culture, each making do as best he could. Fortunately, I acted quickly, found a large bundle of velvet curtains on the stage, and made a bed for Aghavni and myself in a corner. Many of the others slept sitting on chairs.

In Gori we were taken to Stalin's house-museum. That man-eating monster was presented there as a humane, honest, kind, intelligent, and gifted superman whose incomparable genius had saved the Soviet homeland and all humanity from the threat of Hitler's armies and annihilation. The museum displayed his house, his belongings, even the cradle in which little Soso had been rocked. Everything was presented as a sacred relic belonging to a 'god-man.' It was as though we were in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, confronted with a reflected and inflated 'significance for all humanity.'

While our local colleagues examined every detail with emotion, displaying their hero worship, we passed the exhibits in silence and restraint, afraid that an ill-judged [203] remark might bring a political accusation against us. There was a substantial Armenian population in Gori, and both concerts achieved the success we had expected. From there we traveled to Tbilisi by local train. We were to stay in the Georgian capital for a month and give almost all our concerts there. Instead of putting us in a hotel, the ensemble management thought it better to rent furnished rooms. These were in Havlabar, regarded as the Armenian quarter. Aghavni and I were given one such room, where we lived for exactly a month.

Tbilisi's famous Armenian theater was also in Havlabar, and most of our concerts were to take place in its hall. They were even more successful than we had expected. There was never an empty seat. Tickets sold out a week in advance.

Despite all this, the ensemble's employees did not always receive their daily allowances on time. Our allowance was ten to fifteen rubles a day. Those ten or fifteen rubles were what we had to live on. We often went hungry. On one such day, all the money the ensemble members had between them was enough only for green onions. Having eaten those, we went onstage almost starving; as we sang, our mouths foamed from the onions. During the performance there was a scene in which we had to make a great deal of noise, as though fighting. In that scene we shouted in French:

'We are hungry! We want bread! Give us bread!'

We shouted in such a way that even our local colleagues understood nothing. Otherwise, the consequences might have been very [204] unpleasant, and we might have been punished.

Vahram Papazian, the People's Artist and unsurpassed interpreter of Shakespeare's Othello, attended one of our concerts. When we met afterward, he praised our performance and spoke about his own

successes and difficulties. One remark in particular stayed in my memory: 'To create the true character of Othello, I must live like that Moor.'

Two concerts in Tbilisi took place in the Philharmonic's twelve-hundred-seat hall. They too were warmly received. It was time to return home. Yet after such successful performances and excellent takings, the ensemble management had somehow found itself - or claimed to find itself - completely helpless, without the money needed to buy train tickets home. The concert receipts should have supported the group for several months, yet they complained of having no money for the return journey. There was an inexplicable mystery here that could only be explained by fraud. We managed to return to Leninakan with borrowed money.

Several serious problems awaited me at home, chief among them finding somewhere for Aghavni and me to live. Our salaries did not allow us to rent a home. It was impossible to fit a newly married couple into my family's basement, not only for lack of space, but also because my unmarried young brothers and sister lived there. Only one option remained: to live under the same roof as Aghavni's [205] parents. Viki had already married and moved to Yerevan. This solution had many drawbacks too, but I regarded it as the lesser evil and, ignoring all kinds of gossip, agreed to it temporarily.

The dwelling allocated to Aghavni's family consisted of several basement-like rooms. Its only window - pardon me, it was not really a window but a skylight - was set in the ceiling and could neither be opened nor closed. Four of us were to live in this twenty-square-meter 'room.'

The day after we reached Leninakan, Hovhannisyan, the Philharmonic director, called me into his office and told me confidentially that the Security Committee had summoned me. I was to report five days later at eleven in the evening and ask for Comrade Melkonyan. A shudder passed through me. Were they reopening the story of my escape? Had I made some careless remark during the concert tour? If so, which of our colleagues could be the corrupt scoundrel who cultivated friendship only to catch people's careless remarks and report them to his masters in the security organs?

Those people could destroy a person over an accusation that seemed the most trivial offense. Such thoughts tore me apart, yet I could discuss them with no one - not my parents, not my brothers, not even my wife.

On the appointed day, I entered that terrifying building at precisely the required time. After the checks, I was led into Melkonyan's office. He was a young man about eight years older than I was.

[206] [P206-01] He received me very politely. He asked how I was, how I earned my living, how I was adapting to local conditions, and other questions of the sort old friends might ask when they met. Then the subject changed abruptly.

'You lived mainly in Aleppo. Tell me about Aleppo: what you did there, what friends you had, and how you spent your free time.'

'That is right; I lived mainly in Aleppo. From 1939 to 1945 I worked for the electricity company. My colleagues included Armenians, Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs, Greeks, Jews, and others.'

'Did you have no American friends?'

'No. I attended the American college, but there were no Americans among the students for me to befriend.'

'Do you know Carlton?'

'I know Dr. Carlton as the principal of the American college. I had no dealings with him.'

'According to our information, you were closely connected with Carlton and engaged in American propaganda, probably at his direction.'

'That information does not correspond to reality. Our acquaintance went no further than knowing one another. Even that acquaintance arose through my community and religious work at the Bethel Evangelical Church.'

'Did you not have private, friendly conversations with him? Were the American films shown around your home not screened at his instruction? Do not be afraid. Tell the truth freely. It poses no danger to you. Your attempt to cross the border has been forgiven, [207] and now you are obliged to cooperate with us in exposing our enemies.'

'But I have done nothing anti-Soviet, nor have I seen Carlton do anything of that kind. I can add nothing to what you already know. The only thing I can tell you is that Carlton trusted only me to operate the college's portable film equipment. For that reason, it stayed at our house for a time. It is true that I showed an American film on the wall of our neighbor's house across the street. Carlton knew nothing about it. I did it on my own initiative, not for propaganda, but simply to give the neighbors some enjoyment.'

'Where did Carlton's trust in you come from? Why did he trust you in particular, rather than someone else?'

His question seemed gradually to reveal what Melkonyan was pursuing. I replied:

'I think only Carlton himself can answer that. I do not know how I earned his trust. In my view, he had known me since my college years, and I had given him no reason to distrust me.'

'Did you not know that Carlton works for American intelligence?'

That question made Melkonyan's purpose clear. He wanted to connect me with American intelligence. It put me on my guard. I thought for a moment before answering:

'I knew Carlton as an upright clergyman. I heard him preach many times, both in English [208] and in Turkish. I could never believe that he was an intelligence agent.'

'All right, all right. Do not pretend to be so naive,' he interrupted. 'Think carefully about what I have said, and above all, do not be afraid. If you have any arrangement with him, or any assignment from him, tell us. You will not suffer for it, and we may benefit. Think it all over. When we summon you again in five days, you can tell us everything.'

'But I have already told you everything...'

'Do not rush. Come next Wednesday at the same time. Give me your pass to sign so that they will let you out of the building.'

I took the pass, said goodbye, and left that accursed building. In the public's eyes, anyone who came and went there was suspect. Whenever I entered or left, I therefore looked carefully around to see whether anyone had noticed. It was no coincidence that they summoned people for questioning late at night, when as few people as possible were in the streets.

On the day of my next visit, I spent the whole day wondering how the questioning would turn out. When I reported late that evening, Melkonyan received me as before, then returned to the main subject:

'Have you thought carefully about what you have to say? Let me remind you again that you have nothing to fear. Your connection with Carlton could be useful to us.'

'I am hiding nothing from you. [I have told you everything. I have received no assignment,] and have never even had a conversation of that kind.^[P208-01]' While I was speaking, another man ^[209] entered the room. Melkonyan rose when he saw him, but sat down again at the man's gesture. The newcomer took a chair in a corner and began following our conversation. Melkonyan told me to continue.

'My dealings with Carlton were confined to using the film equipment. In effect, he employed me as a projectionist.'

'Did you never discuss political subjects with him?' asked the stranger, who I believe was Melkonyan's superior.

'No. There was never any occasion to discuss such subjects.'

'At your previous meeting, you said that Carlton knew Turkish well. He knew Turkish well - how do you know that?' the chief asked again.

'Several times I heard him preach in church to Turkish-speaking worshippers. He spoke the language very fluently and well.'

'And why did he know that language? Was there not some intelligence purpose behind it? Did it have nothing to do with your city's proximity to the Turkish border?' the chief continued.

'How should I know why he knew the language? After all, I had no close friendship with him that would have led him to tell me such things. I have absolutely nothing to add to what I have said.'

'When did you last see Carlton?'

'As you know, I was studying in Beirut during the year before I immigrated. I probably last saw him in the spring of 1945, when I went to see him to return the ^[210] film equipment.'

'Did he never come to see you while you were studying in Beirut?'

'Why should he have come? What was I to him, that he should come to see me?' I said indignantly.

'And you did not see him just before you immigrated?'

'If anything like that had happened, I would already have told you. I repeat: I had no meeting with him during that period and received no assignment.'

Seeing that the conversation was leading nowhere useful for them, they ended it and sent me away. Yet this dialogue, and others like it, was repeated several more times. Once I was even summoned to Yerevan over the same matter, for questioning at a higher level.

Time flew by. Changes took place in my life and in the country, but the security organs' surveillance of me lost none of its intensity. They continued to test my state of mind and activities. Aghavni had a 'friend' from her former workplace named Annik, who visited our home frequently. She was always talking about her close relations with border officers and her frequent visits to the Turkish frontier. Naturally, she never forgot to add that we could accompany her if we wished. Or she would say that

she knew pilots well who could take us up for a flight if we wanted. I sensed that all these offers were made at someone else's instruction to test me - or to draw me into another reckless venture. I listened with complete indifference and [211] showed no interest at all.

One morning toward the end of the spring of 1949, we awoke to news of mass arrests. In a single night, tens of thousands of families had been deported to an unknown destination. That same day Annik came to our house and said she had learned from acquaintances that the deportations would continue, that our name was on the blacklist, and that we too were liable to be deported. Then, supposedly wishing to help, she added:

'If you have anything to fear or anything that should be put away, give it to me to hide, so that nothing dangerous will be found in your home.'

'I have nothing to hide or put away except English books and magazines. If you think they are dangerous and could harm me, take them,' I said.

'Of course they are dangerous. Give them to me.'

I filled a large suitcase with my English books and a year's issues of National Geographic Magazine, Life, and Reader's Digest, and Annik took it away. Meanwhile, believing we were to be deported, we began selling the belongings we had not yet sold.

For a week we spent tense, sleepless nights waiting for them to come and take us away. Every rumble of a vehicle in the street made us spring up: here they were! After a week of this torment, we became convinced that the danger had passed and that Annik's claim was a lie. I asked her to return the books, but she kept putting me off. Only after a month did I manage to get them back - and all the magazines and illustrated books were missing. After this incident we broke off relations with that deceitful woman entirely. We no longer had any doubt about what sort of person she was.

The great wave of deportations had swept across the whole country. Among its [212] victims were the family of my paternal cousin Luther, who lived in Yerevan, and the young family of Bertha, my maternal aunt's daughter. They were deported to the Altai region in distant Siberia. These were my close relatives; the number of families we knew who were deported was much larger. For them, voluntary migration had become forced deportation - to one of the world's harshest and most terrifying places of exile, the Siberian taiga.

How many Armenians, driven by longing for their homeland, found their graves in that cold foreign soil, thousands of kilometers from the country for which they had cast everything aside to immigrate! What an inglorious end, what a shattering of dreams! It is true that most of the deportees returned to Armenia after the monster Stalin's death. Yet the deprivation they had suffered in exile, and especially the psychological wounds, left a deep, indelible scar on the rest of their lives, on their children, and on succeeding generations.

At the pedagogical institute, Vazgen distinguished himself through his academic performance. Throughout his studies, he never received a mark below excellent. He passed every examination and assessment with the highest grade available. He was therefore the obvious candidate for the institute's single Stalin Scholarship. Besides its prestigious name, the scholarship was worth a full salary, something we badly needed.

Although living conditions were almost unchanged, we had become fairly accustomed to that life - or, as the locals put it, we had 'learned.'

Contrary to our expectations, however, a bitter disappointment awaited us over that scholarship. One day my brother came from the institute [213] [P213-02] furious and despondent.

‘I will not go back to the institute. What is the point of studying when every road is closed to us as “akhbars”? I would be better off doing manual work and learning to steal.’

I had never seen him so distraught and angry. When we asked why, we learned that the institute’s academic council had decided to award the scholarship that should have gone to Vazgen to a local classmate. This student also did well, but his record was inferior to my brother’s. The news was a blow we had never expected. The influence of Communist propaganda’s empty boasts about justice and equality, trumpeted throughout the world, had not yet been completely destroyed in us. Despite all we had suffered, we still tried to find something trustworthy to hold on to. Now even the hope of that last support was collapsing. What could we do to remedy this misfortune and revive my brother’s desire to study? As the eldest in the family, I bore a heavy responsibility to find a way out. [Simply advising him to accept what had happened and continue studying as before would have made no sense.] [P213-01] Most terrible of all was what the episode revealed about the attitude of officials and authorities toward repatriates: they regarded us as beings of inferior origin, not entitled to the benefits of the country and its laws. That, fundamentally, was why Vazgen had been deprived of what was due to him.

I decided not to accept what had happened or regard it as irreversible, but to seek a way to fight it. First I went to the institute’s rector, Shavarsh Aznavuryan, and demanded an explanation [214] for the decision. He received me unwillingly and, after hearing me out, said:

‘Comrade Havunjian, why have you come to me about this? Is it not clear that I did not decide the matter? The academic council did.’

‘I believe you attended the council meeting and, unless I am mistaken, you are its chairman. How could what belonged to a deserving student be awarded to someone less deserving?’

‘The scholarship has not been given to an undeserving student. If your brother had deserved it, he would have received it. The student who received it has far higher grades and is more deserving than your brother.’

‘That is what you say. An examination of the records may prove otherwise.’

‘I advise both you and, especially, your brother to take no further interest in this matter. It has been settled once and for all. Digging into it will bring nothing good for either of you, least of all your brother.’

Such a threat could be understood as a political one. In effect, it was intimidation. Ignoring his threats, I continued:

‘If you refuse to clarify this matter, I can appeal to higher authorities.’

‘Appeal wherever you like. You will achieve nothing, and your brother will lose his standing. Go, and stop concerning yourselves with this.’

‘That is for us to decide,’ I said, and left the room.

Before taking another step, I decided to consult Artashes Nersisyan, secretary of the music college, with whom I was fairly close and whom I could trust. After hearing me, he advised me to write a letter of complaint [215] [P215-01] to G. A. Harutyunyan, first secretary of the Party’s Central Committee.

The letter ran to three pages. I began by describing the hopes with which we had come to our homeland, where we should have faced neither discrimination nor injustice. Yet the facts I set out demonstrated both. I asked him to intervene so that the matter could be resolved fairly.

Having taken this step, I persuaded Vazgen to continue attending classes and await the reply. Fifteen days after we sent the appeal, Velibekov, a representative of the Party Central Committee, arrived from Yerevan. After examining the records closely and speaking with my brother, he convened a meeting of the academic council. It voted unanimously to award the scholarship to Vazgen.

The news immediately changed not only the mood of our family and acquaintances, but also the repatriate students' faith in the future. It encouraged us to fight for justice. Rights had to be won through struggle, not by accepting everything passively. Unfortunately, we soon discovered that, however just a complaint or demand might be, struggle did not always secure justice. Everything depended on an influential patron, acquaintance, or relative. They called it KhTsB: khnami, tsanot, barekam - an in-law, an acquaintance, a relative.

Naturally, repatriates could gain such advantages only by marrying into local Armenian families.

Little by little, we became accustomed to everything, though with great [216] difficulty, and slowly. However much we wanted to merge into the local Armenian community, we never quite could. Something always set us apart, and we remained 'akhpars.'

Leninakan and Its People

[217] Life is full of surprises: unexpected developments, insoluble problems, unforeseen incidents, and sudden, inexplicable solutions to difficulties once thought insurmountable. A city whose name I had never even known or heard soon became my permanent home, my beloved and familiar city, the place where the best years of my youth blossomed, grew, and were enjoyed. That city was Leninakan. I lived there from November 1946 until March 25, 1988. I gave forty-two of the most flourishing years of my life to that unique city and to its deeply conservative, hospitable, humane, proud, sharp-witted, fun-loving, cheerful - and also boastful - people, so passionately in love with their city. I have said that I gave it the greater part of my life, but that would be a seriously incomplete statement unless I added how much I learned during those years from the city and its kindly people. I was tempered into a true human being, someone who loves and respects humanity. Such qualities are worth far more in life than the education and diploma of any institution of higher learning.

Leninakan, regarded as Armenia's second city, has borne different names at different times. In antiquity it was called Kumayri, and later Gyumri.

In 1837, while visiting the city to inspect the frontier defenses against Ottoman Turkey, [218] [P218-01] Emperor Nicholas I of Russia renamed it Alexandropol in honor of his wife, Empress Alexandra. Its main street was named Alexandrovskaya - or, as the people of Leninakan called it, 'Alexandrovski.' In 1924, following Lenin's death, the city was renamed Leninakan. Despite these changes, to its inhabitants it always remained Gyumri, and they thought of themselves as Gyumretsis. It was no coincidence that, after Armenia's independence, the city once again took its older and more familiar name, Gyumri.

Someone asks a man from Leninakan:

'Why is your city called Leninakan?'

The quick-witted fellow replies:

'Son, in a city where two hundred thousand Leninakan people live, what else do you think it should be called?'

In the late autumn of 1946, when we immigrated to Armenia and Leninakan became our place of settlement, the city had a population of about one hundred to one hundred and twenty thousand. Most buildings were one or two stories high. There were only a few with three or four stories.

The city was divided into several well-known maylas, or neighborhoods. Among the best known were Tekstil, Yerkatgits, Turki Mayla, Avznots, Poligon, Papakhana, Dzori Mayla, Depo, Slabotka, Akhbaravan, Tsnndatun, and others. With a few exceptions, the streets were identified by numbers.

[219] The streets with names were Alexandrovski, Kirov, and International. Along the last of these stood about twenty matching two-story buildings, constructed to house the victims of the devastating earthquake of 1926. Those buildings, and the frequent tremors, should have warned urban planners and architects of the danger of destructive earthquakes. Yet the warning was completely forgotten when construction and the beautification of Leninakan gathered momentum in the 1960s.

The churches stood out in the cityscape. Most were built of finely dressed black tuff and, in those years, lent the skyline a sense of grandeur. Their abundance had prompted the ashugh Jivani to write these lines:

I saw a new town, enamored of its churches;
 Its people, Armenians - some twenty thousand souls.
 They lack the food they need to stay alive,
 Yet they have built five monasteries: behold their wisdom!

[220] [P220-01] The most magnificent and architecturally striking of the churches was the Holy Savior. Almost all the city's craftsmen had taken part in its construction, under the direction of Master Mukuch. Building took fourteen years, from 1859 to 1873.

This architectural monument was modeled on the cathedral at Ani built by the architect Trdat. In its dimensions, architectural appearance, carvings, and construction, it reproduced the historic cathedral. Every week Master Mukuch traveled to Ani on horseback or by carriage, took measurements of the cathedral, and returned to continue building accordingly.

In the 1930s, zealous Communists had tried to blow up and demolish this sanctuary, but succeeded only in destroying the belfry's dome. This splendid monument, which one could not pass without admiration and whose beauty could have graced the square of any great city, had unfortunately been turned into a warehouse. I watched in wonder as devout believers kissed the walls and steps of the temple that had become a storehouse.

Besides the five churches, Leninakan had several others, such as Blblan Zham for Russian soldiers, the Franks' Church for Catholics, the Villagers' Church, and others.

All the churches had been converted into warehouses except the Seven Wounds Church, which, despite certain restrictions, continued to quench the spiritual thirst of the devout. The Holy Savior and Seven Wounds churches [221] stood on opposite sides of the central square. But buildings had been erected in front of them to conceal the churches from anyone looking from the square.

Like the churches, the overwhelming majority of the city's buildings were made of black tuff, giving the town a gloomy, mournful appearance. Beginning in the 1960s, the use of pink tuff in the city's reconstruction transformed its appearance, giving it the look of a beautiful modern city.

Leninakan is known for its craftsmen, especially its master stonemasons. The core of the artisan population consisted of Gyumri natives, though many had come from Kars and the surrounding districts. Common crafts included tinsmithing, jewelry-making, woodworking, hat-making, pottery, tailoring, and others.

Its carriage drivers were famous too. Stories about Krunk, Phaeton Alek, and Vesoli Vardan have survived to this day. Poloz Mukuch is the national hero of Gyumri's wit. Pigeon-keeping was also widespread. In the local dialect, a pigeon is a dokh, and a pigeon fancier a dokhbaz. They did not merely keep these beautiful, innocent birds - symbols of peace and innocence - but devised particular ways of 'enticing' other fanciers' pigeons into their own lofts. It became a distinctive 'craft,' rather like a game of chance. Quarrels and fights often broke out among the dokhbazes over accusations of [222] [unfair] practices in their 'craft.' [P222-01]

The people of Leninakan use the word 'city' only when speaking of Leninakan. When one of them says, 'I am going to the city,' he means Leninakan. The word is not used for any other town. They often call one another 'city boys' to distinguish themselves from villagers.

