

AN INSPIRATIONAL STORY OF SURVIVAL

# THROUGH THE CRUCIBLE OF LIFE



An Autobiographical Memoir  
by Dr. Ashot M. Kocharov

*Through the Crucible of Life*

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## **Foreword for Dr. Ashot Kocharov's** *Through the Crucible of Life*

In the summer of 1970, after passing my 8<sup>th</sup>-grade final exams, my grandfather Ashot and I went on a trip. Grandfather had long wanted to show me Nagorno-Karabakh, the place of our origin. Therefore, when I reached my age, he decided that it was time to make the trip.

Our journey began in Yerevan, where we spent a few amazing days before departing to Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh. After spending the night in a hotel, we were on the way to our prime destination, the town of Shusha. A small shuttle bus full of passengers was taking us to the place where my grandfather was born and spent his childhood. It was only a forty-minute drive, but the fatigue that had accumulated over the last few days, the summer heat, as well as the rocking of the bus all took their toll. Grandfather, uncomfortably sitting on the elevated seat behind the bus driver with his legs hanging above the floor, nodded off and soon fell asleep. Holding on to a crossbar, I stood in front of him and watched as his head gradually tilted towards me and bobbed back and forth. Grandfather continued to doze. This was making me feel embarrassed for him, and it worried me that someone might see his bobbing head. My fear was not in vain. I noticed how a young man, who sat next to Grandfather, nudged his girlfriend with his elbow and gestured with a smile towards my dozing grandfather. This made me angry, but out of modesty and my poor Armenian, I pretended not to notice it. Soon we were getting off the bus, and my grandfather, like a skilled guide, took me around the town. Shusha did not leave a special impression on me. Except for a fortress and Khan's palace, which we did not get to see, this was a typical Azerbaijani district town with mixed old and Soviet-era architecture.

Shusha was well known as a sanative resort. I should mention that, because of time constraints, we focused our visit to Shusha on specific parts of the town associated with my grandfather's life here. From what I got to see in Shusha, I particularly remember the abandoned Armenian Church.<sup>1</sup>

Being far from religious, I suddenly found myself standing mesmerized by the austere beauty of the once majestic and now forgotten and abandoned Cathedral. Surrounded by sad calmness, lying in debris and ruins, the Cathedral still stood proudly reminding people of its eternity and not that distant past. In front of the Cathedral stood a monument dedicated to an Armenian patron who sponsored the construction of a pipeline that brought water to the town from a spring located some 20 km out of the town. The monument was sculptured in Paris on the contributions made by the grateful residents of Shusha.

Our next stop was a vast wasteland studded with many squares and rectangles made of stone and cement. This place was once the Armenian quarters of Shusha, and the squares and rectangles were the foundations of the homes of its inhabitants. Grandfather stopped in front of one of them and sadly said that this was all that remained of the house in which he once lived. Then, for the first time, he told me about the tragic events that took place here decades ago, which he witnessed firsthand. Continuing his story, my grandfather led me to the edge of a nearby cliff where a narrow path began descending, almost vertically, down to a deep gorge. Grandfather said that while young men were holding back the enemy, thousands of Armenian residents, himself among them, were escaping their town forever along this path. The path descended towards a road which in turn went up to the distant mountain range

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<sup>1</sup> I believe it was Kazanchenots Cathedral.

visible on the horizon. "That is Zangezur, Armenia," said my grandfather. During this trip, I was the same age as he was at the time of the escape. I looked down the winding path at the road that led to Zangezur and for a moment imagined a clear picture of that night in March of 1920. I envisioned a crescent moon in a starry sky as well as the sounds of rolling down pebbles, the muted hum of whispering, and the weeping of women, children, and the elderly as they were descending. Down below stretched a ribbon of sparse lights of the crowd marching toward Zangezur. This momentary vision left an unforgettable impression on me and remained in my visual memory forever.

It was time for us to return to Stepanakert. I would be lying if I said I was regretful about it. Tired, we got on a bus. Grandfather sat next to me and of course soon dozed off, causing his head to bob again. This time, it did not bother me at all. I looked with pride and respect at my grandfather, who I feel I came to know better for the first time. I remember thinking that if the smirking young couple from the bus had known the story of my grandfather's life, they would have been more respectful.

The dear reader is about to get acquainted with our family's history. Although this book was written for the family circle, I am sure it will be interesting to many others. Grandfather's life was a continuous struggle for an ordinary boy's survival. Being not gifted with any special physical strength or bravery, he not only survived but found his place in life. His astounding fortitude was driven by his deep love and care for his loved ones and an innate instinct for self-preservation fortitude was driven by his deep love and care for his loved ones and an innate instinct for self-preservation.

I remember well when, on one of my infrequent visits to my grandparents, I found my grandfather and his older brother, Yervand, locked in the living room working on something. However, I was not particularly interested in what they were doing there. Later, I was presented with a copy of Grandfather's book of memoirs, which you, dear reader, are about to read.

At that time, I never read it from the beginning to the end and only did so much later in my life. Grandfather's idea to record his memories for posterity is hard to overestimate. Not many people can boast of knowing their family history. Realizing that his next generation will most likely not be able to read Armenian, Grandfather, for whom Russian was a second language, wrote his memoirs in that language.

This was the last feat of Ashot Kocharov and his will to us, his descendants. His son, my father Yuri, would go on to write his memoirs following his father's example. A tradition was taking root. I write these lines because now is my turn to continue what my grandfather started. But before I began working on my own story, I felt obligated to translate my predecessors' work into English, for the same reason that made my grandfather write in Russian.

I have worked intermittently on the translation of this book for more than fifteen years. The author's memory of dates and detailed descriptions of objects and events in the story were astounding. My work was complicated by my lack of English. I am sure the dear reader will soon notice this but will be understanding of my work. Ironically, it is a translation from Russian written by the person for whom it was a second language, into English by a person for whom English was also a second language. A significant part of my work was editing the text to make it more comprehensible for the English reader. Yet at the same time, I was careful in preserving the authenticity of

the text. I illustrated the book with family photos and images of postcards from the Tsar era. Throughout the book, you will find footnotes with my comments.

I am grateful to my dear children, Ashot and Shagane, who despite their work and school loads, helped me with editing the text and printing this book. I am sure my descendants will find this story not only amazing and fascinating, but it will also be their journey to self-discovery.

It should be noted that the described historical events and their assessments are based on the memory of childhood events, which are often subjective to a perception of them, and therefore do not claim to be completely historically accurate.

I have always seen my grandfather as my spiritual father and my work on his book is my tribute and deep respect for his memory.

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# *Through the Crucible of Life*

*An autobiographical memoir*

*by Dr Ashot M. Kocharov*





## *From The Author*

Numerous diverse and sometimes amazing events that had taken place in my long and difficult life have been occupying my thoughts for a long time. Gradually, especially after my retirement, it became my obsession and an insuperable desire to write my memories.

In 1920, there was a historical event which has changed not only my destiny and that of my loved ones but also affected the fate of the next generations of our family. In March 1920 Shusha<sup>2</sup>, the true place we as a family can claim as our hometown has fallen. I was fifteen years old when it happened and therefore consequently remember all that has occurred before and after the tragic event and feel obligated to put everything, I remember into words for you, my kin. I believe everybody should know their roots, forefathers, places they lived, lifestyles, and traditions.

No doubt certain parts of my story will seem to be unduly detailed or perhaps not even interesting to my reader. I realize that. Working on this book, I have often been carried away by the emotions of aroused memories and nostalgia; they were too strong, and I was too weak to resist them. I should also admit that some events did not find their place in this book, as I purposely skipped them, for being either too personal or prone to be misinterpreted. I incur the responsibility to take these untold stories with me, to there where we all eventually unite.

My writing is based on real events. All characters, with whom you will be acquainted were real people, Grandfather Shamir, my father Martiros, Uncle Markara, Pel-Levon, Meshadi-Avetis, Taque-Aker, Uncle Nicolai, Tsiling Ashot, Shirvanzade, Avetik Isaakyan, and many others. I tried to be especially detailed in

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<sup>2</sup> Armenians call this town Shushi, I kept the book original spelling.

the description of Shusha and the everyday life of its inhabitants during the period of peace and the tragic events that led to the fall of the town and the exodus of its Armenian population.

This was the beginning of our family journey.

Someone has asked me if I am sure my memoirs will find its reader. Well, here is what I have to say to that, if I were to learn that somewhere far and away, perhaps on the other side of Earth, there is just a tiny piece of a document written by one of my ancestors, I would do everything in my power to get it, perhaps even only to better understanding of who I am.

I devoted one and a half years of my life to this work. It was intense and hard work, demanding will and many efforts to restore memories of sixty-year-old events. Especially hard was to remember places, dates, and their sequence. It was also physically challenging, as I always had poor handwriting, which had not gotten better when my hands began trembling.

I am incredibly grateful to my older brother Yervand who I was visiting all this time, once or twice a week. Yervand was writing under my dictation, sometimes correcting my mistakes. His writing was more legible and easier to read than the typist I had hired. I am sure that without Yervand's help, I would not be able to complete this book.

I am also obliged to both of my children, Yuri, and Irina, for their support of my idea to write my memories. Yuri also provided me with paper and Ira wrote the first ten pages.



*My time will come, and I will be gone, but let this modest work remains as a memory of me. Let this tradition initiated by me stimulate the future generations to continue writing the story of us, the Kocharov.*



*Ashot Martirosovich Kocharov*

*PART I SHUSHA*







*“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.”*

*Charles Dickens*





*Chapter 1 The Kocharov*

Under traditions of that time, the first name of our ancestor, Kochar,<sup>3</sup> became our family's surname. Unfortunately, I am not sure whether Kochar was a father, grandfather, or even great-grandfather to my grandfather Manuchar. Kochar lived in the small village of *Kendhurd*<sup>4</sup> of current Martuny *Rayon*<sup>5</sup> of *Nagorny Karabakh*.<sup>6</sup> Many *Kocharians*<sup>7</sup> still live in that village, also known by its Armenian name *Haghorti*. Most likely we all are related to the same Kochar, and this makes me think Kochar was, in fact, my great or even great-great-grandfather. The only fact that I can assure you, is that Manuchar was my grandfather, the father of my father. Manuchar had a younger brother, who was married but died young and childless.

Manuchar was married to my grandmother Ekhsa and they had four children together: son Gregory (Quki), daughters Guli and Salati, and the youngest son, my father, Martiros (Mardi). Martiros was born in 1875. My uncle Gregory had six children with his wife Sona: Mirza, Agadjan (sons), Zartarig, Guli (daughters), Arutun (son), and Taque (daughter). In respect of my grandfather Manuchar, all of the Gregory's

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<sup>3</sup> Translates as the Holy Ray (Arm.)

<sup>4</sup> For some reason, the author preferred to use the Turk name of his home village. Original Armenian name of the village is Khagorty. The name is rooted to the word communion, most likely because it had a church servicing nearby villages as well.

<sup>5</sup> Territorial unit, distric (Rus.)

<sup>6</sup> Mountain Karabakh (Per.) or Artsakh (Arm.), the historical province of the Great Armenia, then the autonomous region of Azerbaijan SSR with predominant Armenian population.

<sup>7</sup> I believe our original last name prior to the Soviet time was Kotcharian. Later it had been changed to its Russian version Kocharov when Soviets began issuing passports.

sons were given the last name Manuchryan.

Interestingly, oldest Mirza was only three years younger than my father Martiros. When he married his wife Shushanik, they had five children: son Sasha who died in 1937 from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-three; son Misha who perished in WWII in 1942 and twin sisters *Lusik* and *Astkhig* born in 1919. Lusik lived in Kendhurd, Astkhig in *Sumgait*.<sup>8</sup> Astkhig's younger daughter Jenya<sup>9</sup> currently lives in *Grozny*<sup>10</sup> with her husband Socrat.

Mirza's second son Agadjan moved to *Andijan*<sup>11</sup> in his young age. I saw him only once in Martuny in 1947, when he was already a fairly old man. He died in Andijan, and I am not aware of the whereabouts of his family.

The youngest son Arutun and his wife Satenik had five children. Older son Vasilij served in the Soviet army for over forty years and lived with his Russian wife in *Pskov District*.<sup>12</sup> Other children of Arutun, Wilson, Milton, and Frosya lived in Baku and Kendhurd. For some reason, my father, Martiros, kept the last name, Kocharian.<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> Industrial town near Baku.

<sup>9</sup> It is my assumption that Jenya was the daughter of Astkhig. I have personally met Jenya and Socrat in Grozny back in the late 1970s.

<sup>10</sup> Currently the capital of Chechnya autonomous region of the Russian Federation.

<sup>11</sup> Town in Uzbekistan.

<sup>12</sup> A province in the former Soviet Socialist Republic of Russia, now Russian Federation.

<sup>13</sup> Villagers at that time had no passports, so it is hard to tell now if our family ever had a surname Kocharian. Or they did but it was changed to its Russified version Kocharov when Soviet government began issuing passports.

## *Chapter 2 My Maternal Grandparents*

My other grandparents, Shamir and Bagum Manukov had five children: three daughters, Sophan, my mother Annushka, and Gumash; and two sons, Mukhan and Nikolai. They were a couple of two opposite characters. Shamir was a harsh, sometimes even rude, reserved, and impatient man, while Bagum was a quiet, polite, patient, and careful woman. I still have the warmest, most gentle, and touching memories of her as an exceptionally kind and loving grandmother. God bless you, Grandmother Bagum!

Grandfather *Shamir*<sup>14</sup> was a man of average height and a strong constitution. His big head was endowed with large ears and a huge, swollen, pimples red nose. I well remember his bloated, short-bearded face, his always-unshaved convex cheeks, and red, cataract touched, staring indifferent eyes. His voice was strong and harsh. He was a slow walker, hardly tearing off his thick short legs from the ground, sometimes leaning on a cane. He was usually dressed in wide fabric trousers, a *chukha*,<sup>15</sup> and a papakha on his head. Grandfather Shamir was a social drinker, he did not smoke, but was a *brnoti*<sup>16</sup> taker and always kept a large bullet cartridge in his pockets filled with a few grams of snuff. The cartridge was so big, that I was always wondering what kind of gun would use it. I remember how grandfather would pull out the cartridge from his pocket, remove the lid from it, then raising his left hand he would bend down and twist his big finger in a manner that created a small dimple in his hand, where he, using his other

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<sup>14</sup> Biblical name of Aramaic origin meaning “a sharp thorn, flint”.

<sup>15</sup> A short coat with large pockets.

<sup>16</sup> Snuff (Arm.)

hand, would dump a small portion of his snuff. In a few seconds, his face became deformed, and his head began moving in a series of fluctuations back and forth, all of this followed by loud sneezing. Having taken his pleasure, he would put his cartridge away, while smacking his lips and moaning.

Grandfather Shamir was a small merchant selling haberdashery and household essentials; people called him *Charchi*<sup>17</sup> Shamir. In Shusha, he was purchasing different trifles, such as buttons of every possible color and size, needles, pins, laces, tapes, threads, hairbrushes, dye ink for fabrics, inexpensive custom jewelry, candles, as well as many other miscellaneous items. He then traveled to remote villages where he was selling or trading his goods for dry fruits, beans, peas, *arakh*,<sup>18</sup> *doshab*,<sup>19</sup> and other unperishable food. Usually, he was absent at least for a week, but sometimes it took him longer than that, it all depended on how fast he was able to turn around with his affairs. He returned home with purchased goods stored in *hurdzhins*,<sup>20</sup> loaded on his donkeys. At home, he would pour out the content of the bags on the floor in a corner of a room, creating piles of different kinds, of Armenian merchant beans, peas, dried fruits, etc. Frequently, those goods were mixed, so Grandfather made us children go through the piles to sort out and separate the peas from beans and red beans from motley beans, etc.

It was very tiresome and boring work, however, we obediently submitted to Grandfather. Later, he would take it all away and sell it at the town bazaar to the dealers. Part of his

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<sup>17</sup> Peddler (Per.)

<sup>18</sup> Artizan vodka, in Karabakh means moonshine vodka made out of mulberries.

<sup>19</sup> Mulberry molasses.

<sup>20</sup> Woven bags.

earnings was allocated to purchasing new goods and preparations for his next trip.

On the northern part of Shusha, Grandfather Shamir had a house that he owned. At that time, our family lived close to them in a rental house about fifteen meters across the street. We called our place Malyaga house after the landlord's surname. The backyard of the house faced *Khankandi*<sup>21</sup> and was built several meters from the edge of a cliff. I often ran to my grandparents and was always aware of what was going on there. Grandfather was a good gardener. In the southern part of his practically flat backyard, he had a nicely landscaped garden with several flower beds symmetrically arranged in a chessboard order, alternated by well-groomed footpaths. Grandfather often brought, sometimes even from his trips, various plants and planted them along the footpaths. It was then pleasant to look at the blossom violets, poppies, and some yellow flowers. In the southwest corner of the garden grew a large nut tree, slightly further was a bush of a lilac. From the west to the east along the edge of the garden were planted bushes of gooseberry, raspberry, blackberry, dog rose, and roses. What a great selection of trees and bushes represented in the garden: apples, pears, plums, mulberries, and quince. Next to the right, under the trees, there was a deep well with drinkable water, equipped with a large copper jug on a rope. Grandfather Shamir loved to sit in his garden, and nobody ever dared to disturb him at that time. When leaving, he always locked the garden gate, leaving it to the care of Tsapan, his backyard dog. Children could play in the garden only under adults' supervision. Messing with his favorite place or plucking

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<sup>21</sup> Village of Khan (Tur.) Currently Stepanakert, the capital of Nagorny Karabakh Republic.

unripe fruits was severely punishable. Summer residents and passersby admired the garden, which was especially good in May and June.

Besides being a loving mother and caring wife, Grandmother Bagum was also a fine housekeeper. She had contributed her share to the family's financial welfare by making and selling soap. People called her soap-maker Bagum-*baji*.<sup>22</sup> I remember she had quite a few clay pots, which she used for making soap. She was buying offal, fat, and dry potash at a *bazaar*<sup>23</sup> and had *khambals*<sup>24</sup> deliver it to her house. In the house's front yard, to the left of a wooden gate, there was a shed where she cooked her soap in two huge boilers. When the soap was prepared but still in a liquid state, she would pour it into the clay pots. On the next day, she overturned the pots and by tapping on the top of them, extracted out white solid heads of soap. Later, she would load the soap on her back and walk through the town quarters delivering a product of her hard work to her clients. I should mention that she was making the soap periodically, only when her clients called and asked for it.



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<sup>22</sup> Sister (Tur.)

<sup>23</sup> I believe here and further the Author refers to the Small Bazaar in the Armenian part of Shusha.

<sup>24</sup> Bazaar loaders.



*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*

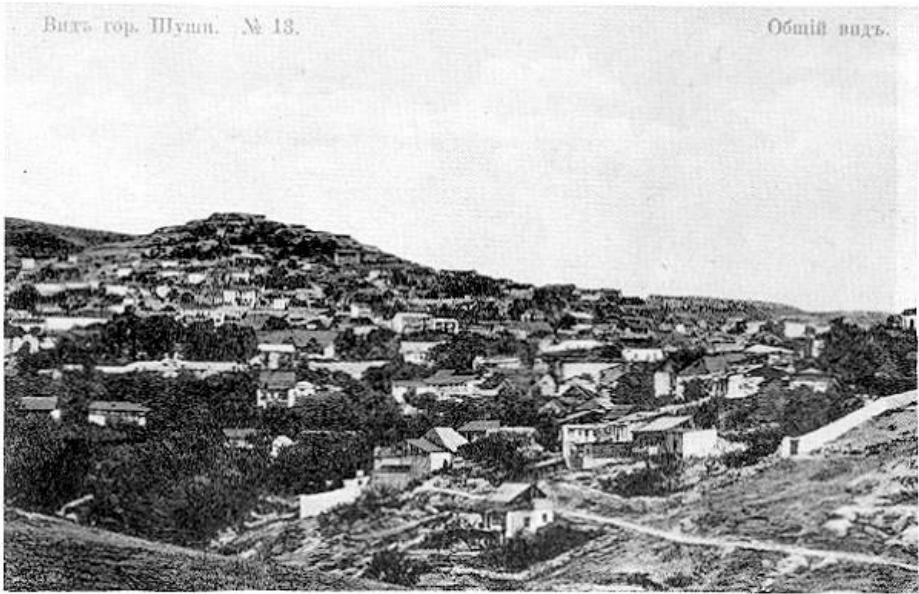


View on the Armenian quarter of Shusha

Elderly Armenian couple of Shusha (below left)  
The Avetisyan's house in Shusha (below right)



*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*



Armenian quarter Verin Tagh



Armenian quarter Djrabertsots

Chapter 3 Our Neighborhood and Everyday Life

Years passed; we children have grown up a bit. Our family has moved to a different rental house that was not as close to my grandparents' place as the Malyaga's house. My father was a poor man, hardly making a living to support his family of six. There were no hopes we would ever have a house of our own. Compelled to the tenant living we often moved from place to place. Yervand was born in 1901, in *Ovtchi Pirum*<sup>25</sup> house; I in 1905,<sup>26</sup> in Telli-baji house. In 1908, in Malyaga house was born Yegishe, my brother who I hardly remember, as he died at the age of nine months. I vaguely remember having a priest and many crying women in our house. My only sister Lusik was born in 1910, and later in 1914, in Khatayunt's house was born Enok. For some, unknown to me reason his birth documents had 1913 as his year of birth, but I well remember how in the mid of May 1915 we gathered in grandpa's garden to mark Enok's first birthday. In 1916, in the same Khatayunt's house was born my younger brother Zarmair. Besides all the above-stated places, we have also lived in several others, including Balasyan's and Badjunt's *Ton*,<sup>27</sup> *Petsur*<sup>28</sup> *Ton*, *Ashugant's*,<sup>29</sup> and Avetisyan *Ton*.

For us children, life was proceeding well and joyfully; in fact, we had no other concerns but to eat, drink, play, sleep and play again. There was a very wide range of fascinating games, such as Knucklebones, which was our favorite game. We even stained bones into different colors. I had tens of them. as

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<sup>25</sup> Hunter Pirum (Arm.)

<sup>26</sup> Author never knew his exact birthday and month.

<sup>27</sup> House in Karabakh dialect, differing from *toon* in Armenian.

<sup>28</sup> Upper (Arm.)

<sup>29</sup> Ashug, folk singer and storyteller.

Knucklebones, which was our favorite game. We even stained bones into different colors. I had tens of them.

I played well in other games such as “*Odji-odji*”, “*Ktzelovan*”<sup>30</sup>, “*Djizinlati*”<sup>31</sup>, “*Avzavuve*”, “*Artymna*”, “*Chilingi*”<sup>32</sup>, “*Cherek-chereki*”, “*Kuglukani*”,<sup>33</sup> “*Chikhildani*”,<sup>34</sup> and many others. I could go over each game and explain the rules, but I am afraid this will take a great deal of time and space in this book. In the wintertime, with great joy, we rode our sleds on the snow. There was no end to our entertainment.

In the northern part of town, there were army barracks of three to four buildings, where during the Imperial time a battalion of Russian soldiers was stationed. The soldiers were friendly and often marched in the streets of Shusha and sang Russian songs that we did not understand. Boys would collect the soldier’s worn-off or lost shoulder stripes, sew them to their clothes, form their groups and units, and play war games. We even had our officers who we hand-picked from our leaders. One of them was Yervand. I managed a role of a drummer in his unit. We were at war with our rivals, from the nearby streets or even remote quarters. The fights were long and often lasted until passing by adults intervened and separated us. These games were not always safe to play; there were many cases when boys had been injured and traumatized. Nowadays children prefer to play soccer or hockey and have no idea about the games of my childhood. It grieves my heart to think that

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<sup>30</sup> Throw in (Arm.)

<sup>31</sup> A game with belts.

<sup>32</sup> A game with wood sticks.

<sup>33</sup> Hide and seek.

<sup>34</sup> A game played on one leg.

they would soon be forgotten and disappear, just as it happened to the customs and traditions of our ancestors.

Occasionally, we had school field trips to such places as *Pekhi-Akhpur*<sup>35</sup> or Khankendi. At that time, Khankendi was a small town of forty to fifty houses and army barracks of an infantry company. The barracks still exist to this day. The upper part of the town had a small church with an elementary school.

Life on Shusha streets was vibrant and bustling, there you could observe a street merchant Amo loudly shouting, “*Obili gilas, bedana toot, ahpiri hiar!*” attracting buyers with the description of the quality of his plums, mulberries, and cucumbers. Later, living in Baku, I often saw him in one of the city’s bazaars<sup>36</sup>, where he was selling paper bags. He died in 1970 at the age of ninety-six.

Karabakh has always been known for its famous mulberries. Dealers from the nearby villages were delivering them to the town quarters and walked streets with donkeys loaded with *chubarans*<sup>37</sup> full of the berries and loudly shouted, “Mulberries! Mulberries! Fresh, sweet mulberries!” Chubarans could have various capacities, ranging from five to fifteen *poods*.<sup>38</sup> To keep their freshness, vendors covered chubarans with fresh mulberry tree leaves. We children never dared to ask our father to buy us something. Yes, that is true, and it was not because he was harsh to us, or we were afraid of him, not at all. As one slogan says, he never had to raise his hands because they never dare to raise their tails. We were brought up in our tradition of strong discipline and have strictly adhered to the established distance

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<sup>35</sup> Spring, this place also had a Turk name Isa Bulag.