The center of Leninakan is the central square - or, more precisely, the area around the October Cinema - which they call vare, 'down below.' When making arrangements, they say, 'We will meet down below,' or 'Be down below this evening.'

A distinctive trait of these people is their almost sacred preservation of old customs, or adats. They conduct every ceremony of daily life in faithful accordance with inherited traditions. Each has its prescribed order: a wedding or betrothal, mourning rites or a funeral, a send-off for a young man entering the army or a welcome on his return. Each has its own sequence and requirements, known even to children and scrupulously observed.

The people of Leninakan stand out for their hospitality. This quality is attributed to the Armenian people as a whole, but the 'city folk' display it especially vividly. If even a complete stranger knocks at a Leninakan resident's door, he will not be allowed to leave without being offered hospitality. On the eve of New Year, the city is full of bustle as people prepare for a whole week of entertaining. They like to compete in hospitality. Everyone tries to adorn the table with special delicacies and offer guests [223] [P223-01] [P223-02] something unavailable in anyone else's house, so that they can boast of it. The New Year table remains laid for an entire week, and the host is delighted when many guests come, eat, and praise his hospitality.

A jealous regard for honor is another inherited moral demand. Leninakan people attach great importance to tasib and namus. An innocent word or glance may be misinterpreted and instantly ignite young men's quick tempers. Celebrations, weddings, and feasts therefore often become scenes of quarrels and clashes. Neighborhood fights occurred, sometimes involving several dozen young men. Even the stage production A Gyumri Wedding gives a special place to a fight scene.

In this city, everything that is not Leninakan is mocked. People from Yerevan are ridiculed as stingy, inhospitable, and inhumane. On similar pretexts they make fun of people from Kirovakan and Akhalkalaki, villagers, and 'Franks' - in short, everyone who is not from Leninakan. They consider themselves superior to all.

Gyumri people are also famous for their apt nicknames - highly 'distinguished,' expressive, and descriptive. One glance at a person is enough for them to attach a nickname. Here are a few examples: Aptek Misha, Astormuz Aram, Andard Martin, Ansnund Ashot, Bekef Onik, Bezdukh Mukuch, Gmpr Onik, Tarakh Yervand, Garshank Yeghish, Darcho Gurgen, Dava Serozh, Lakhana Hendo, Klor Onik, Satkats Hendo, Khiyar Valod, Mzu Vagho, and others.

Leninakan's dialect has a highly distinctive and musical [224] [P224-01] [P224-02] sound, though unfortunately it contains quite a few Turkish words. For example, this is how a Gyumri man describes the duduk, the wooden musical instrument:

‘Զալըըջու դուդուկը երգան օլուղմ, մի ծերը էպեյջե լեն, էրթալեն բարակկա գը: Կրեն օխտը ծակ, մեջը չոփմ:’

In standard Armenian, it would be: 'The musician's duduk is a long tube, quite wide at one end and gradually narrowing. It has seven holes, and a wooden stick inside.'

It is a pleasure to hear this dialect. When we first immigrated, it was completely incomprehensible to us, and years passed before we learned to understand it. In those days, when our ears were accustomed only to Western Armenian, how could we have understood a phrase like this?

‘Look, look how he eats - as though he had never eaten p’urch’uluk in his life!’

Instead of the standard *inchpes es*, ‘How are you?’, they say *inchkhes*. Instead of *sirum em*, ‘I love,’ they say *sirem ge*.

The people of Gyumri are musical and music-loving. Since olden times, the city has been known for its *sazandars*, *ashughs*, and *chalgchis* - its instrumentalists and singer-poets - and that tradition continues to this day. Many famous musicians were born and raised in this music-loving city: the *ashughs* Jivani, Sheram, Jamali, and Bave, and *duduk* players Karo Charchoghlyan, Levon Madoyan, Sergey Simonyan, and Mko.

Leninakan has been a renowned training ground for wind-instrument players. Some of the finest performers grew up here and spread not only throughout Armenia but across the whole Soviet Union.

[225] [P225-01] The people of Gyumri take pride in their celebrated fellow townspeople: Poloz Mukuch, Avetik Isahakyan, Armen Tigranian, Nikoghayos Tigranian, the poet Hovhannes Shiraz, the sculptor Merkurov, the history-textbook author and translator Hayrapet Ghukasyan, the folklorist Aleksandr Mkhitryan, the philologist Grigor Khalatyan, the actor Frunzik Mkrtchyan, the director Albert Mkrtchyan, the renowned weightlifter Yuri Vardanyan, the singer Zara Dolukhanyan, and many others.

Leninakan has been a center of theatrical art. Its drama theater is one of the people’s most beloved places, and Gyumri audiences have been among the finest judges of theater. Many celebrated theatrical figures developed and worked in its theater: Vardan Ajemian, Tsolak Amerikyan, Levon Zohrabyan, Frunzik Mkrtchyan, Armen Armenyan, Hovhannes Zarifyan, Duryan-Armenyan, Varduhi Varderesyan, Zhan Eloyan, Artavazd Pashayan, Sherents, and others. Armen Tigranian’s opera *Anush* was first staged in this city in 1912, beginning its triumphant journey into music-lovers’ hearts and becoming one of the works most beloved by our people and most expressive of our national character.

A state opera theater was founded in Leninakan in 1924. It staged not only Armenian operas but also Western European and Russian classics. Foreign operas were translated into Armenian and sung in Armenian. The distinguished conductor Melik Pashayev, later one of the Soviet Union’s best-known conductors, first took up the baton in Leninakan. Among those who worked at the opera [226] theater were Shara Talyan, the conductor Yaghubyan, the celebrated Georgian ballet artist Chabukiani, and others.

When Lunacharsky came for the opening of the Shir Canal, he saw a production of *Faust* in Leninakan and expressed astonishment and admiration at our people’s high cultural standard. Indeed, at a time when the country as a whole remained at a fairly low level of development, a small town like Leninakan displayed the cultural sophistication of a great city, thanks to its gifted people. It was no coincidence that Leninakan was considered Armenia’s cultural center.

Who has not heard of Poloz Mukuch or his witty sayings? They spring from the Gyumri people’s sense of humor. Their jokes have spread everywhere, even beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. One incident illustrates this. One day in the 1960s, I was traveling by ship on the Black Sea and became acquainted with a Czech tourist. When he learned that I was from Leninakan, he asked me to tell him some of the city’s jokes about Vardanik. I asked how he knew about Leninakan people and the

Vardanik jokes. He replied that they were very popular among lovers of humor in his country, Czechoslovakia.

Because it lay near the border, Leninakan was a closed city. Only residents or holders of special passes could enter. When its inhabitants went away, they had to take their internal passports with them so that they would have no trouble returning home. Its status as a closed city [227] kept Leninakan somewhat isolated, and its appearance remained almost unchanged for several decades. After Stalin's death, toward the end of the 1950s, reconstruction began. First, of course, the pass system was abolished. Large-scale building work spread throughout the city. The use of pink tuff immediately changed its old, gloomy appearance, making it brighter and more beautiful. The city expanded in every direction, creating new neighborhoods, broad streets, and avenues. Multistory buildings sprang up everywhere like mushrooms: first four or five stories, then seven or eight, and even ten to sixteen. From a small provincial town of craft guilds, Leninakan grew and transformed itself into a beautiful modern city. Its people lived at the pace of a large industrial center, completely carefree and unaware of the fateful disaster approaching slowly and silently, like a black snake crawling toward them. Then it burst upon them with a thunderous crash that shook the whole world and brought it to its feet.

The morning of December 7, 1988, began like any cold day in Soviet times. The city awoke, and life followed its usual course. At 11:41, the earth suddenly shook and trembled, throwing everything into chaos. It seemed the end of the world. This was the terrible earthquake whose very possibility the people had forgotten. Fearsome and devastating in its force, it demolished that lovely, beloved city and took thousands upon thousands of innocent lives.

In an instant, that cheerful, happy city, overflowing with joyous folk music, became [228] a city of tragedy, mourning, and suffering, of tears and lamentation for loved ones lying unburied or trapped beneath the rubble.

The memories of many years - good and bad, sweet and bitter - bound to that unforgettable city remain vivid and alive within me. In my mind, it is still imprinted as it was before the earthquake. Although I longed to visit the place, filled with memories of my youth, my work, and my friendships, everyone advised me not to. They urged me not to destroy the good memories and impressions left by the happy years I had spent there. 'When you see the present condition of the city and its people,' they said, 'you will be disillusioned at once. Better to remain with your old memories.'

Ignoring this advice, driven by conscience and longing, I visited in May 1998 and saw what had happened to that wonderful city and its bright-spirited people. I was not disillusioned. But like a child reunited after a long separation with a parent now old and sick, I wept aloud at the ruined buildings. Their skeletal walls reached toward the sky as though protesting: how much longer must they stand there dead?

The people, who had lived through terrible days and seemed forgotten by the whole world, continued their struggle to survive, enduring every kind of deprivation. Strangely, after all that, their sense of humor remained alive. It seemed to heal the wounds of immense suffering, wounds that had left disfiguring scars on both the city and its inhabitants.

[229] 'Unlucky days, like winter, come and go,' Jivani had said. But these had come - and forgotten to go.

How I Acquired My Military Specialty

[230] In the Soviet Union, one of the most important documents was the military service booklet, almost equal in importance to an internal passport. When you changed residence, you had to deregister from your old address and register at the new one. This was done through your passport, but the same change also had to be recorded at the military commissariat. You had to have a military booklet before entering the army, and military training began in the upper classes of secondary school.

When we immigrated to Armenia in 1946, we were well above the usual conscription age, so we were temporarily exempted from service. After a medical examination at the military commissariat, however, we were told that we remained liable for military service, though not subject to call-up for the time being. They gave us our military booklets and explained what to do when we changed address.

Seven or eight years later, I was summoned to the military commissariat. Such summonses always aroused suspicion and promised nothing good. Regardless of your age, you could be called into the army for several months, disrupting a life that had already settled into its normal course.

At the appointed time, I reported with my military booklet. They sent me to a captain. He received me very warmly and asked for the booklet. After studying it carefully, he said:

[231] 'You have never been in the army or performed military service, and you still have no military specialty.'

This frightened me: I thought he would propose sending me into the army for three months to acquire one. Fortunately, he continued in another direction.

'If there is a general mobilization, you will have to be taken into the army, and months will be lost while you learn a specialty. A war will not wait several months. So we shall send you to an evening military school, where you will attend classes and learn one.'

This was bearable, even welcome, since I was not being sent away for military service. I agreed at once. He gave me the school's address, kept my military booklet, wished me success, and sent me on my way.

The following day, I reported to the place called a school. About forty men like me had gathered there. There were two instructors. We were to learn the essentials required in chemical or nuclear warfare: how to assess contamination, how to evacuate people from contaminated or irradiated areas, how to decontaminate the terrain, and so forth.

That first evening, I followed the lessons for three hours and noticed that the overwhelming majority of those attending were barely literate. At the end, I asked the instructors to tell me which textbooks they used, so that I could study at home and come in for the examination. They would not agree. They said I was obliged to attend for three hours every evening [232] for three months. My evenings were occupied with choir rehearsals, as we were preparing to take part in a republic-wide festival. Attending classes interfered with this important work. At my wits' end, I decided not to go, and missed an entire week. At the end of that week, I received a notice from the military commissariat ordering me to report to the chief at ten on Monday morning. This was ominous.

When I reported on Monday morning, the chief, a colonel, received me in a fury and shouted threateningly:

‘What is this? Do you want us to send you into the army, away from home for several months, to enjoy military life? We have done you a favor. Instead of taking you into the army, we have arranged for you to gain a military specialty while remaining with your family. And you refuse to obey our orders! I warn you: you will report for class at seven this evening. Miss even one more hour, and we will send you into the army. Now go!’

There was no point in arguing. I went to class that evening in a thoroughly bad mood. During the first break, an acquaintance asked why I looked so downcast. I told him what had happened. He listened carefully, then said:

‘Is that what is worrying you? Nothing could be easier. Invite those two instructors to a restaurant, “do them honor,” give them plenty to drink, and that is that. Your problem will be solved at once. They will release you from attending classes.’

It was an interesting suggestion, one that had never occurred to me. More precisely, I had no experience of doing things that way. I decided to follow his advice. At the next break, I took the instructors aside and proposed meeting them at two the following day at the Kumayri ^[233] restaurant. They accepted my invitation without hesitation.

The next day, at exactly two, both arrived at the meeting place. We went into the restaurant, and I invited them to order whatever they wished. After they had eaten and drunk well for a while, I asked to be excused from classes. They readily agreed, saying only that I must come for the examination at the end of the course. They promised to help me there too.

After that I attended no more classes and received no further alarms or warnings from the commissariat. About two and a half months passed. Then word came that I must appear for a marksmanship test with a military rifle. I had hunted with a gun as a boy and was not a bad shot. The test was held outdoors beyond the city, and my marksmanship was rated ‘excellent.’

Several weeks later, another message summoned me for the final examination. I arrived at the appointed time and was surprised by the formal atmosphere of the examination room. Everything suggested that the examination would be conducted to a high standard. A Russian colonel chaired the examining board. The question cards were neatly arranged on the official table. I approached confidently, drew a card, sat at a separate student desk, and began to read the questions. It turned out that I had not even the most elementary knowledge of any of them. I called one of the instructors over and told him so. He reassured me:

‘I shall give you an illustration in which you can find the ^[234] ^[P234-01] answers to those questions. The pictures will show you what you must explain.’ A minute later he brought the promised illustration, with the answers written in Russian and demonstrated in pictures. A glance and a quick reading were enough to make everything clear, and I was ready to answer when the colonel chairing the board asked who could respond in Russian. I stood up, went before the board, and answered the questions. My answers received a mark of ‘excellent.’ I left the examination room and went home at ease.

Two weeks later, my military booklet came back from the commissariat. I opened it to see what had been entered as my military specialty. What a surprise! It read: ‘Chemical Reconnaissance Instructor.’ I was certain I was not the only one obtaining a military ‘specialty’ by such an easy route.

If even one percent of the army's specialists were like me, what condition must that army have been in? This was the army considered immensely powerful and one of the world's most battle-ready. Later, during the war in Afghanistan, its true character became apparent when it proved unable to win 'in a short time,' as its leaders had claimed it would. The war dragged on and on, ending not in victory, but in a shameful retreat.

Stagnation and Its Consequences

[235] From 1957 - eleven years after our immigration - we began living as fully fledged Soviet people, thoroughly accustomed to Soviet conditions, with one major difference: we still faced distrust and inequality. We were regarded as people of inferior origin, as 'akhpars,' guilty of the 'unforgivable' offense of having relatives abroad.

We had been christened with the label 'akhpar' from the day we arrived in our homeland. It was not merely a term of ridicule: it marked us as people of lower standing, denied both the moral and legal possibility of equality with the locals. Those 'akhpars' who, over time and through their abilities, managed to rise to something approaching the locals' 'level' were described by local Armenians as 'an akhpar, but a good fellow.' This expression was very common whenever someone had to acknowledge a repatriate's good qualities.

Whether we liked it or not, we had to accept the circumstances and, driven by the instinct to survive, keep working without despair or retreat - struggling for life and even for advancement at work. Under Khrushchev, some promises of better living conditions began to sound more attainable. Specific deadlines were even announced. According to Khrushchev, the building of socialism was to be completed by 1980, and we would enter Communist society. To achieve this, the entire country was given [236] a new slogan: 'Catch up with and overtake the United States of America.' A series of ambitious new undertakings followed: cultivating virgin and fallow lands, expanding the acreage planted with corn, sending a human being into space, and so on and so forth. All of this almost persuaded the whole world, and especially the Soviet people - except for one 'small,' 'insignificant' detail: the sudden shortage of bread products, the round-the-clock lines outside bakeries, and the bread crisis. Like every other hardship, this too was labeled a 'temporary difficulty,' caused by the mistaken and short-sighted supply practices of certain incompetent managers. The fact remained that obtaining 'our daily bread' had become extremely difficult. We teachers were instructed to explain to our students that these difficulties were temporary and that everything would soon be plentiful.

One day during that difficult period, after conducting another political education session for my class at the city Party committee's request, I invited questions. There were mature young adults in the class. The oldest, Garnik, who was married and had a family, asked with a wry smile:

'Comrade Havunjian, have you found your bread for today or not?'

People cannot be fed endlessly on lies and deception. It was already obvious that building Communism was merely a utopia. I shall never forget a cartoon I had seen in an English-language newspaper while in Beirut. It showed a man riding a donkey, holding a long stick with a little hay tied to its end, dangling it before the animal. The farther the donkey [237] moved forward to reach the hay, the farther the hay moved away, producing 'perpetual motion.' On the donkey were the words 'the Soviet people'; on the rider, 'the Communist Party'; and on the hay, 'Communism.'

To divert people's attention from economic hardship, great effort went into publicizing successes in the conquest of space, emphasizing our advantages over the United States and linking them to our armed forces and military technology. The fear people felt arose not only from news broadcasts and political commentary. The movement of military equipment across the country was visible for all to see. Freight trains, whose number had doubled, carried nothing but tanks, military equipment, and soldiers. With memories of the war's cruel days still fresh, and the terrible wounds of the Second

World War not yet healed, people watched these movements with dread. They preferred even the most intolerable economic conditions to another war. They were prepared to accept anything, provided the road to a new war could be blocked. The 'peace-loving' policy of the Soviet government and Communist Party was presented as the only force capable of doing so. Such propaganda compelled people to resign themselves to hardship and accept every difficulty of making a living as natural.

Khrushchev's slight departures from Stalin-era practices were viewed with hostility by pro-Stalin circles, [238] [P238-01] which probably rejected the changes in domestic and foreign policy altogether. One result was the pronouncements in 1964 about the harmful effects of meat. Thursday became a compulsory fish day for every kind of canteen and restaurant. Along with fresh meat, canned meat gradually disappeared. For ordinary mortals, obtaining meat became an unattainable luxury. Shops sold cattle rib cages stripped of flesh as 'meat.' Even for these, queues formed outside the shops, often mockingly called 'dogs' queues.' After meat, dairy products, cheeses, and other foods and provisions gradually disappeared from the shops too.

As hardship increased, propaganda about the danger of another world war intensified. Brezhnev's policy was presented as the only force capable of restraining the warmongers, preserving peace, and keeping the Soviet people safe from another war and the devastation of the entire globe.

Despite all this, life continued along its normal - though in reality abnormal - monotonous course, later described as the 'period of stagnation.' It was a way of life that had lost its optimism and its utopian prospects of a better future. People lived from day to day, making ends meet, without change or prospects, careless and [239] indifferent to their surroundings and the future. Yet many strove to seize everything they could from life and, fortified and enriched, prepare themselves for whatever surprises the future held. These ambitions expanded the forms and scale of bribery, which already existed but on a narrower and less extensive basis. In the postwar years, 'income on the side' had been necessary simply to put a piece of cheese beside one's bread instead of living on dry bread alone. Now the term had changed in content, scale, purpose, and nature. It had become open bribery, aimed solely at getting rich and enjoying a luxurious life: obtaining every comfort money could buy and securing prosperity for one's children. Gradually, this drive drew every area of life into itself. There was no sphere it had not penetrated. Matters reached the point where nothing could be accomplished without direct contact with bribery.

I wanted to enter the Party on the strength of my merits, loyalty, and dedication. I was told:

'That is not the modern man speaking in you; it is the naive "akhpar." Whose stomach will those qualities fill? If an opportunity exists, why not use it for your own benefit? Whoever pays the most will secure admission to the Party, confident that membership will bring him a high position and allow him, in a short time, not only to recover the [240] money he paid, but to gain a plentiful source of income.'

A special vocabulary, a coded language for demanding bribes, had developed. For example, I needed to replace my spectacle frames with a more attractive pair that had arrived at the opticians'. I went to the shop near our home. In response to my request, the optician said that those frames were not currently available: they would arrive in ten days. When I returned ten days later, I received the same answer - 'in ten days.' I realized that he was asking for a ten-ruble bribe. As soon as I handed him a ten-ruble note, he supplied what I wanted, saying:

'I was keeping these for someone else, but you are a good man, and I do not want you to go away empty-handed.'

Those 'ten days' could also mean ten thousand rubles, depending on the matter to be settled.

Bribery reached such proportions that the legislative authorities passed a showpiece law declaring that both the giver and the receiver of a bribe would be punished equally. Supposedly intended to eliminate bribery, the law actually made it safer: the person paying would be afraid to complain, since a complaint would expose him to equal punishment.