<sup>36</sup> Author meant so-called *Kyummyur* (Coal) bazaar. I have personally seen this old man in his small kiosk selling bags.

<sup>37</sup> Baskets weaved from tree or shrub branches.

<sup>38</sup> Russian old unit of measurement, equal to 16 kilograms.

between children and fathers. If we needed anything, for example, school supplies, we would address it to our mother, and she then would pass our request to our father. Our mother was the one that we could always go to with our needs.

I remember how once my father approached a mulberry seller, pointed to one of his chuvarans hung on a donkey, and asked for the price. Then, having traditionally bargained for a while and agreed on the price, he would pay for the mulberries and head home. Unfortunately, such things have happened very seldom; our father could not afford to buy fruit for us.

Stores and shops were full of goods; all you needed was to have the money. Street vendors carried all sorts of goods: weighed out into paper bags tea of different kinds, such as Ceylon, fragrant Nabat, and Darchin; just as it was shown in the popular Azerbaijani movie *Arshin Mal Alan*, vendors carried every possible kind of fabric packed in large fabric bags. Grocery shops were stocked with bulk food: rice of different kinds, such as Khan, Aquli, Sadri, etc.; red, black-eyed, and garbanzo beans. On the streets, you could also see dyers, who per your first request will dye your fabrics, strings, or wool clothes. The dairvendorsndor will sell you milk and *matsun*<sup>39</sup> in clay jugs. Sometimes, you could witness some funny scenes, for example, I saw a sunflower oil merchant, which he carried in leather bags hung over a donkey, completely soaked, and saturated in oil, from his head down to his feet. His donkey did not look much better.

In the central part of Shusha, there were several jewelry, grocery, and household shops as well as drugstores, watch repair, and barbershops. Here and there you could see shoe polishers ready to polish your shoes. Nearby has located a large

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<sup>39</sup> Plain yogurt.

and noisy bazaar where you could always buy fresh produce, fruits, dairy, and meats. Vendors, attracting buyers, loudly shouted advertisements of their goods that were laid out right on the ground: watermelons, melons, cucumbers, etc. The meat section of the bazaar had several butcher shops offering fresh cuts of beef, lamb, pork, and goat meat hung on metal hooks outside of the shops. Inside, you could buy, *jigyar*<sup>40</sup> and poultry, right on the floor laid heads and feet. Buy whatever you want. Butchers dressed in white gowns and armed with daggers waited for buyers.

They would never cut meat in advance and would cut it only per a customer's request and in their presence. Butchers would ask the client what he or she is planning to cook, for instance, kebab, *dolma*,<sup>41</sup> or *goluptsi*, and then advised on the best choice for the meal.

One of the best-known butchers in the whole town was *Gassab Avetis*. I still remember the time when you could buy meat for sixteen kopecks per *funt*,<sup>42</sup> sugar for eleven kopecks per *funt*, and a long loaf of white bread for four kopecks.

Currencies in circulation at that time were so-called tsarist *Nikolayevskie*<sup>43</sup> money; people carelessly carried gold coins in their pockets. The head side of the five- and ten-ruble coins were stamped with the image of Nikolas II and the tail side had a stamp of the Russian crown symbol and a two-headed eagle.

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<sup>40</sup> Liver, kidney, guts, and other animal by-products.

<sup>41</sup> Meat stuffed grape leave rolls.

<sup>42</sup> Pound

<sup>43</sup> Gold coins of different nominations circulated during the Tsar Nikolas II era.

*Chapter 4 Cultural and Religious Objects of Shusha*

Shusha had three churches: *Kananch Jam*<sup>44</sup>, *Mgretsunts Jam*, and *Akuletsunts Jam*. *Akuletsunts Jam* was the largest church in the town. There also was a monastery called *Vank*, which was inhabited by nuns. Near *Kananch Jam* there was the *Nagorny-Karabakh Supreme Episcopate*. The two-story building of Episcopal residency called *Arachnordaran* was situated behind tall stone walls and had a beautiful garden.

Each church hosted a three-year preschool program. Graduates of each preschool could advance to the Armenian Theological Seminary with its boys-only eight-year program. Per the seminary dress code, boys were wearing a light blue uniform with golden buttons. Shusha also had the Russian *Mariinsky School* where both students and teachers were female. The *Mariinsky School* was right across from the Seminary. There was another Russian School called the *Visshoe Realnoe Uchilishe*.<sup>45</sup> My older brother, *Yervand*, went to this school after he attended *Kananch Jam*'s preschool. For a few years, I followed his steps, except after the preschool I went to the Seminary.

Shusha was a popular vacation place for many summer visitors from all over the Caucasus region. Great parks with tall shading trees, green lawns, beautifully arranged flowerbeds, carousels, swings, and surrounding fields with wildflowers attracted people in the summer. Vendors were offering their goods, sunflower seeds, cookies, halva, ice cream, etc. On the lawn, right in front of the descent to the village of *Karin-tak*,<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Green church.

<sup>45</sup> Middle and High School, the name came from German *Realschule*.

<sup>46</sup> Under a rock (Arm.)



were set up tables and chairs. Two huge samovars were taking turns boiling water for hot tea. People, mostly vacationing summer residents were sitting under the open skies around the tables, breathing fresh air, drinking fragrant Ceylon tea, and viewing the beautiful scenery of the Karin-tak village lying below and the surrounding mountains and woods. Further past the village ran a mountain river<sup>47</sup> with a strong current. Despite the distance, you could still hear the bells of the village church, calling the flock to the evening worship.

Armenian quarters of Shusha also had the following buildings and institutions: a bank, a winter club, and a hotel called *Mardunt's* hotel, as well as Jamharovants Hospital with its large full of flowers park. The other place where Shusha residents liked to spend their time was *Abbasbekin dyuzu*<sup>48</sup> located in the eastern part of the town.

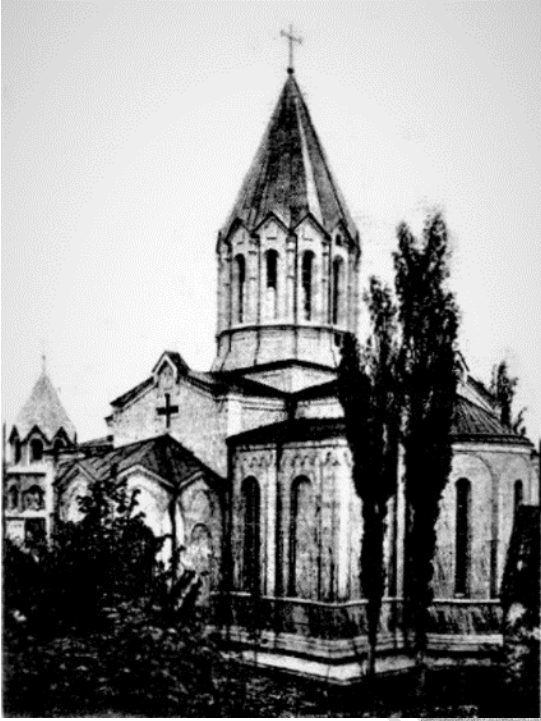


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<sup>47</sup> Kar Kar river.

<sup>48</sup> Valley of Abbas Bek (noble)(Tur.)

*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*



Kazanchenots Cathedral

Kananch Jam church



Through the Crucible of Life Part I



Shusha's Periodic and

Theater Posters

Chapter 5 Religious Holidays

We loved our holidays, which were all exclusively religious: *Djurokhnik*<sup>49</sup> on January 6-7<sup>th</sup> and the *Drdorandj*<sup>50</sup> on February 14<sup>th</sup> when we collected firewood and set up bonfires. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, we marked *Zetik*<sup>51</sup> and *Virteour* in August when we would visit sacred places around Shusha. As I have mentioned, I was attending a preschool at Kananch Jam church, where one of my teachers was *Paron*<sup>52</sup> Avetis. He was teaching Armenian and Music. I had a good, pleasant voice and Paron Avetis picked me among a dozen of other pupils for the school chorus where I soon became the soloist. On Christmas day and the days of other religious holidays, the chorus members dressed in white gowns with a large red cross on the back, sat on their knees under the church altar, forming a circle around Paron Avetis, and sang religious songs. Some of the melodies and lyrics of many of those songs, such as “*Tervogormya, tervogormya*”, “*Surp-surp*”, “*Hristosi medj*”, and “*Mer Aitivetsav, Miyanter*”, I still remember to this day.

I have always loved singing, and even nowadays<sup>53</sup> when I am in a good mood, I will sing to myself under my breath. Due to my vocal abilities, besides singing, I was also trusted with the church reading and often read from “*Daniel*”<sup>54</sup>. The text was printed in gold letters and large font on a scroll of thick, white,

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<sup>49</sup> Christmas.

<sup>50</sup> Pre-Christian holiday of fire.

<sup>51</sup> Zetik or Zatik- Easter.

<sup>52</sup> Sir (Arm.)

<sup>53</sup> At the time of writings these lines.

<sup>54</sup> The book of Daniel (Part of the Old Testament).

and glossy paper, approximately 20 x 40 cm in size.

There I was, standing beside clerics in the light of candles, holding with both hands the scroll of "Daniel" and looking from the height of the altar onto the people standing in front of me. I would slowly unroll the scroll and begin my reading calmly and confidently. I read with expression, singing the extended words, while slowly turning the scroll. Two girls with candles stood next to me, illuminating my reading.

Every Christmas Eve on January 6th, boys traditionally would unite into numerous pairs and would walk around Armenian quarters, going from house to house and knocking on doors. One of the boys would hold some copper utensil in his hand and hit on it with a large nail, meantime, his partner would pronounce the religious words, "*Khoritmez! Khoritmez!*". In return, the boys would receive change, usually in coins valued and three or five kopecks, seldom ten-fifteen. The children tried to be fast, as they wanted to go through as many houses as possible and collect as much money as they could. Many times, we had to wait in line behind several pairs of boys lined up in front of a house, especially if it was a wealthy house. Everybody would get his share. Long before Christmas time, many boys were asking me if they could walk "*Khoritmez*" with me; sometimes, even their mothers would come and ask my mother for her support in talking me into walking with their sons. This was due to my official appearance during *Khoritmez* walking. As a chorus boy, I had the privilege to wear a white robe with a red cross on it; this enabled me and a boy walking with me to receive more money.

At that age, I was already demonstrating business acumen. I even remember how, in prior holiday seasons, I was preparing a list of the households I would visit. I selected them by my

estimate of their financial well-being, how much money they would give away, and my share in it. Then, it was time to make plans on how to spend the money. Our choices were: fried sunflower seeds and garbanzo beans, sugar rock candies on a stick, colored pencils, etc.

At the end of August, following our old traditions, most of the Armenian inhabitants of Shusha would leave town to go on a twelve-kilometer trip to a sacred place called *Saribek*.<sup>55</sup> The place was located about five to six kilometers south of Stepanakert and approximately two kilometers north of the village of Dashushen. The ordinary people would go there on foot and the wealthy townspeople on horses. Many employed khambals to bear their things: utensils, clothes, bedding, food, etc. Traditionally, people would also bring along an animal sacrifice. Needy families, such as ours, bore two to three cocks, while the wealthy would bring a lamb. Sacrifice could also be purchased on the way to Saribek at the ancient stone bridge over the mountain river by the village of *Shoshu*.<sup>56</sup> Before we got to the bridge, the road was descending, and once we passed it, we began walking up to a hill. The rumble of speech, laughter, shouts, and baby cries accompanied the procession of thousands of people. Everybody was impatient and hastened to get to the place. Even from two to three kilometers from Saribek, you could hear the fascinating sounds of *zurna* and *balaban*<sup>57</sup> played by numerous musicians. Finally, our trip came to an end, and we were at Saribek where we had to find a place to camp for the next couple of days. The landscape around the place was rough and stony, elevating from the west to the east.

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<sup>55</sup> Name of martyr.

<sup>56</sup> Also known as Shushikend.

<sup>57</sup> Wind musical instrument. (Pers.)

There, among huge stones and trunks of trees, we would find a place to camp. Saribek was a sacred place, therefore, nobody dared to break branches from the trees even if they were dry, as it would be considered a sin. On our way here, I saw a sacred tree whose branches were decorated with multi-colored knit yarns and strings, hung by people who made a wish and asked the Almighty to make it true. Usually, it was childless young women asking for a child.

The Saribek sanctuary was laid out of a semi-round stone wall structure of three to four meters in diameter and up to a meter high. On the facade of the sanctuary, there was a niche with an altar with candles burning inside. This was Saribek's burial. In the ritual ceremony, people walked the sacrifice three times around the sanctuary and then butchered it in a special place allocated for it. Traditionally, one part of the sacrifice (a half of a cock or a lamb leg) was given to a cleric. After the sacrifice offering, the ceremony was completed, and the feast began. Numerous trios of musicians would start entertaining separate groups of people with the great sound of zurna. People were dancing, singing, laughing, drinking, and eating kebabs or some other food. Some people were walking from a group to a group, dancing with guns in their hands, screaming, and occasionally shooting into the air.

Everybody had an amazing joyful time. Merchants from the nearest villages and even from the Azerbaijani town of Agdam were bringing and offering watermelons, melons, apples, pears, plums, grapes, etc. Inhabitants of the same villages were coming over to Saribek with pots to get their portion of the *matagh*.<sup>58</sup> Many beggars were roaming among the groups of people asking for food and money.

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<sup>58</sup> A sacrifice.

This holiday took place in 1913 when my grandmother was still alive. I remember the same celebration in 1916. Yervand was already a good clarinet player. He climbed to a high place and played his favorite tunes Croonk<sup>59</sup> and *Verchin Vart*<sup>60</sup>. The sound of beautiful, well-performed music spread in the dark, reaching people sitting around. Applause and exclamations of admiration came from all around us.

Unfortunately, everything comes to its end. After a few wonderful days spent together, it was time to go back, and people began getting ready for a return trip to Shusha. Soon, people formed into an endless column and began the journey back, hoping to get home by dusk. The portion of the road until the river was going through mulberry gardens. The season was over and the berries on trees were already gone, but on the grass underneath the trees, you could pick up plenty of dry sweet berries. My grandmother Bagum was carrying my three-year-old sister Lusik on her back (Enok was not born at that time yet). With a bow in her hair and a straw hat, Lusik looked beautiful. I ran forward a couple of hundred meters to pick up some dry berries and bring them to my sister. Having done so, I would turn back and run forward for more berries. As we passed the river and advanced about three kilometers up the road, we reached a deep gorge. That place was called *Karkhad*<sup>61</sup>, and in conformity with the name, the whole area was covered with thousands and thousands of small rocks. On the edge of Karkhad, there was a spring with clear and cold water. Many travelers took a short stop to fill up their samovars to prepare hot tea and refresh themselves under the open skies.

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<sup>59</sup> A Crane

<sup>60</sup> The Last Rose

<sup>61</sup> Stony





Гидль гор. Шуши. № 19. Пехъ Азбуръ.

The Pekh Akhpure Sanctuary



Шуша. Армянскій монастырь Сарибекъ.  
Schouscha, Monastère arménien "Saritek"

The Saribeck Sanctuary

Chapter 6 More About Grandfather | Our Cultural Life

We children loved and often visited our grandparents Shamir and Bagum, especially when we lived close to them. During cold days, we would frequently find our grandfather sitting by a burning stove, with his crisscrossed short legs closely exposed to the warmth. Moreover, when he was in a good mood, he could be singing. I still remember some of his songs “*Erevanda khan gyal’ misham*”, “*Kursin alta pishmish toukh*.”<sup>62</sup>, “*Taritz anik lachar zamun kharsin*.”<sup>63</sup>, etc. At such times, he could also tell us stories, fairy tales, jokes, proverbs, or sing cheerful couplets. Grandpa had always kept a half-meter long, backscratching wooden stick, which had been carved into a cat claw at one end, by his side. During his storytelling, he would occasionally interrupt his story, grab the stick, reach his back with it, and having shoved it under his shirt, begin scratching his back.

One fine evening around Christmas time, Yervand and I had to take a pot of pilaf over to grandpa’s house. When we entered their living room, we found Grandfather sitting to the left of us at his favored place by the stove. Grandmother was to the right and further away from the stove, patching Grandpa’s trousers. Grandpa was obviously in a good mood, having inspected what we brought, and said, “Well children, you brought us your pilaf and now will take back home our *mash*”<sup>64</sup>. As he finished this phrase, he began laughing, “Ha-ha-ha-ha...”. Then, he sharply stopped his laughter, raised his right hand, and said, “Once upon a time, a man was walking through a remote desert. In one hand, he held a jug full of kerosene, and in another a bag

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<sup>62</sup> Both songs are in Turkish, first means, “I returned from Yerevan as a khan.”

<sup>63</sup> Song in Armenian.

<sup>64</sup> Black-eyed beans served on rice.

with his belongings. Soon, in the dark, the man has gone astray. Puzzled, he desperately tried to find his way, and unexpectedly ran into a hut and decided to spend the night there. As he walked in, he placed his jug by the door and was getting ready to sleep, when he noticed another jug with water in it. He drank some from it, laid down, and soon fell asleep.”

With great interest, we were listening to the story. Having lifted his head, and looking to somewhere in a distance, Grandfather continued, “Suddenly, at midnight, someone humpbacked with long and messy hair walked into the hut with a torch.” Not taking my eyes off Grandfather, I began slowly moving closer to my grandmother. Yervand had made the same move.

Meanwhile, Grandfather clenched his fingers into fists and pronounced, “In a torn, black raincoat, ugly and toothless wench Satan appeared in front of the man.” In these words, Yervand and I made another step toward Grandmother. “Bo-Bo-Bo’, loudly shouted Satan,” continued Grandfather, “Awoken by the awful voice, the man jumped up and instantly fell. Right in front of him, looking directly into his eyes, continuing its mad shouting, stood a terrible creature. Fear made the man’s hair stand on ends.” Here, Grandfather, still holding his fists, began moving his index fingers up and down. This made Yervand and me move again. “Who are you?”, pronounced the man shaking in fear. “I am *Bakhchagyul*.”<sup>65</sup> loudly responded Satan. Feeling his mouth dry up from the fear, the man reached for the jug with water, took a few greedy sips from it, and asked again, “Are you human or Satan?”, “YA-YA-YA...”, scoffed Bakhchagyul at the man. Then she grabbed the jug with kerosene, thinking it was her jug of water, and

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<sup>65</sup> Female Devil, Satan.

began drinking from it." During the point of the story when Satan shouted, "YA-YA- YA- YA!", Grandfather began chattering his teeth and warped his face into such an ugly and awful grimace that I, in horror, rushed into Grandmother's embrace and stayed there till the end of the story. "From the torch burning in her hand, Bakhchagyul caught fire, and in a few seconds, flames spread all over her. Loudly screaming, she began spinning and jumping around, then rushed out of the hut and disappeared into the darkness."

Having finished his story, Grandfather looked us over with amusement and began loudly laughing again. Meantime, Grandmother extended both of her hands in front of her, widely spread out her fingers in motions like she was pushing her husband away, and began loudly scolding and reproaching him for frightening us. Yervand and I were so frightened that even though we lived nearby, we were too scared to return home. Later, our father had to come over to take us home.

Around these times, our Yervand began showing interest in music. He even made a very primitive musical instrument, something like the *kamancha*.<sup>66</sup> He made it out of scrap materials, a tin can, a sheep belly skin to wrap the can, a smooth wood plank for a deck, and a branch of a tree and horsetail hair for the bow. Thus, having made himself a musical instrument, Yervand began practicing playing it. Right across the street from us, in his own two-story house surrounded by a high stone fence, lived *Ter*<sup>67</sup> Musheg. He was a quite pleasant, corpulent man of average height, bearing a dense white beard on a pinkish face. Petros, the oldest son of Ter Musheg, was an exceptionally good musician. In the summer evenings, you could often hear him

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<sup>66</sup> Bowed string instrument. (Pers.)

<sup>67</sup> Priest (Arm.)

playing a tar on the balcony for the pleasure of our neighborhood. I think Petros' and Yervand's passion for music had affected our father, and on one fine day, after long consideration, he brought Yervand a tar, a small one. Soon after, our mother talked to and came to an agreement with Petros. Excited Yervand began taking tar lessons. We all loved to listen to the music, but enjoyed the pleasure only on rare occasions, such as holidays or weddings.

I remember the time when gramophones first appeared, but not everyone could afford them. There was a family of middling merchants living in our neighborhood: Katinka-baji, her son Avetis, and his wife Mina and children. This was a well-doing family who traded in home baking. They would buy flour in large bags and would bake bread in large quantities. You could often see Avetis walking, loaded with a couple of dozen *lavash*<sup>68</sup> thrown over his shoulder, delivering them to his customers, including us. Katinka-baji's family lived in their own house and had a gramophone. Very often, I sat across the street from their house and for hours patiently waited for that moment when someone in the house would decide to turn on their gramophone, so I could listen to the pleasant music. Once, when my mother and I visited their place, someone turned the gramophone on. Overwhelmed, I stood staring into the wide opening of a gramophone pipe and was quite seriously convinced that there were invisible and mysterious people inside the gramophone playing the music.

Especially joyful events for the townies were weddings, and the public interest and attraction for them was great and widespread. Traditionally, Armenian weddings were

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<sup>68</sup> One of the most widespread types of bread in Armenia. Lavash is a soft, thin unleavened flatbread made with flour, water, and salt and baked in a tandoor.

performed as follows: first, about two to three days before the wedding, balconies, and verandas of the groom's and bride's homes get decorated with colorful balloons. That was to let everybody know that soon there will be a wedding in this house. On the morning of the wedding day, the groom, and his best man, accompanied by a group of 8 to 10 *makari*<sup>69</sup> and a trio of *zurnachi*,<sup>70</sup> would walk to the bride's home. Once the procession approached the house, the musicians began playing "Saari",<sup>71</sup> spreading the waves of magic and bewitching sounds of zurna around the area. Young people would form a circle. The groom and his maids in pairs would then enter the center of the circle and begin to dance individually, while others would joyfully shout and clap for them. Meantime, right there outside of the house, relatives of the bride would set up a table full of drinks, cakes, dried fruits, and other sweets. The musicians would take a short break from playing. The *makari*, and only they, would say cheers and make congratulatory toasts to the groom and the bride and have two-three shots of wine or cognac. "Saari" would begin to sound again. It also served as a signal for the *makari* to make a raid on the sweets, and soon everything from the table would disappear, safely transported to pockets of the young men. The ceremony would last for about an hour, after which the groom and his friends would leave to meet again later in the evening for the wedding reception at the groom's house. For all this time, the bride had no right to appear in public, or as they would say, she could not even peek her nose. The wedding ceremony would continue much more solemnly and with many more guests than the

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<sup>69</sup> Maids of honor, groom's friends.

<sup>70</sup> Zurna player.

<sup>71</sup> Morning song.

morning ceremony at the bride's home. After midnight, the groom and part of the guests would leave for the bride. A trio of zurnachi would lead the procession, raising their instruments upwards and playing different tunes. The procession would be illuminated by several *mashallas* carried on the sides.

The mashalla is a pot-size cylinder made of tin sheet metal, built with apertures for air access, and a piece of metal pipe about 15-20 centimeters long soldered to the bottom to insert a two-meter wooden pole handle. You would place kerosene or oil-soaked rags into the mashalla and after lighting it up, you get yourself a torch. Usually, for wedding ceremonies, people would hire professional *mashallachies*.<sup>72</sup> Depending on how big the wedding was going to be and the financial status of the families, they would hire three to seven or even nine mashallachies. One of them would walk behind the procession carrying a kerosene jar in one hand and a fabric bag full of rags. On the left and right of the procession would walk the others. The rear mashallachie would watch to make sure all the torches are flaming, otherwise, he would run to it and provide a mashallachie with more rags and kerosene to keep the torch going.

Now try to imagine the following amazing and beautiful scene: a dark summer night, zurnachi playing daintily and sonorously *Vokzali*,<sup>73</sup> and the vigorous drumbeat of the *nagara*<sup>74</sup>. Locals awakened by the loud music, sleepy and not properly dressed, some even in their undergarments, would open their windows and step out onto their balconies or even out to the streets to watch the procession. From time to time, you would hear random pistol shots fired into the air and soaring,

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<sup>72</sup> People carrying torches.

<sup>73</sup> Another wedding tune played when bride is leaving her home for the groom.

<sup>74</sup> Type of drums widespread in Caucasus and Middle East countries.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*

mysteriously illuminating and extinguishing *pshang*<sup>75</sup>. At last, the procession ends at the house of the bride where visitors and hosts cheerfully spend some time treated with drinks and desserts. Then, the groom and his party take the bride away. Joined by some of the bride's relatives, the crowd would head to a church where a priest would bless the young couple and approve the legality of their marriage. After the matrimony, the ceremonial procession would walk to the house of the groom. I should mention that the zurna would not play at the reception. At that time, clarinet was not widely spread.



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<sup>75</sup> Firework.



*Chapter 7 My Shameless Pranks | Markara–Dai,  
Sarkis-Aper and Others*

From our house to Kananch-jam School that I had attended was less than 100 meters away. Nearby on the corner of an intersection stood a small shop owned by some man by the name of Markara-dai. He was a tall, heavy-built man with an unusual mustache on his always sore face. Inside walls of his shop had been covered with shelves stocked exclusively with dried fruits, nuts, and sweets. There were great selections of *kishmish*,<sup>76</sup> golden and dark, with pits and without, and a few kinds of Persian raisins from Tabriz. They were sold along with other dried fruits and berries such as mulberries, prunes, *unap*, *pshat*, *hurma*,<sup>77</sup> apples, and pears. Next to the fruits, one would find walnuts, hazelnuts, chestnuts, almonds, pistachios, nut halva, fried garbanzo beans, and even sweet cockerel suckers on a stick. In the only remaining empty floor spot in the center of the shop sat Markara-dai himself, cross-legged on a sheepskin chewing a big piece of a cud so his poor jaws had never rested. From the ceiling, right in front of him hung a cord with a primitive two-cup scale. The most remarkable thing was that Markara-dai had a large wooden ladle with about a two-meter-long handle that he dexterously used to reach for any product he needed, bring it to the scale, and pour it into the scale cup. We kids have often visited his shop, sometimes just to tease him with humiliating rhymes that we would come up with: “*Hey Markara, akut hora? Bokhertfis, tassi yara.*”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Raisins.

<sup>77</sup> Chinese dates, dates, persimmons.

<sup>78</sup> “Hey Markara, where is your tail, and your mustaches with ten boobies?”

I shall admit that I was growing up a romp and restless boy, always in search of adventures, getting in the middle of every fight. Once, in 1911 or 1912, when we lived in Milyagyan's house, I was playing in our backyard and my eyes were caught by a plant with very pretty, bright blue flowers called *kashki manishak*.<sup>79</sup> I liked them very much and decided to pick them. The house was located near the edge of a cliff with a steep narrow pathway descending about 40 meters. Manishak flowers were growing along the path between rocks. I still do not understand how I could take such a risk and get down the path 3-4 meters. I stopped and looked down and was stunned by the abyss lying under my feet; sudden fear seized me. I looked around. Manishak flowers were all around me, but at such an unreachable distance that I could not reach them. I did not see it possible to get closer to them without putting myself at risk. I looked up and realized that I would not be able to climb back up, I began loudly shouting, calling for my mother. In a few minutes, someone's head appeared for a moment, and very soon, right above me, I saw the faces of both of my parents, Grandmother, one of my uncles, and someone else looking at me over the cliff's edge. Mother was crying and Grandmother moaning and patting her thighs. Uncle, on the contrary, was cheerful and showed me candies. Father was consoling me, tenderly speaking, and promising to buy me lamb. They lowered down to me a large *chuvol*<sup>80</sup> attached to a strong rope and together in unison were asking me to get into and when I did so, they pulled me up. I got right into the hands of my father whose face was way far from being happy. He began screaming at me and pulling my hands and ears. Mother came

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<sup>79</sup> Devil's violet.

<sup>80</sup> Fabric bag.

to my rescue; she embraced me and walked me home away from Father's anger. At another time at the same place, I was chasing pigs and pushed one of them so hard, that it fell down a ravine and died. For the next three days, I would not leave our house until Mother had convinced me that nobody saw me, and that the owner of the pig would not know who had done it.

I should confess that I have made some other unscrupulous and senseless acts that I regret and want to confess by telling my reader about some of those petty crimes that I have committed.

Not far from Grandma's house on the outskirts of the town lived an elderly man, Sarkis-aper, who was making a living by crushing stones. Every day with an iron crow in his hands he hollowed rocks, punching in them several holes about fifteen centimeters deep. When finished, he would then fill those holes with gunpowder, connect them with Beckford's cord, and light them up. Loudly shouting "*Khabardan! Khabardan!*", Sarkis-aper was warning everybody around about the explosion. Then, he and we children that came to look at the explosion would run to a shelter and observe a powerful explosion. Sarkis-aper then would split large stones by an ax into small ones and pile them into heaps to sell to builders. He was a hardworking man, earning his living by being engaged in such dangerous and laborious hard work. We, unscrupulous idle boys, waited for evenings when Sarkis-aper would leave home and dragged the stones to the edge of a precipice and dumped them down. Wow! What an amazing show! What a fun, delightful pleasure it was to see the stones falling and then hitting the ground with force, some 50 meters below. From the impact, a stone would jump up in the air for about five meters and then roll down again, now for about 3km all the way down to the river twisted below, crumbling all the way.

There was a poor man by the name of Pel Levon living in the town. Levon was not crazy, in terms of having a psychological disorder, but had obvious problems with his central nervous system. He spoke as a child, reversing and deforming words in his sentences; it was hard to understand his speech. Always quiet and kind, he trusted whatever he was told. Curly headed, he looked to be in his mid-20s. Levon slightly limped on one leg and one of his hands operated poorly, probably after suffering encephalitis or poliomyelitis. Always unshaven and unkempt, dressed in old and dirty clothes, Levon walked streets barefoot. One of the legs of his pants was torn off at the knee and the other dangled on the ground. Instead of a belt, his trousers were kept on by a rope. In his pockets, Levon carried pieces of sugar, bread, cookies, candies, and other treats he was receiving from people. His trousers usually fell, and he continually pushed them up. There were times when he could not catch them and would find himself in awkward situations. Young, vulgar women and girls never hesitated to surround him and make fun of him. One would ask Levon to marry her and another shouted that he loved only her and demanded that the other girls would leave her and Levon alone. Levon trusted all and laughed and danced with delight. We, children, were cheerfully joining the women and loudly laughed and clapped at Levon. With a kind and happy face, Levon was walking streets going from house to house collecting garbage and dragging it on his back in an old bag up to a precipice where he would dump it. People paid him for his work by giving him small coins of food, and he was Always happy and never grumbled about anything. He served our quarter once a week. Well, now you are about to read about my most inexcusable act. Here was Pel Levon, bent over under the weight of his garbage load, slowly walking up a narrow and

abrupt street, and there was I, sneaking behind him. Waiting for the right moment when Pel Levon could not see me, I pulled his bag down from behind and having dumped its contents to the ground, quickly disappeared around the nearest corner.

Angered, Levon made several attempts to lift the bag back to his back, but it was beyond his strength. The poor man was shaking his head and mumbling his "UH-UH-UH, while looking around for help. Having seen passing by elderly woman, he addresses her with the request "AYE-AYE, UH, WOO, O ", pointing to the bag. The kind woman would have liked to help, but she was too old for the task. She gestured, trying to explain something and calm Levon down, then she left to return a few minutes later with two men. In the meantime, I like an unscrupulous villain, was having fun observing it through a gap in a fence I hid behind. The men who came to his aid lifted the bag and put it back on Pel Levon's back, and he continued his walk. I again waited for the right moment, ran up to Levon, and pulled the bag to the ground. This time I was not lucky, and Levon had time to see me. He came to indescribable fury, shouting in a rage and biting his shirtsleeves, threateningly swinging his hands, and angrily growling," UH, KH, MAMMA-ANI, MAMMA-ANI, OH, KH ", swearing at someone's mother.

Over sixty years have passed since that day, but I still remember and will never forget and forgive myself for what I have done.

An image of the kind and defenseless face of Pel Levon embedded in my memory causes me to feel incredible pity for him, and with pain in my heart, I deeply repent my deeds.



*Chapter 8 My Father*

My father's image has remained with me forever. I am almost seventy-two now, but my thoughts about him do not leave me not for a day, and the more I think of him, the more pity and sadness I feel for this unfortunate man. Fate had ordained him a short, hard, and difficult life full of hardships and suffering.

Father was born in the village of Kendhurd and was a late child to his parents who died early, and he had no memory of them. He was only two when his older brother got married and about seven when his two sisters left their home for marriage, thus leaving him deprived of care. Fortunately for Father, his childless aunt, the wife of my grandfather's brother, adopted him, and he stayed with her for a while, helping her around the house. My father has not reached his adult age when his aunt died. He has remained on his own, unneeded by his married brother and sisters. At the age of seventeen-eighteen, he accompanied his fellow villagers to the *Trans Caspian region*<sup>81</sup> where he worked as an apprentice learning the craft of mason from his masters. Later, when he was already working as a master, he managed to save some money, and in 1900, he returned to Karabakh intending to start his own family. On his way to Kendhurd, Father and his companions stopped in Shusha. His friends, who knew of his plans to marry, found him a matchmaker, and in the same year, my father married my mother in Shusha.

Father, our provider, had indisputable authority and respect among all of us; there was nothing more superior and dearer to us than our papa. This thin, average height, bald man needed only to appear, and we would stop our unruly behavior and

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<sup>81</sup> Turkmenistan.

hide our tongues behind our teeth. Even though he has never raised his hand on us and only seldom elevated his voice, we were afraid of him as fire. I speak only for Yervand and me, as Lusik and Enok would not remember it.

Our father was a quiet, reserved, and modest character. He was illiterate, and it would take him a long time and great effort to produce his signature on documents. To provide for his big family, this hardworking and long-suffering man worked long hours as a mason for contractors for a scanty payment. He was always coming home from work late and tired, therefore only on rare occasions we could go out to visit some friends or family. Our father was not just an ordinary mason; he performed high complexity work that required high qualification and good hands, such as carving stone with ornaments or figures and bas-reliefs<sup>82</sup> on wealthy people's houses, gates, eaves of windows, and balconies. Due to many years of hard work, the skin of his hands has coarsened and was covered by numerous scratches, cracks, and scars. Every evening, upon his return from work, Mother greased his palms and fingers with melted goat fat, otherwise, he would have difficulty using them.

With great joy and impatience, we waited for Father's return from work as he would always have something for us in his large shawl. Usually, it was fruits and vegetables purchased at discounted evening prices. Mother would wash it all, and we with indescribable pleasure ate it with bread. Sometimes, he could bring bunches of large-headed green onions, and we with a big appetite overate it until the sweat appeared on our foreheads and eyes, but then we slept deep and sweet all night

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<sup>82</sup> A kind of stone carving when ornaments are raised a few inches from a flat background of a stone to give a 3-D effect.

till the morning. In our family, it was not appropriate to be capricious about food. Whatever was lying on a table was all you would get, and if you did not want to stay hungry, you were better to eat it. We had meat only once a week on Sundays when Father was usually home. He helped Mother beat the meat with a big wooden mallet over a specially made for this purpose, smooth and round stone. He beat the meat with fast and strong hits, often turning a mallet from side to side until the meat turned into a dense mass from which Mother prepared tasty *golubtsi*.<sup>83</sup> According to the established house rules, we children could not sit at the same table with adults at the time when we had guests visit our family. Yervand and I usually sat on the floor by a wall, having crossed our legs under ourselves, silently and patiently waiting for when Mother would finish serving guests first. Only then it was our turn to get food. Our father was an economical man, but by no means could you call him avaricious or greedy for money. He was able to use his monetary resources cleverly and rationally, not squander them, and at the same time not regretting them for the family's needs. He so skillfully, evenly spread his expenses that they sufficed even then when he was out of work. He had never borrowed a single kopeck.

Always thoughtful and concerned about the well-being and the future of his family, Father usually was serious and not very talkative. Occasionally he smiled and could moderately joke. On those days when he was in a good mood, we heard his pleasant voice quietly singing under his breath. I do not remember ever seeing him loudly laughing, scolding, or screaming. He never abused alcohol, seldom. Seldom, on holidays, he would have one or two shots of arakh. On Sundays, sometimes he would

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<sup>83</sup> Meat stuffed cabbage leaves.



send Yervand and me with an empty *Borzhom*<sup>84</sup> bottle to merchant Khudy to buy draught wine for twelve kopecks for the bottle.

Our father was a devoted family man, both a loving father and husband. However, when Mother sometimes presented him with unreasonable claims or was capricious, demanding something that he would not be able to provide and refusing to understand his reasons, he knew how to calm her down. Yes, I remember this happened, but I would not reproach him.

There were times when there was no work for Father in town, and he had to join a group of three or four other men and go to remote villages in search of work and would be absent for as long as two-three months. I remember how Mother, with tears in her eyes, was setting him up for the road, boiling eggs, and frying meat, and then, still crying, she would splash water behind him for his safe return. Father's financial opportunities could not allow us to live in a big way; therefore, our life was quite modest but decent. Seldom, we could afford cheese but forget about butter. It was unaffordable to us. Only a few times a year we would buy it to prepare pilaf for holidays.

Some of Father's fellow villagers were doing well. They even owned houses in Shusha and their native villages and could afford to give their children a decent education. However, instead, they chose to give them as apprentices to artisans, such as barbers, shoemakers, smiths, etc. Our father, on the contrary, had said, "My children will go to school to be educated and live a better life than us."

Preparing for the winter (in Shusha winter is from October to May), Father was purchasing several bullock wagons loads of firewood, plenty of vegetables, dry red beans, rice, peas, etc. In

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<sup>84</sup> Georgian table mineral water.

the late evenings, lying already in bed, I heard my parents silently cutting lamb *kurdyuk*<sup>85</sup> into small pieces to provide us with melted fat for the winter. Winters in Shusha are long and often severely cold and snowy. Snowfall could reach up to half a meter high and often restrain people from leaving homes for days. Women from the nearby homes agreed to get together on certain days called *Mdshi*<sup>86</sup> to bake bread in *tundir*.<sup>87</sup> In the fall, Father was buying a few bags of flour for this occasion. For all day long, the women baked long, thin, and white lavash in *tundir*, pulling it out hot and hanging it on fences and walls to cool down and dry. Then, towards the evening, all baked lavash that could amount up to 200 sheets per family got carried up ladders to the attic where they were stacked in 60-70 pieces into several special cradles, so they would not be reachable by mice and other animals and birds. This is how families would provide themselves with bread for the entire winter. When needed, lavash would be lowered back into the house. Stored in an attic, lavash dries up and turns into a strong sheet. However, if you sprinkle it with a little water and wrap it in a towel for a few minutes, lavash will turn soft and ready to eat.

The day before the holidays, Mother and Father would go to baker Amirdjan and bake gata, one small piece for each of us.

On New Year's Eve, our school would arrange parties with a Christmas tree decorated with ornaments and sweets. Teaching staff and pupils lit candles, sang, and danced. At the end of the party, there were gifts handed over to the children in paper sacks filled with sweets and dried fruits. In two occasions I as a child from the family in need received free clothes.

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<sup>85</sup> Sheep fat tail, on certain breads of sheep.

<sup>86</sup> Baking bread this way allows families to save time and firewood.

<sup>87</sup> Or turoon, Armenian for tandoor.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*



The City Seminary



Loris-Melikov Street

*Chapter 9 Tragedy After Tragedy*

Our childhood was proceeding joyfully and carefree. Yervand continued his study in the Russian Town School. I was still attending the Kananch-Jam School. Unexpectedly, in April 1914, misfortune knocked on our doors when our beloved grandmother got sick. In a few days, her condition drastically worsened. At that time, we lived in Khataunt's house located quite far from my grandparents' house and my mother had to move Grandma to our place, so she could take care of her. Grandmother was complaining about a strong pain in her lower right abdomen, and Mother had been applying a warmed brick to that area. Many years later, when I became a doctor, I recalled those tragic days with a sore heart.

Due to our ignorance and misunderstanding of the situation, we prematurely lost our grandmother. It became clear to me now that she was suffering from the purulent acute appendicitis and my mother, who loved her so selflessly, instead of applying cold, had been applying heat, thus speeding up the process of festering that had led to the tragic consequences.

By this time, Grandfather Shamir grew old and a long time ago, having transferred his business to his older son Mukhan, had ceased traveling. When Grandmother became ill, Uncle Mukhan was out of town on a business trip to the remote area called *Mrov-Daga*.<sup>88</sup> Per Grandma's request, a messenger had been sent to uncle Mukhan, who returned home as soon as he got the bad news. Unfortunately, he was late, Grandmother was already in grave condition her tongue was paralyzed, she was refusing to eat and drink, and vomiting had begun. Having reached the house, uncle Mukhan jumped off his horse and

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<sup>88</sup> Mt. Mrov.

silently, without paying attention to anybody around, approached his mother who lay in a bed on a balcony. He lowered himself before her on his knees and began loudly calling her, "Aya! Aya! Aya!"<sup>89</sup> His mother at once recognized the voice of her son and was able to slightly open her eyes and even tried to say something. Unfortunately, except for a hardly audible gibber, nothing could be understood.

There were several doctors in the town, and we sent for one of them. However, it was too late. Disturbed by a hopeless situation, uncle Mukhan, a man of an athletic fit, the man whose physical strength inspired fear and respect in most of his fellows, was shouting and crying like a child, bringing himself into a near unconscious condition. On the next day, Grandmother passed away. Her body was carried on carpets to



her house. It was impossible to calm Uncle Mukhan down; he was beating himself on the chest, tearing out his hair, and barely eating. At one moment, he stepped aside, pulled a dagger he always carried, placed his right hand on a log, and with one blow of his left hand, chopped off his index finger at its base. Someone tried to stop him, but Uncle Muchan's mighty hand was very strong. He asked to wrap his chopped-off finger into a scarf and placed it into his mother's coffin, prophetically

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<sup>89</sup> This is what he called his mother.

saying that who knows if he will ever have a chance to find his rest near his mother; this way at least part of him would be with her. On the next day, the coffin with the body was taken to Kananch Jam Church for the burial service and from there to the Armenian cemetery. Over the next several days, Uncle Mukhan, alone or accompanied by his younger brother, was visiting the cemetery.

Following our religious traditions, on the seventh day of Grandmother's passing, we all visited the cemetery. Poor Uncle Mukhan looked very gloomy and in a dejected state, slowly walking with a lowered head. A few meters from the tomb, he threw his papakha and jacket on the ground. Sobbing like a child, he approached the tomb and fell on it. For a long time, we could not withdraw him from the tomb. Recollecting this tragedy, I am writing these words with tears in my eyes. Oh! My unfortunate uncle must have had a feeling that he would never see his mother's tomb again.

When Uncle Mukhan received the message about his mother's condition, he left all his merchandise with his companions and immediately returned to Shusha. Therefore, the day after the Seventh Day wake, he had to go back, planning to quickly wrap up his business and return home by the Fortieth Day wake. Alas, it was not meant to happen. He never returned. After a while, we learned that he was murdered. This news was like thunder on a clear day. Again, everybody around was crying, shouting, and tearing out their hair. Uncle Nikolai, my aunt's husband Shirin, and my father urgently went to the place of the incident, in the hope to find and bring home the body for a proper burial. Unfortunately, they soon returned with empty hands. Uncle Mukhan's body was not recovered. Later we learned that he, having finished his business, headed back home

with a large amount of money. He planned to stay overnight in an Armenian village, but at dusk, he ran into some rain and decided to wait in a teahouse that stood at a crossroad. The owners of the teahouse somehow learned about my uncle's money and persuaded him to stay for the night. When he was sleeping, four of them attacked and strangled him to death. What they have done with the corpse remains unknown. This is how Uncle Mukhan, at the age of twenty-three and about to be engaged, tragically lost his life. Mother, because of her endless tears and cries of sadness for her loved ones, had inflamed her irritated eyes and lost her voice for quite some time.

Around this time, I got ill with sharp rheumatism. My joints had badly swelled, and I end up staying home for quite some time. I saw my friends playing, and I could only look at them with envy. My mother had to check me into *Zhamkharovats* Hospital, where I stayed for several weeks before I finally recovered.



*Chapter 10 Yervand's Nightmares | Exorcism*

Soon after the death of Grandmother, strange things began to occur to Yervand. Poor boy, almost every night he was waking up screaming in sweat and horror as if he were being strangled or attacked by some monsters or something. He would jump from his bed crying and shouting, and we all would get up and surround him. Mother then would embrace him and quietly cry.

For the next few minutes, Yervand would remain under the impression of the terrible dream and would not come to his senses. This kept happening repeatedly, and after each time he was saying that he saw our grandmother in his dreams. Mother cut off a thread, the length of which was equal to Yervand's height, and took it to the cemetery and buried it by granma's grave.

In the fall of the same year, coming back home through the woods, I was attacked by a group of huge shepherds' dogs. Remembering how my schoolteacher had taught us to act in such a situation, I at once sat down and kept sitting until shepherds came and called the dogs off. However, I was severely frightened, my legs went numb, and I could not walk. In a couple of days, Mother called for an old medicine woman. She came over and asked my mother to bring her a basin filled with water, then she melted wax on a small iron plate and poured it into the basin. The wax quickly hardened in the cold water and took some shape. The old woman looked at the basin and pointing her finger at the wax on the bottom of it, said, "Here it is. Look, Ashotik was frightened by dogs." She received her fee and left. It appeared to me that the medicine woman was well informed of my incident before visiting me. Father and Yervand went to the village of Ningi to see the priest who, as



people were saying, was good at displacing fear. Since I could not go, they took along my undershirt. The “wizard” priest could even expel fear in my absence. Her methods certainly did not help me<sup>90</sup>. One cold and snowy winter day, my father took me to an old remote cemetery to the tomb of some *naatak*.<sup>91</sup> I could barely move and hardly kept up with him and was afraid to slip on ice. When we approached the tomb, Father pulled a small bottle out of his pocket and poured a little bit of water into a small deepening on the tombstone, and ordered me to bend down and drink from it. As I bent down, I heard a sudden and sharp clap behind me. It was my father who smashed the bottle on a sepulchral stone.<sup>92</sup> Seriously frightened, I jumped up. Father liked that very much. He satisfactorily smirked and told me that all my fears were now gone.

Recollecting my childhood, I would like to mention my constant esurience and all the tricks and dodges I had played to receive more food during mealtimes. Once, when Yervand and I were sitting on a floor and waiting for soup, we crumbled a lot of bread into our empty plates and passed them to our mother to fill them with soup. Mother looked at the plates full of breadcrumbs, strictly moved her eyebrows up, and began lecturing us. However, she had no other choice but to pour more soup into the plates to completely cover the crumbs. Well, that was exactly what we wanted to achieve. As you can tell, our parents did not have to ask us twice to eat. Being deprived of a proper diet since childhood, we were not picky and ate all that we were given and ate it with a great appetite. Perhaps that is why our generation cannot understand when we see some

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<sup>90</sup> Ironic sentence.

<sup>91</sup> Martyr.

<sup>92</sup> That was the folk remedy to treat a fright.

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parents nourishing their teenagers by making them sandwiches, mixing sugar in teacups for them, and begging them to eat.

Here is another story. It was a common tradition among Armenian families to give more food to the head of a household and then to the rest according to their age. Since I was the next after Yervand, my portion was accordingly smaller than his. One day, when Mother gave Yervand his plate of rice, I found it to be too small and began crying. Mother asked me what my problem was, and I said, having seen how little Yervand's plate was, I imagined what my plate would look like. It seemed it had never bothered Yervand. He was always happy with what he was getting.



*Chapter 11 Calm Before the Storm | In the Embraces of Nature*

1915 has come. WWI was in its full swing; those with blue and red military registration cards had been drafted and sent to the front. However, it seemed these dramatic events did not affect daily life in our town.

Nature has its laws. Each event has its beginning and end, whether it is happy or sad. After the death of Grandmother, Grandfather Shamir and Uncle Nikolai were left deprived of women's hands to care for them. Mother, with her four children, ran two houses. Per the advice of our relatives, in the autumn of 1915, Uncle Nikolai married a girl by the name of Satenik. In 1916, Satenik delivered a healthy baby boy who, per the suggestion of grandpa, they named *Kolya*.<sup>93</sup>

I was already attending the Seminary and was a good student who liked to read a lot. Like other children from poor families, I was entitled to receive coupons for free breakfast. Thanks to them, during the long break, I was able to get myself a sandwich with sausage or butter and cheese and a glass of hot sweet tea.

A few kilometers west of Shusha began areas covered with bushes, gradually transforming into dense woods spread over numerous hills and gorges. This area was rich with springs with clean and tasty water. Most significant of them were *Pekhi-Akhpur*, *Dara Bulag*, *Tashtak-Akhpur*, and *Katna Akhpur*.<sup>94</sup> Since 1915, every summer and autumn, after school I, frequently went to the area to gather brushwood. Having reached the place, I would first chop branches, pick up brushwood, and tie them up

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<sup>93</sup> Short for Nikolai.

<sup>94</sup> Akhpur (Arm.) and Bulag (Tur.)- spring, Katna- (Arm.) – milky.

into bunches. I would then hide the bunches among bushes, and for the next few days, carry them one at a time on my back, walking a *kyrmyker*<sup>95</sup> home. At home, I would stock them up in our backyard for the winter.

Occasionally, in searches for wild fruits and berries, I went exploring new areas that were far away and into impassable forests. Soon I knew all the mountain tracks and forest fields around. During the springtime in secluded forest glades hidden from prying eyes, I picked flowers and filled my hat full of beautiful wild violets, then sitting on the grass, I would put together beautiful bouquets by attaching flowers to a finger-thick tree branch. Satisfied with my creation, I would solemnly walk home proudly holding up my bouquet.

In June, while climbing some mountains, I would smell a faint fragrance, an indication of a nearby strawberry glade. There I was, a lonesome boy standing on an isolated glade, surrounded by the green beauty of Mother Nature, enjoying the surrounding landscape and the sense of strawberry aroma in the fresh mountain air. Having sat down on my knees, I would move the grass apart and find aromatic and ripe wild strawberries. I would pick a lot of them, fasten them into bunches, and, just as with the violets, fix the bunches onto a branch and victoriously and proudly return to town. This involuntarily attracted attention and caused surprised smiles from those passing by. Wow, I almost forgot to mention blackberries. Do you know how many of them I picked in my childhood? It is hard to imagine. I knew inaccessible places where you could collect the largest and sweetest berries. Neither natural obstacles nor numerous grazes and scratches on my face and body could stop my desire to pick these tasty

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<sup>95</sup> Narrow footpath.

berries. Dressed in old clothes that would quickly wear and tear apart, I looked quite ridiculous, probably as funny as a scarecrow. Years later when I visited these places again, I found pieces of my clothes still hanging on blackberry shrubs.