I think the following true story will be of interest. A taxi driver from Leninakan managed, through a bribe, to get his daughter admitted to the Bryusov Institute of Foreign Languages. The following year, a friend approached him:

[241] "My daughter has finished secondary school and wants to enter the Institute of Foreign Languages, just as yours did. Please introduce me to the lecturer through whom you got your daughter admitted last year."

The taxi driver agrees, and the two of them go to Yerevan to see this lecturer. They arrange for Valod to bring the agreed sum on a particular day. Suspecting something, the lecturer calls the law-enforcement authorities and invites them to his home, where he accuses Valod of offering a bribe. Valod is arrested and charged.

Naturally, many people were prepared to borrow even large sums to pay the required bribe for such a job, knowing that they would soon recover the money and be able to repay the debt. Once someone had been hired, it was impossible to remove him, even if the heads of the institution or the high-ranking officials who had taken the bribe were replaced. For this reason, the senior officials of the local Communist Party committees took the sale of such positions and jobs into their own hands. I remember an occasion when the city Party committee directly handled an appointment to an ordinary job at a filling station, since that job was regarded as a good source of income on the side.

Anyone who managed to secure a managerial or directorial position in an institution - usually through a bribe - tried to surround himself with people he could trust, and to that [242] end he employed his close relations and other relatives, regardless of whether they had the necessary qualifications. To hold a managerial post, it did not matter what your profession was, or whether you had any professional qualifications at all.

What you needed was a handsome, enormous bookcase, its shelves lined with beautifully bound volumes of the world's classics and fashionable contemporary literature, not one of which the owner had any intention of reading. They were simply for show. Expensive jewelry and foreign travel were other fields of competition among this class. Competition extended to everything: from luxurious clothes, comfortable homes, and costly foods unfamiliar to ordinary mortals, all the way to gravestones. As a result, the city's cemeteries had become architectural museums. Ordinary mortals with no income on the side could not afford to compete. Yet, ashamed beside the magnificent neighboring graves, they were drawn involuntarily into the competition and felt obliged to make their own relatives' graves resemble the others to some extent, spending not only all their savings but going into debt as well.

With the class divisions that had emerged in the country, these new bourgeois were, of course, far more generous than the bourgeois of capitalist countries, since their capital was not the product of their own work or intelligence. On the one hand, the country was disintegrating economically; on the other, its leaders had become a new, all-powerful class that fundamentally contradicted the country's basic [243] principles. I am neither a political scientist nor a historian qualified to investigate the causes

and foundations of these developments. But I do not think one needs to be a specialist to see that they are closely interconnected. Which came first in this relationship - the economic collapse of the country or its leaders' pursuit of personal gain - is, in my view, not especially important.

It was during this period that, quite by chance, I once had a conversation in a very small private gathering with an official of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Armenia. There were only three of us at the table, but it was laden with the finest delicacies, unobtainable elsewhere. Looking at all this abundance, I asked the official:

"All these good things for you - and what is there for the working people?"

He replied with a smirk:

"The country, the factories, everything in the country belongs to the working people. And we poor fellows get a share of these little odds and ends. Is that really so much?"

A little later, when the drink had lifted our spirits, I asked another question:

"Where is the country going at this rate? This can't be the road to communism. What direction are we taking?"

The answer came closer to the truth:

"Do you think we know where the country is going? Even Demirchyan and Brezhnev don't know where it is going. It is drifting along, and no one knows where we will end up. That is why everyone looks after today and his own personal tomorrow. The country's tomorrow is uncertain."

I took this explanation as a sincere and truthful confession, and in it I found an explanation for our leaders' [244] drive to enrich themselves.

The following joke was widely told in those days: "Lenin proved that the people could govern a country. Khrushchev proved that any fool could govern a country. Brezhnev proved that a country need not be governed at all: you could simply let it go its own way."

Assignments That Encouraged Corruption

[245] A change in the secretary of the Communist Party's city committee was always followed by a redistribution or reshuffling of senior posts. Robert Arzumanyan had replaced Gharibjanyan as secretary of the Communist Party's Leninakan city committee, and another reshuffle was therefore expected. During this period, I was greatly surprised by the appointment of Albert Manukyan, an ordinary instructor on the city committee, as head of the department responsible for justice, trade, and law-enforcement agencies - one of the most important departments. I had known Movsisyan since our student days, and we were now also colleagues in teaching. He was a lively fellow who liked a joke, and he had great respect for me. [P245-01]

One day he suggested that I serve as a lay assessor alongside a judge in court. Since I had never been in a courtroom, I was interested to see what kinds of cases were tried.

I had read about a Russian composer who went to Paris in the nineteenth century and spent his evenings in concert halls and his days in courtrooms. He explained this unusual behavior by saying that to understand the real life of a country, one must learn what kinds of crimes occur there. With much the same motive, I agreed.

Some time later, I was summoned to court to take part in a trial as a lay assessor. I was given a brief [246] explanation of who the assessors were. More precisely, they were called people's assessors and represented "the people's presence and participation in the judicial process." At every trial two assessors sat on either side of the judge, and, under the law, the judge and assessors conducted the proceedings with equal rights. That was the law, but the judge was master of the entire process, conducting it in the direction he had decided upon and desired beforehand. Occasionally, for appearances' sake, he would turn to the assessors during the trial and ask, "Do you have any questions for the accused, the witnesses, or defense counsel?"

The assessors seldom made use of this opportunity, because the course of the trial showed that everything had already been decided. Almost nothing new emerged in court.

From my very first trial, it became clear to me that I was merely a token representative of the people, with no actual influence over the course of the proceedings. After announcing a recess in a trial that had lasted several hours, and sometimes several days, the judge and assessors withdrew to decide the verdict. There, too, the judge simply dictated what the verdict should be and asked us, for form's sake, "Do you agree?" If either assessor tried to disagree, the judge produced laws or rules from the legal field that the assessor, having no legal education, could not have known about. In the end the verdict was adopted "unanimously." As the law required, it was put in writing, [247] signed by the judge and the assessors, and then, when we returned to the courtroom, read aloud by the judge before the standing audience.

I served as an assessor for several years, with various judges, but there was no significant difference in the proceedings, apart from the following incident. The judge was a woman surnamed Harutyunyan; I do not remember her first name. When the trial ended and we withdrew to decide the verdict, Harutyunyan told us the verdict she had decided upon beforehand and asked for our agreement. Believing that disagreement would be pointless, we agreed. Then, instead of drafting and writing out the verdict, Harutyunyan picked up a blank sheet of paper and said:

"Let's go to the courtroom."

The people rose to hear the verdict, while the judge looked at the blank sheet, pretending to read, and pronounced it. The trial was over. Outside, she told us that she would write up the verdict later and bring it to us to sign.

Considering participation in such disgraceful behavior a form of complicity, I asked Movsisyan to remove me from the list of assessors.

The people had lost faith in the fairness of the courts and knew that there could be no "fair" judgment.

Some time later, Movsisyan invited me to his office again and offered me a highly responsible assignment.

Before giving me the assignment, he described how intolerable the extortion in the city's shops and restaurants had become [248] and how urgently it needed to be fought. He went on to say that, making use of my standing in the city, he wanted to entrust me with the responsible task of conducting surprise inspections of shops and restaurants. He gave me the appropriate credentials, authorizing me, in the name of the city Party committee, to make an unannounced inspection of any restaurant or shop.

The intention was good. Any honest citizen would have warmly welcomed the idea of bringing order to these establishments in the city. Encouraged by such hopes, I accepted the proposal. A month later I received the credentials, but Movsisyan advised me to act first on instructions from the city committee and only afterward on my own initiative.

A week later I was summoned to the city committee and instructed to inspect the well-known Van restaurant in Leninakan, whose director was a notorious extortionist. That evening I went there with a friend. There was scarcely an empty table, and we barely managed to find one. We looked at the menu the waiter offered and gave our order: drinks, appetizers, and shish kebab. A band was playing in the restaurant. Its musicians knew me well, but they knew nothing of my mission that day.

After sitting there for several hours and enjoying the food and drink we had been served, we asked the waiter for the bill.

When it arrived, a single glance was enough to show that the sum demanded was at least twice the actual cost. When I pointed this out, [249] the waiter assumed a pitiable expression and apologized profusely, saying that he had made a mistake and added two rubles too much. I produced my credentials and demanded that the restaurant's director be called.

The director was resting at the guesthouse adjoining the restaurant. My demand threw the entire staff into a panic. The musicians and other acquaintances came to intercede, but I remained firm and yielded to none of their pleas. At last the director appeared and asked, in a tone of contempt and surprise, what I wanted. The question was to be understood as: "How much of a bribe do you want to keep quiet?"

I told him that I intended to draw up a detailed written report of what had happened. At first they continued trying to persuade me to give up the idea. When they saw that I would not change my mind, the intermediaries began urging me to abandon the report in exchange for a substantial sum. Despite all this, I drew it up and submitted it to the city Party committee the following day. Movsisyan praised it highly.

A week later I learned that the director of the Van restaurant had been dismissed.

I drew up similar reports concerning several shops and other restaurants as well. The stories of intermediaries and offered bribes repeated themselves according to almost the same script.

One day just before New Year, on December 30, I was summoned to the city committee once again. They told me there was an important assignment, for which a five-person commission had been formed under my chairmanship. We were instructed ^[250] to inspect a large grocery store opposite the railway station, managed by a certain Rom. At the same time, we were warned that every previous attempt to inspect his store and catch him in wrongdoing had failed.

Let me briefly explain how, in those days before the holiday - and throughout almost the whole of December - people rushed from one shop to another, preparing for New Year in the hope of finding something worthy of serving their guests. Everything suitable for the festive table was kept out of the customers' sight and sold clandestinely, "under the counter," at double the price, of course. Fine alcoholic drinks, sausages, fresh meat, chocolates, mineral water, soft drinks, and the like were in great demand. Fruit and fresh meat naturally had to be found among the private sellers at the market, since ordinary mortals had almost no chance of finding them in state shops. One had to begin shopping by mid-December at the latest and take special measures to keep these dearly purchased provisions "fresh."

Now let me return to the story of how we carried out the city committee's special assignment.

At seven in the evening on December 30, the five of us entered the store in question. One member of the commission carried a bag containing a concealed tape recorder, so that every fact could be recorded. As in all the city's shops, the display cases were almost empty.

We entered the manager's office and presented Rom with the city committee's instructions and ^[251] demanded that he open the store's stockroom. Taken by surprise, he reluctantly led us there. When he switched on the light and opened the door, an incredible sight met our eyes. Along one side of the enormous storeroom stood about sixty cases filled with bottles of fine brandy and vodka. Elsewhere, varieties of sausage unobtainable elsewhere were piled up. Shelves along one wall held boxes of the famous, much-sought-after chocolate bonbons. In the center of the storeroom stood fifteen hundred jars of pickled gherkins, mineral water, Pepsi-Cola, and more.

When we demanded an explanation from Rom for these hidden delicacies, he replied that they had been set aside to send to the city's senior officials. Since everything was being recorded, I demanded the names of those officials. He was a very cunning man and took care not to name anyone. He simply said:

"Whose name should I give? There are so many of them."

I warned him that we would have to make a written record of what we had found and submit it to the appropriate authorities. Naturally, he could not offer a bribe in front of five people, so he merely said:

"So they have entrusted you with the responsible task of straightening out this country's crooked ways? But you should know that the people who sent you here did not send you with pure intentions either. They may dismiss me, but once I have given them their 'share,' they will appoint me to a new job, perhaps an even better one. That is how this country has always worked, and that is how it will go on. I would ask you not to draw up a report. I will give you the 'share' that would have gone to them."

"Whom you give a 'share' to, and how you do it, is your business. We have come [252] to carry out the assignment given to us conscientiously," I said indignantly.

"You are very naive, Comrade Havunjian. They are using you to carry out their devious purposes. I am not afraid. Write your report; write it. Just know this: they will dismiss me and give me a better job. You will be the one who suffers."

After this speech of his, we drew up the report. It was signed not only by the members of the commission but also by Rom himself.

On the basis of that report, Rom was dismissed. The news spread at lightning speed among the employees of the shops and restaurants. Everyone connected it with my name. Workers in those establishments became very wary and cautious whenever they saw me. Even when I went into a shop or restaurant on no official business, I could sense their agitation and alarm. There were occasions when they charged me less than the actual price of what I had bought. They must have been afraid of another report.

This continued for several months. During that time, almost everyone dismissed on the basis of my reports was appointed to a new job - often a higher position, more lucrative and more advantageous. Rom, for example, was appointed director of a large new supermarket that was opening.

Seeing all this, I concluded that Rom had been right. Party officials were using me for their personal benefit. I went to Movsisyan and [253] placed the credentials I had been given on his desk, saying:

"As of today, I resign from my duties as an inspector." At the same time, I explained why I was resigning.

Movsisyan smiled and said:

"But, Comrade Havunjian, I gave you those credentials so that you could benefit too. Write reports on a few of the places you inspect, so that we can benefit, and profit from a few others yourself by taking a tidy sum in return for not writing a report. Is it my fault that you are naive and incorruptible? It is up to you. There are plenty of people asking for credentials like these. If you change your mind, you can have them back whenever you wish."

And so I got myself free of the whole affair - rid of the trouble and its cause.

Although I no longer had an inspector's credentials, for a long time afterward, whenever I entered a shop or restaurant, I still noticed the same alarm and caution, and I could obtain whatever I needed without paying an extra charge.

My Working Life

What do we understand by work? Thinkers from various periods of human history have offered differing meanings and explanations. In the first book of the Bible, when God drives Adam and Eve out of Paradise, [254] he curses them and says, "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread." This is one of the first and most important functions of work: it serves to preserve one's existence. But that is not the whole nature of work. Work is also creativity - the creation of something new, useful, beautiful, or more suitable, and so on. Otherwise, we would still be like our primitive ancestors, tilling the soil or bringing bread to our mouths with our bare hands, without tools or the technical means available today.

Work is also art, and, I believe, humanity owes its present stage of development mainly to the creative and innovative aspect of labor.

Work is pleasant when its result is visible and useful; above all, when we love our work and do not perform it as a compulsory duty; and when our work yields a useful and valued result.

It is a great misfortune to work at a profession one does not love and to perform it only as the sole possible means of earning a living. Such work can only be an ordeal, never a pleasure. The working hours pass slowly, the day stretches out, and fatigue doubles. When, by contrast, we do our work with love, at the same time striving to find ways of making it more effective, it simply becomes a pleasure. Time passes quickly, fatigue is slight, and productivity is high.

I began my working life in tailoring, which I never liked, chiefly because I had to do everything exactly as the master said. No ^[255] innovation of any kind was permitted. Attempts at innovation were regarded as defiance of the master. He valued only what he himself knew, and any attempt to add to it could get you dismissed. It was precisely because of such an attempt that I finally said farewell to that trade.

My next job was office work. From November 1939 until June 1945 I worked for the French company Électricité d'Alep in Aleppo. I liked my work there, and my attempts at innovation were appreciated, increasing both my standing and my salary.

After immigrating to Armenia in 1946, my first job was as a cashier, and later a bookkeeper, at the Lenkosh artel in Leninakan. I performed my duties with a great sense of responsibility, but without enjoying them. I felt that such work was not my calling. After eight months there, I learned that I could work as a singer in the Philharmonic's song and dance ensemble and earn more than I did at Lenkosh. I immediately left my old job and joined the ensemble as a singer. My new work was more enjoyable, creative, and less demanding. ^[P255-01]

Taking advantage of that last circumstance, I entered the choral-conducting department of the music college and studied while continuing to work. In 1950 the song and dance ensemble was disbanded. At the same time, I was offered a position teaching solfeggio to the Russian-language classes at the music school. I did not know Russian well; I could barely understand and speak a little. Considering myself incapable of doing such a job, ^[256] I refused the offer. They had no other suitable candidate, however, and spent a long time trying to persuade me, believing that with my abilities I could easily overcome the language difficulty. In the end they convinced me, and I began my first teaching job with Russian as the language of instruction. At first it was quite difficult. I had to prepare thoroughly for every lesson, less in the subject itself than in the Russian language. Surprisingly, I not only proved equal to the new task but acquired a reputation as a good teacher of solfeggio. It also helped me master Russian quickly. My pupils' parents were Russian military officers, and I often had to speak with them about their children's progress. Through these contacts, friendships developed between our family and the families of many senior officers. To give two examples: Khakhan, commander of the Leninakan garrison, and Pershets, head of the military transport vehicle inspectorate. ^[P256-01]

I worked at the music school for ten years. They were so pleased with my work that they entrusted me with the important task of conducting the pupils' admission tests and examinations. Thanks to this responsibility, I became known throughout the city as an authority.

In 1951 I was offered an additional job at Leninakan's teacher-training college, teaching the mandolin.

[257] I had not played the mandolin for a long time, since I did not own an instrument. I was very hesitant about accepting this offer when Artashes Nersisyan, the director of the music school, who was also head of the music department at the teacher-training college, persuaded me that I could do the job successfully. I accepted and began teaching the mandolin alongside my other work. Unlike the music school, here I was dealing with young men and women who were already grown up. New and special teaching methods were needed to help the students develop a love of music and of the instrument they played.

The college had other instrumental teachers, including other mandolin teachers, one of whom was a violinist. This put me in a position of serious competition: I had to make sure I did not fall too far behind the other, more experienced instructors. At the end of the academic year, the students had to take a graded assessment in instrumental performance. These assessments were conducted like examinations, in the presence of the college director, the department head, and the other instrumental teachers.

It was a great surprise to me when, at the assessments at the end of the academic year, [258] the director and the head of the music department remarked that my students' knowledge and performance were considerably ahead of those taught by my fellow instructors. This gave me confidence and raised my standing at the college.

After I had worked at the college alongside my other job for several years, I was offered additional teaching hours and asked to conduct the choir as well, since its conductor was to be absent for a year. This last assignment carried a great responsibility: I would be replacing my own conducting teacher, Knarik Yerosyan. By devoting myself completely to the work, with discipline, conscientiousness, and a strong sense of responsibility, I managed to justify the trust placed in me in every assignment. The college director, A. Fayroyan, suggested that I give up my hours at the school and devote myself entirely to music education at the college.

Although I had already taught at the music school before coming to the teacher-training college, I received my true baptism as an educator at this real forge of teaching - the A. Mravyan Teacher-Training College in Leninakan.

Director Fayroyan immediately recognized and appreciated my abilities and opened a path to success for me in teaching.

The college was founded in 1924, immediately after the founding of the state university. It performed an invaluable service, providing every community in the Shirak plain with capable teaching [259] staff. By the time I joined, its employees had already accumulated considerable experience in effective teaching. It had knowledgeable and experienced instructors who trained teachers for the primary grades of general schools. The students received a broad education so that they would be able to teach mathematics, literature, music, drawing, physical education, handicrafts, and other subjects.

The role assigned to music in this broad education was not considered particularly important. In the late 1950s, however, the proportion of musical subjects gradually increased. This reflected the director's special love of and inclination toward music. At the same time, the success of the college's graduates in teaching singing and music in village schools was plain to see. As a result of this success, responsibility for all the musical subjects taught at the college was placed on me. The standard of teaching rose so high that, when our graduates were assigned to jobs, they were also given the qualification of singing and music teacher. A preschool department was opened at the college as well, and musical subjects occupied a large place in its curriculum.

I worked intensively, from eight in the morning until nine at night. In addition to instrumental instruction and choir, I taught most of the other music subjects.

I taught musical literacy and theory, [260] solfeggio, methods of teaching music, music appreciation, conducting, and choral direction. To many people's surprise, I carried this heavy workload easily. The secret was, first, that I loved my work, and second, that teaching different subjects changed the nature of what I was doing, leaving me no time to become bored or tired. I was the highest-paid instructor. Many envied me for it, and sometimes their shameless remarks reached my ears. They also stressed that I was an "akhpar" and had no higher education, adding, "If only what he taught were a real subject! Who needs it?" Despite all this, I was invited to teach in the newly opened department of teaching methods at the pedagogical institute. The fact that I would be teaching at an institution of higher education without having completed higher education myself did not trouble them at all. They trusted my knowledge and abilities and were sure they had made the right choice. There, too, I enjoyed the respect of the rector's office, the lecturers, and the students. [P260-01]

Obtaining a higher education had now become imperative. In 1964 I entered the correspondence course in choral conducting at the Komitas State Conservatory in Yerevan. This meant that, while continuing to work, I had to attend the conservatory several times a year for consultations and examinations.

By the end of the first academic year, it had become clear to me that I could complete the necessary courses ahead of schedule and, [261] by taking the required examinations early, finish the conservatory's five-year program in less time. The rector's office approved my application. I redoubled my efforts and completed the conservatory in three and a half years, receiving the professional qualification of conductor and choirmaster. Both my standing and my salary increased.

In 1969, at the congress of the Leninakan branch of the Armenian Choral Society, I was elected its executive secretary. I was reelected several times and remained in the post until 1988, when I was obliged to resign because I was emigrating.