I learned how and was good at weaving chuvarans from tree branches. There were times when I either did not have enough of them with me, or when I was out collecting firewood and unexpectedly came across blackberry patches, but had nothing to put them in. In these cases, I would get out my pocketknife which I always carried with me, and still do, and having cut elastic branches, would weave chuvarans. We loved eating fresh berries. Every year Mother prepared preserves from them and often we were even able to sell some of it. Most of the time, I was going out for blackberries alone, but occasionally went with the son of *khambal*,<sup>96</sup> Simon Gevorkyan.

In the autumn, I also collected currants and wild fruits, such as apples, pears, carnelian cherries, *mushmula*,<sup>97</sup> *alycha*,<sup>98</sup> etc.

I remember how, during one of my trips in the late autumn when I was out looking for firewood, I ran into a tree with no leaves but with plenty of *mushmula* fruits. On another occasion, I came across a tree that had an endless number of fragrant and ripe carnelian cherries.

Yervand seldomly went for blackberries, and rarely went for firewood. He was our firstborn and he enjoyed this special and privileged status in our family. All new and best things would go to Yervand. I remember how, on rare occasions when our family went out for a visit to relatives or friends, it was me who had to stay home and watch the house. Everybody else had an

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<sup>96</sup> Loader for hire.

<sup>97</sup> Medlar. Fruit also known as *Shishki*.

<sup>98</sup> Cherry-plum.

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excuse to go. Yervand was a senior, Lusik was a beautiful doll to display, and Enok was a parent's favorite, so it was not long to figure out who had to stay. To convince me to stay and to calm me down and stop my crying and protesting, Mother would give me a glass of sweet tea. Do not be amazed. Sweet tea was such a delicatessen and luxurious.

During severe winters, the town water pipelines would often freeze, and we had to walk about four kilometers out of Shusha to Dara Bulag and bring home water for household needs or melt snow and ice. We also frequently used rainwater, reserving it in large bidons.



*Chapter 12 Unrest in Shusha | New Tragedy |  
Without Father | In Danger*

Our life was going on through its normal course; we lived quietly and relatively well. Yervand played the clarinet in school and later in a military orchestra, he also played tar and was good at playing both instruments. I, in my turn, enjoyed accompanying him by blowing on a tin pipe from our brick stove, imitating a tambourine.

At the beginning of 1917, we learned that the Autocrat of Russia Tsar Nikolai II had renounced his throne. Soon the social atmosphere in town began to escalate, stirring up the activities of many political parties, the nationalists, social democrats, cadets, and other anti-national movements. Life had changed for the worse. Disorders in town had become frequent, and prices had sharply risen.

Father had a hard time finding work in town and was compelled to join some men from Kendhurd and left to go to the Trans-Caspian region in search of work. Uncle Nikolai had joined the municipal *Militsiya*,<sup>99</sup> but soon left, having decided to follow in the footsteps of his father by continuing his business. Mother occasionally made bars of soap part of which Uncle Nikolai sold on his trips to remote villages. Everything seemed to be going not too bad for our family, but tragedies continued to haunt us.

In the autumn of 1917, Uncle Nikolai with three partners, among whom was his brother-in-law, left for another trip with a large consignment of goods. Having successfully finished sales, on their way back home they came across armed bandits who

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<sup>99</sup> Police forces in Soviet Union.

had plundered them and were about to release them, but here Uncle Nikolai had made a fatal mistake that cost him and his comrades their lives. Having recognized the leader of the gang, Uncle Nikolai began to reproach and shame him, thus not leaving the bandits any choice but to get rid of the witnesses, and they shot them all. They were buried by a road near the village of *Badara*. Again, there was weeping, lamenting, and unrestrained sobs of women. Our mother bitterly cried for days and nights, coming to hysterics, and completely abandoning her children. Poor Grandfather Shamir could not find peace in his unrestrained grief.

1918 had come, and we had not heard from our father for a long time. We knew that railways were blocked because of wars but waited and hoped for his fast return. Town life became harsh, especially for us living without the head of the household. In addition, the atmosphere in Shusha became menacing. In March 1918, armed bandits broke into the house of a military chief at night and killed him and all his family. I have seen this man before. He was a medium height, plump man with a forked gray beard.

Ordinary Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Shusha traditionally had a good neighborhood relationship. They had freely visited each other, befriended one another, and traded for many friends. Some Armenians had shops in the Azerbaijanis' quarters. In turn, Azerbaijanis traded in the Armenian quarters. Now, these people, incited by leaders of *Dashnak* and *Musavat* parties<sup>100</sup>, silently and helplessly watched the events occurring and were losing trust in each other.

Once, after an unsuccessful attempt to sell firewood at the bazaar, I decided to take a risk and go down to an Azerbaijani

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<sup>100</sup> Armenian and Azerbaijan nationalist parties.



quarter hoping to sell it there. There was a man who approached me and bought the firewood and requested me to follow him to deliver it to his home. I was aware of growing tensions between our two nations but was compelled to follow the man.

We had passed several streets and were walking deeper and deeper into the Azerbaijani quarters. I began worrying and grew suspicious of such a long walk. While I was deep into my suspicions, we approached a stand-alone house. The man stopped and shouted; soon a younger man came out of the house. They both stood staring at me and whispering something, which seemed malicious to me. Then, the older man again ordered me to follow them. I looked around and noticed that the house we were standing by was the last house on the street and there was nothing ahead. At this moment, I realized that I was in danger and needed to get out of there as soon as possible. I gradually began to slow down my steps and untied a cord on my back that was holding the firewood, and as soon as the men turned around the corner of the house, I quietly lowered the firewood from my back to the ground and ran home with all my might.



*Chapter 13 My Unsuccessful Trip to Shushikend*

Father had not returned yet, and having struggled with providing for the family, Mother decided to send me to Shushikend to see her younger sister Gumash, in hope that she could help us with some food or money. To get to Shushikend, you would normally take the route through the Azerbaijani part of town, but I was scared going that way in such troubled times and decided to take a different route that I've never used before through the southern part of town to a trail to the village of Karin-tak and then to Shushikend. Shusha was built on the plateau of highlands surrounded by a deep abyss, which made it an impregnable natural fortress with only two roads that connect the town to the rest of the world. The descent to the northern part of town where we lived would be much easier, however, unfortunately for me, I had to walk the southern slope, a tough narrow footpath twisting between blocks of stones. Once fallen from above, stones chaotically arrayed around the area down to Karin-tak. This conglomeration of stones different in sizes, shapes, and colors created a unique and futuristic landscape. Some of the rocks were huge reaching 40-50 meters in diameter. I have walked this trail before. Sometimes it would run into huge rocks and make sharp turns. There were times when I had to climb over the stones to get back on the trail. Perhaps, for an observer, people coming down the trail would suddenly disappear and then reappear. No doubt, climbing up such a trail would be a much harder job than going down. Before reaching Karin-tak, the trail splits, branching east to the left, while the main trail proceeds forward on a strip of the green plain into a narrowing gorge.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Author was obviously referring to the Hunot Gorge.

Surrounded by almost dead silence, only the murmur of a river<sup>102</sup> cutting through the gorge was disturbing it, I continued walking the gorge in the twilight. On my right like a stone wall towered Mt. *Chakhmakh*. The top of the mountain was covered by woods that soon turned into fertile lands settled with numerous Armenian villages. To the left, and only within ten to twenty meters from the wall of Mt. Chakhmakh, stood another wall towering up to the same height and terminated by the plateau near the southeast part of Shusha. The distance between the tops of the two heights was only thirty to forty meters, and I imagined a bridge thrown over the gorge from Mt. Chakhmakh to the town. Wow! That would be amazing.

I continued through the gorge; it gradually widened and became illuminated. Directly right under Shusha, to the left of the trail, settled a tiny Armenian village *Hunot* that consisted of no more than ten houses and three to four mills. The mills were generating such a noise that villagers talking to each other had to loudly shout. I turned to the right, crossed the bridge over the river, and kept walking up the trail. Soon, I got to another Armenian village *Earkatali*<sup>103</sup>. Located in the ravine, this village was also small, with only about two dozen houses. I was hungry. One kind woman having learned who I was and where I was going, had treated me with a tundir bread and yogurt. I ate it all with a great appetite, thanked the woman for her hospitality, and left the village. In half an hour, already in the twilight, I reached up to Shushikend. To my disappointment, my journey was in vain as it turned out Aunt Gumash with her family left for Russia a long time ago. Having spent the night in the village, I headed back home in the morning.

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<sup>103</sup> Reach of iron.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*



General View on Shusha



Shusha's downtown

*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*



View on the village of Hunot



Gorge Hunot

*Chapter 14 Fathers' Village and His Return*

The summer had come, and we had decided to visit our father's village of Kendhurd, where lived his older brother with his adult sons and two of his married sisters. Life in villages was better than in towns. We counted on our relatives' hospitality and support and were confident that they would not leave us in trouble and help us to survive until Father's return. Our relatives had often visited us in Shusha sometimes with their entire families and enjoyed staying with us. At the end of their stay, my father had always presented his guests with gifts and even was giving them gifts to pass on to those in Kendhurd who could not come.

On one fine day, all loaded up with shawls of bedding and utensils, we left for Kendhurd. Ahead of us were forty long kilometers on a nasty road. Difficult terrain with the numerous rises and descents quickly exhausted us, and about halfway up to our destination, we stopped to take a break at the Derin Akhpur spring near the village of Trnavaz<sup>104</sup>, which was situated on a slope of the *Bour-Khan* Mountain. Having washed up, drank cold water, and rested under the arches of a stone canopy over the spring, we were soon back on the road. Once again, the road abruptly went upwards and here Enok began capriciously crying, refusing to walk any further and demanding someone carried him. Mother was carrying our younger two-year-old brother Zarmair on her back. She also had a shawl with various items in one hand and held Enok's hand with her other hand. Yervand and I were also carrying shawls with belongings and from time to time began taking turns in carrying Enok on our backs. Enok was too young to

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<sup>104</sup> Also known as Kamir Gukh.

understand that all of us were struggling and kept insisting on his demand. Someone had to step in and explain to him the whole situation here, so I turned around and shouted, "If you do not want to walk, you can stay here, but be aware of hungry wolves that hide behind the bushes around the road." Having convinced him that his tricks would not work, gloomy and dissatisfied Enok followed us. Lusik somehow silently walked herself.

At last, in a far distance, I spotted the long-awaited site of the road descending along a stony ridge to Kendhur. I remembered this place, about two years ago I traveled on it with one of Kendhur's villagers by the name Ambartsum for a ten-day stay with my uncle. Unexpectedly, when the village was so close, trouble had fallen upon us; the sky turned dark as loud thunder, lightning, and the strongest rain falling from heaven, had descended upon us. The huge mass of water fell upon the ground and instantly turned the clay road into a muddy mess. We kept walking, sliding, stumbling, falling, and rising again. Our terrified mother began to cry and shout, appealing to God and people to save her children. However, despite the entreaty of Mother, the rain continued and stopped only when we approached the village in complete darkness. Wet to the last thread of our clothes, exhausted and hungry, we reached the house of Aunt Salati.

Perhaps, it was not our best day; we received a cold reception, and it was obvious that our relatives were not happy with the unexpected guests. Aunt Salati lived with her husband Akop, an elderly, taciturn, unconcerned man with red, unhealthy eyes, and their younger son Suleiman who was a couple of years younger than me. They lived in a small, one-

room house with an earth floor. Suleiman worked in pastures shepherding goats from early morning to the late evening.

On the third day of our stay, Aunt Salati ordered us not to enter the house in her absence and hung up a padlock on the entrance door, leaving us outside. Mother, expecting further escalations, began to search for another dwelling.

Across the road from our aunt's place, there was a house like hers with the same porch and a single room with an earth floor. Basically, it was four walls with a door and window openings covered by an earth roof. What was most awful was the strongest stench coming from almost a foot of excrement left there by animals that had used this dwelling for years as a refuge from the rain, heat, and cold. Mother rolled up her sleeves and began vigorously cleaning the room. Unexpectedly, destiny had taken pity on us and sent us help. First, came an old man Matos-aper, who gave us a shovel, a jug, and much useful advice. Then, came along kind Gumash-Baji, the widow of mason Tavos, a longtime friend of our father with whom he occasionally worked with. Tavos and Gumash-Baji had their own house in Shusha and lived near the Malyaga house our family rented. Gumash-Baji, being herself from Kendhurd, had come here with her children sometime before us. She and Mother worked hard for two days scraping, cleaning, and washing floors and walls and at last brought the dwelling to a condition more or less suitable for habitation.

About two weeks later, we received news that our father had returned to Shusha. Yervand at once left there, and on the next day returned with Father. Our joy of seeing Father had no limits. However, he looked quite gloomy and suppressed, and when he saw our situation, he sadly sighed. As it turned out, having been gone for more than a year working in foreign



lands, he returned with empty hands. Since railroads were blocked because of the war, a group of men he was traveling with decided to make their way home through the Caucasus Mountains. Overcoming improbable difficulties, they at last reached up to Nagorny Karabakh where they ran into bandits, lost all their earnings, and hardly escaped alive. Father was very offended by the way his close relatives treated his family. I saw him talking to his sister Salati in the street; however, I am not sure if he has met with his brother Quki or his other sister Guli, but I know well, that neither before nor after his return, we have never seen them. In a few days, our big family of seven, led by Father, went by foot back to Shusha. On the way, we often made stops and excitedly picked and ate blackberries, wild pears, and hazelnuts, and reached our home before sunset.

For the next several days, not yet fully recovered from the travel, Father was leaving the house in the early mornings, going far from the town to pick wild pears, and returning late at night carrying a heavy load of pears on his back. Having collected five to six poods of fruits, he allowed them to ripen for several days and then took them to the bazaar and sold them wholesale to dealers. With the money received, we bought ourselves food.

For some reason, soon we moved to live in Ashig-Avetisyants house, which was just a few houses away from Khataunts<sup>105</sup> house.



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<sup>105</sup> House of Khataunts family.

*Chapter 15 Gabriel Varzhapet*

In 1918, when I was attending the City Seminary, among my teachers there was Gabriel Varzhapet<sup>106</sup>, who taught us the Divine and the History of Religion. He was a middle-height, corpulent man in his sixties with a dense black mustache on a purely shaven face. His head had occasional gray hair that he was unsuccessfully fighting by pulling out to the laughter of all his pupils. Gabriel Varzhapet lived with his wife and daughter in a house across a small alley to the south of my grandparents' house. The two houses were so close to each other that branches of Grandpa's walnut tree hung down on the teacher's roof. Gabriel's Varzhapet the only son studied somewhere abroad. Later, during the Soviet era, he became the well-known historian Hayk Gabrielovich Gulikekhvan. He died in Armenia in the 1960s. Gabriel Varzhapet was a strict and severe man; students were afraid of him, especially because of his habit of humiliating them for their slightest fault. Troubled boys had to listen to a plentiful stream of scolds like, "Hey, Donkey, I wish you and your parents fell through the ground" or "I know your father. He looks like a man, but you are a snotty puppy" or even "Hey! You donkey's head from a donkey tribe, you would be better dead."

Once in the late fall, I was running late for school. However, despite that, I could not resist making a stop to buy roasted sunflower seeds. I bought two full glasses of them, and for a few minutes stood puzzled about where to put them. I believe I have mentioned before that my pants had no pockets; there were only cuts for them. Moreover, at that time I had no underpants, so you could slide your hand in through the

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<sup>106</sup> Teacher (Arm.)

pocket's holes and touch or scratch there all you want. I took off my school peak cap, poured sunflower seeds into it, put it back on, and ran to the school.

The City Seminary was in a large three-story building, with the long hallways with a set of classrooms on each side. My class was on the second floor at the very end of the hallway. I was late for a class; it appeared the bell had rung a while ago. I could not remember my schedule and was not sure which classroom I needed to go to. I approached a classroom door and lent my ear and heard the strong voice of Gabriel Varzhapet. Oh no, I did not dare go in and be lectured by this twerp. I stood thinking, trying to decide if I should wait for a break and attend the next class or just go home when I heard a directive voice behind me, "Hey you! Why are you here? Immediately report to your class." I turned around and faced a strict physiognomy of a tall and short-bearded man walking directly towards me. It was our principal Alexander Tsaturyan, of whom we students were also very scared. I had no choice but to quickly open the door and walk in... into the "warm embraces" of Gabriel Varzhapet sitting at his table and facing the class. As he noticed me walking in, he turned around and looked at me atop of his glasses and began screaming, "Donkey, where have you been? Take your hat off." Frightened by my meeting with the principal, I felt completely lost and ... Oh my God! I took off my ill-starred peak cap. The horror that occurred next is hard to describe. The sound of thousands of seeds falling and reaching the floor... shir-shir-shir followed by the almost simultaneous bell. Pupils instantly jumped from their seats and began picking up seeds. Red-faced from the anger and still screaming. Gabriel Varzhapet hardly made his way out of class. He disposed to leave me without dinner and to stay in school until the evening.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part I*



Shusha's College Faculty



Shusha's School Choir

*Chapter 16 The Social Atmosphere in Shusha is Escalating*

Relations between Armenians who represented the majority of Shusha's population and resided in the Western, geographically largest part of Shusha and the Azerbaijani population of the Eastern part of the town worsened every day. The Armenian merchants who had shops in the Azerbaijani part of the town one after another have left it; likewise, Azerbaijani merchants have ceased to appear in the Armenian part too. There was a rumor going around that Azerbaijanis killed an authoritative and respected Armenian man who had gone to them with a call for goodwill and prudence. The Armenian response was not kept waiting for long; by the order of their leaders, water delivery to Azerbaijani quarters was cut off. Most people of both nations had remained loyal to traditional good-neighbor relations. Many Azerbaijanis secretly made their way to water sources in the suburbs of Armenian quarters. Some Armenians even helped them with this, bringing water to their territory.

In the northern part of the city, there was a small river from which the Elin Road was gradually rising upwards to the Azerbaijani quarter. On that road, you could often see peasants from nearby Azerbaijani villages compelled to deliver water to their relatives in town on donkeys and horses loaded with large leather or copper jugs.

Once, far down the road, I noticed, two Azerbaijanis on two donkeys and a mule carrying water. Suddenly, there was a shot and one of the donkeys loaded with jugs of water tumbled down to the ground. The Azerbaijanis hastily descended from the road with the mule and the other donkey and disappeared into the bushes. The Armenians who shot from the height of the

town went down the road and about an hour later returned with two big copper jugs.

Another time, in the autumn of 1918, I with other children were following Armenian men escorting three Azerbaijanis on a narrow stony trail under the northern cliff near the town to a shooting execution. On the east, about three kilometers from Shusha, there was the *Syangyar* Mountain. That day, many concerned Azerbaijanis gathered on top of it and watch the execution procession. The crowd was well-visible, but of course, we could not hear their voices. The Armenian guards noticed us watching them and drove us away. I have never learned how that story ended. I should say, at that time, the Armenians of Shusha were relatively strong.

Food prices continued to rise, especially for bread. Karin-tak and other nearby villages sometimes delivered tundur baked bread made of grain flour mixed with bran and other surrogates. It did not taste right at all and cracked between teeth.

In the absence of soap, pediculosis widely spread among the population. As a result, there were registered cases of typhus. Occasionally, Mother would make soap bars, but the money she made was barely enough to buy food and more raw materials to produce more soap. At that time, denominations released by Kerensky<sup>107</sup> were in circulation. Bills were hardly larger than postage stamps. Anarchy and chaos reigned in the town.

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<sup>107</sup> Alexander Kerensky was a Russian lawyer and revolutionist who was a key political figure in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Served as the second Prime Minister of the Russian Provisional Government.

*Chapter 17 Thieves Internal and External*

As I have already mentioned, in September 1918 we lived in Ashig-Avetisyan's house. To make the reader better understand the following stories I am about to tell, I need to describe this place in a bit more detail. This house was located on a dead-end street right before the last house on its left side. It had a single entry to its small and enclosed yard through a heavy wooden gate equipped with a lock-up wood crossbeam. It was a two-room house with a kitchen and a glazed-over veranda. A small external door to a veranda was equipped with a strong spring. I always had a hard time opening it and keeping it open to quickly slip through without being hit. The veranda was almost square about 4x4 meters and had an adjoining deck with several wooden steps leading to the backyard. On the veranda's floor, there was a wooden hatch through which you could lower a ladder and get down to the basement. However, you could walk out of the basement through a small door to the space under the deck and then to the front yard. Doesn't it remind you of a labyrinth? The veranda was elevated over the porch level and Mother, to make it easier to step to it, laid a large round stone, which we by the way were also used to chop meat. There were three inner doors on the veranda that led into the house which, in my opinion, had rather a strange layout and numerous courses and exits.

The center door led to a spacious living room with two windows facing west. One of them was facing the yard of *Uzun*<sup>108</sup> Abram's house, while the other had a view of the entire deadlock street. There was also a solid door into a small bedroom. The door to the right on the veranda led to the same

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<sup>108</sup> Tall (Turk.)

bedroom that had no windows and was illuminated only through the glass over the door. The door to the left on the veranda led into a long corridor with several doors to locked rooms. The corridor ended with our kitchen and a restroom. Now, we can go back to the stories I want to share.

September was a good time for picking blackberries, and I periodically went out to bring home sweet and ripen berries. On one of those trips, I was able to bring in a lot more than I usually had. Mother sorted out the largest berries and made jam out of them, and there were still enough left to enjoy our favorite delicacy. To tell the truth, among all preserves and jams, I preferred the blackberry one. One day after dinner, Yervand left for the town, Lusik and Enok were playing outside, and Mother went with Zarmair to visit Aunt Sophia, Mother's oldest sister.

I was left home alone. Bored, I was walking back and forth thinking about how to get myself occupied with something when devils inside me began tempting, "Why don't you go and try some of that fresh blackberry jam? There is plenty of it. Two-three spoons will not make a difference, and nobody would even notice it." That was odd, no matter how hard I tried to refrain from this seductive idea, my legs unwittingly were pulling me towards a kitchen cabinet for a spoon lying in a *gazan*<sup>109</sup>. No sooner said than done, having lifted the hatch on the veranda, I armed with a spoon, went down to the basement. There on the floor stood two jars of blackberry jam with their necks wrapped by oilcloth and tied up by a twine. I opened one of them and ate a few spoons from my favorite preserve. Having eaten what I thought was enough, I covered the jar neck back with oilcloth and tied it with the twine, put it back in its

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<sup>109</sup> A type of large cooking pot, roughly equivalent to a cauldron.



place, and went upstairs. However, the obsession continued haunting me. No matter how fast I was pacing the room, the aroma and the sweet taste of the preserve were all over me, in my mouth, and in my mind. I wanted that jam desperately. I wanted it and wanted it now. Suddenly I had, what I thought at that time, a bright idea. What if I eat a little more, leave the jar neck uncovered, put the jar on its side on the earthy floor, and drop a few fresh berries around it? Mother would never pick up dirty berries to taste. Besides, if I leave an external door, the one that was under the deck, to the basement slightly open, I could put all fault on a cat that had come into the basement from outside and eaten the jam. I looked through the window to make sure nobody was coming, then armed with the same spoon and a plate of fresh berries, went back to the basement. I jumped on that jam as if I were eating it for the first and the last time, loading it into my mouth up to my ears. Having gorged myself, I overturned the almost emptied jar on the floor, scattered some fresh blackberries around it, and rushed upstairs. The first thing that I did when I got back up to the room was to look through the window again. Nobody was coming. I quickly washed my hands and face and rinsed my mouth. Still, nobody returned home yet. Weakened and excited by my deeds, I sat down on an ottoman and decided to lay down and take a break, but it appears the eaten jam made a joke on me; I did not notice how I fell asleep. I am not sure how long I slept, but I woke up to a series of hits to my head, accompanied by loud screaming.

It was my angry mother who kept slapping me and madly shouting, "Let you die! How dare you are, a dog spawn? Was that jam sweet?" I began to justify myself by blaming it all on a cat that most likely came through the open door to the basement

and done that disgrace to Mother, "I swear it wasn't me, Mama!" Nevertheless, she was still furious and kept attacking me with even greater force. "Are you saying a cat has come, eh? A cat has come, eh? Is that so, eh?" Having finished her tirade, she grabbed me by my shirt's collar and rubbed it into my nose. Oh my God! What a horror! An entire collar of my shirt was soiled by jam.

"Is that so, eh? Next time I will kill you," concluded the angry at me Mother. Embarrassed, I jumped up and ran away. Well, how foolish I was to make such thorough planning of my crime and to forget about checking my clothes. Moreover, my cat alibi was not worth a rotten egg! What kind of cat eats blackberry jam and can unwrap a cord on a jar?

One autumn day of 1918, Mother and Yervand went to visit our priest Ter-Musheg on an occasion to get some documents needed for Yervand's application for a night watchman position at one of the local banks. Before heading out, Mother prepared our beds on the floor in the living room, then picked up Zarmair and the three of them left, ordering me to follow them to lock the gates behind them. Lusik, Enok, and I got to stay home. Dressed in our pajamas, we cheerfully played in our beds throwing pillows and wrestling with each other. Carried away by the game, I had absolutely forgotten about the gate. Moreover, I had also forgotten to put an iron bolt on the entry door. Having played enough, we soon fell asleep. After a little while, through my dream, I had heard the well-recognizable shivering squeak of an opening gate. In fear, I instantly sat up in the bed and listened. Lusik and Enok slept lying to the left of me. The next couple of minutes went by in relative silence; all I heard were broken howls of a strong wind. Perhaps it was the wind that woke me up. Having calmed myself with this

explanation, I laid down again. Only much later, did I realize that even the strong wind would not be able to shift such a heavy gate as ours. I sat up again.

The kids were still sleeping sweetly, and the wind continued blowing. Then I heard another sound, different from the one before but also familiar. That was the sound of an expanding spring on the door to our kitchen. Now, there were no doubts; there was someone on our veranda. My heart began strongly pounding. If someone is on the veranda, he could easily get into the bedroom and then from there slip into the dining room, or even right from the veranda get through the other door directly into the living room. In fear and disturbing expectation of something awful, I was puzzled and did not know what to do in this situation. Lusik had woken up and began to rub her eyes. Placing the forefinger over my mouth, I warned her to stay silent. I was afraid, God forbid, we would wake up our cry-baby Enok, and he for sure would get loud. At this moment, I heard a squeak of the outside door opening into a bedroom. It sounded like the intruder walked into it. Lusik sat up in the bed and stared at me not understanding what was going on. I should mention that the dining room in which we slept was illuminated by the weak light of a beautiful small night lamp with a lampshade in the form of a light green glass sphere. In a minute, I heard heavy footsteps coming out of the bedroom. My heart was trying to jump out of my chest. Right across from our bed stood Zarmair's crib. Having left with Zarmair, Mother did not put the crib back together and its wooded sticks laid on the floor among our clothes that we randomly scattered when we went to bed. Something was telling me that I needed to get up and get dressed. My clothes were laid by the slightly opened door into the bedroom. I got on my knees and slowly

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crawled towards the door and looked through the aperture and what a nightmare ... there was a pair of grey eyes under a grey papakha staring right at me. In horror, I jumped to my feet and made a few steps back towards the crib, seized a couple of sticks, and began throwing them at the door. Then, I ran to the window and began calling for help, "Abram-dai, Abram-dai, help... thief!", I was still screaming when I heard a door slam on the veranda followed by the gate groan. By this time, Enok had woken up and was crying from fright. I passed on the night lamp to Lusik, seized the Viennese stool, and followed her to the bedroom where I climbed on a stool and quickly locked the door with the wooden crossbar. At once, we passed into the dining room and put an iron crossbar on the door. The wind kept rustling outside, but now it had not raised an alarm in me. Soon, Mother, Yervand, and Zarmair returned home. They knocked on the window and shouted to me to open the gate for them. Crying, I shouted back saying I am scared to get out, but the gate was open, and they can come in. When they walked into the house, I ran to them and cried and hugged Mother and told her about our adventure.



*Chapter 18 Father's Death and After*

Father continued having difficulties finding work in town and occasionally disappeared for a few days in search of casual earnings in nearby villages. I had often helped him with collecting firewood in forests on the outskirts of Shusha and selling it in bazaars. It was a good supplemental to our budget. The coming cold winter aggravated our situation even more. Also, as they say, misfortune never comes alone; an outbreak of the typhus epidemic had raged in town claiming the lives of many people.

The town hospital was overflowing; due to the shortage of beds, many patients stayed in their homes. Local authorities had converted a large building in our part of the town into a temporary hospital, and Mother somehow had managed to get a job there as an attendant. In December, she caught typhus and fell ill. She was laying in delirium in the bed we had transferred for her from the bedroom to the much warmer dining room. Father and I made a few more trips for firewood for our own needs and to sell some in bazaars. Once he had managed to get a few pounds of wheat groats, some meat, and salt and cooked soup for Mother and us.

Having always been a thin man, Father attenuated even more. I well remember watching him one cold winter day coming back from the bazaar. Drooped and pale, shivering from the cold, he walked through the blizzard. Having approached the house, he shook off the snow with his hat, stomped a few times, and at last entered the house. With a runny nose and snowflakes on his face, he reached under his pea-jacket and pulled out churek. Having looked at our unconscious mother and us, he shook his head, kindled the fire, and began working

on other household chores. There was nobody there for us. Mother's younger sister, our Aunt Gumash, was gone to Stavropol and the older sister, Aunt Sophia, had been indifferent to our situation. She occasionally visited us, sat for a short time far from her sister's bed, perhaps out of fear of contracting the typhus, and would leave.

1919, the year full of misfortune, has begun. With firewood dwindling in our house, I once again went out with Father on what turned out to be our last trip. We took a winding trail that descended to the woods some five kilometers to the north of the town. Having reached the place, Father climbed into the dense bushes with *tzakat*<sup>110</sup> in his hand and began nimbly chopping off brushwood. In the meantime, I cleared and stomped the snow and created an area where I would pile brushwood thrown to me by Father into bunches and tie them together with a rope. Loaded with the brushwood bunches on our backs, we walked back to town, making occasional stops for short breaks.

At the end of January, Mother began feeling better. She was still weak but could now sit in her bed. However, fate continued its course of testing us, as now our father fell ill with typhus. Groaning, he was lying in a bed by a window. Grandfather Shamir had occasionally visited us. He would helplessly sigh looking at our parents and leave. Our poor and unfortunate father was laying without care and food. Sometimes, he would make signs to let us know that he wanted to drink. We did not even have a single piece of hard sugar to prepare him a sweet hot tea. Soon, he lost consciousness; weakened and exhausted, he died in the first days of February 1919, at the age of forty-four. Yervand went to Kendhurd to let his brother and sisters know about Father's death, but none of them wanted to attend

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<sup>110</sup> A chopper with a rectangular blade (Arm.)

the funeral. They gave Yervand a few chureks and sent him back. I then went to Kendhurd for our good neighbor Gumash-Baji. She came and helped us in many ways.

Our grandfather with some other men dug Father's grave. We placed his body wrapped in a blanket into a coffin lent from the Church. The funeral was small with very few attendees. Even Mother could not come as she was still in bed. We buried our father next to Grandmother's grave, which had a large tombstone with an appropriate inscription. Only a bunch of ordinary stones were placed over our father's grave. The Seventh and the Fortieth wake days had not been properly commemorated; we simply could not afford it.

When I wrote these lines on July 21st, 1976, I was home by myself. My son Yuri left this morning with his family for a long trip around the country on his new *Zhiguli*.<sup>111</sup> Asya stayed last night with them and returned home this morning, but later left again this time to visit our daughter Ira. I am all alone, alone with my thoughts. I am writing these lines and tears are pouring out of my eyes. Sometimes I stop and reminisce about my poor and infinitely unfortunate father. This makes me get up and walk through the rooms crying and in an irresistible urge call out to him, "Papa! Papa!" With burning resentment, I was addressing the merciless and unscrupulous fate. He had lived and died in misery. Was he worthy of such a destiny?

It took a while for Mother to get better. Her sight returned and she began doing some housework.

Around this time, the British Army entered Shusha. Officers and their subordinates, the Indian soldiers, had settled in the deserted barracks of the Russian Army. Like most of the townspeople, I saw a truck for the first time. It was amazing yet

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<sup>111</sup> This was the first Soviet made Fiat sedan, called Zhiguli, or VAZ 2101.

scary to watch such a huge, rumbling, and snorting giant moving on the streets, and the most amazing thing about it was the absence of bulls or horses in front of it. The British soon began distributing free bread to the poor, a pound per capita every other day per the parish clergy list. Several times, on the bitterly cold nights, I went to the distribution center to take a turn to receive bread the next morning. There was a huge line of people, and it was a complete nightmare; people were pushing each other, screaming, crying, and fighting. It was terribly cold. Mother tied me crossways with a large wool shawl. I had to stomp my feet to keep warm. Painfully suffering, my teeth were chattering as I walked back and forth to not freeze, desperately waiting for the time when they began giving out the white cornbread. Two times I was able to bring bread home. On the third time, they refused to give it to me as someone somehow managed to get it under our name. Empty-handed, I went home weeping from resentment. On top of that, I got pneumonia and ended up staying in bed for a month. The harsh winter continued to persist. People who were exhausted and weakened by cold and hunger fell onto the snow, and many of them never got up again. Within the ruins of old houses, I saw the corpses of the dead homeless.

Finally, the long-awaited spring had come. Nature woke up from hibernation and days became longer and warmer. Edible wild herbs and plants, such as *khndzeloz*,<sup>112</sup> *khazyaz*,<sup>113</sup> and *penjar*<sup>114</sup> had appeared in fields. Only God knows how much of those herbs, especially *penjar*, I ate. For hours, I grazed out there

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<sup>112</sup> *Ornithogalum montanum* (Lat.), a perennial plant from the family of *Asparagaceae*.

<sup>113</sup> Ramson or Wild garlic.

<sup>114</sup> Nettle.



in the fields like a cow, picking young leaves of penjar, rubbing them between my palms, and then eating them. There was no salt, everything we ate, we ate unsalted.

Someone said that a slaughterhouse has been giving away animal blood, and the starving people boiled and ate it. As they say, one drowning would even clutch onto a snake. I went there and stood in a long line with a pot in hand and brought it back home full of blood. Three or four times I managed to get blood there, but then the slaughterhouse stopped doing it. Mother boiled or baked coagulated blood and fed us. I shall admit that considering the circumstances, it was hearty and not bad-tasting food.

Perhaps, it was Yervand's turn, as it was, he who soon ended up in the hospital with typhus. After spending weeks there, weak, and thin, he returned home. To put him back on his feet, Mother had sold her sewing machine, and later our big and beautiful dining table and some other household belongings. By the summer, for unknown to me reason, we again moved back to Khatayunt's house; we had lived in this house longer than in other homes.

Soon Satenik, the widow of Uncle Nikolay, and her three-year-old son left Grandfather's Shamir house and moved in with her parents. Left on his own, Grandpa began visiting us more often, coming to wash his head and bring his laundry to Mother. Eventually, he moved in and stayed with us. Our house had a damp and cold basement with a small window facing the street under the porch stairs and the earthen back wall. That is where Grandfather Shamir slept. For some reason, he did not want to sleep with us upstairs and asked Mother to make him a bed there against the wall. He spent most of the daytime at his home or the bazaar and was coming back to our place only in

the evening to spend the night. In his home, he had rich bedding and copper utensils that he had been slowly selling at the bazaar and buying himself bread that he ate sometimes even at night. He seemed to be in good health. I remember how on one frosty winter day, he gave me his large copper mug and asked me to bring him water for the night. The next morning, when I went downstairs to see him, I found him still sleeping. His big, grey-haired chest was wide open, abandoned breadcrumbs were lying around his chest and the bed and his mug with the frozen water in it was standing next to the bed. The cold did not bother him at all. Then, in one of the slots between the stones of the wall against Grandpa's bed, I noticed a dead frog and sobbed. Grandfather woke up and still sleepy, looked at me. I pointed my finger at the frog and asked him, "Apa! Apa!"<sup>115</sup>, what is it?" Grandpa looked at the frog and said, "Damn frog, at night I felt something moving on my chest, so I grabbed and squeezed it in my fist and threw it away."

In the autumn, led by Nuri Pasha, the Turks entered the town and occupied the empty barracks abandoned by the British. The situation of the Armenian population of Shusha became more complicated. Local *Musavatists*<sup>116</sup>, feeling the shoulder of their *askers*<sup>117</sup>, had begun to dictate their will to Armenians. The sense of threat and insecurity drove many Armenians to leave the town and find refuge in distant villages.

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<sup>115</sup> That is how he called his grandfather.

<sup>116</sup> Members of the nationalist Musavat party.

<sup>117</sup> Solders (Tur.)

Chapter 19 Meshadi-Avetis | Saved by the Bell

Rumor had it, that there was a man from Baku in town who was buying *shyrmyshug*<sup>118</sup>, which was used in the preparation of yeast. Shyrmyshug grew in ravines along riverbanks, climbing up trees. In the fall they bloom pretty white, delicate, and fragrant lilac-type flowers. I had twice gone with another boy to collect shyrmyshug, sold it to a man, and gave the money to Mother.

Nearby, in the quarter of *Kamu Chehaz*,<sup>119</sup> lived a man by the name Avetis, but everybody called him Meshadi-Avetis, the way he was called by Azerbaijanis. In the winter, Meshadi-Avetis worked as a khambal at the bazaar, and the rest of the time he was engaged in the trade of wild fruits and firewood that he collected from the surrounding forests and sold at the bazaar. Meshadi-Avetis had three sons. The eldest, *Topunts Girish*, was a notorious hooligan and a drunk. He always carried a gun and bullied others. The middle son, Simon, was so fluent in Azerbaijani that sometimes I wondered if he was even Armenian. The youngest son, Vartan, was a couple of years younger than me. Once, Vartan persuaded his father to take me with them on a trip of collecting shyrmyshug, and the next morning, I grabbed a big bag and joined the father and son, and we went to the country. I was following Meshadi-Avetis, who was walking in front of me, down the road to the river, and began collecting what we came for. Filling the bags, we soon realized that there was not enough shyrmyshug to fill them up. Meshadi-Avetis looked around and noticed that on the opposite

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<sup>118</sup> Liana, long-stemmed, woody vines that are rooted in the soil at ground level and use trees or other means of vertical support.

<sup>119</sup> Wind Stones, possibly a windmill. (Arm.)

side of the river there were many trees covered with shyrmishug. However, there was a problem. Just a few kilometers away from the other shoreline was the Azerbaijani village of *Khalifalli*. Crossing the river could be quite dangerous. Yet, the opportunity to earn money was stronger than fear, so we took the risk by crossing a bridge to the other side and continued our work. Carried away by the easy prey, we gradually moved up the ravine. Suddenly, we heard women's screams and spotted three young Azerbaijani women shouting for help as they ran towards their village. They must have noticed us too and overheard our conversation in Armenian. In search of a place to hide, we moved in the same direction, climbed the nearest hill, and disappeared into some thick and thorny bushes. We were right under the village in a good position to observe the area. Almost immediately, we noticed to the west and below us a group of six to seven young Azerbaijani men sitting under an orchard tree. They must have stolen a sheep somewhere and were now having a good time picnicking under the shade with kabab and arakh. Some of them were armed with rifles. As soon as they heard women's screaming, they responded to their cry, and realized what was going on, jumped up, picked up their weapons, spread out, and began searching for us. Decades later, recollecting this day, I realized how wisely Meshadi-Avetis acted when he made probably the only right decision of not going down to the bridge where we could be easily spotted, but instead we moved towards the Azerbaijani village and hid in the bushes. There, from the top of the hill, Meshadi-Avetis kept a sharp eye on the movement of our pursuers, who were appearing and disappearing again between hills, calling to each other. Meshadi-Avetis told us not to speak but a whisper, or even

better, keep quiet. However, young Vartan had not fully understood the seriousness of our situation and often forgotten and spoke loudly. At one point, he even began loudly laughing. His father pulled him sternly and said, "A whelp, a scoundrel, a bastard, the Turks are about to cut your head off, and you are laughing here? Be quiet, idiot." Although I sat in silence watching around, I also got his rebuke. He gave me a fair comment to remove my school cap with a shiny badge and big Armenian letters of abbreviations of my Seminary.

I immediately took the cap off and put it under my shirt. The long three hours of waiting and fear passed before Meshadi-Avetis, having once again looked and checked around making sure that our pursuers were gone, gave us a command to walk down the path towards the bridge. Quickly but quietly, we walked forward bypassing the trail. We were almost at the bridge when we noticed a pile of several rifles stacked near a large boulder.

While we, dumbfounded by the unexpected discovery, were considering our next steps, we saw several men standing by and swimming in the river. They noticed us too, and quickly got out of the water, grabbed their guns, and surrounded us. These were the same men who were looking for us. Having pointed their rifles at us, they began pulling on their pants and shirts and briskly discussed the luck that fell on them. It was obvious that their joy meant nothing good to us. No doubt they had an intention to kill us. However, my destiny had different plans for me, and my death that day was not part of it.

On the road passing through the bridge to the west towards the Azerbaijani village appeared three elderly Azerbaijani peasants with a few donkeys walking in front of them. They stopped by out of curiosity about what was happening here.

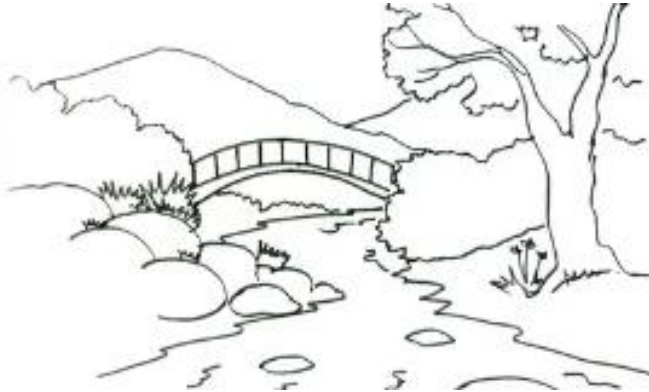
Then, the incredible happened; two of the men knew Meshadi-Avetis. They were his fellow woodcutters. After greeting him and understanding what was going on, the men began to scold and shame our captors, some of whom they knew by name, and at the same time told us, not to be afraid and to go home in peace. They did not have to persuade us for long. Still trembling with fear, we crossed the bridge and stepped onto the saving bank of the river. Remembering this story, I admire these ordinary people who in such tragic times of confrontation between the two nations, were able to maintain their humanity. When we were still not far from the bridge and our rescuers had gone their way, shots were fired from the other bank and bullets were flying over our heads. We rushed from the road into the forest and began to climb to the town. Suddenly, Vartan yelled, "Apa, Apa, look how many mushmula are here!", and earned a few slaps on the face and swearing from his father. We kept walking and soon were in safety. It was getting dark. The forest ended and the landscape changed to glades with rare shrubs.

After a while, we caught up with an unattended herd of cows. For some reason, Meshadi-Avetis thought it was an Azerbaijani herd, and when we walked by a well-fed one-year-old calf, he said that we should take advantage of the opportunity and slaughter the calf, hide its carcass in bushes, and return the next morning to freshen it and divide the meat. Carrying out his word, Meshadi-Avetis grabbed the calf by the head, I got hold of the tail, and we dragged it into the bushes where Meshadi-Avetis with my and Vartan's help with great effort brutally butchered it with his pocketknife. We hid the carcass and went on our route home.

On the next morning, nobody called me to go for the calf, and only in the evening was I told that they went back there but

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found the calf torn apart by wolves, leaving only the bones. A week later, passing by Meshadi-Avetis's house, I noticed a calfskin drying in the sun in their backyard, resembling the one familiar to me.



*Chapter 20 The Attack on Gaibalushen | Enok's  
Punishment*

Units of the Savage Division<sup>120</sup>, organized by the Musavatists with the support of Brits, had been proudly walking around the town, showing the Armenians who were in charge there. They had made several unsuccessful attempts to capture *Zangezur*.<sup>121</sup> In one of these attempts, they were seriously defeated and put to the flight by the Armenian troops under the command of General Andranik<sup>122</sup> at the *Zabukh*<sup>123</sup> river. Now, having returned to town beaten and humiliated, they took their revenge on the Armenian population.

One autumn day,<sup>124</sup> I joined a crowd of the other townies gathered on the northern outskirts of the town, and from the height of Shusha, witnessed dramatic events unfolding in front of us. A detachment of about fifty cavalry troops made their way up the slope in the direction of the Armenian village Gaibalushen, located about 10 kilometers west of Stepanakert. Before long, we heard a barely audible popping of shots coming from all over the village and saw flames of houses catching fire and clouds of smoke flaring up to the skies. We watched how the villagers, taken by surprise, ran away in different directions saving their lives. I remember being struck by the indifference on the faces of several British men standing in the crowd.

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<sup>120</sup> The Caucasian Native Cavalry Division of the Tsar's Army formed in 1914.

I doubt that this is the correct description for local Muslim militants.

<sup>121</sup> Territory in Armenia on the border of Nagorny Karabakh.

<sup>122</sup> Andranik Ozanian, commonly known as Andranik was a legendary Armenian military commander and statesman, the best known fedai and a key figure of the Armenian national liberation movement. National hero of Bulgaria.

<sup>123</sup> River in Lachin region of Karabakh.

<sup>124</sup> The massacre in Gaibalushen actually took place on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1919.



Suddenly, the crowd gasped. People began screaming and pointing to a young man running down the gorge holding a baby in his hands and a young woman running behind him. Several Armenians quickly went down to help them come up to the town. They met at the river and returned an hour later with the saved family. Later we learned that part of Gaibalushen's residents were killed, and the rest managed to escape. On the next day, many of the survivors appeared on the streets of Shusha.

Around these days, Mother took Enok, Zarmair, and Lusik to see her rich-by our standards-aunt, the eldest sister of our grandmother. Yervand and I got to stay at home. At lunchtime we ate some cold meat without bread and salt; however, close to dinnertime we were hungry again, but there was no more food in the house. Soon, Mother and the kids returned. They ate there, and Mom's aunt gave her some rice to take home, from which she quickly cooked a rice porridge for Yervand and me. But here it was that Enok, who had already eaten, began to whine and cry, demanding a share for himself. Mother had to give him some, thus reducing our share with Yervand. After getting what he wanted, Enok changed his mind about eating it now and suggested leaving the porridge for later. No matter how much Yervand and I had asked him to give it to us, he was adamantly standing his ground. Well, I thought to myself, we will yet see about that, brother. Having fed us, Mother took Lusik and went to visit our neighbors; well-fed Enok quickly fell asleep. I looked at his plate and then back at my serenely sleeping brother and slyly smiled under my breath; now I knew how to restore fairness. I took a few grains of rice and dropped them around Enok's bed. Next, I dipped his forefinger in the oily porridge and carefully, not to wake him up, smeared his

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lips. In a minute, the porridge was gone, and Yervand and I were licking our spoons.

An hour later Enok woke up, yawned, and asked for his porridge.

"What porridge? You already eat it.", I politely responded.

"How come?", Enok irritably asked.

"Yes, you woke up and asked for it. I warmed it up for you and you ate it all. Look at the rice in your bed and your greasy lips."

Enok had begun to cry as he looked through his tears at the rice in his bed and checked his lips.

"Why didn't you wake me up well enough, so I could feel how I ate it?", said Enok, continuing his nagging.



*Chapter 21 Insidious Diplomacy of The Brits |  
In Danger Again*

1919. The tension in town between Armenians and Azerbaijanis persisted. The British claimed their non-interference in the conflict and even tried to act as mediators. They went to Zangezur and met General Andranik who was about to invade Karabakh to protect the Armenian population. They were able to dissuade him by convincing him that they would not allow Turks to attack Armenians and that his campaign could provoke them otherwise. In reality, they practically gave a *carte blanche* to Musavatists for crimes against Armenians. One example of such a deterrence policy promoted by the British was the fall of Gaibalushen and other villages. Soon, Brits hastily left the town, and Turks entered Shusha.

Around this time, Yervand got a job teaching Russian in the village of Khanabad.

On one October day, I set up to go to the forests to gather mushmula, currants, rose hips, and other gifts of nature. Mother got bread somewhere, I ate and now full and in a good mood, I went on the road. The road went up to the barracks, which were now occupied by Musavat askers after the departure of Brits, and then to the north to a forest near the *Isa-Bulag*.<sup>125</sup> I walked briskly past the barracks, singing a new popular song in Azerbaijani. I did not understand the lyrics and was just repeating the words I remembered. It went something like this, "*Bu gyun aiyn onu dyr, pasha byagyn akhry dyr ...*". Suddenly, one of the askers that were passing by me with a cauldron in his

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<sup>125</sup> Spring of Isa.

hands grabbed my hand and began dragging me up to the barracks. I screamed begging him to let me go, but he continued dragging me and brought me behind the barracks. There was a spring there and a small stone-walled pool built to provide water for cattle and horses. Many askers were standing there around the pool and washing and brushing their horses. My asker dragged me close to the pool, pointed with his finger to his long dagger, and said something that I did not understand, but his facial expression was telling me a lot. I better stay there. The asker let go of my hand and waded between the horses and men to the pool.

Here I was, a scared little Armenian boy standing among the neighing and stomping horses and shouting and cussing askers. After filling up his cauldron and washing, my captor began to make his way back and ran into another asker and knocked his hat down to the ground. He came up to me and gave me his pot and warned me again not to move as he went back to recover his hat. Having picked up his wet, muddy, and horse trampled hat, he approached the pool again and began washing it. I stood there in fear holding the cauldron and thinking he probably would slaughter me with his dagger and then wash his hands with water from the cauldron I'm guarding here for him. The asker finished with the hat and was now washing his hands. Suddenly, it dawned on me. What a fool. What the heck I am still doing here? I carefully placed the cauldron on the ground and, as they say, grabbed my feet into my hands and ran like a lamplighter. I literally flew across the street and ran into an Armenian courtyard with a few women sitting there under the sun darning and knitting socks. Right in front of them, there was a wooden toilet where I took refuge without delay. I sat there thinking that the askers would come here

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looking for me and ask the women about me, and they not knowing what was going on, could point to the toilet and I am done. I rushed out of the toilet and jumped over a barbed fence into the next yard and through a gate out to the next street. A few minutes later, I was home.