A new and serious responsibility was added to my already heavily burdened shoulders. It is true that I received a fairly high salary from Yerevan for this position, but I was responsible for organizing song festivals involving more than forty choirs active in Leninakan.

This work taught me a great deal about finding a "common language" with people at different levels, persuading them, and sometimes yielding to them or making threats. In effect, I was directing the choral art and activities of a city of 250,000 inhabitants. Every year I organized reviews and final concerts for the school choirs, thirty-five in all.

A republic-wide choral review was held every two years, which required me to supervise and assist the adult choirs. Reviews were also organized for the districts near Leninakan. Song festivals marking anniversaries were held both in [262] Yerevan and Leninakan. The combined choir took part in these festivals too, singing five or six songs in harmony with the accompaniment of a wind orchestra.

In speaking about my working life, I must also speak of my work in my own particular profession. My first introduction to choral singing came at the American College in Aleppo, when I sang in Mr. Kanimyan's choir. Later I sang in the youth choir of Bethel Church, conducted by L. Haytostyan. Then I made my first attempts at organizing and conducting a choir at Bethel Church. For those years it was a very bold undertaking, and it was crowned with success. My professional work as a choral conductor developed after I received specialized training. I began with schoolchildren, and then took

part in reviews and concerts for the first time with the choir of the teacher-training college. I also organized and conducted a choir at the pedagogical institute.

My reputation as a conductor rose at once when I organized the men's choir of the Poghpat - "Steel" - cooperative in Leninakan. Apart from a few exceptions, its singers were employees of the cooperative. The choir consisted of forty men. This was the first men's choir in Armenia. When we first went to Yerevan for the republic-wide review, the members of the jury came up to me after our performance, embracing and kissing me and saying, "What an atomic bomb you've dropped!" The reception was extraordinary. The choir and I were awarded a cash prize and an official certificate of honor from the Supreme Soviet [263] of the republic. A week after we returned to Leninakan, we were invited back to Yerevan to perform at a government concert.

The local authorities also praised my work highly. They even promised to nominate me for the state title of Honored Art Worker. But the fact that I was an "akhpar" stood in the way until 1985. I eventually received the title, but not on the recommendation of the Leninakan authorities: it came from Yerevan, at the insistence of the Armenian Choral Society.

In 1955 I was summoned to the first secretary of Leninakan's city committee. When I arrived, an army general was there as well. I was told that that year's November holiday was to be devoted to the unity of the people and the army. In connection with this, I was instructed to use the Poghpat cooperative's choir as the foundation for a choir that would include soldiers, and to open the holiday's ceremonial meeting with a performance by this group. [P263-01]

I agreed and put forward my requirements, which they accepted. A military vehicle, soldiers from an army unit, and a combined military band were placed at my disposal. After a month of intensive work, the curtain rose at the ceremonial meeting to reveal the following scene: at the back stood the choir in five rows, alternating rows of soldiers with the men of the Poghpat cooperative in their concert clothes. In front of the choir sat the sixty-member orchestra. The sight brought an outburst of applause. Under my direction, the concert began with [264] Muradeli's song "The Party Is Our Guide" and was a great success, with demands for several numbers to be repeated. At the end of the concert, both the city leaders and the military commanders warmly praised my work.

I want to mention an incident connected with the Poghpat cooperative's choir. The choir was at the height of its fame when one day I was summoned to Comrade Ikilakyan, head of propaganda at the Shirak district committee. When I entered his office, I saw that a senior official of the State Security Committee - the KGB - was seated there. After we greeted one another, they began discussing the choir's success. They praised it at some length and then asked: [P264-01]

"Why are the members of your choir all repatriates?"

My answer was brief and to the point:

"Participation in the choir is voluntary. First you have to want to join, and then you must have the necessary natural abilities. I have included those who expressed a wish to do so."

"Hasn't a single local young man expressed an interest?" Ikilikyan asked.

"Don't you know that choral singing is not particularly popular among the local men?" I asked.

"We are giving you a Party assignment: add local young men to the choir. Understand that you must carry out this assignment," the two of them concluded.

The purpose of this assignment was political. They probably thought that so many repatriates gathered in one place might [265] engage in political activities. To prevent such solidarity, they demanded that other elements be inserted among them. The only way to carry out the assignment was to put a few young workers in the choir's ranks and tell them not to sing, but merely to move their mouths as though they were singing. That is what I did, and it won the approval of those who had given the assignment.

At this time, intrigues began against the management of the Poghpat cooperative. The entire cooperative had come from Bulgaria, and its chairman was a repatriate - the only repatriate in a managerial position in Armenia. He was accused of various "crimes" and dismissed. A local man replaced him. Gradually the cooperative was dissolved, and its workers scattered throughout the republic in search of jobs. All this paved the way for the choir's dissolution in 1957-58.

The number of choirs I have organized and conducted is very large. I shall name only a few that were particularly successful: student choirs, schoolchildren's choirs, teachers' choirs, military choirs, the Armenian Choral Society's Leninakan choir, the teachers' choir in Artik, and others. I have received numerous prizes, cash awards, and, finally, Armenia's honorary title of Honored Cultural Worker. After settling in Los Angeles in 1988, I first conducted the choir of the Church of the Nazarene in Glendale. Later, at the Armenian Evangelical Church in Hollywood, I organized and conducted a church choir for five years.

For a time in America, I also translated religious literature from English and Russian into Armenian. After such a busy working life, for me [266] the hardest thing was to be without work. And I think I am right when I say, "The hardest work is not working - idleness."

Through a Crack in the Iron Curtain

[267] Even though we had immigrated from abroad, having relatives outside the country or corresponding with them was regarded as an unforgivable sin and aroused suspicion. In the 1950s, these rules, which had hardened into dogma, began to relax somewhat. Until then, going abroad as a “tourist” was an unattainable privilege, especially for a repatriate. All Khrushchev’s mistakes can be forgiven if we remember that he was the first to dare to open cracks in the Iron Curtain and allow people to pass through them. Recognizing how damaging it was to the development of the Soviet people to remain isolated from the whole world, ignorant of other countries’ achievements, and stagnant, Khrushchev decided that praising ourselves and considering our own social system the most advanced was not enough if we were cut off from the rest of the world’s progress. We had to keep pace with that progress and even think of competing with it. To achieve this, people had to know, to some extent, what was happening in the world. That required the country to poke its head a little way out of its iron shell and see what was going on outside.

From the middle of the 1950s, “tourists” began visiting Armenia. Although they were kept under strict surveillance and their every step was watched, this was nevertheless considered a major and promising development. A Department of Visas and Registration - OVIR - was established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Before long, this department was inundated with applications to go abroad [268] as a “tourist,” the overwhelming majority of which were rejected without any explanation. They simply said, “The state does not consider it expedient.” And that was that. Every question asking for an explanation went unanswered. There were a few lucky people who were granted permission, provided their records were impeccable or the relatives who had invited them also took steps through their country’s embassy.

To travel abroad as a tourist, one had to fill in numerous questionnaires demanding detailed information about all one’s relatives, living or dead: their dates and places of birth, present addresses, occupations, non-membership in any political party, participation in the Second World War, the front on which they had served, and so on and so forth. Then came questionnaires requiring exhaustive answers about oneself, one’s family, wife, and children. A certificate from one’s workplace was also required, stating that the head of the institution agreed to one’s absence from work for several months and vouched for one’s honesty and loyalty to the social system. All the information was checked by the relevant departments of the State Security Committee. The checks took from six months to a year, after which a positive or negative answer arrived: the application was either refused or permission was granted to travel abroad to see one’s relatives. Even when permission was granted, part of the family had to be left at home as hostages, to guarantee one’s return, [269] so that the traveler would not be tempted to refuse to come back.

The first members of our family to try to pass through a crack in the Iron Curtain were my wife and my mother-in-law. They had immigrated from Bulgaria. Although that country was the Soviet Union’s closest and most trusted ally, unofficially considered its sixteenth republic, their papers were prepared and investigated just as if they were going to a capitalist country. Fortunately, the answer was favorable, and they left for Bulgaria for three months.

Encouraged by the fact that my wife had been allowed to visit Bulgaria as a tourist in 1955, in 1968 I dared to apply to go there as a tourist with my wife and younger son, leaving our elder son at home as a hostage.

What joy it was when, a year after we applied, we received a favorable answer and permission to go! It was a sign that they were beginning to trust me. After twenty-two years of keeping me under surveillance and watching my movements, they had concluded that I was not a dangerous or untrustworthy person. We began preparing for the journey so that we could go to Bulgaria during the summer holidays. The journey had to begin in Moscow, and tickets to Bulgaria had to be obtained there. On July 1 we left by train for Moscow, where we stayed with my Russian friend Sergei. It took two days to obtain tickets for the Moscow-Sofia express. At eight on the morning of July 5, we set off for Sofia. The train traveled quickly and seldom stopped at stations. [P269-01]

[270] There were only the three of us in our comfortable compartment. I was lying on the upper berth in my pajamas, reading. At about eleven o'clock, the loudspeaker announced that we were approaching Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Hearing this, I decided to go down to the platform and buy some ice cream. My wife also asked me to buy a little bandage from the station pharmacy for a sore on her foot caused by a tight shoe. I got dressed and first checked the timetable posted in the carriage: the train was supposed to stop in Kyiv for ten minutes. The carriage attendant confirmed this.

The train stopped on track four. To reach the station building, one had to go through the underground passages, come out onto the station square, and then enter the building. Keeping an eye on my watch, I went out onto the square and into the station. I found the pharmacy, but I had to stand in line for the bandage. Six minutes had already passed when I received it, and at that very moment the station loudspeakers announced that the Sofia express was departing. I could not believe my ears. I ran out of the station and toward the underground passages, and then I saw that our train really WAS moving, gradually picking up speed. I raced through the passages, pushing aside - and sometimes knocking over - people coming toward me, earning their curses. I reached the platform at track four just as the last carriage of our train sped past about ten meters away and disappeared. I signaled to a man visible through the window in the door of the last carriage to pull the emergency brake, which would stop the whole train, but he thought I was wishing him a pleasant journey [271] and waved back with a cheerful smile. The train went off, leaving me standing on the platform, dumbfounded.

At such a moment, you seem to lose all ability to reason. For a while you stand there in uncertainty, not knowing what to do. Our passports for travel abroad and our money were with me. What would Aghavni and the child do when they reached the border? At first I thought of taking a taxi and following the train. But how far? The train stopped only once every few hours. Where could I go to catch it? I was completely at a loss. Then I suddenly decided to find the station officials and ask their advice. I could not find the stationmaster, so I went to his deputy. He seemed a kind and decent man. After listening calmly, he advised me not to get upset and promised to send me on the next train. I insisted that I had to catch this very train. He thought for a moment and said:

"In that case, go into the station hall, find the Aeroflot kiosk, and ask them what time you can fly to Chişinău."

I went at once and found the kiosk, with about a dozen people waiting in line. When my turn came, I asked my question.

"The plane to Chişinău leaves at 14:30," came the answer.

When I asked whether she could sell me a ticket for that flight, she answered rudely:

“Comrade, have you fallen from the sky? This is the travel season. Tickets are sold fifteen days before departure.”

This reply plunged me into despair and [272] cast doubt on whether I could fly to Chişinău at all.

I returned to the station official and told him my worries. He did not share them in the least. Instead, he said:

“You are Armenian; you will find a way. It is twelve o’clock now. Hire a taxi in the station square, go to Juliana Airport, and fly to Chişinău from there.” [P272-01]

“Could you send a telegram to the train to say that I missed it and will meet it in Chişinău?” I asked.

“I’ll send one right away,” he replied.

Reassured that my family on the train would be told I was coming to catch up with them, I took a taxi from the station square to Juliana Airport. This was Kyiv’s second airport, close to the city. The sky was dark and cloudy, and the airport was very crowded. It turned out that the weather was unsuitable for flying, and there were no announcements of departures or arrivals because there were none. Those waiting to leave or to meet arriving passengers moved about restlessly, trying to obtain reliable information, since neither the loudspeakers nor the flight board told them anything. I somehow managed to reach the airport director, who was surrounded by people asking questions, and asked him to help me get to Chişinău. His reply was very curt:

“Can’t you see that there are no flights at all? You are a railway passenger. Go and settle your problems at the station.”

This was discouraging, but I refused to lose heart and continued searching for a way to fly to Chişinău. More than two hours had now passed since I arrived at the airport, [273] and in all that time not a single aircraft had taken off or landed.

I approached a pilot, explained my situation, and asked for his help, promising to reward him. He advised me to find the crew assigned to the Chişinău flight; they would gladly help me. But how was I to find that crew in the airport’s confusion? The task seemed hopeless and impossible. I grew increasingly agitated. I thought of my wife and son: what would happen when they reached Chişinău and did not find me there? What would they do at the Romanian border?

The scheduled departure time for the Chişinău plane had long passed, and the loudspeakers were still silent. It was nearly three o’clock when, after their long silence, they called the passengers for Chernihiv to board. Hearing this, I ran to the boarding entrance. The woman checking tickets and admitting passengers was middle-aged. I began watching her, trying to decide whether I could “find a common language” with her and achieve my purpose with her help. After studying her for some time, I went up and made my request. Her answer gave me hope:

“If I’m the one boarding the passengers for Chişinău, I promise to help you.”

Encouraged by this answer, my spirits rose. Now I had hope of catching the train. Unfortunately, I had forgotten to ask at the station what time it would reach Chişinău.

At 15:15 the loudspeakers spoke again and called the Chişinău passengers to board. I immediately ran to [274] the boarding entrance - and froze on the spot. A completely different person was admitting the passengers. I had to find a “common language,” and quickly, with this younger woman and her official

manner. There was no time to study her at length. Suddenly an idea flashed into my mind. I ran to the snack bar in the airport waiting hall, bought two large bars of chocolate, and raced back to the boarding entrance. Most of the passengers had already gone through, and there was no crowd at the door. Seizing the opportunity, I approached the young official and slipped the chocolate bars into her pocket. For a moment she was taken aback. "What do you want from me?" she asked. I hurriedly told her my story and concluded:

"You are the only one who can save me from this impossible situation. You must help me fly to Chişinău on this plane and catch my train."

"What nationality are you?" she asked with a smile.

"I am Armenian," I answered proudly.

"It shows at once," she said, with another kind smile. "Wait a little, and I think I can help you."

After waiting a little, I approached her again, reminded her of her promise, and asked her to fulfill it. She gave me a slip of paper and told me to go to the ticket office and ask for a ticket without an assigned seat. I protested that the queue was so long that, by the time my turn came, the plane would already be in Chişinău.

"Show them the voucher I gave you and tell them it entitles you to buy a ticket without waiting in line," she explained.

With that miraculous scrap of paper in my hand, I ran to the ticket office, where twenty to twenty-five people were waiting.

[275] "I have a voucher and the right to buy a ticket without waiting," I said. Ignoring the protests, I reached the counter, presented the voucher, and asked for a ticket without an assigned seat. Once I had the ticket, I went back to the young woman. She personally escorted me to the aircraft and seated me in the front row. Now I was calm, certain that I would catch our train. It was a small, twin-engined passenger aircraft designed for short journeys. There were about forty people in the cabin, all Ukrainians.

At last the engines roared. The aircraft began moving toward the runway, then its engines gathered speed, and it lifted off and climbed into the dark clouds. After we had been flying for some time, it landed at the airport of a small town before continuing along its main route. We reached Chişinău at 16:48. I took a taxi from the airport to the central railway station. We arrived at 17:25. Checking the timetable, I discovered that our train was due at ten that evening. I breathed a calm, relieved sigh: I had reached my destination and had more than four hours to spare. Then I remembered I was hungry. First I went to a dining room to answer the complaints of my stomach. Afterward, I hired a taxi and asked the driver to show me the city, both the new districts and the old, historic neighborhoods. This tour gave me some idea of the capital of Moldavia. The newly built districts were no different from the new districts in other Soviet cities. The older, more historic part of the city bore the stamp of the previous century's [276] aristocratic, romantic architecture, characteristic of the countries of Eastern Europe. The city's shops were full of fruit and vegetables at extraordinarily low prices. That was natural, since Moldavia's main exports were canned fruit and vegetables and a wide variety of wines.

After wandering through the streets for a while, I returned to the station at 21:30 to wait for our train. At precisely 22:00 the express made its grand entrance into the station. My eyes searched for our

carriage. All its passengers had crowded to the windows to see whether I really would be there to meet it, as the announcement over the carriage loudspeaker had said.

Among the faces I recognized the happy faces of Aghavni and Gogo. Everyone was glad that I had managed to catch up with the train. I climbed aboard and handed Aghavni the ill-fated bandage, saying:

“This bandage, worth a few kopeks, has cost me thirty rubles and a great deal of anguish.”

Half an hour after the train left Kyiv, the carriage loudspeaker had announced that I would meet it in Chişinău. The day's events had thoroughly exhausted me, and as soon as the train began moving, I lay down to rest. My rest did not last long. At midnight we reached Ungheni, the station at the Romanian border. The loudspeaker announced: “Prepare for inspection by the border guards and customs officers.” Apart from these inspections, another complicated operation took place at this station. Soviet railway tracks were wider than the standard used abroad, so, to continue along the European tracks, [277] it was necessary to change the carriage's wheels from a wider to a narrower gauge. The passengers had to leave the carriage while this was done.

The border guards were the first to enter the carriage. They checked the passports and any places where someone might be hiding. Then came the customs officers, who first handed out declaration forms for us to complete. Once that was done, the inspection of our suitcases began. It lasted more than an hour and was extremely tiring. They found nothing to object to, and we were left to pack everything back into the suitcases. Then we were instructed to deposit the Soviet money we had with us at the station's savings office, to be collected on our return journey.

After several hours of inspections, we settled back into our carriages and the train moved on. We had gone barely two or three kilometers when it stopped again. We had reached the Romanian border and customs station. Another inspection awaited us there. Fortunately, it was more superficial; the whole process took an hour, and the train moved on. At last it was possible to sleep and rest.

In the morning we reached Bucharest, Romania's capital. The station was bustling. Everywhere there were young people of eighteen to twenty, speaking different languages. To my surprise, I could also hear Turkish. One of the young men who had boarded our carriage was calling to his friends through the window:

“We're starving. Doesn't this train have a dining car? How are we going to eat before we get home?”

[278] I approached the young man and asked him in Turkish what they were doing in the city. He replied that they had come for an international youth competition and were now returning home. Then he asked what nationality I was, since I spoke Turkish so well.

“I am Armenian,” I said, and invited him to our compartment to have something to eat. My purpose was to get him talking.

“An Armenian offering a Turk something to eat?” he said in astonishment, taking a step backward.

“So the Turks are still giving their young people that discredited, savage education in hatred and hostility toward Armenians. Since you refuse an Armenian's bread, go and starve to death. And may the bread you do eat bring you no good.”

At this he withdrew to the far end of the carriage and stood there for a long time, watching my every movement. He remained in the same place for more than two hours, then disappeared.

We reached the Danube toward evening. This great and famous river separated Romania from Bulgaria. A third inspection was waiting for us on the Bulgarian bank. There were no particular checks on the Romanian side, and soon we were crossing the two-level bridge to Bulgaria. As we crossed the river, I remembered how often it had been celebrated in world-famous works of literature and music. Strauss's "The Blue Danube" sounded in my ears. Unfortunately, this romantic moment did not last long. Across the river, we entered the town of Ruse. The border inspections were far lighter and more of a formality than the earlier ones, taking about forty minutes.

Leaving Ruse and traveling on throughout the night, [279] we reached the capital, Sofia, at ten in the morning. We waited there for about ten hours, then took another train toward our final destination, the port of Burgas. My only difficulty in Bulgaria was the language. Although I understood a fair amount, I found it difficult to speak. Many people think that if you speak Russian, Bulgarians will understand you. In reality, that is not so: making yourself understood in Russian is not particularly easy.

For twenty-three years I had been denied the right to leave the country. During this journey I had finally crossed that frontier, but so far my only opportunity to study life abroad had been the bustle of railway stations, which is much the same everywhere in the world. The only difference I noticed, compared with our country, was that everything was much quieter, calmer, and less noisy, and the stations were not as crowded as those in Moscow.

Unlike our trains, the local railway carriages had no sleeping facilities. After a sleepless, exhausting night on the Sofia-Burgas train, we reached Burgas at dawn. No one was waiting to meet us. Wanting to surprise Aghavni's relatives, we had not told them the date of our arrival. I thought we would simply take a taxi straight to the address we needed. Unfortunately, that proved impossible. It turned out that finding a taxi was not so easy: one had to order it several hours in advance. It was six in the morning. If I ordered one now, it might arrive around noon. This was my first disappointment with "abroad." So socialist bureaucracy had begun taking its first steps [280] in this formerly capitalist country. To get out of our predicament, I had to telephone my brother-in-law and ask him to help us reach the house. My call took him by surprise, but half an hour later he came in a friend's car and drove us home.