I have never gone near the barracks again. By the way, the words of my song translated as, "Today is the tenth day of the month, days of Pasha-Bey will come to an end. "



*Chapter 22 The Unforgettable Night at the Butcher's  
The Meeting After Decades*

Then came a harsh full of bloody events, 1920. For many families, especially for those who like our family had no provider, came dark days. The town had been experiencing a severe shortage of food. Prices for bread and essential provisions increased to the highest ever level; we had been living in constant hunger. It was still possible to buy bread in private bakeries by standing in long lines. Mother gave me Father's tools to sell at the bazaar, but who needed those tools at such times. Yet, somehow, I managed to sell some of them and buy three chureks standing in a long line at a private bakery. We lived on them for two days.

Out of desperation, Mother took me to the bazaar, and upon passing by a butcher shop, she walked in to talk to the butcher. Soon she returned and said, "My child, you will have to stay here and do whatever your master will ask you to do. Work here, for now, then we shall see how things will turn out for us." Mother then turned around and left. For about an hour, I quietly and thoughtfully was standing and waiting for instructions from my master until he came up to me and handed me a tin can full of kerosene and told me to take it to his house. The butcher added that if I follow one of his customers who was going that way, he would show me his house. It was snowing and cold. As I followed the man up the street, I was periodically shifting the can from hand to hand and warmed the free one in my pocket. After some time, my companion stopped and pointed me to the right house and went his way.

I knocked on the door of the house, introduced myself to the hostess, and told her why I was there. She looked me up and

down, took the can, told me to wait there, and went inside. In about half of an hour, she returned with two small pots stacked one on top of each other and sent me back. By the time I got back to the butcher's shop, it was about three in the afternoon. The butcher almost immediately handed me a fabric bag and gave me a new order to get coal. He then called his khambal and asked him to explain to me how to get to Parseg's shop and went himself to a table to eat whatever I just brought him in those two pots. I was back in half an hour, carrying half a pood of coal. The day turned into the evening, and all the meat in the shop was sold. My master was having a long conversation with two of his visitors, discussing some deal. Finally, they finished and headed to the door. The butcher turned around and gave me new errands. Before his return, I had to wash the floor, a meat rack, and all his tools: axes, pots, knives, steel hooks, etc.

Left on my own, I quickly turned to work. I swept, and using water from a barrel, I washed the floor and washed and wiped all the butcher's tools. It was almost dark outside. I was very hungry as I had no food since morning, but there were still a few pots that I needed to clean. I picked one of them and ... what a lucky day? On the bottom of the pot, I found a few spoons of soup leftover. In another one, there were a couple of wiry pieces of meat and partially gnawed bones along with a few crumbs of bread. Well, this was a good find for me. I lifted the pot with the soup and drank it right out of it. Working my sharp teeth, I chewed, and swallowed the wiry meat, gnawed up bones, and ate all the breadcrumbs. Finishing off my meal with cold water, I went back to work, washed all the pots, and took out the garbage.

It was already dark when I saw the butcher and one of his early visitors slowly walking down the street chasing a cow in

front of them. When they reached the shop, they talked a little and went their separate ways. My master walked in, looked around checked on my work, and told me to take the bag of coal and the two pots that I brought and close the shop. Out on the street, he handed me a long wood stick and told me to drive the cow and follow him. Despite the darkness, I noticed that the cow was very thin and weak and could barely walk the climbing street. When we reached the butcher's house, we drove her into a barn. The butcher went up to a veranda and entered the house to shortly return with a kerosene lamp. He lit it up and put it on the windowsill of the only window in the barn. Then, he turned to me and said the following words, which to this day I cannot forget, "You will stay there on the veranda tonight. You will often go downstairs to the barn and check on the cow. Make sure she is standing. If you find her lying down on the floor, beat her with your stick until she gets up. You must keep her alive until next morning, so I can take her to the slaughterhouse." Then he grabbed a few logs from a basement and went into the house and did not come out until the morning.

In the darkness of the night, I walked up the wood stairs to the veranda and stood there for a while in the cold and strong, penetrating wind. In front of the door into the house, there lay a tattered piece of carpet. In the hope to stay warm, I laid down on it and tucked in my legs. Periodically, I would go down to the barn and look out for the cow's silhouette in the dim light of the kerosene lamp and check on her. One time I had to get her up on her feet. Returning to the veranda, I would lay down again. Shivering from the cold, I could not sleep and for the entire night I was crying and calling out for my mom.

Sometime past midnight, I heard a baby's cry coming from



inside the house, it would not stop and continued louder and louder. Seemed like no one was paying attention to it. I did not know what to do. Should I walk in and check what was going on? After some hesitation, I decided to take a chance and walked in. Oh, God, it was so warm and cozy there, and all that was right behind the door from my bed on the veranda. I looked around and found the butcher sleeping on a bed and facing a wall. Next to him slept his wife, whose long and flowing hair hung down to the floor. Quietly, walking on my toes, I stepped up towards her, stretched my hand to touch her, and lightly nudging her shoulder, I whispered, "Aunt! Aunt!". The woman would not wake up. I shook her more insistently until she finally opened her eyes. "Aunt, aunt, your baby is crying, I whispered again. Half asleep, she pointed her hand at a cradle standing next to the bed and gestured for me to bring her the baby. I gently pulled the baby out of the cradle and handed it over to her. The baby calmed down. The halve-asleep mother began feeding him. I stood there enjoying the warmth. Having finished the feeding, the woman handed the baby back to me. In a minute, both the mother and the child were asleep. I continued standing there. A thought flashed through my mind. What if I just stay here for the night? I could lay down on the floor by the door and sleep here in the warmth. After all, they are all asleep, and by the morning I would have left, and no one would know I was there. But unfortunately, this idea was contrary to the principles of my character, which were brought up in me by my parents: respect and obedience to elders, responsibility, and fear for consequences. I quietly opened the door and stepped out into the cold embrace of the night. First, I went down to check on the cow. Overcoming a strong wind, I hardly reached the barn. Thank God, the cow was all right. I

went back to the veranda and spent the rest of the night standing there.

The morning was clear but frosty; the butcher got up, washed, put on his sheepskin coat, and came out to the veranda. Standing by the open door, he had a shot of arakh and a bite of something and told me to follow him. We walked down the same street where we were chasing the half-dead cow. My legs were stiff, and I was walking in pain. Finally, we got to the slaughterhouse where we had to wait for two hours while the cow was getting slaughtered and freshened. The meat and the cowhide finally got loaded on an arba. My master gave me the shop keys and told me to go there while he would stay to pay for the services. I climbed the arba and sat shivering and quietly crying from the cold, hunger, and fatigue.

The arba driver, having observed me, asked my name and whose son I was, and when he learned how I had spent last night, he shook his head and said:

“Do you know where you live?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Go, son, go home. He is not a good man. Go.” I jumped down, handed the keys to the man, and went home. When my mother opened the door for me, I threw myself into her arms and cried. She reacted with understanding to my story and did not condemn my act. By the evening, I was burning like a fire, and only a week later I began feeling better.

This and many other stories of my childhood have remained in my memory forever. I have shared this story with my son Yurik and my family. The story with the butcher had an unexpected continuation. On December 19, 1949, at that time, I was working as the head of the Health Department of the Martuny district of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and came to

Baku for a meeting in the People's Commissariat of Health. I brought with me some meat, wine, and arakh because that day was my son's birthday. In the morning, we both went downtown to buy some other things for the table. Yurik then was supposed to take the purchased items home and I attend the meeting. While we were walking down *Basino* Street, suddenly among the passersby had flashed a familiar face. Is that him? The butcher? I looked at him again and recognized his eyes. I told Yurik to follow me, got off the pavement, and accelerated my steps to catch up with my old master. Yurik was wondering about what was going on, and I told him that I just saw the butcher from Shusha that I had been telling him about. Past the butcher, I sharply turned around and walked towards him. Here I was, well-dressed, shaved, and cheerful, standing in front of the old, poorly dressed, an untidy man who many years ago abused a child.

"Hello, could you please tell me if you lived in Shusha from 1919 to 1920?"

"Yes, I lived there."

"Have you had a small butcher shop in the Little Bazaar?"

"Well, yes, I had. But who are you?"

Without answering, I turned to Yurik and said, "See? I was right. It is him." He looked at me in surprise and said, "It's amazing that you still remembered him after so many years." I grabbed my son by the shoulder, turned us around, and we went our way, not gracing the old man with an answer.

Modesty and innate respect for the age did not allow me to name myself and to tell that person everything I thought about him. I have never seen the butcher again. Who knows, perhaps he is still alive.

However, my dear reader, we need to return to the turbulent

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and troubled years of the early 1920s. Shusha was in danger. The Western part inhabited by Armenians was trapped in malicious jaws, from the north by Turkish askers lodged in the Tsar's barracks and from the south by the Musavat thugs.



*PART II*  
*THE ROAD TO CALVARY*











*Chapter 23 The Last Days of Armenian Shusha*

March 1920. The relationship between the Eastern and Western parts of the city continued to be hostile. The situation was catastrophic; with the onset of darkness, people were afraid to leave their homes. Far-sighted Armenians left the town with their families, carrying their belongings on their backs, donkeys, and horses. Most of them went to stay with their relatives living in villages. Back in February, Armenians killed a young Armenian woman of easy conduct. Rumor had it that at night some Azerbaijani men from the eastern part of the town had been often visiting her. Many onlookers and I among them went to look at her naked body lying in the snow near the City College. Someone cut her lips and breasts off, spread apart her legs, and her crotch was disturbed by some object, most likely an ax. As a lesson to others, her relatives were not allowed to remove her corpse until dusk.

Yervand continued his teaching in the village of Khanabad until March 15 when he unexpectedly showed up at our doorsteps. According to him, villagers, in the anticipation of something bad that was about to happen, were getting armed. The tragic event in Gaibalushen was just an overture to the bloodier atrocities planned by the Musavat leaders. It was a test of Russia's and Britain's reaction to the violence. Being convinced that there was no one for the defenseless Armenians to rely on, the enemy gained confidence in its impunity. Shusha was left to the mercy of fate. There were no organized self-defense forces among Armenians, and there were no chances of getting help from outside. Numerous Armenian villages located to the south and east of the town could make up a significant force, capable of defending Armenians in Shusha. However, the

lack of organization and centralized leadership prevented this from happening.

Most of the villages acted independently and spontaneously, without coordinating their actions with each other. There was one local leader nicknamed *Dali*<sup>126</sup> Gazar who with a group of armed comrades was at the defense of Askeran, but he soon died, and his people dispersed. Left alone against the well-organized and armed enemy, the Armenian population of Shusha was living out its last days.

Musavatists, led by the ardent Armenian haters, doctors Sultanov and Mehmandarov, were ready to begin their criminal plan to terminate Armenians. The slightest event could serve as an excuse and, like a match, ignite the flame of hatred and lead to tragedy. Such a “match” was soon found. It was provided by Armenians themselves when a detachment of the Dashnak party member, Aga Paron,<sup>127</sup> entered Shusha on March 21, the very day of the Muslim New Year holiday Novruz Bairam. On the next morning, after a nightlong binge, they attacked askers’ barracks, firing at them with pistols and rifles. The askers came out and a short skirmish ensued, at the end of which, the “daredevils” of Aga Paron retreated to save their wicked heads, leaving the dead. Shortly, sounds of disorderly shooting began coming from many directions. At one point, we heard intermittent shouting of “Hooray! Hooray!”. People were saying that there were people of Gasab Avetisyan attacking askers and driving them away from Armenian quarters. My grandfather even rejoiced and began believing that all troubles would end soon, and we all would return to our normal life.

Loyal to my boyish curiosity, I could not resist seeing what

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<sup>126</sup> Crazy (Tur.)

<sup>127</sup> Nickname of Nerses Azbekian. Aga, (Turk), military rank, title, Paron (Arm), Sir.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

was going on out there, and a boy from our neighborhood left our block. As we came out to an open area, we almost ran into two armed askers drinking water from a hydrant and rushed to run back to the block. On the run, I turned around and saw the askers kneeling on one knee and aiming their rifles aiming at us. I hastened my run to catch up to the safety of the corner of the nearest house. My friend ran right behind me. Shots rang out, and one of the bullets hit the wall and a piece of stone flew off and hit me in the right ear, slightly wounding me. In the next moment, I was already behind the saving corner. I looked around but did not see my friend and ran home. I never found out what happened to him. I hope he managed to escape.

Still running under the cold rain and dark clouds, I soon reached our house and found myself in another dire situation. Shots were firing awfully close, and it seemed like there was a fight going on in the nearby streets. All the people around me were chaotically running in different directions, screaming, crying, and calling names of lost loved ones. I ran inside our house; nobody was there. I quickly grabbed Grandfather's *chukha*<sup>128</sup>, threw it on my back, and ran out into the street to join a crowd of people running from the assailants. We walked towards the two-story house of Sara-baji. It was a sturdy house with a heavy gate, behind which on a courtyard flocked many people who were desperate to find a haven. Shortly after, I saw a familiar man by the name of Safari from *Gara Gishlag*<sup>129</sup> walking in through the gate and carrying a wounded and bleeding man on his back. Safari made it to the center of the courtyard, and with the help of others, lowered the man to the ground. I recognized this man as well. His name was Usi. One

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<sup>128</sup> A fur hat made of tanned sheepskin (Arm.).

<sup>129</sup> Black village (Tur.)

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

of the men asked to bring a blanket to cover Usi, but Sarah-baji's daughter-in-law refused to give it to him, fearing staining it with the blood. People began reproaching her by saying that askers could come any minute and take her life, and she was worried about her blanket. Someone shouted out "Look, the Seminary is on fire." We all looked in the direction of the Seminary. It was burning in flames and smoke was rising over it and some other buildings. Stray bullets kept flying from all over, falling on the roof of Sara-baji's house.

Then, there was another man in a white apron and rolled-up shirt sleeves running towards the gate. It was baker Melikset. He began pounding on the gate with both his hands and shouting, "Open, open. God forbid to destroy your homes!". People rushed to let him in. He told us that askers had just broken into his bakery, but he managed to escape through the back door. He was heartsore about the loss of the bread he had laid in an oven right before the attack. Thin and red-haired, Melikset was originally from Armenia. His small bakery shop was not far from our home. Sometimes, when he was able to get flour, he would bake bread on rocks. His prices were high, but the bread was good. Just yesterday, Mother bought some from him, most likely with the money Yervand was able to get.

Right after the baker, into the courtyard walked in a frightened and weeping young woman with a wounded hand. Crying, she told us that she was from the upper part of our quarter, where askers broke into her home and slaughtered her husband in front of her. "My God, my God! They are coming and will be here soon," she lamented. It was obvious that we could not stay there any longer. Men threw the gate open, and all the refugees rushed out to run loose.

At the corner of the entry into our dead-end street, there was

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

a tall fence surrounding a land lot of a large three-story house standing on the top of a hill. The house belonged to my surname Karapet Kocharov, the youngest brother of my Aunt Sophia's last husband. Karapet was a prosperous capitalist, owning several shops, lucrative houses, and a phaeton. The main entry into his house was up the street, and I was heading there in hope of finding refuge. Instead, when I approached the house, I witnessed a horrible picture. Men and women with their children were rushing out of the house through the backdoor in a panic, throwing their belongings out over the fence and climbing themselves over it to the street to disarray in different directions. Then came Karapet himself, pot-bellied, without a jacket, and in a vest with a long and heavy golden clock chain bouncing on his side, running to the fence. He climbed and jumped down to the other side of the fence. He then raised his hands in a begging motion and began shouting, "People, neighbors, give me a rifle! Give me a rifle, so I can kill at least one of them." As I understood, askers showed up at the front entry and were trying to break in through the stone barricaded door, and at any time, they could be here in the courtyard. Nobody paid any attention to Karapet. Everyone was running for their own life. Shooting and shouting intensified. Our neighbor, poor Aunt Elena, opened her wicket to get out to the street and was immediately stricken to death by a stray bullet. Panic among people was growing more and more, reaching its apogee.

I joined hundreds of others and we walked backroads towards the town's Boulevard. At some point, to avoid running into askers, the crowd turned to the right and marched across streets, moving from one backyard to another, breaking through or jumping over the fences. Soon we reached a dead-end street,

built with two-three-story upper-class houses. In front of some of them stood old men armed with wooden sticks. They were elderly of the runaway families, who stayed to guard their homes against marauders. These naive people were sure that this nightmare would soon be over, and their children and grandchildren would return home. The crowd grew larger as more and more people were joining in as single persons, families, or even large groups. With a smaller group of people, I tried to return to the streets, but as soon as we got on one of them, we spotted a company of askers marching from the barracks down the street towards us.

We immediately retreated and hid behind houses, gates, and fences. From our hideouts, we were watching the askers and, as soon as they proceeded down the road and passed us, we, after making sure it was safe, quickly crossed the street. As we were crossing it, we saw several people lying on the ground here and there. Most of them were wounded, moaning, and crying as they were begging for help. There were also dead. On the run, I fearfully glanced at them and in one of the corpses, recognized *Sotnik*<sup>130</sup> *Chorur* Saak. With a big mustache and open eyes, he was lying on his back.

On the way to the Boulevard, near the place called *Chyarkyazovant's Dukyani*,<sup>131</sup> we leveled off with the armed Armenians from Agha Parron's group, whose irresponsible act provoked this tragedy. They told us to keep moving and to not be afraid as they were here to protect us. Later, people rumored that they had been breaking in and plundering the houses left by Armenians. We were walking through the spacious territory of the Boulevard towards the only safe passage out of the town -

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<sup>130</sup> Militia Lieutenant.

<sup>131</sup> Tea house owned by the Chyarkyazyan family.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

a steep and difficult trail descending to the Armenian village of *Karin-Tak*.

People probably have never been so happy about bad weather as they were on this day when it saved many lives. Cloudy skies, drizzly rain, and dense fog reduced visibility, making it difficult for askers at the barracks to see the people escaping from the town. Bullets continued flying over our heads. There were many wounded and even dead. I saw a crying woman, who dropped the knots she was carrying and began dragging her bleeding husband on her back. Many, caught in the rush of askers' attack, lost their loved ones in turmoil and now were anxiously asking neighbors and acquaintances if they knew anything about their fate or whereabouts. Some men decided to return to the burning town, hoping to find and save those whom they had lost.

After descending a bit along the path to a safe place, I stepped off the trail to take a breath. Shusha was no longer visible. In front of me was an impressive spectacle of the human tragedy. Down below on the saving trail, an endless string of the motley crowd of people chased up by the fear and horror were running for their lives. As they reached the bottom of the gorge, the procession continued through a valley and past *Karin-Tak* further up to the very top of Mt. Chakhmakh. I joined the crowd and continued my descent. On the way down, on a side of the trail, a baby was lying on the ground under a bush. Wrapped in a shawl, the child was crying in the rain. A young woman picked the baby up and hugged it with pity, but immediately put it back when she heard a menacing scream from her husband walking in front of her with their two children. As we passed *Karin-Tak* village, we approached a spring surrounded by many people. Working my elbows, I made my way to the

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

water and stood stunned. What a miracle! Right in front of me, gloomy, sullen, and holding back his tears, stood our Enok. I ran up to him, hugged and kissed him. Holding hands, we continued our way. Enok was weak, and I often had to carry him on my back. When we reached the top of the mountain, I turned around to look at the town for the last time. There in the distance, thousands of people continued walking down the trail. I thought of the many who could not leave the town, the elderly and sick, and those who did not want to leave them there and shared their fate.

As the road descending from Mt. Chalmakha through rugged and mountainous terrain reached the base, it turned into an easier walk on a flat plateau. The procession began to thin out. At road crossings, many were turning into villages where they could find shelter with relatives and friends. Almost at all the villages that we walked by, we were met by groups of armed young men, who were pushing us away from entering their villages as all of them were already in a state of inability to receive more refugees. Many young men from the crowd were forcibly taken to self-defense detachments, and those who resisted were beaten and shamed with cowardice and unwillingness to defend their homeland.

Among the people we walked with, we found our distant relative Aunt Sai (our grandmothers were sisters) with her family. There was her only son Babken, who was five years younger than me, and Sai's youngest sister Zabella, who I occasionally carried on my back. Soon, in the darkness of the night, we lost them. I was worried about losing Enok too, so I held his hand all the time. He had already asked me for food many times, but all I had was a hole in my pocket. Then it began raining. The road turned into a continuous mash; we were wet



## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

and cold. Grandpa's chukha that I took from home came in handy. I covered Enok with it.

Unexpectedly, from a distance, we noticed a dim flashing light between trees; it was a village. Some people turned toward the light, and Enok and I followed them. Without hesitation and permission, we entered the very first house. In a fairly large room, we found two ill-looking boys of ages six and eight sitting on a simple wooden couch and a group of people gathered in the center of the room around a tin oven. The fire in it was barely smoldering, so I went out and brought in some brushwood. The oven quickly lit up with a cheerful twinkle. A pack of knots and suitcases of the unexpected guests was mounted along with one of the walls. It was gloomy in the room. The source of light was an old, seven-line kerosene lamp with darkened and cracked glass held in place by thick paper. Well, I needed to feed Enok. Taking advantage of dim lighting, I remorselessly crept up to the knots and bags lying near the wall and began to poke through them. In one of the bags, I found a whole churek, and without hesitation, tore off two large pieces of bread, hid them under my shirt, and went to Enok. We stepped aside, and quietly, so no one could hear us, ate the bread. Soon, the widowed mistress of the house returned home. She gave us a good-natured smile and said, "Look how many guests I have here?" Children refugees were annoying and loud. They cried asking for food, their toys, and patty pots. Yesterday morning they were carelessly living in their homes. Poor kids did not yet realize that they no longer have toys, and they no longer have homes either.

An endless night finally came to an end. In the morning, I walked out and looked around. Far away, in the east, I spotted mountains with Armenian villages on their slopes. I pointed my

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

finger and asked a passerby, "Uncle, what is the name of that village?"

"Alyamant's Kumer, son."

"What is that one?", I asked again, pointing at one on the top of a mountain.

"Khachmach."

"What about that one?", I asked about the village to the left of Khachmach.

"This is Trnavaz, son. Do you know this village?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you!"

I knew Trnavaz because it was on the way to Kendhurd, which is where we should be headed. Without pausing, I snapped up Enok, and we set off. With frequent ascents and descents, the road was not easy to walk. From time to time, I had to drop Enok from my back to rest. It was already noon, but we still had a few kilometers ahead of us. Enok began weeping, asking for food, and refusing to get off my back. By the road, on the bank of the river, I noticed two women and a man sitting under trees. I approached them and asked for a piece of bread for the child. One of them handed me half of a churek. I thanked her, and we returned to the road. From above, Enok immediately grabbed the bread from me and began eating. I asked him to share some of it with me, but he retaliated by whimpering and kicking my hips, thus letting me know that I should keep going and forget about the bread. I had no other choice but to accept his "arguments".

After a while, we reached Derin-Akhpur spring, where the road began going uphill until Trnavaz when it began descending. It was getting dark, but I was able to see a road fork ahead; that was where we would have to make a turn to Kendhurd. Per my estimate, we had about two more hours to

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

walk. Long kilometers and hunger were taking their toll. In addition, it was getting late, and chances to encounter wolves did not particularly attract me, came to understand that getting to Kendhurd today would be pushing it and risky. I knew there was the village of *Gavakhan* nearby, and when I saw its lights in the distance, I took a side road and walked towards the village.

Tired of exhaustion, we barely made it to the center of the village and stopped. While I was thinking about what to do next, I heard male voices discussing something about posts, rifles, cartridges, etc. It was several men walking in our direction. When they came close, they asked me who we were and what brought us to their village at such a late time. While telling them my story, expressions on their faces were changing from curiosity to empathy and then to alarm. They were unaware of the tragedy in Shusha. The men suggested we go to the village priest and gave me the direction to his house. The priest was a short old man with a long gray beard and a low female voice. He welcomed us, provided us with food and water, and even washed our feet. We introduced ourselves and told them about us and our family, and the events that we had to endure. In the morning, after a long and sound sleep, we thanked our hosts for the hospitality and left. An hour later, we reached Kendhurd.



*Chapter 24 We Found Each Other | Shameful  
Behavior of Father's Kin*

As we entered Kendhurd, we went directly to Uncle Mirza's<sup>132</sup> house, where we received an unexpectedly cold welcome from his wife Shushan. For the first time in my life, I missed my mother and my family. We were unaware of their fate. Are they alive and well? Did they manage to escape? However, all my worries were dismissed when on the next day Yervand appeared at the steps of Uncle Mirza's house. Thank God! What a joy it was to see my brother alive and unharmed. Happy about our reunion, we hugged and kissed for a long time. As it turned out, they also spent a night at the same Gavakhan's priest, and he told them about our whereabouts. On the same day, Yervand and I went to Gavakhan, and by the evening returned to Kendhurd with Mother and the kids.

During my journey with Enok from Shusha to Kendhurd, we saw compassion and help from many strangers with whom we crossed our paths. They helped us by sharing their food and sheltering us. And we, probably because of our naivety, counted on the same support from Father's brothers and sister. Unfortunately, we were wrong. When we walked up the stone steps to Uncle Mirza's house, a huge figure of his wife Shushan appeared on the balcony. She shouted that we are not welcome in their home and wanted us to leave. Saddened by such a cold attitude, we walked away. Nearby lived my father's older brother Quki and his wife, and to the left of them, their youngest son Arutun with his family. To our misfortune, none of them expressed a desire to extend a helping hand. We turned

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<sup>132</sup> The eldest son of Quki-ami.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

to the head of the village for help, who happened to be our distant relative Kechunt's Khachi. He placed us into a classroom of the village's school, which like schools in all other villages was closed. Over the next several days, we stayed there, lying on the floor, and eating the bread collected by villagers in the direction of Khachi.

Besides our family, there was another refugee family from Shusha in Kendhurd. It was the family of widow Gumash-Baji and her three children (I already wrote about her helping us when our father died). They were luckier with their relatives. The good people sheltered them in their homes and helped them as best as they could.

After a while, on the advice of some villagers, we moved to live in the unoccupied house of blind Ashug Moses, who at that time resided in Baku. We lived in that house for a long time, until our departure to Baku, so it is worth describing it. It was a two-story house<sup>133</sup> with a balcony. The livable part of the house was the only room on the upper floor with two windows and an entry door. There was no ceiling, so you could see the roof's tin sheets right above your head. A similar situation was with the wooden floor; it was just a rough underfloor, through the slots of which you could see the dirt floor of the unfinished lower level of the house. Not to mention the lack of bedding and any household necessities. That is where we had to live indefinitely.

Mother began working for some villagers as a maid helping around houses. Occasionally, she would bring home one or two chureks, which we would stretch for a few days. Time went by; it was the end of April. Days became longer and warmer. Many edible wild plants and herbs, such as pyurput and penjar, grew in the fields. We cooked pyurput chowder every day. Often it

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<sup>133</sup> As I understood, it was a one-story house with a walk out basement.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

was the only food we had, and even then, we ate it without salt, which we could not afford. Only God knows how much I ate penjar. I would pick a big bundle, rub it with my weak palms so that it would not bite the lips and tongue, and ate and ate it, but never got enough to feel full. Hunger is probably the most terrible and painful test that is out there that one can experience. No matter what you do or what you think about, you always catch yourself thinking about food. You can endure all the deprivations, the absence of basic things of first necessity, but there was nothing to replace bread, and there was no difference whether it was freshly baked bread or hardened moldy crust. That is why, even after so many decades, my hand will not rise to throw a crumb of bread away. That is why I make remarks to others when I see a disrespectful attitude towards bread. It involuntarily evokes my memories of that terrible and nightmarish time, the memories that will remain with me for the rest of my life.

Once, Yervand brought home half of a *pood*<sup>134</sup> of flour from Mirza-ami. Our joy had no limits; for the next few days, we did not have to think about where to get food.



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<sup>134</sup> Old Russian unit of weight measurement, equal to approximately 36lb.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*



Servicemen of Nagorno Karabakh's Armenian Defence Forces  
(1918-1921)



Shusha. Blind Ashug

Chapter 25 Out for Chatana | Army Volunteer |  
Went to Plunder, Returned Robbed

1921 was another harsh year for many people of Nagorny Karabakh. Most villagers struggled to make ends meet and lived in hunger. A bad harvest, lack of cattle feed, the war, refugees, and danger on the roads were to blame. Only wealthy peasants could afford wheat. Most people were happy when they could get barley, the grain crop that in the good days had always been used to feed cattle, horses, and donkeys. One of the villagers even joked about it, saying that he had eaten so much barley, so now when he would hear “*Toqush! Toqush!*”<sup>135</sup>, he would involuntarily stop.

At the end of May, we learned that in the wilderness of lowlands, where the climate was warmer, was ripened chatana. Chatana is prickly, up to three feet tall wild plant, that grows mostly along the country roads and in the fields. When its flowers fade, they leave buds full of edible but bitter seeds. Yervand and I, in the company of other boys, began going down to the lowlands and picking chatana.

I remember how on the first trip we had to walk about 15 to 20 kilometers, descending to the places where chatana has ripened. Yervand was walking in his old *chustiki*,<sup>136</sup> and I was barefoot. Like that we would climb into thorny bushes, pick chatana buds, and at the expense of poked and scratched hands and feet, fill up our bags. On the way back, right before the steep climb to Kendhurd, we noticed a man in his garden roasting chatana on a round iron *sadzha*.<sup>137</sup> Since morning,

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<sup>135</sup> Shout used to stop donkey.

<sup>136</sup> Slip in sandals.

<sup>137</sup> Deep frying pan.



neither of us had a single crumb in our mouths. We stopped by, lent a wooden cudgel to smash several buds of chatana, picked the seeds, and roasted them out on the sadzha. Having satisfied our stomachs, we headed back home. Chatana helped us a lot. We fed on it for several days.

Later in the summer, we got additional relief, at last, the mulberry ripened. A lot of starving people were waiting for this to happen. Mulberry is quite hearty food, with a high content of glucose; they also have healing properties. The berries helped us to restore digestion spoiled by eating the chatana and penjar. As summer advanced, the berries ripened and became sweeter. We spent days in the mulberry gardens fattening and were returning home only as dusk fell.

Towards the end of the summer, Yervand and I once again set out for a food hunt. This time we went much further down past *Khonashen*<sup>138</sup> to gather spikes of barley. On the way, we ran into a column of the Red Army. Yervand, with his good Russian, approached the soldiers and spoke to them. During the conversation, he told them our story. Soldiers sympathetically reacted to our situation and even gave Yervand a brand-new shirt. There must have been something else that he learned from soldiers because, upon our return home, Yervand told Mother that since he did not feel that he belongs to the peasant life, he would like to join the Red Army. After receiving Mother's consent, Yervand went to Shusha and enrolled as a volunteer in the Red Army. Soon, with his battalion, Yervand was dispatched to the town of the Gursi in the Zangezur region.

About the same time, there was a rumor going on that nearby Armenian villages attacked the Azerbaijani village of Gulyaply,

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<sup>138</sup> The old name of Martuny.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

located five kilometers from the Armenian villages of *Norshen*<sup>139</sup> and *Khatsi*. People were saying that *Gulyaply* was burned down and was now being plundered.

With my mother's permission, I went there in hope of finding something edible, clothes, and household utensils. As an avid adventurer, I took a bag, lent by Mother from our neighbor, and set out on a new journey. Towards the evening, I reached *Khatsi*. On the eastern outskirts of the village, was a post of armed men sitting around a bonfire who allowed me to sit down by the fire. I trembled all night from the cold, turning from side to side.

In the morning, I with a group of villagers descended to the road towards *Gulyaply*. Walking down the road, I saw many *arbas*<sup>140</sup> drawn by oxen and bulls, slowly moving towards us. Loaded with roofing tin sheets, window frames, doors, and other building materials and goods, they were returning from *Gulyaply*. Among the *arbas* walked people leading after themselves donkeys and horses loaded with all sorts of stuff.

*Gulyaply* was a village of two rows of houses stretching along both sides of the road for about three kilometers. As I entered the village, I walked into the first house and found a towel and a copper bowl and put them into my bag. I ran across the road and went into another house. There were a lot of feathers on the floor. Someone probably ripped a pillow out and took the pillowcase. There were some other people in this house, so I ran outside to check the next house where I found two pillows and grabbed them. I kept moving from house to house and found a woman's jacket and another towel. Occasionally, I heard distant

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<sup>139</sup> New village (Arm.). *Norshen* is the village of my mother's side.

<sup>140</sup> A large wooden cart.

single shots coming from the direction of Agdam<sup>141</sup>. In one house, I saw a blood-stained mattress. In another, the floor was covered with scattered small lumps of old wool that probably came out of a mattress or a blanket chopped up in search of hidden valuables.

Using a stick, I began picking at the wool lumps and came across something hard. It was a flat white rock, slightly elevated above the floor. Under the rock, I discovered a large clay jar, almost full of dried mulberries. What a lucky find! I covered the jar back with the stone, stuck a stick into the ground in front of the house as my reference rod, and moved to the next house. Shooting continued somewhere distant. There were a lot of people in the streets, some leaving the village with stolen goods, while others just came for the prey. They immediately began searching houses, removing doors, windows, stoves, and everything else that can be carried. In one house I found a small mirror. While passing to the next, I sensed an unpleasant smell. I hid my bag under the porch and entered the house where I found a dead dog. Rummaging through the house for about five minutes and finding nothing, I went outside and saw a young man with a rifle standing by a horse tied to a pillar. He was folding my already emptied sack and was about to put it into his chute, where he obviously had deposited my trophies. I boldly approached him and asked him, "Uncle, that is my bag, and where are my things that were in it?" He silently roughly pushed me away so that I would fall to the ground. I immediately jumped back onto my feet, grabbed my bag, and began pulling it towards me while crying, asking my offender to give everything back to me. He rudely hit me on my soft place, and I fell again. Almost immediately, I jumped up to fight

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<sup>141</sup> Azerbaijani town.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

for my own again, but the insolent fellow was already sitting on his horse and threatening me with a whip, galloped away. I cried with resentment for a long time; if I were older and stronger, I would tear the scoundrel to pieces.

Only then did I notice that the shooting became more intense. In the distance, I could now hear people's shouts and other sounds. I decided to go back home. Along the way, I picked up a large, round wooden basin with cracks on the bottom, fastened with three metal staples. By my landmark, I found the house with a buried jug, but much to my chagrin, someone had already emptied it, leaving me with a few raisins at the bottom. I picked them up and put them into my pocket and went home. The basin was big and heavy, and I could carry it only by lifting it above my head with outstretched hands. I was exhausted and hungry. On the road, I lowered the basin to my head and with a freed hand, pulled out raisins from my pocket and ate. I got home only in the late evening. On the next day, my mother went to the neighbor to apologize for the lost bag, and as compensation, she gave her the basin.

That is how my marauding campaign ignominiously ended.



*Chapter 26 To the Crop Fields for Barley*

Our life continued to be a struggle for survival. Once, I went to the fields to pick up barley and by the evening managed to collect a decent amount of barley spikes. On the next day, I beat them up with a club and received a few kilograms of grain. A part of it we fried and ate, while the rest we ground in millstones and received cereals Mother cooked us a porridge. We ate for several days. A few days later, I, now with Mother, went back to the fields and collected a decent amount of barley spikes. At home, we separated grains from the spikes and got over a pood of barley grain. We dried it up and I carried it to a mill. There was such a long line of people that I had to stay there overnight, and only on the next day did I return home with flour. Daily our mother baked scones, and with great pleasure, we ate them with pyurput. At once we felt that we had something in our stomachs. We even began to gain weight and felt more energy and strength. The harvest of barley and a bit later wheat began on the outskirts of the village. Mother and I resumed our trips to the fields, now for picking up fallen and not yet harvested crops. Most farmers had no objection to us doing it, but some would drive us out of their fields. I remember how one such a farmer attacked me, and by force took away from me a half-filled bag of wheat and dumped it on the ground in front of his donkey. With tears in my eyes, I tried to explain him that I just got there, and all that wheat was collected in other fields. In response, he threw my empty bag in my face and shouted that he would rather feed it to his donkey than let me walk away with it. "Get out of here!", screamed the farmer. What could you do? I turned around and wandered home. All my day's work was gone.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

Mother was not able to go with me all the time. She had to take care of my young siblings and the household; therefore, the main burden of providing the family with bread fell on my shoulders. Wheat and barley fields, as well as mulberry gardens, were mostly located six to ten kilometers from the village. Almost every day I went there to harvest grains. There were times when I had to stay there for several days, spending nights right there in the fields. I would stay there until I gathered enough grain. It was hard to work under the sun collecting, and the spikes, thorns, and dry thorny needle-like straw left after harvesting were scratching and pricking my legs to blood. At noon, I would go to the shade of mulberry gardens, eat the berries with churek brought from home, and drink cold spring water. After eating and taking a short break, I would go back to work. It was not rational for me to go home every night and return to the fields the next morning. Many farmers had their own threshers; one of them was kind enough to allow me to stay and spend nights by his thresher. With the onset, I would go there, lay down on a pile of straw, and almost immediately fall asleep. In the morning, I would get up early, hide my crop under the straw, and before the sun gets high, I would be back in the field. After a few hours spent in the fields, I would start separating grains from spikes at the thresher location. This was a long-hours process. First, I would chop the spikes off the stems by beating them with a metal rod. Then, I would rub the chopped spikes between my hands, separating the grains from the husks, making sure all grains were removed. On the next day, I would carry the grain to the mill to turn it into flour. With the bag of a pood of flour on my back, I would finally walk home where my father's hungry children were long waiting for me. The difficulty of providing grain to

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

the family was not only in hard and exhausting work but also in my luck, which had not always accompanied me. I could come across a clean-harvested field or a field where you can face an owner, who would drive you away.

One day, wandering from a field to a field, I ran into the farmer who had emptied my bag with wheat in front of his donkey. The man had folded bundles of the harvested wheat and heaped them all over the field and was now transporting them to his village. It was getting late, and there were still many bundles to move; I realized that he would not be able to finish his work today. At that moment it stroked me, that I have an opportunity to take revenge on my abuser. I quickly ran home and asked Mother to borrow a pair of scissors from our neighbors for me. Soon, armed with them, I was running to the field of my victim-to-be. From a distance, I noticed the man was riding his arba in my direction. I hid behind a hill and waited for the arba to pass me and ran to the field to the nearest heap of stacked sheaves. It was already gloomy, and I was sure that the man would not return today. I boldly and vigorously set to work, grabbing five spikes at once and cutting them off the stem with the scissors at their very base, thus greatly facilitating my further work on the separation of the husks. Having worked this way for almost two hours, periodically looking around, I managed to fill the big bag up to the top. After tightly tying it up with a rope, I threw the bag on my back and headed home. This time I did not take the shortest way. Instead, I made a big loop, and in the dark, entered Kendhurd from the west. On the next day, Mother and I went through the spikes and got about 1.5 poods of wheat. This is how I paid back the soulless farmer. I should mention that at that time, money wasn't worth much. It had long been depreciated and grain was used as a currency.

*Chapter 27 Our Trip to Shusha | Public Reprimand  
of Aunt Guli*

We have not heard from Yervand for a long time. Before his departure to Shusha, he mentioned that we, as a family of a Red Army serviceman, were entitled to some benefits, particularly to a monthly allowance. In the first half of August, we all went to Shusha to find out what was the situation there and in hope of receiving the benefits. As we entered the town, we saw a terrible picture of human remains, bones, skulls, strands of female hair lying all over the streets, and wells that were packed with decaying corpses. Signs of destruction and fire were everywhere in the Armenian quarters. Almost every house, including Khataunts Toon, stood without doors, windows, and roofing tin-iron, and fruit trees were cut down. Shusha, which just recently was full of life, now lay destroyed and immersed in the deadly calm. It was like the town, at the behest of a wicked sorcerer's wand, was instantly turned into ruins.

We were told that we could stay in a Russian church located on the outskirts of Shusha in the Muslim quarter. Walking down a street through the quarter, we observed many courtyards of Muslim homes clogged with stacks of the very doors, window frames, and roofing tin sheets that disappeared from the Armenian homes. On the way, we often came across Russian soldiers. I then had no idea about the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, the Reds, and the Whites, but I firmly knew that we could trust Russians and I felt safer around them. Yervand's joining the Red Army was a clear confirmation of this. When we got to the church, we settled for the night among the other refugees. Lying down on the floor tight to each other, fidgeting and scratching with lice, we spent the night.





Armenian Boroughs destroyed by Azerbaijani armed forces in 1920. Kazachenots Cathedral on the far back.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

In the morning, we visited a government office to check on the benefits. However, I am not sure what exactly happened, but we ended up with nothing and went back home in disappointment.

A couple of weeks later, I fell seriously ill with typhus. The disease was merciless, high fever, chills, dizziness, and vomiting soon knocked me down so bad that I lost my consciousness. Only at the end of September, thin and weak, I come to myself. I still could not move my hands and turn my head. Covered with some dirty rags, I lay helplessly on a pile of straw over the dirt floor. On the wall by my bed, there was a niche, and my mother placed a plate of *tanov*<sup>142</sup> for me into it. At one moment

I heard some light crawling sound. I looked around and noticed a strange cat walking in from outside. The cat approached the wall, jumped into the niche, and calmly began eating my soup as if it knew that I was alone in the house and that I was no threat to it. This story may sound funny now, but at that time it was devastating. In my attempt to stop the cat, I began whispering, “Pshish! Pshish! Pshish!”, but the cat continued to swallow my food, occasionally stopping to stare at me with its contemptuous gaze. Finished with my soup, it quietly retreated, hitting me with its final renounced look. All I could do was cry in anger for my helplessness. Without proper care, food, and medicine, I still survived, and at the beginning of October got on my feet. I remember how I, being skinny with bedsores on my sides, wearing only my underwear, was getting up with the support of my mother, and how she wept and lamented when showing me to our neighbors that stopped by. Some of them sympathized with our misfortune and sometimes brought us some food, while others were limited to shaking

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<sup>142</sup> Sour, slowly cooked milk chowder with rice and mint (Arm.).

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

their heads, and saying “*Wai, Wai, Wai.*”<sup>143</sup>

There was an old hunter, Hanunts Petros, who often visited us. Poor himself, he would always bring us something. It could be a churek or even a bowl of tanov. I slowly began walking and developed a wolfish appetite, but most of the time there was nothing to eat in the house. I remember well and will never forget how one day, from hopelessness, my mother sent Lusik to my father’s older sister, Aunt Guli, with a request to help at least with a handful of wheat for me. Despite that, Lusik returned with nothing. She was refused and told that they did not have wheat. A few months later, we learned that Aunt Guli’s youngest son, who was a couple of years younger than me, died. Let God forgive me for my sinful thought, but wasn’t it His retribution for the insensitivity shown towards another boy in trouble?

Nearly two decades later in 1938, when I oversaw the Martuny District Health Department of NKAO,<sup>144</sup> I visited the village of Gavakhany to investigate a children's measles outbreak. I end up closing the village school for the quarantine. I also temporarily transferred several paramedics from the nearest villages to Gavakhany and once a week visited the sick, getting there from Martuny on the horseback. The road to Gavakhany was passing through Kendhurd. During one of those visits, riding through the center of Kendhurd, an elderly man by the name of Bakhshi approached me, grabbed the horse’s lead, and asked me to visit his sick wife in his house.

I must say that I recently treated Bakhshi for a snake bite. Although I was in a hurry, my duty called me to visit the sick. When we walked into his house, Bakhshi showed me the way to

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<sup>143</sup> Exclamation expressing regret (Arm.)

<sup>144</sup> Nagorny Karabakh Autonomous Oblast’ (Region).

the living room, where instead of his sick wife, I found a room full of people sitting around a generously laid table with plenty of food and drink, obviously gathered for a good occasion. It turned out that yesterday they had a wedding, and today they gathered in a tight circle of relatives and close friends. I was uncomfortable leaving immediately, as it could offend my host, so I decided to stay, but not for long. Bakhshi smiled wryly and said, "Dr. Kocharov, sorry I deceived you. You saved my life, and now you are my dear guest." Well, what could you do? I had to sit down at the table, where I had a shot of vodka and some food. Suddenly among the other people in the room, I heard a familiar voice and recognized it. It was the voice of my Aunt Guli sitting in a corner of the room on the floor. She lived here next door. Having learned that the doctor is me, her nephew Ashot, she came up to me and very politely and kindly said: "Let me be your sacrifice. Come to my home. I will slaughter and cook a chicken for you, my soul."

"No", I said. "I will never cross the threshold of your home." People in the room went silent, listening to our conversation. "Ashot-*djan*,<sup>145</sup> what are you saying, am I not your aunt?"

Not being able to tolerate such hypocrisy, I stood up and responded with, "You are my aunt, but a shameless and a pathetic one. Why do I need your fried chicken now? Twenty years ago, when our family was dying of hunger and my poor mother sent my little sister to you for a handful of wheat for me when I was dying of typhus... ", here I stretched out my hand and bent my fingers as if I were begging and continued, "...and you refused the child. You had never bothered to check on the orphans of your own brother huddling in the cold and damp cellar, starving, and sleeping on a straw bed." Everyone in the

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<sup>145</sup> Dear (Arm.)

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

room looked at her with surprise, and I ruthlessly continued. "If you would have extended your helping hands to us then, I would have spent the rest of my life thanking your kindness, and there would be nothing that I would not do for you. And whatever I would do for you would never be enough to pay you back my debt."

Overwhelmed by my emotions, I said goodbye to everyone and left the house.



*Chapter 28 Yervand's Return | The Falls Alarm |  
Mother's Accident*

By the end of October, I gained some strength and felt much better, and even twice made trips to *Ningi forest*<sup>146</sup> for brushwood for home. Yervand soon returned; we were happy to see him. He brought a few meters of tarpaulin, which was a great help for us as we used it as a blanket.

One day, there was a rumor going on in the village about the offensive of the Musavatists from Agdam. In the next few days, refugees from Armenian villages Norshen, Khatsi, Myurushen, Avdur, Ashan, *Karakend*<sup>147</sup>, and others located near Agdam began to arrive in Kendhurd. They were coming on foot, carrying their burdens on their hands and backs, riding horses and donkeys, arbas, and driving their livestock. Kendhurd's residents succumbed to panic and began to leave, leaving the refugees in the village. It did not take us long to pick up our miserable belongings and set off. We walked in a crowd along the Orat's Karer<sup>148</sup> road. A hubbub of screams, children's cries, and the roar of cattle were painfully familiar to us. The most interesting thing was that no one really knew where we were going, why we were going, and what awaited us ahead. After walking about five kilometers, the crowd got off the road and turned left onto a path; we walked in the front rows. Suddenly, three armed riders, they were *Kendhurdsi*<sup>149</sup>, jumped out from nowhere and began to loudly shout, urging everyone to turn back and return to the village. As it appeared, there was no

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<sup>146</sup> The forest near the village of Ningi.

<sup>147</sup> Village that was built out of stone (Arm.).

<sup>148</sup> Most likely means, Or's stony road. (Or -Arm. male first name, Kar - stone).

<sup>149</sup> The residents of the village Kendhurd.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

danger; it either was a false alarm or miscommunication, or the situation changed for the better. It did not take much to convince the villagers, and the crowd turned back. By the evening we all were home. In the next couple of days, the refugees who came to Kendhurd began leaving the village.

While the refugees were still in Kendhurd, Mother managed to work for one of the refugee families by bringing their bedding in order. She ripped off mattresses and blankets, pulled out wool from them, and then washed, dried, and shook it with a stick to make it fluffy. She then stuffed the wool back into the ironed mattress and duvet covers. For this work, she received a few chureks and a half pood of flour.

On one ill-fated day, Mother was kneading dough in a wooden basin for bread to bake. Having only pressed her hands down once on the dough, the floor collapsed under her, and she fell to the cellar. We all screamed in horror and rushed to the hole in the floor and began to call our mother. Yervand found an ax somewhere and cracked the lock on the outside door leading to the cellar, and we all rushed down the steps. Fortunately, nothing terrible happened to Mother; however, she was still badly hurt and had to lay down for a couple of days. She limped for a few days before she got back to normal.

At about this time, Yervand temporarily lived in the village of *Veger*, teaching in the local school.



*Chapter 29 Living in the Cellar | Taque-Aker |  
Bandit Tevan*

After the incident with Mother, concerned about our safety, we settled to live in the dark and tiny cellar. The back wall of the cellar, laid out of uncut stone, was always damp. Moisture condensing into merging water droplets trickled down the wall. Mother and I scribbled a few clefts on the wall to assist drainage and guide water down into a small canal we dug along the wall to direct water to run outside under the cellar entry door. The only window in the cellar faced the front yard. Most of the glass in it was gone, and we had to seal the apertures with cardboard and rags. At the eastern wall, there was a stone-built hearth with a chimney. We began cleaning the place by taking out all the trash and cleansing the earth floor as well as we could. We dragged in quite a few stones and stacked them up in two rows, thus creating a bed base. On the top of the stones, we tightly laid wood beams, then brushwood, and at last piles of straw, thus completing the arrangement of our bed. While we were cleaning and bringing the cellar to order, we had to spend a few nights on the balcony. It was the end of November; the tops of the surrounding mountains were already covered with snow. Winter was just around the corner. Our food stocks have run out. Crop fields had been harvested a long time ago, and there were no opportunities to replenish them. We went hungry again. Mother often cried from helplessness and hopelessness of the situation. But God again was merciful by sending us our guardian angel.

To the left of our place lived the Afunts family. That is where our savior lived, dear, kind, and noble Taque-Aker. She was about sixty years old and lived with her two married sons,



## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

Agalar and Arakel, and their wives Satenik and Shushan. I am not sure about Lusik and Enok as they were too young, but for Mother, Yervand, and me, Taque-Aker was, still is, and will always remain a saint until the end of our days. It was only thanks to her, that we survived that harsh winter.