While waiting for my brother-in-law, and then on the way to the house, I carefully observed the morning activity of this small city: the people hurrying to work, the shop windows. What struck me was the spotless cleanliness of the streets and the calm, quiet traffic. In several places I noticed signs reading, "The cleanliness and quiet of the streets are evidence of your culture." In this respect, it was indeed the opposite of the noisy streets of Armenia and Moscow.

We spent about two months in this place that was not quite "abroad," and I would like to compare it briefly with the Soviet Union. First, I must say that crossing the "Iron Curtain" was very deceptive. Politically, this was regarded as an independent country outside the USSR, but its internal organization, rules, and regulations were very much like those at home. More precisely, it was still in a transitional period, trying to preserve certain characteristics that did not fit the system so familiar to us. The shops were better stocked, both in variety and quality, with labels from different foreign countries. This applied to food as well as manufactured goods. One thing was strange: Bulgarian cheese and cigarettes cost more there than they did in our country, while Russian vodka was cheaper there than in its homeland. Fruit and [281] vegetables were very cheap. That was natural, since Bulgaria

was primarily an agricultural country. Heavy industry was only beginning to develop, though it was developing very rapidly. The growth of the chemical industry was particularly noticeable.

The country was green and beautiful. There were many holiday resorts, visited by people from both socialist and capitalist countries. Small resort towns had been created for tourists near Burgas - Slanchev Bryag, or Sunny Beach - and Varna - Zlatni Pyasatsi, or Golden Sands. These were on the Black Sea coast. There were also resorts in the Balkan Mountains.

In summer, tourists came from many European countries. The noisy groups of Soviet tourists were especially noticeable. They stared in amazement at the abundance of goods in the shops and descended on them as though they had never seen such things before. Fortunately, compared with Soviet tourists visiting capitalist countries, those traveling to the "democratic" countries were allowed to exchange larger sums into foreign currency. This gave them greater freedom to shop. [P281-01]

The local people treated Soviet tourists politely and respectfully. At the same time, one could detect a mocking smile, like that of a younger brother observing the mistakes and foolishness of his older, stronger brother. Only in one place, a café where there were Czech tourists, did we encounter open contempt for being "from the Soviet Union." This was a consequence of the bloody events surrounding the Prague Spring a year earlier, when Soviet tanks crushed the Czech people's attempts to win freedom [282] for themselves. This savage act was presented as "a response to the request of the Czech government and an act of fraternal assistance."

I noticed something there that was unfamiliar to us: everyone avoided eating much bread. Even the brother-in-law whose home we were staying in would tell his wife, "Put less bread on the table. In Armenia they fill themselves up more with bread than with food. Let our guests eat less bread and more of the meal." One or two thin slices of bread were enough for them at a meal.

In Armenia, bread consumption really is quite high, and everyday bread makes up a large proportion of what people eat. In my opinion, this habit has its roots in the continual struggle for survival that history and fate have imposed on our people. Bread was the first and most essential food for surviving hard times. Often it was the only food that could be obtained, and even that with great difficulty. This not-so-distant historical past has bound our people to bread.

We like to eat fresh bread and prefer it warm, straight from the oven. In Bulgaria, the bread sold was at least a day old. Fresh bread was considered harmful to the stomach, so it was forbidden to put bread on sale the day it was baked; it was sold the following day.

Their attitude toward alcoholic drinks was also interesting. At the start of a meal, several kinds of appetizers and one bottle of spirits were placed on the table, regardless of how many people were sitting around it. After barely a small glass had been drunk, the bottle was removed, and wine or beer was brought with the meal. These too were consumed in very limited quantities. Perhaps [283] that was why, during the two months of my visit, I did not encounter a single drunken person.

One day a relative invited us to dinner. Her husband had been to Armenia and had stayed with us for a week. When we were invited into their dining room, I was surprised to see five bottles of spirits on the table - for five people. I asked our host what this new arrangement meant. Smiling, he replied:

"I am trying to make you feel just as you would at home. This is how I saw you entertain guests in Armenia."

I have loved traveling since childhood, and that love did not change as I grew older. I tried never to miss an opportunity to travel. After the first difficult years following our immigration, when the days of longing for bread gave way to relatively better times, it became possible to think about pleasure as well. Naturally, my first journeys were within the Soviet Union. I did not even dare dream of traveling abroad, certain that any application to the authorities would be refused. The reason, of course, was my attempt to cross the border. But when my application was accepted in 1969 and I was allowed to go to Bulgaria, I gained more confidence about applying again. Fortunately, the next time I did not have to apply personally. The Armenian Choral Society, of whose Leninakan branch I was executive secretary, invited me to join a tour of Bulgaria with the members of its board. I could not refuse such a pleasant offer. And so, in 1970, for a second time I [284] slipped through a crack in the Iron Curtain. This was no longer a private journey but a more official, representative visit. We received a very high-level welcome. Over fifteen days, we traveled by bus throughout Bulgaria and saw almost all its sights. Everything that had been impossible to see during my family visit the year before was now within reach: there was scarcely a place of interest that we did not visit.

Compared with our visit the previous year, the change was noticeable, although only a year had passed. In its life and way of living, the country had moved one step closer to its elder brother, the Soviet Union.

My next journey abroad required a bolder step. The previous two visits had been to socialist countries, for which permission was easier to obtain. Expecting certain refusal, I nevertheless applied for a tourist visa to Lebanon. About a year after my application, I received permission. It was a great occasion for me, not so much because I was going as because it meant that I was no longer regarded with suspicion. My brother Vazgen had already been there and returned, so he could give me some guidance.

I began preparing. This meant buying gifts for all my relatives and friends. Naturally, I chose souvenirs of Armenia rather than expensive presents. A few days before my departure, I was summoned to Captain Gasparyan at the State Security Committee. He told me:

“After the incident in 1946, we followed and investigated you for many years. We have come to the conclusion that [285] it was an isolated mistake on your part, and that at heart you are honest and loyal to our country. I am sure that wherever you go, you will not say unnecessary things, that you will be restrained in what you say, and that you will keep away from political gatherings or meetings and from public or party activities. Have a good journey.”

My departure was scheduled for seven in the morning on February 19, 1972. The night before, we had to go to the airport for customs inspection. On February 18, heavy snow fell in Yerevan from morning until late at night. It had grown so deep that small passenger cars could no longer drive through the streets. To reach the airport that night, we had to hire a small bus. My wife and my brother Vazgen accompanied me. The customs inspection ended at six in the morning, and we were allowed into the departure lounge, where we had to wait for the aircraft arriving from Moscow that would take us to Beirut. The flight was scheduled for seven, but the continuing heavy snowfall caused one postponement after another. All day we were kept in a hall guarded by border troops. They would not even let us lift the edge of a curtain to look outside and see whether it was still snowing.

My wife and brother were outside the hall, only a few meters away from me, but I was allowed neither to see them nor to communicate with them. Although we were still in our own country, we were considered to have left it, because we had passed through [286] passport control and customs. It was as

though we were in Purgatory - neither in heaven nor in hell. This continued until five in the evening, when we were told that our aircraft had managed to land at Yerevan airport. That meant we might be able to depart in another hour or two.

At last, at 18:30, we were taken to the aircraft, and half an hour later we were in the air, heading for Beirut: the city I had left twenty-six years earlier, without any hope of ever seeing it again. The plane sped on while I was lost in thought. How would I meet my relatives? What changes would I find in them, in Beirut, in the country? Something was happening that I had not even dared dream possible.

Absorbed in these thoughts, I had no sense of time passing until I noticed the signal to fasten our seat belts. We were preparing to land. Through the aircraft's windows, Beirut's night lights and illuminated signs formed a magnificent picture. The city looked like an enormous jewel-studded brooch, sparkling in colored light. The sight was captivating, but brief. The aircraft had landed, and we were approaching the terminal.

We left the plane and headed toward the terminal entrance. Through a glass wall, my relatives' smiling faces began to appear. Contrary to my expectations, there were not very many people waiting. At that same hour, in a restaurant somewhere, the Ekbez Compatriotic Union was holding its annual dinner and [287] dance. Because our plane was delayed, most of those who had intended to meet me had gone there.

After brief passport and customs formalities, I was happily embracing my relatives.

On the drive from the airport to the house, we passed through beautiful streets flooded with the light of advertising signs, a sight unfamiliar to me.

I tried to remember something from the past - a street's name or the direction it led. But my astonished eyes could find nothing familiar. Everything had changed. It was as though I were driving through a completely unknown city. I was amazed by the number of shops and by the fact that they were open at that hour of the night, and by the crowds still wandering through the streets. At last we reached the house where I would stay during my visit: the home of my brother Harutyun. My nephew Hovhannes was acting as host. In 1946, when we immigrated, he had been six or seven years old. Now he was a very lively, cheerful young man, full of jokes, doing his best to entertain the relatives who had come to welcome me. Among them were my paternal aunt's daughter Nver and her husband Sargis, my brother Yenovk, and many others. After we drank our welcome toasts, they suggested going to the restaurant where all our relatives and friends were gathered for the Ekbez Compatriotic Union's annual dinner and dance. Although I was very tired, I gladly agreed. It was an opportunity to see everyone.

Half an hour later I was there. Several dozen people surrounded me, coming forward to welcome me.

[288] Their first question was:

"Do you remember me? Who am I?"

Unfortunately, I could not remember or recognize them all. During our twenty-six years apart, the children had grown into adults, their features and general appearance had changed, and, above all, so many people were approaching me that I had no time to search my memory. Those I could not remember went away disappointed. Naturally, I recognized my close relatives. Among them I should mention especially Shakeh, Poghos, Sammy, and Maggie; my paternal uncle's daughter Elizabeth and her husband Misak; and others. The celebration was lavish and long. Toward dawn my eyes were

closing, and I struggled desperately not to fall asleep and embarrass myself. In a way, I felt I was already asleep and seeing it all in a dream. At last, realizing that I could no longer endure the exhaustion or even remain sitting upright, I asked to be taken home.

My impressions of Beirut were rich and varied, so I must describe them only in broad outline. The first days were intoxicating, particularly the abundance in the shops. That feeling lasted about two weeks, until I became accustomed to it. Afterward, everything seemed natural and ordinary, yet something was missing. I realized that what I missed was the life in our homeland to which we had grown accustomed. Although I was surrounded by relatives and could feel their love and affection deeply, I felt somehow a stranger. It was as though we were different people. Even many familiar things seemed foreign.

“Keeping Busy” and Summer Holidays

[289] A “tourist” from Beirut once described our life in Armenia this way:

“Your life is much more peaceful and carefree than ours, and your future more secure. Day and night, we have no peace: we worry about how to hold on to what we have and add a little more. But you have no worries or concerns. You have grown accustomed to life in your country, and you do not worry about tomorrow. Your life is like the saying, ‘The blind man goes on, and the road goes on’ - ‘Kyor gider, yol gider.’”

For those years, this remark contained a great deal of truth. Indeed, contenting ourselves with what we had and having no hope of improving our future, we lived an uninteresting, monotonous life with no prospects. Our only interest was in passing each day as pleasantly as possible. Having a pleasant time was directly linked to eating, drinking, and making merry. A thousand and one occasions were invented to justify or fulfill that desire: khash meals, matagh offerings, group excursions, birthdays, weddings, engagements, and christenings. Often it was simply a matter of “keeping busy” - our code word for drinking. [P289-01]

Very few people managed to keep themselves away from all this eating and drinking. Those who did were regarded as outsiders, and even with suspicion. The reasoning was that only wicked, deceitful people would refuse a drink, afraid that once they had drunk, their hidden malice would come out and disgrace them.

Respect for one another had to be shown by entertaining people and giving them plenty to drink. I will never forget what one villager said when he wanted to repay a kindness I had done him:

[290] “I’ll make Comrade Havunjian drink until he chokes!” [P290-01]

Willingly or unwillingly, even if you drank very moderately, you caught the drinking habit. There was a period when not a day passed without my having at least one glass. Drinking had become the key to solving every problem, and gradually it developed into, or was replaced by, bribery.

The worker drank, the schoolteacher drank, the lecturer, the official, the head of an institution, the military man, and the leaders of the city or the country all drank. Some drank to drown their worries and forget their troubles and sorrows; others “did someone the honor” of treating him in order to get a matter settled. Behind the latter practice lay the truth that a person under the influence of alcohol is much easier to persuade. Other drinkers owed their friendship with drink to their circle of friends.

When they were alone, they had no desire to drink, whether with a meal or on any other occasion. But when they were among their friends, they wanted to drink and even to get drunk.

Not everyone could hold to his principles and intentions and limit himself to moderate drinking. Such people easily slid into alcoholism and came to need intensive treatment.

Jokes about drinking were enormously popular. The lion’s share concerned people from Kyavar, who were considered champions of drinking. Even their children were thought to be drinkers.

Those whose lives offered no prospects, and who had lost hope of any improvement, chose the most readily available means of escaping reality: drink. They drank on occasions of joy [291] and of sorrow alike. They justified themselves by saying that grief became more palpable when one had been drinking, and that tears and lamentation flowed more freely, more uninhibitedly, and more deeply.

Over time, drinking had acquired particular social customs, handed down from generation to generation. These dictated what to drink on each occasion, in what order to drink the toasts, when to clink glasses, and when, instead of raising the glasses to drink, to touch the fingers holding them together in silence. There were many such customs, especially for those who took a conservative view of observing them.

Drinking seemed to be a defining national characteristic of all the Soviet peoples, although it was a particular trait of the Russian people, rooted in centuries of tradition. The cities of all the Soviet republics had sobering-up stations. Drunks were taken there, made to shower in cold water, and put to bed; in the morning they were released after paying a fine. Only Armenia had no sobering-up stations, because no need for them was felt. This gave Armenians an occasion to boast that they knew how to drink and did not lie about in the streets like pigs.

After we had overcome the difficulties of our first ten years following immigration, and living conditions had improved somewhat - or, more precisely, we had grown better accustomed to the conditions that existed - we began thinking about new ways to spend our leisure. From the late 1950s onward, people wanted to go to the Black Sea coast for their summer holidays. This became a custom in our family, [292] although such journeys involved many complications. The greatest was obtaining train tickets for the return journey. You had to begin working on that from the very day you arrived. Otherwise, your return became highly uncertain, especially for families like ours, with no income on the side. We could not afford to “throw to the wind money that the wind had brought,” handing out generous bribes left and right.

Buying a car in 1965 changed the course of our family's life and daily routine at a stroke. Above all, it freed us from the tedious difficulty of obtaining train tickets. Driving had difficulties of its own: finding fuel and making our way without maps. Finding a route through large cities was particularly hard when there were no direction signs. Besides that, traffic police inspectors lay in wait at every turn, ready to use any pretext to extract a bribe from each passing driver. Despite these difficulties, traveling by car had great advantages for arranging an active holiday. Over a few years, we acquired a beautiful two-room tent, inflatable mattresses, a folding camping table, chairs, a gas stove - in short, everything needed to stay on some undeveloped stretch of shore and enjoy nature's beauty and peace.

First we would look for a suitable place. We pitched our tent twenty or thirty meters from the sea, and there we cooked, ate, slept, swam, sunbathed, and so on. If we grew bored after a few days, we looked for somewhere more beautiful and peaceful. It was particularly pleasant when [293] another family came along, so that the two families could make up for anything the other lacked. When the border guards did not forbid it, we sometimes lit a campfire at night and sang and danced happily around it.

These summer touring holidays covered the whole Soviet coast of the Black Sea, including the shores of the Crimean Peninsula, as well as all of Crimea itself. We spent many interesting and enjoyable days on that extraordinarily picturesque peninsula. Particularly unforgettable were the sights of Sudak, Sevastopol, Yalta, Simferopol, Yevpatoria, and Feodosia, the home town and birthplace of the famous painter Hovhannes Aivazovsky. Our travels stretched from Batumi to Odesa. In 1976, we extended our journey as far as Bulgaria. We made that trip as two families and, naturally, in two cars. Accompanying us with his family was Jean Gegham Paklavajyan, a physiologist and academician of the Armenian Academy of Sciences. [P293-01] This month-long journey left unforgettable memories with everyone who took part. We greatly wished to repeat it later, but that wish remained unfulfilled. The journeys were somewhat tiring, yet they gave our whole family, and those who accompanied us, great

satisfaction and pleasure. Of course there were also unpleasant incidents, but these were soon forgotten.

New acquaintances and friendships formed during these journeys. Besides Paklavajyan, who was the brother of my wife's sister's husband, we became well acquainted with two other families and developed close friendships with them. One of those ^[294] families was the Srmayan family of Leninakan; the other was the Belov family of Moscow. With these families we spent many delightful, unforgettable days, not only on the Black Sea coast but in Leninakan and Moscow as well.

The way we lived made many people envious. We paid no attention and continued along our normal, untroubled course. My one complaint was that, because I was a repatriate, all paths of advancement were closed both to me and to my children. What I had achieved without anyone's intervention or influential connections was probably the highest point I could reach through hard work and conscientiousness, by making moderate demands and looking with satisfaction on what I had gained, while never giving up my desire to strive for something higher.

A few years after coming to Los Angeles, my wish to travel by car revived. Once we had settled in and found our feet, we began thinking about touring, and about the need to see and get to know this "new" country. With that in mind, Aghavni and I set out on our first trip in 1993. Unlike in the Soviet Union, here we could plan our journeys in detail. There were detailed maps of everywhere you might want to go. There was none of the torment of finding a hotel room that had been such a great problem in the USSR.

Our first route took us through San Diego, Yuma, Arizona's capital Phoenix, Flagstaff, the Grand Canyon, and San Francisco, ^[295] and then down the Pacific coast to Los Angeles. It was a very pleasant trip, and it convinced us that this country was rich in natural beauty. The creative work people had done to bring out that beauty had turned some places into paradise.

After that, our trips became an annual custom. Every year we set aside fifteen or twenty days for such journeys. On our tours we visited the major cities and sights of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Washington, and Oregon. Once we went as far as Vancouver and Victoria in Canada.

Exchanging the car for a ship or an airplane, we also visited Hawaii, Ensenada, Puerto Vallarta, Athens, the Greek islands of "Mykenas," Rhodes, and Patmos, the Turkish city of Kuşadası, Istanbul, Sydney and Canberra in Australia, Bulgaria, Armenia, and other places. ^[P295-01]

Nowadays, traveling remains my only enjoyable occupation. Although I already feel that I have grown old, I gladly bear the fatigue of traveling. It is a pleasant fatigue.

While traveling, I often think of how much science and technology have advanced within the short span of my own life, and how much smaller the world has become. My parents used to tell of someone who had gone from one village to another and said, "A human being is a bird with wings. Where was I yesterday, and where am I today!" If we compare those words, spoken a century ago, with the journeys of today, the enormous strides science has made become plain.

Interesting Incidents from My Life

[296] In the 1960s, the Armenian Choral Society sent me to Moscow to exchange professional experience. I was instructed to attend rehearsals and performances by leading choirs of the Soviet Union. I found a room in an inexpensive hotel. Unfortunately, I was alone, and without friends it was rather dull. Besides, after a few days I had already grown tired of the tasteless Russian dishes served in the dining halls. One day I decided to have lunch at the Baku Restaurant, thinking that its food might be closer to Armenian cooking. I was walking leisurely up Gorky Street toward the restaurant when I noticed a bookshop. I generally cannot pass a bookshop indifferently. I went in and began looking at the books on sale. A Russian translation of a book by the Turkish satirist Aziz Nesin caught my attention. I began examining it, and, looking at his photograph at the front, I thought, "How much he looks like me!" It really was almost like a photograph of myself. I took a copy, left the bookshop, and continued toward the Baku Restaurant. Looking at the menu there, I saw that I had not come all that way for nothing. I ordered a favorite dish and began eating with great enjoyment. It was lunchtime, and the restaurant was growing more crowded. Two young Azerbaijani men approached my table and asked permission to take the empty places beside me. With my consent, they settled into the vacant [297] chairs at the table and began speaking in their own language, which I understood perfectly. They discussed what to eat, how to find the address they were going to, and so on. It turned out to be their first visit to Moscow; they had barely managed to find this restaurant. Wishing to offer some advice, I joined their conversation, but in pure Turkish rather than Azerbaijani. Hearing me speak Turkish, they asked in surprise who I was.

"I am a Turk," I said, wanting to amuse myself a little.

They immediately asked what kind of Turk, and where I came from. I replied:

"A Turk from Turkey. Have you heard of the writer Aziz Nesin? That is me. I have been invited here in connection with the Russian publication of my book."

Then I took the book from my pocket and showed it to them. Seeing the photograph, they cried happily, "Özüdür, özüdür!" - "It is him! It is him!" They asked me to give them the book. I said they could satisfy that wish by buying a copy at the bookshop a little way down the street. But they wanted the very book in my hand, with my inscription. They pleaded so much that I was obliged to write in Turkish on its first page, "A keepsake for my friends from Baku," and sign it.

Having obtained what they wanted, they proudly told me that this book would make a great impression in their circle in Baku, and everyone would envy them this precious gift. They then began asking about the world outside, and especially about life in Turkey. Their questions revealed that the Azerbaijanis were more fanatically Turkish than the Turks themselves. From Leninakan I could watch Turkish television broadcasts, so I was somewhat familiar with [298] life in Turkey. This enabled me to answer their questions, although I made certain adjustments to counter their dreamlike picture of life there.

Because of a frivolous prank, I seemed trapped by their enticing hospitality. They would not let me leave. They ordered every kind of food and drink to show their delight. At last, to free myself from their clutches, I said I had an appointment at the Writers' Union and had run out of time: I would scarcely get there in time. Hearing this, they said they would take me wherever I needed to go. They paid the restaurant bill, came out with me, hailed a taxi, and we got in. Turning to me, they asked for

the address. In my role as a Turk who knew little Russian, I said in broken Russian, "Writer ... Union ...". The driver asked which district's union I wanted - the October District's? I simply said, "Yes."

After driving for a while, the taxi stopped somewhere, and the driver asked, "Here?" I looked at the sign on the building, saw that it said Writers' Union, and answered yes. I tried to get out, but my "new friends" got out ahead of me and wanted to know which hotel I was staying at and when they could visit. One lie always gives rise to new lies. Once again I was obliged to lie:

"I am at the Moskva Hotel, room 247. I will be free tomorrow afternoon." With that, I entered the building, waited a little while for them to leave, then came out and hurried away from that dangerous building. For the rest of my stay in Moscow, I never went back to the Baku Restaurant.

An Unwilling Journey

[299] On the morning of November 24, 1965, I went to Leninakan's school specializing in English, School No. 20. I was friendly with its principal and several teachers. Entering the principal's office, I found all the school's male teachers gathered there. They were discussing how to get to a football match the following day in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. Yerevan's Ararat and Tashkent's Kairat were to play to decide which team would win promotion to the top division of the Soviet football championship. [P299-01] It was certainly a decisive match, and the presence of Armenian football supporters to cheer on our players was very important in securing an Ararat victory. There was, however, a major obstacle. At that time of year, the road to Grozny over the high mountain pass was covered in snow and ice, extremely dangerous, even impassable. I advised them to abandon this hazardous journey. Not only did they reject my cautious advice; they said:

"We are going, and you are coming with us in your car!"

Naturally, I refused, not only because of the dangerous road, but because I had several compelling reasons. I held positions at both the pedagogical institute and the teacher-training college, and I was convinced it would be impossible to get permission from both to be absent for several days. Moreover, I had only recently bought my car, and I was not experienced enough behind the wheel to drive over icy mountain [300] passes. On top of all this, that day was my birthday, and my wife would not agree to my being away from home on such an occasion.

Having heard all my reasons, the principal, Tadevosyan, undertook to settle everything. Despite my skepticism, a few telephone calls enabled him to resolve what had seemed insoluble, leaving me no way out. As their friend, I could no longer refuse. Only the matter of convincing my wife remained. At that hour she was working at the Russian school. I decided to tell my younger son, who was in the second grade at the English school, to say to his mother when he got home that I had gone to Tbilisi.

And so, taking supplies of food and fuel for the road, at four in the afternoon ten of us set off on our dangerous adventure in two cars - mine and another teacher's. First we went to Tbilisi. Barely finding our way through the city in the darkness, we emerged and reached the junction where our road turned toward the Kazbek mountains. We asked the policeman directing traffic at the junction about the safety of the mountain road. We learned that the pass was open and that about two thousand cars with Armenian license plates had already gone that way.

It was ten in the evening when we left that point and headed toward our destination. The weather was very cold and wet, and the asphalt was icy. We advanced very cautiously, climbing all the while. Above a certain height, banks of snow lined both sides of the road. Evidently the road had been cleared and the snow piled along its edges. The higher we climbed, [301] the higher the roadside snowbanks rose. We reached a tunnel and had to pass through it. This took a few minutes, but when we came out at the other end, the asphalt road itself was covered with snow and seemed to have narrowed until there was barely room for one car. The snow piled at the roadside stood higher than the car. It was as though we were traveling through a tunnel walled with snow. The precipice beyond those walls was invisible. Thick fog surrounded us. Nothing could be seen. I could barely follow the red lights of my friend's car a short distance ahead. We drove along this terrifying road for a very long time. I had lost all sense of time; every part of me was concentrated on those two red lights, which I followed in extreme tension. I do not know how long that strained ascent lasted - I later learned that

we had climbed to nearly three thousand meters - when suddenly I realized we were descending. For an instant I was glad that the climb was over. But going downhill on the snow-covered asphalt proved even more frightening and dangerous than going up. Instead of easing, my tension increased, because it was impossible to brake when necessary. Instead of stopping, the car slid forward like a sled, drifting sideways.

While I was thinking this, I noticed the red lights of the car ahead grow brighter. That meant it was braking. I tried to brake too, but in vain: my car continued sliding forward. I do not know whether the first car had stopped or was still sliding, but the distance between us grew steadily smaller. To avoid a collision, ^[302] only one course remained: to turn the wheel toward the snow wall beside us, without thinking about the deep abyss beyond it. Fortunately, the cold had frozen the snow as hard as stone, and it stopped the car. Later, we learned that the line of cars had halted because a car attempting to travel in the opposite direction had had an accident.

At two in the morning we reached Ordzhonikidze. After a short rest and refueling the cars, we continued toward Grozny, arriving at dawn. The city was wrapped in a thick blanket of fog, and in the darkness it was impossible to see or read street names and house numbers. At that hour, the streets were deserted. We needed to find the home of the maternal uncle of Onik, the school's physical education teacher, who lived in Grozny. We waited for daylight, until people hurrying to work appeared in the streets. By asking them, we found the address we needed and Onik's uncle's house, where our host welcomed us warmly.

The house was spacious and astonishing. It was like a zoo. Its yard was full of different kinds of small animals and birds, while aquariums and parrot cages occupied the living quarters. It turned out that our host sold birds, aquarium fish, and various small animals.

We spent the whole day at the house, enjoying splendid hospitality. In the evening we went to the football ground where Ararat and Kairat were to play. In the stadium, the local people's sympathy for their fellow Muslims, Tashkent's Kairat, was unmistakable, as was their pronounced ^[303] hostility toward the Armenians.

The match was played under powerful floodlights. A thick fog had settled over the field, and the lights could not make every part of it visible. The stadium was packed with patriotic supporters from Tashkent and Armenia, as well as local people. The Chechens showed their hostility toward the Armenians by throwing empty bottles and other objects at the Armenian footballers.

The match was fiercely contested and ended 2-1 in favor of the Armenian players. During the game, the loudspeakers announced that the mountain pass had been completely blocked by snowdrifts and advised people against taking that road.

After the game, elated by our victory, we returned to our hospitable hosts. After supper together, we decided to leave at once. Since the shorter road over the pass was closed, we were obliged to return by a route three times as long, through Makhachkala and Baku.

After expressing our deepest thanks to our host, we set off at eleven that night, heading east toward Makhachkala on the Caspian coast, then south toward Baku. This journey took approximately twenty-four hours. We reached Leninakan at eleven the following night.

Although Ararat had won this decisive match and was therefore to move up to the top division, a decision of the Soviet government admitted Kairat to the top division as well. I am convinced that if Kairat had won, Ararat would not have been allowed to move up.

Impressions of Famous People

Vahram Papazian (People's Artist of the USSR)

[304] A great actor, whose portrayal of Othello, the hero of Shakespeare's play of that name, is considered his masterpiece. His magnificent performance could have been an unrivaled jewel in the dramatic theater of any developed country in the world. Many times I have admired the performances with which he held his audiences spellbound.

I first saw him in Tbilisi in the summer of 1948. Our song and dance ensemble - the Leninakan Philharmonic's Song and Dance Ensemble - was giving concerts on tour at the Armenian theater in the city's Havlabar district. Pleasant news spread among the performers: the famous actor Vahram Papazian was in the audience. After the concert, a meeting was arranged between him and the members of our ensemble. At that time he was only a name to me; I had not yet had an opportunity to see him play Othello.

He was an imposing man: tall and powerfully built, with a pleasant face and a manly bearing. He was about fifty-three, yet retained a youthful charm and manner. [P304-01]

Of that meeting, I remember only his answer when someone asked the secret of his ability to create so fine and convincing an Othello.

"To play Othello truthfully and authentically, acting talent and work on the character are not enough. I [305] try to live like Othello in my own life as well: to eat, drink, choose my company, love, and hate as he does. My own life is an example of the Moor's life," he replied.

It was in the early 1950s. One day in Leninakan, I was listening to a Turkish radio broadcast about the history of the founding of Turkish dramatic theater. They spoke at length and with praise of Vahram Papazian's important, positive role in it. Then they told an incident illustrating his wonderful acting. Siranush, who played Desdemona, told Papazian that in the strangling scene she was afraid he would actually strangle her, and asked him to be careful not to do so accidentally. To prove that he retained control even while assuming the character's savage nature, Papazian slipped the ring from Siranush's finger during that very scene, unnoticed by anyone - especially by Siranush herself, playing Desdemona.

I have seen and admired his performances many times. I regard him as a giant, not only as an actor but as a writer. The works that came from his pen, through their merits and their language, could have done honor even to celebrated writers.

I want to mention two incidents from my memories of the great master.

One January morning in the 1950s, I read on that day's tear-off calendar sheet that it was Vahram Papazian's birthday. I knew he was in Leninakan that day. Toward evening, encountering him near the Mravyan Drama Theater - which at that time stood in the city park - I approached, held out my hand, and said:

"Master, my heartfelt wishes on your birthday ..."

[306] Interrupting me, he assumed a serious expression and rebuked me in his deep voice:

"Young man, I advise you not to remind me of my birthday."

"Why, Master? Isn't it customary throughout the world to offer birthday wishes?" I asked in surprise.

He drew a deep breath, and with a sad inflection in his pleasant, resonant voice, said:

"Yes, for other people. Unfortunately, I hate that day, because each one brings me closer to the grave. The thought terrifies me."

"Are you so afraid of death?" I asked.

"Oh, how fortunate you are to be young! It is too early for you to think about that. When you grow old, you will understand what I mean." With that, he walked sadly away.

I am convinced that this was not terror of death itself. It was fear of leaving his creative life forever: of losing the stage and the characters he had made his own, the cherished bonds that had become essential to him. And finally, it was dread of the unbearable prospect of leaving this world, to which each year bound him more closely, and setting out into the unknown.

I do not know what faith or reverence for God he held. But every time he traveled along the Leninakan-Yerevan road, he asked his driver to stop at the khachkar - the carved cross-stone - beside the road in the village of Nor Bazmaberd. Getting out of the car, he would walk toward it with slow, solemn steps. He kissed the cross-stone, then bowed his head and stood motionless for a few minutes [307] - presumably praying - then crossed himself and returned to continue his journey. I witnessed this once, when I was traveling in the same car. According to the drivers who worked that route, he repeated it every time they passed the cross-stone.

Aram Khachaturian

[308] In the autumn of 1948, we went to Kirovakan to give concerts with the Leninakan Philharmonic's Song and Dance Ensemble. Instead of a hotel, we were housed in the Kirovakan rest home, or sanatorium. Needless to say, conditions there were much better than in a hotel. It stood in beautiful natural surroundings, encircled by forest. It was a holiday resort to which people came from distant parts of the Soviet Union. The ensemble's artistic director, Minas Krishchan, besides attending to his artistic duties, also took an interest in the performers' artistic education. He frequently arranged meetings with famous figures in the arts. Learning that the talented young composer Aram Khachaturian had come to Kirovakan, he decided to arrange a meeting with the ensemble's artists.

We were told to gather in the sanatorium hall at six that evening to meet Aram Khachaturian. For us repatriates, who had arrived in Armenia barely two years earlier, that name did not yet resonate or make the impression it should have. We knew only that he was a young composer who had already achieved great fame in the Soviet Union.

That evening, we assembled in the hall and greeted his entrance with applause. With confident, proud steps, the celebrated composer entered: a middle-aged man with a youthful [309] appearance. There we learned that he was an Armenian from Tbilisi, had studied cello at Moscow's Gnessin Music School, and then composition at the conservatory. He had already written a symphony, a violin concerto, the ballets *Happiness* and *Gayane*, and numerous other works.

This handsome, curly-haired, powerfully built man - a youthful middle-aged man of about forty-five - was transformed before our eyes when we learned that he ranked among the Soviet Union's celebrated composers.

Khachaturian spoke about his creative work and said he was working on the ballet *Spartacus*. At the piano he played several passages from it. When someone asked how he had composed the famous, much-loved *Sabre Dance* from *Gayane*, he replied:

"I was sitting at the piano, idly playing my fingers over the high notes at the right-hand end of the keyboard. Suddenly, out of that playing, this swift, martial melody emerged, which later became so popular." At the audience's request, he performed the *Sabre Dance* at the piano and was rewarded with our vigorous, enthusiastic applause.

In the years that followed, I met Aram Khachaturian, by then world-famous, many times. Twice, at receptions in Leninakan following concerts of his own works, I had an opportunity to speak with him more closely and observe him. What I noticed was that he was a womanizer, continually surrounded by young women, whom he frequently kissed. Perhaps what he did [310] was not unusual. But when you follow a gifted person with extraordinary interest, every act of his seems strange or out of the ordinary.

Those who knew him more closely spoke of his excessive stinginess and love of money.

For all that, he remained a talented composer, recognized, loved, and highly esteemed throughout the world. His works enjoy great popularity in every country.

Suren Harutyunyan, a People's Artist at the Sundukyan Theater, whom I had known since his years working at the Leninakan theater, once told the following story:

“I had gone to Egypt as a tourist, and on the return flight a Japanese man was sitting beside me. We could not communicate because we did not understand one another's language. At last I realized that he wanted to know my nationality. I said, ‘Armenia,’ and he replied, ‘Aram Khachaturian?’”

As you see, his name represents our country and our people. He does this not merely by composing, but by making Armenian folk melodies and dance tunes the foundation of his work. With his accomplished mastery, he transforms these simple village melodies into works that achieve worldwide fame.

Life's Ups and Downs Level Out

[311] Wrapped in the black curtain of night, I wander the uneven paths of my life's journey. Not a whisper can be heard. There is perfect stillness. Life seems to have stopped, and, like the ticking of a clock, I hear the steady beating of my heart - the only proof that time continues its measured course. My heartbeats lull me and invite me to sleep, but sleep seems to have taken offense and gone away forever. Time does not stop ... It follows its familiar course, just as it has sped on through centuries and millennia. Where did it begin before arriving at this day, and where is it going? What, after all, is time, whose pace remains unchanging? It is impossible to stop it, still less to turn it back, though at different ages we perceive its speed differently. In childhood, for example, when we are full of energy and our hearts seem to beat faster, time slows: the hours, days, and years lengthen, and time drags. In middle age, there is never enough time to accomplish this or that task or intention. In old age it moves incomparably faster, reaching cosmic speeds.

My children and grandchildren appear before my eyes, growing up so quickly. I rejoice that in so "short a time" they grow tall, succeed in their studies, and embark on bold, ambitious ventures. All this amazes me - provided I do not look in the mirror and notice the furrows and wrinkles that time's footprints have left upon my face.

[312] What, finally, is time, which continues its monotonous course regardless of the era, the season, or the changes in the weather? Is the speed of its passing relative to a person's age?

The night was well advanced when I made the effort to get out of bed and decided to consult dictionaries to see what they said about time. I found definitions such as "All past, present, and future days," or "The world exists in space and time." Neither satisfied me, so I also consulted an encyclopedia. There it was described as a "flow," and it said that "in ordinary life, our perception of its speed is related to the extent to which we fulfill our aims: it quickens or slows."

As I write, time continues its age-old flow, and the beating of my heart keeps it company. They will keep step until my heart, no longer able to continue, stops, while time will carry on along its familiar, endless course - its flow. But toward where ...? In theory, time belongs not only to our planet but to the whole universe. What has not happened in times past, both on our little earth and in the boundless reaches of the universe! Humanity knows only a very small part of what has happened, and a far smaller part of that in any detail.

Those over fifty, who have crossed life's Rubicon, often complain of how quickly time passes and of "the enormous changes taking place in so short a time." Yes, that is how it seems. In reality, it is not God who [313] makes time move faster; it is we who quicken our pace to break the finishing tape of life's marathon. From the day of birth, a person begins this marathon toward its inevitable finish - its end. The length of the course differs from person to person. Every beginning has an end. At New Year, people usually look back over the year that has passed to examine and assess the good and bad in what they have done. In the same way, I want to look back over my eighty-four years of life. I was born in Cilicia at a time in our people's history when the whole Armenian nation was being tossed in the terrible storms of deportation, genocide, and massacre. From infancy, before I could understand anything, I shared with my parents all the bitterness and privation that fell to wandering Armenians who had barely escaped the Great Genocide. Having left his home and homeland, the places he had

known for centuries, the Armenian roamed foreign, unfamiliar lands, longing to find a corner where he could live.

I spent my adolescence and early youth in Aleppo, Syria. In 1946, at the age of twenty-seven, I immigrated to the homeland, where conditions were wretched amid the thousand and one hardships of the postwar years. Adjustment was not easy for us - not so much because of the hardships as because of a new order that was entirely opposed to the rules and customs we knew: unfamiliar and difficult to comprehend.

Although many years have passed since then, I still find myself pondering, and demanding an explanation for, the “appropriateness” of the timing and manner ^[314] of organizing that immigration. People who knew nothing of Armenia’s appalling economic condition were deceived with fairy-tale dreams and brought to the homeland. True, “great deeds demand great sacrifices,” but that does not excuse what was done.

Decades after their immigration, when repatriates applied to emigrate, they were called “traitors” for abandoning their beloved homeland. In reality, they wanted to free themselves from the prevailing system and its authorities, because they were treated as less than full citizens, as people who could not be trusted ...

But how can one explain the more recent, widespread emigration from the “free, independent” homeland, when those leaving are chiefly trusted citizens born and raised in Armenia? What should these people be called ...?

It turns out that these people, too, are leaving the homeland, as we did, because the government and its officials have become estranged from the people. Thus, by “homeland” we must understand not only our native soil and water, but the authorities as well. It falls to them to determine whether the homeland feels familiar and dear or alien. Yet every beginning will have its conclusion, its end, and that end is not far away.

Life is the same. If there is a birth, a beginning, there must also be a death, an end.

I think one should prepare for that end while still alive, so as to meet that seemingly terrible moment more calmly and peacefully. In an instant, you bid farewell to every kind of worldly care.

^[315] Once all your accounts with life have been settled, none of the rites and ceremonies performed afterward can mean anything to you. They are only for those who remain alive, to uphold the honor of the family and those around them. And they serve as a reminder that this is life’s end.

Among the people of India, it is customary to wear a large turban instead of a hat, and in their faith this has great significance. That turban represents the shroud in which they are to be wrapped when they die. The meaning is that by carrying their shroud upon their heads, they should always remember they are mortal: “Death is theirs, and they are death’s.” Thus they should always remember this and live accordingly: do no harm to their fellow beings, but always think of doing good, and injure not even insects. All this is right and good, but I doubt that every Indian thinks about it continually. Some things become habits and lose their original meaning.

To return to my thought, I believe it is right to consider life’s inevitable ending beforehand and prepare for that day. The overwhelming majority of humankind believes that life continues after death. Some believe in the immortality of the soul and see death as a passage from one state of existence to another. For people who hold such beliefs, death will not be frightening at all. Although

there is no material proof that such a state exists, faith accepts it as reality, and so the terror of death disappears. Death becomes an ordinary passage from one condition into a new and still better one. In my view, what we see and touch every day has no need of faith. Faith concerns what you feel exists, though you cannot ^[316] prove it. Franz Werfel, the author of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, wrote these lines: "It is impossible to prove God's existence to an unbeliever, and unnecessary to prove it to a believer. He feels His existence and His presence." ^[P316-01]

According to an old tale, when God created man, He gave him twenty-five years of life. For those twenty-five years, man lives carefree, feeling responsible for nothing, concerned only with his own pleasure and surrounded by companions of his own age and mind. At the end of the twenty-five years, he asks God to extend his life. After much pleading, God takes twenty-five years from the life He has given the horse and gives them to man. Man lives the next twenty-five years as a horse. He starts a family and works like a horse to provide for its needs, earn a living, establish a home, and secure his children's future. When this term, too, nears its end, he once more appeals to the Almighty, asking Him to prolong his life so that he may see his grandchildren. After long entreaties, God agrees to shorten the dog's life and give man another twenty-five years. For those next twenty-five years, man lives a dog's life: he tends and guards his grandchildren and "barks" at his children and daughters-in-law. Often his children neglect him when he needs their care. Sometimes he is regarded as an extra burden. Though it is a "dog's life," man does not want to part easily with life and dares once again to appeal to his Creator. Stretching trembling hands toward the Almighty, he asks for yet another span of life. Again God does not refuse this poor creature's plea. This time He shortens the monkey's lifespan and gives another twenty-five years of life to man, ^[317] who, surrounded though he is by weakness, illness, and hardship, still clings to this suffering life and does not want to bid farewell and leave the world.

Then begins the monkey stage of his life. Although respected as an elder, he is also mocked by everyone and often becomes an object of laughter for his grandchildren and those close to him. Moving about becomes difficult. He is treated as a relic of the past. For him, the greatest pleasure lies in memories of bygone days, especially those of the "horse years" that followed his human years. Comparing the strength and abilities of that time with his present condition, he realizes that he is no longer useful to anyone, but an extra burden on those dear to him. Gradually, this forces him to reconcile himself to the need to leave life forever.

I tell this fable because I have already passed through all those stages and am now in the period of the "monkey's life." Looking back, I see that what sustains me today is the memory of the past, and that I belong to the past while life goes on renewing itself. How many billions of people like me have come, lived their short or long lives, and departed without leaving even the smallest trace! They lived, enjoyed, and suffered, imagining life had no end, that death was for others and not even worth thinking about. Yet cruel death came and took them too, leaving, at best, a gravestone in remembrance. In Armenia, I used to criticize those who spent everything they had to give a loved one a "worthy" gravestone, without thinking that fifty years later it would have been forgotten ^[318] by everyone.

Many wise people have said that the only memorial a person leaves is his work, what he has created. True, the work remains - but work of what merit, and for how long? Thus the question arises: WHAT IS LIFE? Is it simply one small link in the chain of succeeding generations, and nothing more ...?

How rich a person's inner world is, and how suddenly it withers and vanishes before the word "Death." Human reason can never reconcile itself to this terrible thought. Is it possible that, in a single instant, without even saying farewell, one should leave behind so many years of good and bad memories, casting everything to the winds? Is this the end of our life, for whose survival and improvement we struggled and toiled for so many years?

My childhood passed amid the harsh struggle for existence that fell to my refugee, wandering people, who had barely escaped the Great Genocide. My youth passed in relatively better conditions, despite the difficulties brought by the Second World War.

I spent the most fruitful part of my life in the homeland, though it was not so fruitful economically.

In my old age, I have found refuge in the United States and enjoy all the benefits provided here to give older people a happy old age. We, who have done nothing for this country - do we deserve this happiness? Yet, as Solomon the Wise says, this too is vanity and temporary, for as time passes, every tick of the clock brings us nearer our end. It is not so much that ^[319] end that frightens me as the uncertainty of the world's future course. The truth is that, for me, everything ends. In one stroke, you are removed from all the events of existence. Does that put an end to everything, or is there life after death? From the first days of his existence, man has searched for an answer to this question. All the religions that exist hold that death belongs only to the physical body, while the soul is immortal. It merely passes from one state to another.

But what kind of new state? That is a matter of faith. Christianity links the soul's new condition to the deeds performed during the material body's life. If you can follow the right path in life and receive forgiveness for your sins, that passage will be smooth, natural, and above all pleasant, because the new place and conditions promise to be far more peaceful, heavenly, and blissful than earthly life. This is called paradise.

But if, during the body's material existence, you have lived only for your own pleasures, leading a sinful life, then that passage is indeed troubling and terrible. In that case, the place to which you pass is a world of punishment, where you must answer for every error and sin committed in your earthly life and suffer eternal punishment, far more dreadful than the human mind can imagine.

The best source of a full answer to all these questions is the Bible, especially the New Testament. Reading and studying it can help you overcome the terror of death. The Apostle Paul says, "O death, where is your ^[320] sting? O grave, where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). Yes, through His resurrection Christ annulled the terror of death. Those who have repented of their sins and appealed to Jesus to forgive them and save them from their heavy burden of sin have been forgiven; once they are saved, death has lost its dread for them. It becomes simply the soul's passage from an earthly body into a heavenly one. Thus the soul is immortal, and only the material body dies.

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[322] Print run: 300 copies

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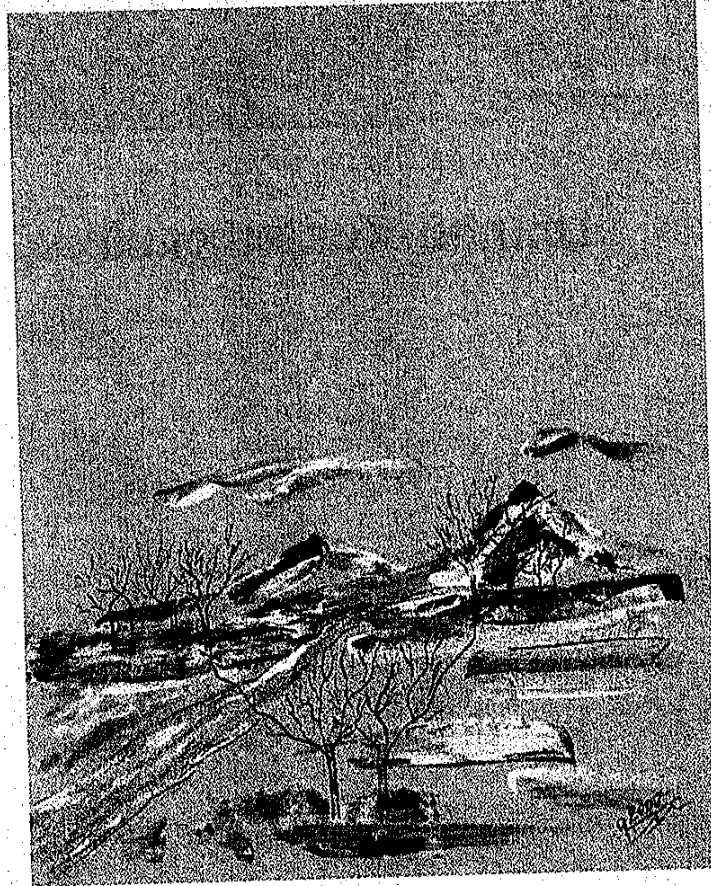
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Original illustrations and photographs

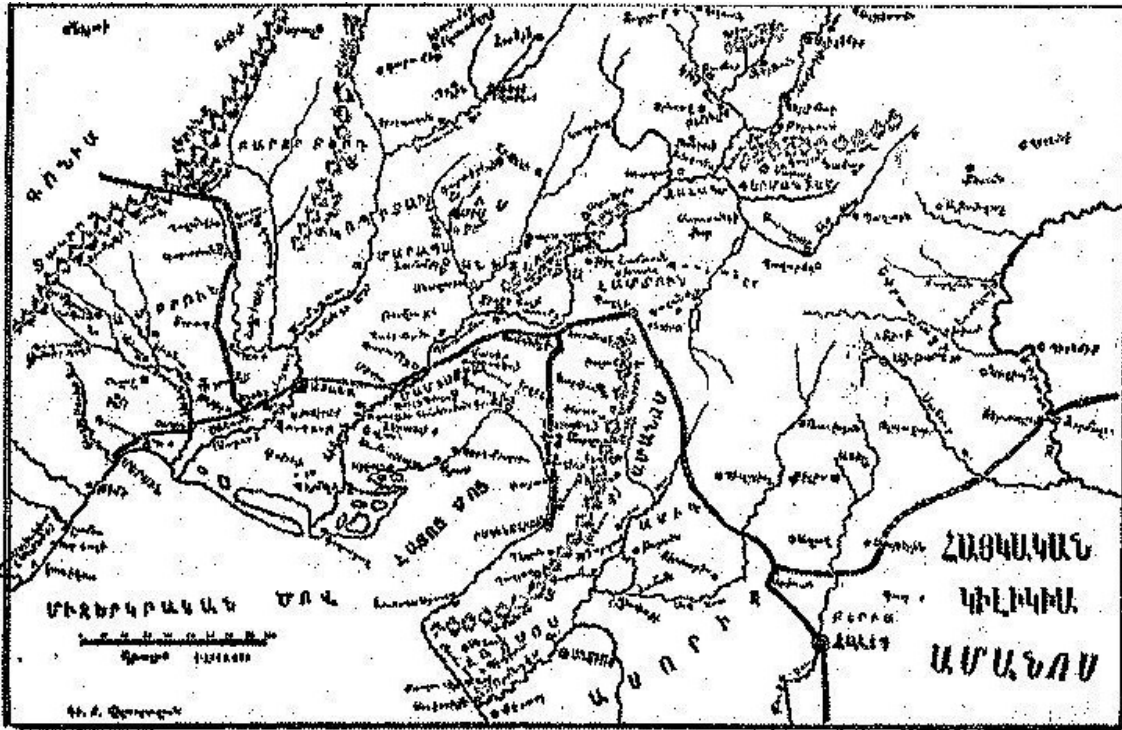
Images are cropped from the supplied scan. Printed captions are translated below; editorial descriptions appear in brackets. No missing visual detail has been reconstructed.



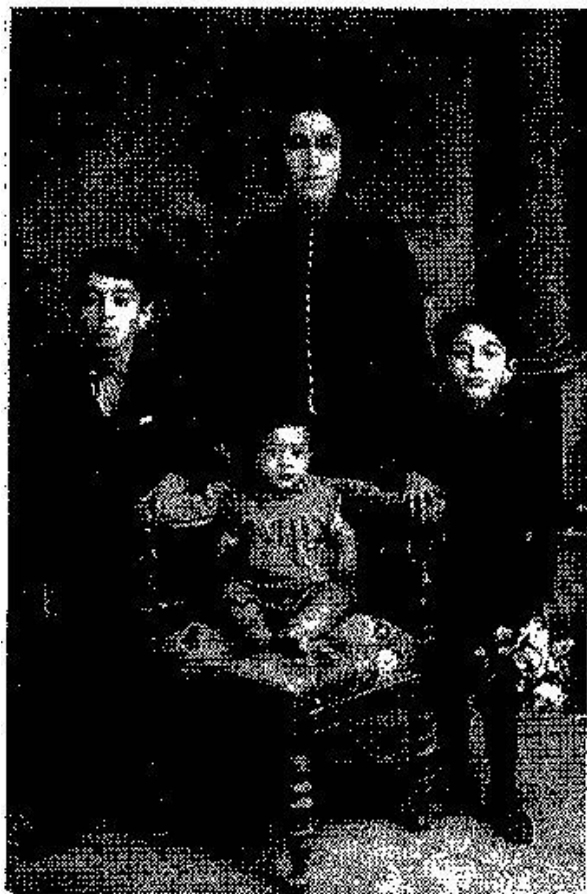
Source page 1. Cover illustration. [Description: a mountain landscape.]



Source page 4. [Uncaptioned photographs. The people are not identified on this page.]



Source page 14. Armenian Cilicia and the surrounding countries. [Within the map, the title reads "Armenian Cilicia - Amanus." Clearly legible labels include "Mediterranean Sea" at lower left, "Syria" along the lower right, and "Aleppo" beside the marked town near the lower right. Smaller place names and the scale cannot all be read reliably in this scan.]



Source page 32. 1929, Aleppo. My mother; at left, me; in the center... [The caption stops here in the scan. See P032-01.]



Source page 58. Beirut, the 1930s. My friends.



Source page 133. Our family, 1948, Gyumri (Leninakan).



Source page 196. At the piano, 1950.



Source page 219. Leninakan.



Source page 257. [Uncaptioned photograph of two people at a keyboard instrument.]

Translator's notes

These notes distinguish problems in the source from choices made in translation. A flagged passage is not automatically an error: it may reflect memory, regional usage, historical terminology, damaged print, or a fact that needs family confirmation.

P003-01 Source page 3 name

Source wording: Դաբիտա; Դաբիթա Սարգիսյան on p. 16

The mother's name is clearer on page 16: Dabita Sarkisyan. Dabita is the Armenian form of the biblical name Tabitha. Family-preferred English spelling remains to be confirmed.

P006-01 Source page 6 language

Source wording: «Փարան վար, դունյա ավեմ դուլուն: Փարան յոք, թիմարխանա յոլուն»

The Turkish saying is printed phonetically in Armenian letters. It is rendered here in Latin letters, followed by the author's own explanation. Literally, he says that if you have money, the whole world is your slave; without money, your place is the madhouse.

P009-01 Source page 9 incomplete printed sentence

Source wording: Անձամբ անելի յատկությունները:

The printed source contains this grammatically incomplete fragment, approximately “Personally, more of his qualities,” between the comments about mutual understanding and the next sentence. Its missing words cannot be recovered from the scan.

P010-01 Source page 10 cultural context

Source wording: Մեծ Եղեռնին յաջորդող տարուան մեջ ծնած

“The Great Catastrophe” (Mets Yeghern) is the Armenian expression for the Armenian Genocide. The foreword says “the year following,” whereas the author gives his birth as 24 November 1919 on page 20. The wording is preserved; see P020-01.

P010-02 Source page 10 cultural term

Source wording: թամատաուլթիւս

The printed word is an unusual spelling referring to the role or art of the tamada, the toastmaster who leads formal toasts and speeches at a gathering. The memoir later describes this activity.

P011-01 Source page 11 place-name variant

Source wording: Էյալեզ in the Western Armenian foreword; Էքբեզ in the memoir

The foreword and memoir spell the ancestral town's name differently. Both are rendered Ekbez here for consistency; the variants do not indicate different places.

P012-01 Source page 12 name spelling

Source wording: Յովհաննես Յ. Հավունճեան

The foreword's author uses Western Armenian orthography. His name is rendered Hovhannes H. Havunjian provisionally; the family's preferred English form may differ.

P013-01 Source page 13 family recollection

Source wording: վագրերի որսը

The author explicitly says “tigers,” distinct from the “leopards” listed just before. This is preserved as a family recollection; the species has not been independently established.

P015-01 Source page 15 family-name forms

Source wording: Հավանջյան; Հավունջողլու; Հավունջյան

These are the surname variants the author gives: Havanjian, Havunjoghlu, and Havunjian. The Armenian letter in Havunjian is ջ (j), visually verified in the portrait caption and this passage. Havunjoghlu preserves the Turkish-style ending -oğlu. The English forms are transliterations and may differ from established family spellings, including Avunjian.

P020-01 Source page 20 chronological inconsistency

Source wording: 1919 թվականի նոյեմբերի 24-ին

The author clearly gives his birth date as 24 November 1919. The foreword (p. 10) describes him as born “in the year following the Great Catastrophe,” which would normally suggest 1916 if the reference is to 1915. Both passages are preserved; the author’s precise date is used in the translation.

P022-01 Source page 22 cultural context

Source wording: ֆիդայիներ

Fedayis: Armenian irregular fighters or volunteer defenders.

P022-02 Source page 22 account requiring clarification

Source wording: վառողի փոխարեն մոխիր է լցված

The account says that the cartridges contained ash instead of gunpowder, although it has just described the men firing shots. This technical inconsistency is in the narrated story and is preserved, not silently corrected. The later reference to “dum-dum” denotes expanding ammunition.

P023-01 Source page 23 historical insult

Source wording: Գյավուրներ

Gavur is a derogatory Turkish term for a non-Muslim, often used against Christians. It is retained here as part of the reported dialogue.

P024-01 Source page 24 proverb

Source wording: «Եղունգ ունես, գլուխդ քորիիր»

The author identifies this as a Turkish proverb but gives it in Armenian. The image urges self-reliance; his own explanation follows in the text.

P025-01 Source page 25 historical term

Source wording: բաշի-բոզուկ

Bashi-bazouk: an irregular fighter, a term used here for the armed bands attacking the town.

P030-01 Source page 30 chronology requiring confirmation

Source wording: 1920 թվականի Չատկվա առավոտ ... մի քանի տասնօրյակ պաշարման

The text dates the beginning of refuge in the monastery to 28 March 1920 (p. 25), describes the siege as lasting several ten-day periods, and dates the departure to Easter morning 1920. These chronological details need to be reconciled; the translation preserves them.

P030-02 Source page 30 terminology in the original

Source wording: հրաբխային սև գրանիտի ու բազալտի

The author calls both the granite and basalt “volcanic.” That description is retained as written.

P032-01 Source page 32 truncated photograph caption

Source wording: 1929 թ. Հալեպ / մայրս, ճախից՝ ես, կենտրոնում

The photograph caption is cut off after “in the center.” The identity or identities in the missing part cannot be recovered from this page.

P037-01 Source page 37 title and name

Source wording: Հայտոս Խոջան ... Հայտոստյանը

Khaja (Turkish hoca) is a title for a teacher. The surname is provisionally transliterated Haytostyan; its preferred English spelling is unconfirmed.

P039-01 Source page 39 punishment terminology

Source wording: Ֆալախա

Falaka usually denotes beating the soles of the feet. Here the author applies the term to the belt beating of a child tied to a tree, as described in the following passage. The local usage is retained.

P044-01 Source page 44 food

Source wording: Ֆուլ

Ful is a dish of cooked fava beans, commonly served as an inexpensive, filling meal.

P046-01 Source page 46 place name requiring confirmation

Source wording: Նելյել փողոցի

The street name is provisionally read Nelyel. Its standard local spelling has not been established.

P049-01 Source page 49 narrative gap in original

Source wording: Երկար ժամանակ արյունահոսությունը չէր դադարում

The printed text moves directly from throwing stones to bleeding, without saying who was injured or how. No missing event has been invented in the translation.

P051-01 Source page 51 place-name spelling

Source wording: Մըղըր [scan]

The summit name is provisionally rendered Mighir. The text's local place-name spelling has not been independently confirmed.

P059-01 Source page 59 political context

Source wording: Դաշնակցական

A Dashnak is a member or supporter of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun).

P060-01 Source page 60 approximate chronology

Source wording: 1935 թվականին ... Սոս մեկ տարի հետո ... 1937 թվականին

The author says he went to Beirut in 1935, then describes the family's move as “about a year later,” while dating it 1937. The dates and approximate interval are retained as printed.

P066-01 Source page 66 historical term requiring verification

Source wording: Մյուրյուտական շարժումը

The movement's name is provisionally rendered “Murid” from the Armenian form Myuryutakan. The precise organization and the author's account of its sponsorship have not been independently established.

P076-01 Source page 76 literary attribution

Source wording: Ա. Դյումայի ... «Կամելիազարդ Տիկինը»

The original groups these works under “A. Dumas.” The Count of Monte Cristo and Twenty Years After are by Alexandre Dumas père; The Lady of the Camellias is by his son, Alexandre Dumas fils.

P084-01 Source page 84 context

Source wording: խալիպ / խան

The author recounts a local tradition about Aleppo's name; it is presented as a tradition, not a verified etymology. Khan means a caravan inn or trading courtyard. His historical description is retained in his own voice.

P085-01 Source page 85 name

Source wording: Աջուռ Թարլասը / Խորթախ Դաղ / Բուշնիկ Դաղ

These neighborhood names are transliterated from the Armenian spellings in the scan. Their preferred historical English or Turkish spellings need confirmation; Nor Gyugh means New Village.

P085-02 Source page 85 historical check

Source wording: 540 / տասներորդ դար / 1516–1920

The author's dates and historical claims are retained. The account's long gap between destruction in 540 and rebuilding from the tenth century, and the endpoint 1920 for Turkish rule, warrant historical checking rather than silent correction.

P085-03 Source page 85 name

Source wording: Ֆախրի Նեյել

Fakhri Neyel is a transliteration of the Armenian spelling. The family's own Arabic or English spelling has not been established.

P087-01 Source page 87 source syntax

Source wording: 1941 թվականի հունիսի 22-ի ... Սովետական Միության վրա

The source sentence runs onto page 88 but lacks an explicit main verb at this point. “Had attacked” is supplied from the immediately preceding account; no new event is added.

P088-01 Source page 88 chronology checked

Source wording: Սովետական Միության վրա Գերմանիայի հարձակմանը հաջորդեցին

The source places the Syria–Lebanon campaign after Germany's attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The campaign had actually begun on June 8; the armistice followed on July 14. This chronological discrepancy is retained in the narrative.

Source: Anzac Memorial, NSW Government, “The Syria-Lebanon Campaign, June-July 1941”:

<https://www.anzacmemorial.nsw.gov.au/our-stories/our-stories/syria-lebanon-campaign-june-july-1941>

P089-01 Source page 89 chronology

Source wording: Զսաներկու տարեկան էի

The stated age of twenty-two during the summer of 1941 conflicts with the birth date November 24, 1919 on source page 20, which would make him twenty-one. The author's stated age is retained.

P093-01 Source page 93 illegible

Source wording: Նա ... տարեկան մի օրիորդ էր

The age is corrupted or indistinct in the printed scan. The adjacent text clearly says the visiting woman was much older and more experienced than the narrator; no age has been invented.

P094-01 Source page 94 chronology checked

Source wording: 1938 թվականին այն հանձնվեց Թուրքիային

The date in the original is 1938. The Hatay State was established on September 2, 1938; its formal incorporation into Turkey occurred in 1939, following the June 23 Franco-Turkish agreement and the June 29 assembly decision. The author's wording appears to combine these separate stages and is retained. Source: Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, "History": <https://antakyatarihikentmerkezi.ktb.gov.tr/EN-348066/history.html>

P102-01 Source page 102 wording

Source wording: Բռնաբարության կամ կենսակցելու

The first Armenian word normally means rape or sexual violation; the second means having intercourse/cohabiting. The author's intended distinction in this passage is unclear. The unusual wording is retained, rather than silently replacing it with a claim about consensual sex or virginity. His suspicions about Hasmik and her mother remain his interpretation.

P103-01 Source page 103 idiom

Source wording: ունքը շինելու փոխարեն աչքն են հանում

An Armenian saying about an attempted improvement that causes worse damage: while trying to fix the eyebrow, one puts out the eye.

P104-01 Source page 104 context

Source wording: հիսուն միլիոն / երեսուն միլիոն

These casualty and disability estimates are the author's figures and have been retained without substituting modern estimates.

P105-01 Source page 105 chronology

Source wording: Պատերազմը ավարտվեց 1945 թվականի մայիսի 9-ին

Here "the war" refers to victory over Germany as commemorated on May 9 in Soviet usage, rather than the later end of the war against Japan.

P107-01 Source page 107 context

Source wording: Հայ Յեղափոխական Դաշնակցություն / դաշնակցական

The Armenian Revolutionary Federation is also called Dashnaksutyun; a member or supporter is a Dashnak. The political judgments and characterization of Dro's wartime role in this passage are the author's.

P108-01 Source page 108 narrative gap

Source wording: արձակուրդով Բեյրութից ... տուն գնացի՝ Հալեպ

The narrative now places the author in Beirut without an account here of his move from Aleppo or the work from which he took leave. The numbered pages are in sequence; this is a gap in the telling, not evidence of shuffled scans.

P111-01 Source page 111 idiom

Source wording: մարալ ու ջեյրան

Maral and jeyran, deer and gazelle, are conventional poetic images of a woman's beauty and grace. The source's playful, possessive wording is preserved.

P112-01 Source page 112 context

Source wording: Մյուրոնսօրհնէք

The blessing of Holy Muron is the Armenian Church's consecration of its sacred anointing oil.

P112-02 Source page 112 place

Source wording: Մասիս

Masis is the Armenian name commonly used for the greater peak of Mount Ararat.

P117-01 Source page 117 source order

Source wording: Պետք էր մաս կազմելնք ... հինգերորդ ... քարավանին

Several fragments in the first lines of this paragraph are visibly displaced in the printed page. They have been reconnected into their evident grammatical order: fifth departing group; ship leaving Beirut in mid-September; one month remaining. This is a local typesetting problem within page 117, not a displaced PDF page.

P119-01 Source page 119 incomplete source

Source wording: Այդպիսիներին ճանապարհի դնողները ոչ միայն ծնողներն էին, այլ ...

The source begins “not only their parents, but...” without completing what follows “but,” then moves into the description of farewell cries and vendors. The missing clause has not been invented.

P120-01 Source page 120 historical check

Source wording: Նավը պարտված Գերմանիայից գրավված

The author identifies the vessel as Vyacheslav Molotov on page 118 and describes it here as captured from defeated Germany. The ship's identity and provenance warrant checking; the description is preserved as written.

P124-01 Source page 124 geography

Source wording: Դարդանելի Նեղուցի անցումը (45 կիլոմետր)

The distance of forty-five kilometers is the figure printed in the memoir. It may describe the passage as remembered rather than the full geographical length of the strait.

P124-02 Source page 124 place

Source wording: Պոլիս

Bolis, literally “the City,” is the traditional Armenian name for Constantinople/Istanbul.

P124-03 Source page 124 context

Source wording: սանդալների

Here sandal is a local term for a small boat, not footwear.

P135-01 Source page 135 unclear subject in original

Source wording: Այս մտքերով խռովված՝ վերադարձավ և երկար ժամանակ պատասխանում էր մեզ...

The original abruptly shifts to third-person verbs, “returned” and “was answering us,” without identifying the subject. The likely sense is that the narrator returned and Misak resumed answering the family's questions, but the printed wording does not establish this clearly.

P142-01 Source page 142 cultural context

Source wording: մյուրոնսօրհնեք

The blessing or consecration of holy chrism (myron) is a major ceremony of the Armenian Church. The author is recalling visiting delegates' descriptions of Armenia.

P142-02 Source page 142 terminology

Source wording: չեք / Բաղսովետ

Here “check” means a bread-ration slip. Kaghsovet is the Armenian abbreviation for the city soviet, or municipal council; its unfamiliar name is essential to the exchange.

P143-01 Source page 143 terminology

Source wording: «բորեշկի»

The author writes “boreshki,” apparently his rendering of Russian pirozhki, small filled pastries. His unfamiliar pronunciation and comparison with börek are retained.

P146-01 Source page 146 terminology

Source wording: «կոլխոզնիկները»

Kolkhozniks were members or workers of Soviet collective farms, known as kolkhozes.

P156-01 Source page 156 confirmed printed text-order error

Source wording: մեր Տեսնելով մեր շփոթված վիճակը ... Մարդկայնության փորձաքարը նեղ օրերն են: գույքը

On printed page 156, the paragraph beginning “Seeing our distress, Gaspar...” interrupts the sentence “I undertook to spend the night on the platform guarding our belongings,” separating “our” from “belongings.” Gaspar is not introduced until page 157. The entire displaced paragraph has been moved to its evident position on page 157, immediately after his introduction and before the description of his building. No text is omitted or duplicated. This is a printing or editing error within the text, not evidence that the scanned pages are out of sequence.

P158-01 Source page 158 language and wordplay

Source wording: «սիսկա՛», «շաիչկա՛», «պապիրո՛ւ», «կերասիսկա՛», «կասիսկա՛», «պլաստիսկա՛», «ների՛կ... նե՛րկ...» «առե՛ք, աշե՛մ լավ պլաստիսկան»

The cries reproduce unfamiliar Russian-derived market words in local pronunciation: laundry bluing, matches, cigarettes, a kerosene stove, a headscarf and a gramophone record. The Armenian nerk means “dye”; on the next page the father mistakes it for mek, “one.” The last cry reads «առե՛ք, աշե՛մ լավ պլաստիսկան». Its opening means “buy” or “take”; the middle word, աշեմ, is uncertain, possibly a dialectal or misprinted form of ասեմ (“I say”). That provisional reading is bracketed in the translation.

P161-01 Source page 161 vocabulary

Source wording: «փափախը» / «բիյազի» կտորեղենի

Papakh is the author’s term for illicit earnings, explained on the preceding page. Byaz is a plain cotton fabric, rendered here as calico.

P162-01 Source page 162 context

Source wording: մեր ե տեղի ժողովրդի խոսած հայերենի մեջ մեծ տարբերություն

The passage describes differences between the repatriates’ Armenian and local Armenian, including pronunciation. The author does not name the dialects in this passage.

P165-01 Source page 165 name

Source wording: Միհրան Չափկիսյանը

The name is transliterated provisionally as Mihran Chapkinian; the family’s preferred Latin spelling is not established.

P168-01 Source page 168 relationship

Source wording: ինձ նվիրել էր մի ընկերուհի

Ընկերուհի can mean a female friend or a girlfriend. The passage does not establish whether the relationship was romantic.

P169-01 Source page 169 source wording

Source wording: Մի րոպե կանգնեք ու վազեք դեպի ավտոմեքենան

The printed line says “Wait a moment and run toward the car,” using an imperative for “run.” The following sentence says that the guide returned. The translation therefore provisionally reads the second verb as “he ran,” in brackets; the print appears to contain a verb-ending error.

P170-01 Source page 170 source contradiction

Source wording: Բարեբախտաբար ... ծեծն ու խոշտանգումը կիրառվեց

The printed sentence reads literally, “Fortunately ... the beatings and torture were inflicted.” This conflicts with “fortunately” and the surrounding account. The translation provisionally supplies a missing negative in brackets; the intended wording needs confirmation. The scan has been checked.

P176-01 Source page 176 source damage

Source wording: խոսքերը՝ «Ինչքան շուտ խոստովանես...»

The scan begins this sentence with the fragment “the words: ‘The sooner you confess...’,” without a governing verb. The minimal connective “stayed with me” is supplied in brackets to convey the evident sense; the omitted wording cannot be recovered.

P188-01 Source page 188 author inference

Source wording: հավանական է՝ ... անվտանգության օրգաններն էին

The author presents the security services’ involvement in setting the trap, and its relationship to his release, as his inference rather than a confirmed finding.

P189-01 Source page 189 context

Source wording: «Լենկոշ» արտելում

An artel was a cooperative work or production association. The enterprise name is transliterated as LenKosh.

P193-01 Source page 193 title

Source wording: «Ի պատիվ Նրանց, ովքեր ծովում են» / «Երկվորյակները»

The play titles are translated from the Armenian as printed. The author does not identify the playwrights for these two works here.

P195-01 Source page 195 name

Source wording: Մինաս Բրիշչյանը / Թամարա Թեմուրյանի / Ջուխան

Minas Krishchyan, Tamara Temuryan, and Jukhan are transliterated from this passage; their preferred or historical Latin spellings remain unverified. The same director appears as Minas Krishchan on page 308; the Armenian source itself varies the surname spelling. Both forms have been preserved.

P195-02 Source page 195 wordplay

Source wording: Տվողդեքը եկա՛ն

The author explains this dialectal cry as “the people giving the concert have arrived.” The literal “givers” preserves his amusement at the villagers’ wording.

P198-01 Source page 198 author viewpoint

Source wording: կանանց բարոյականությունը ... անկում է ապրում

The generalization about women’s morality is the author’s personal judgment, retained as part of his memoir rather than adopted as a factual conclusion by the translator.

P199-01 Source page 199 context

Source wording: քանոնի

The qanun is a plucked string instrument played flat, commonly described in English as a zither.

P200-01 Source page 200 source omission

Source wording: ճանապարհորդությունից մի քանի առաջ

The printed phrase appears to omit the time unit after “a few.” “Days” is supplied from the immediate travel and wedding context.

P201-01 Source page 201 geographical attribution checked

Source wording: Վահան Տերյանի ծննդավայր՝ Ախալցխա քաղաքը

The source calls Akhaltsikhe Vahan Teryan's birthplace. Teryan was born in the village of Gandza in Javakhk, near Akhalkalaki. The geographical attribution in the memoir is retained and flagged here. Sources: Armenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, report on his house-museum: <https://escs.am/am/news/30403> ; Armenian Museum of Moscow, biography: <https://www.armmuseum.ru/authors-catalog/--5>

P201-02 Source page 201 vocabulary

Source wording: աշուղ Հավասին

An ashugh is a poet-singer in the regional bardic tradition. Havasi is the performer's name.

P202-01 Source page 202 context

Source wording: փոքրիկ Սոսոյին

Soso is the familiar childhood name used here for Stalin.

P206-01 Source page 206 name

Source wording: Դոքթ. Կարլտոն

The name is transliterated as Dr. Carlton. The Armenian text alone does not establish its original English spelling.

P208-01 Source page 208 unclear wording

Source wording: Ամեն ինչ պատմելու հանձնարարություն չեմ ստացել

The scan reads literally: “I have received no instruction to tell everything,” after “I am hiding nothing from you.” This wording is difficult to reconcile with the surrounding denial of any intelligence assignment. The bracketed English provisionally reconstructs two statements—“I have told you everything; I have received no assignment”—but missing words or punctuation cannot be recovered with certainty. The literal printed wording is recorded here so the reconstruction is reviewable.

P213-01 Source page 213 unclear wording

Source wording: Անտրամաբանական էր նաև խորհուրդ չտալ, հաշտվել եղածի հետ...

The scan says, approximately, “It was also illogical not to advise, to accept what had happened and continue studying....” The negative and punctuation leave the intended syntax uncertain. The bracketed English follows the immediate context and the next paragraph's decision to resist the injustice, but this is a provisional reconstruction, not a certain recovery of the author's wording.

P213-02 Source page 213 vocabulary

Source wording: «ախբարի»

Akhbar/akhpar is the colloquial label applied to repatriates, related to the Western Armenian word for “brother.” Here it carries the exclusionary or disparaging sense experienced by the author.

P215-01 Source page 215 context

Source wording: ԽԾԲ (խնամի, ծանոթ, բարեկամ)

KhTsB reproduces the initials of the Armenian expression for relying on family and personal connections to obtain favors or advancement.

P218-01 Source page 218 place names

Source wording: «Մայլաների» ... թաղամասերի ցանկը

Mayla is a local word for a neighborhood. The names are retained in approximate transliteration: Yerkatgits means Railway; Turki Mayla, Turkish Quarter; Dzori Mayla, Valley Quarter; and Tsnndatun, Maternity Hospital. Local/historical spellings of the full list should be checked if a map or place-name index is prepared.

P220-01 Source page 220 local names

Source wording: «Բլբլան Ժամը» / «Ֆրանգների Ժամը» / «Գեղցվոնց եկեղեցին»

These are local church names or nicknames as given by the author. “Franks” here denotes Catholics; the identity and preferred English name of Bblan Zham should be confirmed before substituting a formal church name.

P222-01 Source page 222 source contradiction

Source wording: ազնիվ ձևով կիրառման մեղադրանքն

The scan literally speaks of accusations of practicing the craft “honestly.” The preceding account of quarrels among pigeon fanciers suggests dishonest or unfair practices, perhaps with an omitted negative prefix. The contextual reading “unfair” is supplied in brackets and remains provisional.

P223-01 Source page 223 cultural terms

Source wording: թասիբ / նամուս

Tasib and namus overlap in meaning around honor, pride, dignity, and the safeguarding of personal or family reputation; they do not map neatly onto separate English words.

P223-02 Source page 223 nicknames

Source wording: Ապտեկ Միշա ... Սզու Վաղդ

The nicknames are retained in transliteration to preserve the people’s local identities. Readily intelligible examples include “Pharmacy Misha,” “Carefree Martin,” “Undernourished Ashot,” “Spiritless Mukuch,” “Pus Yervand,” “Disgust Yeghish,” “Quarrel Serozh,” “Cabbage Hendo,” “Round Onik,” “Dead Hendo,” and “Cucumber Valod.” Some dialectal nicknames, especially Astormuz, Darcho, Gmpr, and Mzu, require a knowledgeable local speaker to confirm their precise force.

P224-01 Source page 224 dialect

Source wording: Չալըըջուլ դուդուկը...

The original dialect quotation is preserved because its sound and vocabulary are the point of the passage. The English immediately following translates the author’s own standard-Armenian explanation, not a technical definition of the instrument.

P224-02 Source page 224 unclear dialect

Source wording: փուրչուկուկ

The food term p’urch’uluk is retained provisionally. Its exact local meaning requires confirmation from a speaker familiar with Gyumri dialect; guessing a specific dish would be unsafe.

P225-01 Source page 225 name

Source wording: Մելիք Փաշայանը

The Armenian spelling is rendered here as Melik Pashayev, the commonly recognizable form of the conductor's surname; the passage gives no first name.

P234-01 Source page 234 military term

Source wording: Զինական հետախուզության հրահանգիչ

Chemical reconnaissance here refers to detecting and assessing chemical contamination in military conditions; it does not mean espionage.

P238-01 Source page 238 chronology

Source wording: 1964 թվականին ... հինգշաբթի օրերը ձկնեղենի պարտադիր օր

The author associates these food-policy statements and fish days with 1964. The date and policy chronology are retained as written and would need historical verification before being treated as a precise institutional timeline.

P245-01 Source page 245 source inconsistency

Source wording: Ալբերտ Մանուկյանը ... Մովսիսյանին

The printed page first names Albert Manukyan, then calls the apparently same official Movsisyan; later pages continue with Movsisyan. Both forms are preserved. Family knowledge or another edition may clarify whether this is a name error or an unmarked change of person.

P255-01 Source page 255 context

Source wording: արտել

An artel was a cooperative work or production association. The institution's name, Լենկոշ, is retained as Lenkosh.

P256-01 Source page 256 name to verify

Source wording: Խախանը ... Պերշետը

These military officers' names are reproduced as Khakhan and Pershets from the Armenian forms in the scan. Their original Russian spellings are not supplied; family records may establish the preferred English forms.

P260-01 Source page 260 context

Source wording: ախպար

Akhpar, a form of the Armenian word for 'brother,' was used in Soviet Armenia as a label for diaspora Armenians who had resettled there; in the hostile remarks quoted here, it is disparaging.

P263-01 Source page 263 context

Source wording: Նոյեմբերյան տոնը

The 'November holiday' refers here to the Soviet celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution, observed in November under the Gregorian calendar.

P264-01 Source page 264 source spelling variation

Source wording: Իկիլականի ... Իկիլիկյանը

This page gives the propaganda official's surname first as Ikilakyan and later as Ikilikyan. Both printed forms are retained; the intended family name should be confirmed if possible.

P269-01 Source page 269 chronology to clarify

Source wording: 1968 թվականին ... դիմելուց մեկ տարի անց ... Քսաներկու տարվա

The source says he applied in 1968, received permission a year later, and had endured twenty-two years of surveillance since his 1946 immigration. Page 279 says twenty-three years, and page 283 explicitly dates the first Bulgarian visit to 1969. Thus 1969 is supported within the book; the twenty-two-year count appears approximate or refers to the application year. All figures are preserved.

P272-01 Source page 272 place-name clarification

Source wording: Ջուլիանա օդակայանը

The airport is rendered 'Juliana' in the source. The description—Kyiv's second airport, close to the city—appears to refer to Zhulyany (also transliterated Zhuliany); the source form is retained pending confirmation.

P281-01 Source page 281 context

Source wording: դեմոկրատական երկիր

'Democratic' here reflects Soviet-era terminology for the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, often called 'people's democracies'; it is not a present-day assessment of their political systems.

P289-01 Source page 289 cultural context

Source wording: խաշը, մատաղը ... «զբաղվելը»

Khash is a traditional meal centered on a broth of boiled cattle feet; matagh is a religious offering whose meat is shared. "Keeping busy" translates the author's deliberately innocent euphemism for drinking.

P290-01 Source page 290 wording to clarify

Source wording: խեղրի

The villager's final dialectal word is printed as "խեղրի." "Until he chokes" conveys the apparent sense of excessive drinking; the precise local meaning should be confirmed by a speaker familiar with the dialect.

P293-01 Source page 293 name and probable identification

Source wording: Ժան Գեղամի Պակլավաջյան

The memoir calls him Jean, son of Gegham, Paklavajyan. He apparently is the physiologist listed by the Armenian National Academy of Sciences as Hovhannes Gegham Baklavadjyan (Հովհաննես Գեղամի Բակլավաջյան, 1922–2001). The memoir's familiar given name and variant surname spelling are retained here; family confirmation would clarify them. See the Academy's biographical entry: <https://www.sci.am/membersview.php?d=1&id=41&l=2&langid=1>

P295-01 Source page 295 place name to clarify

Source wording: Միկենաս

The source names "Mykenas" among the Greek islands. The intended destination may be Mykonos, but the printed form is retained here for family confirmation.

P299-01 Source page 299 historical detail checked

Source wording: Տաշքենտի «Կայրատը»

The source repeatedly calls the opposing club "Tashkent's Kairat." The historical opponent was Kairat of Alma-Ata (Almaty). The RSSSF archive confirms the match in Grozny on November 25, 1965, Ararat's 2–1 victory, and the eventual promotion of both clubs. Thus the date and result agree with the record, while the city is mistaken. The memoir's wording is retained. The archive does not establish when or why the decision to promote both clubs was made. Source: Rec.Sport.Soccer Statistics Foundation, "Soviet Union 1965": <https://www.rsssf.org/tables/su65.html>

P304-01 Source page 304 date and age discrepancy

Source wording: 1948 թվականի ամռանը ... Տարիքը մոտավորապես 53 էր

The memoir dates this meeting to summer 1948 and estimates Papazian's age as about fifty-three. His documented birth year is 1888, which would put him at about sixty in 1948. The source's date and estimate are both retained. The discrepancy may concern the remembered age or the meeting date. See Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, "Shake this island" (2019): <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/shake-this-island/>

P316-01 Source page 316 quotation attribution

Source wording: Ֆրանց Վերֆելը այսպիսի տողեր ունի

The memoir attributes these words to Franz Werfel without naming a particular work or giving a page reference. The English here translates the Armenian quotation; it is not presented as a verified quotation from a published English edition.

P321-01 Source page 321 contents discrepancy

Source wording: ԶՈՆ ԾՆՈՂՆԵՐԻՍ ... 4

All numbers in this translated contents list reproduce the original book's printed references. The dedication is actually on PDF/printed page 3; page 4 contains two uncaptioned photographs. The contents' reference to page 4 is retained and flagged. This discrepancy alone does not justify moving the pages: the numbered sequence and the rest of the contents agree.