I consciously omitted to mention Taque-Aker in the previous chapters to devote her to a separate chapter about her good deeds. Back in the spring, on the very first day following our relocation from the school to this house, we were visited by several villagers, including Taque-Aker. Most of them, having looked at our situation and done some talking, would leave to never return, but not Taque-Aker. She continued visiting us. Never coming empty-handed, bringing us some food such as matsun, churek or few fruits and vegetables. She was doing it even against the will of her daughters-in-law, insisting on her obtaining the consent of her sons for supporting a strange family. She continued openly helping us for as long as she could. Take-aker was very afraid of her elder daughter-in-law, childless, rude, and mean Satenik. I heard several times how Taque-Aker complained to my mother about her, "This damned son of a bitch. Watches my every step. She says do not go to them, we are not to blame for their misery and starvation. Let their relatives worry about them." But this barrier did not stop Taque-Aker. She now secretly continued her support.

Nearby was a shed, where cattle were kept during cold seasons. The shed was not visible from the Taque-Aker's home. It was shielded by the wall of someone's dilapidated house. And here was Taque-Aker driving livestock: two cows, a calf, a donkey, and a few lambs and goats. Loudly so we could hear her, she was chasing them with the cries, "*He-Ga, Go-Chu-Chu!*". When she was sure she had our attention, she would look

around, pull out two chureks from under her apron, and put them in a secluded place. She then would wave to us and move on with her cattle, but now without the shouting. Anyone who has ever been in our situation would understand the value of those chureks. To us, dreadfully exhausted by hunger, they were like manna<sup>150</sup> from Heaven. With joy and gratitude, our mother would immediately divide one bread among us and held the second for the next day. Taque-Aker had done this trick with bread many times, but there were days when she could not do it. That was when her sons or daughters-in-law drove the cattle themselves. Once, she told Mother that there were times when she could not escape the sharp eyes of her daughters-in-law. Those times she would not drive the cattle because she did not want to pass by us with empty hands. One summer day, when Agalar and Arakel were working in the fields far from the village, I helped them for a week by carrying bundles of wheat on their donkeys to the thresher set next to their house. After another trip, I heard Taque-Aker calling my name, "Ashot, Ashot, come here quick."

"I'm busy and need to hurry back. What do you want?", I responded.

"Come here. I'll tell you something that you need to pass on to Agalar."

I had to comply, and as soon as I walked into her house, she handed me a full plate of *okroshka*.<sup>151</sup>

"Eat it quickly, while my daughters-in-law are gone. They went

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<sup>150</sup> According to the Bible, an edible substance that God provided for the Israelites during their travels in the desert during the 40-year period following the Exodus and prior to the conquest of Canaan.

<sup>151</sup> Summer dish made of mixed cold matsun, chopped cucumber, red radish, green onion, mint leaves, and crumbles of bread (Rus.). It is not the same as Russian version of okroshka.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

to the spring to bring water.” Then, in addition, she put two chureks under my shirt and told me to take them home first, and then go to the fields. I asked her about what she wanted me to tell Agalar. Taque -Aker smiled in return and gestured like do not worry about it. During that week, she did it twice.

This kind woman, at the high risk of completely ruining her relationship with her daughters-in-law, tried in every possible way to help us as much as she could. She was like a mother or grandmother to us. Taque-Aker always tried to cheer us up and give us hope for a good future. I well remember how she once said to my mother, “Annushka, do not cry. Everything will be fine. The time will come for your children to grow up, to get on their feet, and you will remember these days like a bad dream.” She often cursed our father’s relatives for abandoning us to fate at this difficult time. Now being December with its snowfall and wind, it was bitter cold in the cellar. There was no wood to burn and no kerosene to light a lamp. With the approach of dusk, we would go to bed early, nestling next to each other. We were overpowered by lice; our bodies were covered with wounds from systematic scratching. The only way we could fight lice was by drying our clothes in a tundir. When the villagers finished baking their bread in the tundir, Mother and I would plunge our clothes into the hot tundir for a few minutes, pull it out, and shake it off. Soon returned Yervand, as continuing teaching became a dangerous occupation. In the district operated a gang of a certain Tevan. He was from the village of Tumi in the Gadrut district. He gathered a gang of 30 to 40 thugs and raided the villages of Gadrut and Martuny districts. The gang was killing communists and executing sympathizers, beating up teachers for not teaching the law of God, and looting houses of ordinary villagers. He also led anti-Soviet propaganda, saying that the Bolsheviks do not

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recognize private property, they plunder people and want their wives to be in common, that everyone would eat from the same pot, and so on. I happened to see Tevan when he entered our village and shot four young communists. When the gang left, the village youth identified and shot to death three of Tevan's local followers. Kendhurd was in mourning; in one week it lost seven inhabitants. Later, we learned that Tevan fled to Iran.



*Chapter 30 To the Villages for Alms*

The year turned out to be lean. Drought, hail, and heavy rains, as well as the shortage of draft animals, led to a loss of crops and consequently to hunger among the population. There was a young widow Tamam Khialyants with her three children living in our neighborhood. Mother and she began going to the nearest villages to beg for food. Upon their return from the first trip, they brought some food, mostly bread, just enough for us to last for a couple of days. Later they went on another trip, and on the third time, I joined them. We went to *Gishi, Khushenak, and Chartar* villages and returned on the next day. It was not a successful trip; after we had divided what we brought between the two families, there was not much left to last for long. Thanks to Taque-Aker, she continued supporting us, sending us her conspiratorial signals of, "Guo, Ge, Choo!". Snow piled a lot, reaching about two feet. We children had to quickly run barefoot through it to Taque-Aker's secret cache for the stashed bread. With tears of joy in our eyes, we ran back home and ate the bread. Unexpectedly, on one fine day, Uncle Mirza brought us about a half of pood of millet grain. I almost immediately left the house for the mill on the upper part of Kendhurd. Hungry, cold, and almost barefoot, I walked backstreets through the mud and snow carrying a heavy bag. Having received my flour, I headed back home taking several shortstops. Lowering the bag from my back to a boulder, I would eat a little flour and move on. No matter how hard we tried to make this flour last, it was gone in two weeks. At about this time, our other uncle, *Atun-ami*,<sup>152</sup> invited Enok to his house where he stayed and fed for a few days during the daytime, returning home in the

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<sup>152</sup> Atun short for Arutun, Ami (Persian) for uncle.

evenings. It seemed to me that this metamorphosis in the behavior of our relatives was due to the reproaches they had been getting from some villagers, who denounced such an attitude towards their sibling's widow and children.

One evening, the eldest daughter of Aunt Guli, Nakhshun, came to visit us for the first time. "What a horror. Poor little souls living in this misery. Hungry, perhaps? I am going to run home and bring you bread, doshab, and dried mulberries. I will be right back," she said and left. Excited, we froze in anticipation; we had not had a single crumb since that morning. An hour passed, then a second and third, and there was no Nakhshun. We kept waiting, loudly talking, and coughing, feeding the oven with brushwood to illuminate the cellar. We did all that to let Nakhshun know that we were still awake and that it would be all right if she could bring us food even at such a late hour. Another hour passed. We were keeping each other awake; however, our relative never returned. Moreover, this was the last time we ever saw her again.

Heavy snowfalls finally ended, and Mother and I resumed our trips to villages and had probably made five or six of them. I remember in one of them that we made at the end of February, we went to the distant villages of Karakend, Ashan, Norshen, Khatsi, Myurushen, and others. We walked from house to house. Mother was knocking on doors and begging, while I was carrying a bag with donations. These walks were not safe as many houses had big and evil dogs that had attacked us on several occasions. At some houses we were denied; however, some kind people were giving us pieces of fresh or hard chureks, sometimes even a whole churek. On the first day, we stopped to spend the night in the village of Ashan. It was snowing, but we found a shelter under a canopy over a tundir.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

We were lucky that someone recently baked bread and the tundir was still warm. Mother and I sat around the tundir and lowered our legs into it. I bent down and put my head on her hips, and she in turn leaned against me, thus covering my back. To have some protection from the cold for herself, she placed the bag with donations over her back. On the next day, we spent a good night in Myurushen in the house of one kind old man. In the morning, we decided to go home because Mother was worried that the children could run out of food. In addition, our bag was getting heavy. We walked along the deserted snowy roads, stepping in somebody else's footsteps. We were almost barefoot. Yes, yes, my dear reader. It is hard to believe, but that is how it was. Many years later, I have been asking myself the same question many times. Unbelievably, but somehow, I had tolerated the cold and managed not to get sick. Away from the road on the hill, I suddenly noticed a wolf standing among bushes and watching us. I said to Mother, "Mom, look at the wolf." We accelerated our steps and continued walking, periodically looking back at the wolf; it was still standing and watching us, and finally disappeared.

It was getting dark when we reached the village of Kaghartsi. We were lucky that one poor, but kind widow allowed us to spend the night in her house. The room where we stayed was modestly furnished, but rather large and well-warmed. Four children of our hostess, aged between three and ten, were playing and running around the room completely naked. Mother and I enjoyed the warmth. Mom pulled out one churek from the bag and handed it to the children, and then she had a long conversation with their mother. I stretched out on the wooden floor and almost immediately fell asleep. In the morning, we said goodbye to the hospitable family and left.

*Chapter 31 On the Way to Baku | The Train Station*

At the end of March 1921, Yervand, and a young fella by the name of Ruben, who we knew from Shusha and was then visiting Kendhurd, his wife's home village, decided to go to Gadrut district to get salt. Salt is a necessary mineral for humans. A lack of salt in one's diet can lead to scurvy. In addition, salt could easily be exchanged for food; for example, for a pood of salt, you could buy a pood of wheat or two poods of barley. The guys soon returned, bringing along a pood of salt on their shoulders.

May came with its warm days and a lot of greenery began growing in the fields and forests. Salt came in handy; we gladly ate pyurput and penjar. We had survived another severe winter.

I must say that we had one more problem. We did not have matches, and starting a bonfire was not always an easy task. When we would lose the fire in the hearth, we would have to go to the nearest hill and look out for houses with smoking chimneys and go there for a spark.

Once, Taque-Aker came to our place and said to Mother, "Annushka, why don't you go to Baku? Thank God, your Yervand is a big guy now, and as I heard he even speaks Russian. He will find a job there and it will be much easier for all of you there. Take the children and go. You will not survive another winter here. Zargaryants Gumash with her children left for Baku about two weeks ago." Apparently, Mother took Taque-Aker's advice seriously and thought it over for several days, and then announced her decision to go to Baku. Nothing was holding us here, and in a few hours, we were ready to leave. I remember how Taque-Aker stopped by to say goodbye, and again she did not come empty-handed, bringing us some



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bread and boiled beans. My mother embraced her and wept bitterly, as this woman became like a mother to her. We, children, stood aside close to each other and sadly observed the two women. Finally, they said goodbye to each other, and we set off. Kind, sweet, and dear Taque-Aker encouragingly smiled, wishing us a good journey and good luck in the new place. We saw her waving to us for a long, long time until her lonely silhouette disappeared from the horizon.

“Dear Taque-Aker, you are forever in our memory, and until the end of our days, we will never forget all the good deeds that you have done for us and will pray for you. You were our kind guardian angel. If you had not been there for us, we all would have starved to death. And then again, it was you who gave us the advice to go to Baku. It was your wisdom that allowed us to survive and turn our lives around towards the light. Our low bow to you and eternal glory, dear Taque-Aker!”

We walked several kilometers to Agdam, and then we rode occasional arbas and a phaeton to Yevlakh, where there was a railway station. It took us three days to get to Yevlakh. Everything around there was new and amazing to us. For the first time in our lives, we saw noisy and buzzing locomotives moving along the rails by themselves, pulling the passengers and the freight cars behind them. In fear, we watched moving trains and tried to stay away from them. Soon, along with other people, we climbed onto an open platform of a railway freight cart and set out on our journey. Around midnight, at some station, our cart was unhooked from the train, and we had to get off and find another one. Unluckily, there were no other platform carts that we could get on, but there were several large metal petroleum cistern carts that were just added to the train. With no other options, we climbed up a metal service ladder on

one of them. Mother, Yervand, and I were standing on the ladder, one above the other, holding the metal railing with one hand and with the other, each of us held one of the kids, placing them in the space between ourselves and the stairs.

The train departed, and we were on the road again, holding on tight to the railing and periodically calling each other to make sure we were staying awake. I will never forget that night's journey. Now I realize that at that time we did not think about the real danger we were all exposed to. Any sharp jolt or the train braking, or if any of us falling asleep could lead to a tragic consequence. However, back then we were on the verge of our physical and moral abilities, we were naively careless. It was incomprehensible; perhaps it was a miracle that we had made it to Baku safe and sound.

On the following happy morning, we came out of the railway platform and entered the train station building, or rather its upper level, and then walked down the steps to the square in front of the main entrance. We stopped to the left of the ticket box office. There were many people around: different nationalities and ages, homeless and drunks, sick and handicapped, women, and men, and men were predominant. I have never seen so many people at the same time. They scampered back and forth between the people lying and sitting on the ground. Some in their haste were even jumping over them. The first floor of the train station was in complete chaos. We were surrounded by dirt, debris, and the smell of sweat and urine. People with luggage and without it were sitting on the floor in groups or alone, sleeping, snoring, eating, arguing, swearing, laughing, and crying. It was not entirely clear whether they were departing or arriving. Perhaps they were just

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

living at the station. Many of them were itching. It was not hard to guess that the lice among them were highly spread. The second floor was a little better, more spacious, and it seemed like the order there was respected more rigorously. Straight across from the main entrance was a small oval-shaped garden. When I walked there to check it out, I got sick from what I saw there. People in need were going there even during the daylight and disgustingly relieving themselves. All around there was human and animal feces, remnants of food, bones, fish heads, worms, tin cans, broken glass, and all sorts of other muck. We made a scouting trip and found a column of drinking water. Since we did not have any containers, we had to walk there to drink. Yervand and I were taking turns to take Zarmair there. On the next day, we found an empty beer bottle and were glad that now we did not have to walk Zarmair to drink. On the second floor of the station, the authorities were handing out free porridge. With the scraps of newspaper in our hands, we went there and received our portions of rice porridge. And there we were, sitting on the ground in a circle and happily, with a great appetite, eating with our fingers (imagine that) right from a piece of paper the best porridge we have ever tasted. At the same time, we were not paying any attention to the people scurrying around us. Later, recalling our stay at the station, I thought about how it was all simple those days, how humane the attitude was towards the disadvantaged. To obtain a portion of porridge, nobody was asking for any documents. There was no need to register or sign. Everything was built on trust.

In a few days, when for some reason the crowd of people diminished, the station became more spacious and easier to sit in a warm spot. The days became longer and hotter. By evenings the heat subsided, and we enjoyed the cool air.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

At the train station, we also went to watch silent movies, another wonder of the progress. Once, I got the courage and went out of the station to the nearby street. Later I learned that I was walking along *Telephonnaya Street*,<sup>153</sup> and for the first time saw a *konka*, a city tramway pulled by horses. The street was quite dirty and untidy. Most of the people were wearing wooden shoe pads.



Sabunchi Train Station<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Now (at the time of writing this memoir) April 28<sup>th</sup> Street.

<sup>154</sup> This station was built in 1926 in the place of the old building where the Kocharov was staying. The architect was Nikolai Baev, Armenian by nationality.

*Chapter 32 Our New Home | My First Job | Zarmair*

We continued to live at the train station. One morning, two weeks after our arrival, a woman from Karabakh, who heard us speaking Armenian, stopped by and spoke to our mother. When she learned our story, she informed Mother that there are many Armenians living in *Armenikend*,<sup>155</sup> and some even are our fellow countrymen from Kendhurd. She suggested we go there. She said it would be better for us there, and we would certainly be able to find a place to live. We had no idea where this *Armenikend* was, but the woman was going in that direction and offered to show us how to get there. No sooner said than done, Mother and I quickly got ready and followed the woman, leaving the kids in the care of Yeryand. It looked like God sent us his angel again. We walked up the street<sup>156</sup> approximately to the place, where now is located the Army Headquarters. Our escort, who had to turn and go her own way, gave us the direction where we should go from there. We cordially thanked her, said goodbye, and went straight, walking along a wasteland stretching to the place where *Mugan*<sup>157</sup> hotel is located now. In a little while, we reached a residential area; this was our ultimate destination, the *Armenikend*.

We began asking passersby if they knew where our fellow villagers lived. We entered one courtyard after another, and then in one of them we ..., what a miracle, we found Gumash-Baji and her children. It turned out that it had already been a month since they arrived in Baku. There was no end to our joy.

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<sup>155</sup> Armenian village (Tur) The quarter of Baku with dominant Armenian population.

<sup>156</sup> Lenin Avenue.

<sup>157</sup> The steppe in Azerbaijan.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

After numerous kisses and hugs, and endless lamentations of Gumash-Baji, she said that we should immediately go back to the train station and bring the rest of our family here. We did so and soon return with Yervand, the children, and our belongings.

We settled in a small, one-story house located in a square asphalted courtyard. The house had several rooms occupied by twelve Armenian families, ten of whom were from Kendhurd. Gumash-Baji placed us next to her room in a small and dimly lit room. This house is still there at the address of Suren Osipyan <sup>158</sup> Street #67, directly across from the Children's Library. Now, fifty-five years later, from all the old tenants who had lived there, only the eldest son of Gumash-Baji, Ashot, remained living there. After some time, one of our neighbors, the painter Durasan, left Baku for Shemaha, and we moved into his room. It was a time when the housing was much easier than now; all we needed was just to go to a manager and register this room under our name.

Yervand soon managed to get a job with the *Sovmarkhoz*<sup>159</sup> as a food distributor<sup>160</sup>. I remember how he was often bringing home large pieces of chocolates, bread, and other food that we just could not even dream about. We no longer had a problem with getting food.

I also tried to make my contribution to the family budget and began selling drinking water on the streets. I was filling a clay jug with cold water from a street hydrant and sold it by glasses on the summer hot streets of Armenikend. To attract the thirsty, I was shouting my advertisement, "Water! Water! Drink cold

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<sup>158</sup> Armenian revolutionary.

<sup>159</sup> The Board of People Economy.

<sup>160</sup> Anyone familiar with Soviet reality understands that this was a lucrative job.

water!”, I must mention that at that time there were no kiosks where you could buy cold sparkling water or sparkling water with syrup like it is now. At the corners of the streets sat men with buckets who sold water. Well, we were nimble boys running around the street and trying to compete with the street cornermen. In the fall of 1921, I began working as a laborer in a private stone quarry that belonged to our relative Uncle Grisha. I was mostly involved in digging the earth and sorting stones. Approximately at this time, on the advice of friends, we placed Lusik, Enok, and Zarmair in an orphanage that was located on 7th *Nagornaya*<sup>161</sup> Street, roughly where the Radio Station is now. However, after a short time, we took Lusik home.

In early 1922, per the recommendation and with the assistance of one of our neighbors, Yervand got a new job as an armed guard at *Azneft'*<sup>162</sup>. In the spring of the same year, I applied and got a courier position at *Azprombank*.<sup>163</sup> My workplace was in a corridor on the second floor of the three-story bank building. On the wall over my desk hung a display board of ten numbered red-light bulbs connected to different bank officials. My job responsibility was to watch the board, and when the lights on lamps would come on, rush to the corresponding offices, pick up documents, and per instructions deliver them to the recipients. In general, it was correspondence that had to be signed and returned to the initiators. Often there were times when I would come to pick up a document and find the caller talking on the phone. By the time he or she would finish the conversation and give me the instructions and I would execute them, the display board at my desk could have several lamps

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<sup>161</sup> Upland.

<sup>162</sup> Azerbaijan State Petroleum Corporation.

<sup>163</sup> Azerbaijan Industrial Bank.

on. There was no way to know which one of these lamps came on first. So, I would run to the nearest caller and often get a scolding like, "Jackass, are you sleeping there? I called you for a long time." Even worse, you began realizing that you are no longer catching up and you could run all day between the floors in sweat and your tongue out, but still would not be able to take care of all calls. Because of the hopelessness of the situation, my hands would drop down in powerlessness, and sometimes I even cried from the offense. A few days later, I was transferred to another job. Now I had to deliver correspondence to various city organizations. But even here I faced new problems. I did not understand nor speak Russian, and this of course prevented me from performing my duties well, and after two or three months, I quit.

We often visited Enok and Zarmair at the orphanage. Around May 1922, we were informed that Zarmair fell ill. I went to visit him. The nanny, Balasan-baji, who by the way was our landlord in one of the houses we rented in Shusha in 1913, walked me to the ward. As I entered the room, I found Enok lying on the bed to the left, and Zarmair on the right. "Look who is here?", said the nursemaid turning to Zarmair. The kid hardly raised his head and answered in a weak voice, "My brother, Ashot." With tears in my eyes, I approached him and kissed his forehead. "Where is Mom?", Zarmair quietly asked, looking at me with his painful eyes before closing them. When I returned home, I told Mother in tears about what I saw there and said that Zarmair should be urgently taken home. Unfortunately, this turned out to be a belated decision. The next morning Zarmair passed away. He died, apparently from a severe form of pneumonia. He was only six years old. We buried him very modestly. Fearing for Enok, we took him home.



Chapter 33 Bazaar's Profiteer | My Entertainment

1923 was peaceful and generally prosperous for the entire population. People seemed to have been happy, singing and dancing during street gatherings. The shelves in the shops and stores were stocked up with provisions and goods. Bazaars were enjoying full freedom of trade.<sup>164</sup> You could literally buy everything from meat to all kinds of fresh and fried fish such as *kutum*<sup>165</sup>, carp, zander, lamprey, and marinated herring, as well as a great selection of bread and bakery, a huge variety of fresh vegetables and fruits, nuts and dried fruits, hot pies, kebabs and *kutabs*,<sup>166</sup> and all sorts of sweets and ice cream. Vendors and street dealers were loudly calling their advertisements to attract buyers. Everything was in abundance. There were no queues. Take whatever you want, and all you want and all you needed was the money. The currency was of great denominations. The ordinary people would spend a few million rubles on bazaars and had to carry a bunch of bills and count them for a long time.

At this time, I got engaged in buying and reselling water and saccharine vouchers. At the bazaar,<sup>167</sup> there were many trading guys like me, but the sales leaders were Ashot, the son of Gumash-Baji, and me. From the early morning until dusk, we spent time in the bazaar, walking back and forth and beckoning buyers. We ate at the bazaar, most times snacking on the go,

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<sup>164</sup> This was the golden era in the Soviet economy. The New Economic Policy (NEP), the policy of the government of the Soviet Union from 1921 to 1928, representing a temporary retreat from its previous policy of extreme centralization and doctrinaire socialism sparked the boom of the private sector.

<sup>165</sup> Caspian sea fish from the carp family. Latin name *Rutilus frisii*.

<sup>166</sup> Ground meat stuffed bread made of thinly rolled dough that is cooked briefly on a convex griddle.

<sup>167</sup> Here and further in the book author was referring to the Armenikend bazar.

sometimes going to private dining to have lunch or eat *khash*.<sup>168</sup> Being so busy with my business, I was still able to have free time for rest and entertainment. Often, I got together with friends and played the lotto in the apartment of one of our guys, Mikhail. He lived across the bazaar, in the courtyard of the present-day Commercial Clinic. In the evenings, we would go to the cinema, which was still silent. With the subtitles being in Russian, I could not keep up reading. Mostly it was American movies such as, "Secrets of Hudson's banks", "Tarzan", "Arbi the Subjugator of Tarzan", "Mysterious eyes", "Nibelungs, Mountain Carnival", "Headless Horseman", "Sign of Zorro", "Son of Zorro", etc. I also often visited the circus where French wrestling took place daily with the participation of well-known wrestlers.

I shall mention at that time crime in the city was quite high. Swindlers, robbers, pickpockets, and murderers were feeling their impunity and freely wielded. It went so far that inscriptions such as, "Until 8 p.m. it is yours. After 8 it is ours." in large fonts began appearing on the walls of buildings.

I remember how once, in the late autumn evening of 1923, I was walking a sidewalk home to Armenikend through the wasteland near the same orphanage and ran into a militiaman who told me to go down and walk on the pavement. As I was doing it, I noticed a man lying on the sidewalk. When I got home and washed for dinner and did not see Yervand at the table, I asked Mother about his whereabouts. She said that I

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<sup>168</sup> Khash is a traditional Armenian winter soup made of beef feet and eaten by men very early in the morning with vodka. The legend has it that during the occupation of Armenia Persians took away from the population all their livestock. To keep the alive so they could work Persians were troughing them meat by-products. The gelatin in beef feet helped Armenians become strong and drive the enemy out of their country. Eating khash is like paying tribute to that victory.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

should concentrate on eating, and Yervand should be home soon. Recollecting the scene of the man lying on the sidewalk, I quickly got up and rushed out, anxiously thinking about Yervand. Approaching the place, I heard voices of arguing men. Coming closer, I recognized the voice of one of the speakers; it was Yervand talking to the militiaman. I called him, and he said goodbye to the militiaman and came up to me. We embraced and cheerfully went home. On the way, I told him the reason for my being there.

1924 arrived. We were doing well. We continued to settle into the new place. We bought some household items, primarily bedding, tableware, and furniture. In late spring, Enok asked to allow him to trade at the bazaar too. I resisted for a long time, but in the end, subdued to his persistence. I bought him toffees, lollipops, chocolates, and candy cones. We placed it all into a wooden tray and hung it over his neck on a twine. I gave him a price list and taught him the ways of how to deal in the bazaar. However, my younger brother's entrepreneurial activity ended on the same day when he fell prey to a con man. The thing was that fifty- and five-hundred-ruble banknotes had a similar appearance. The main difference was in their sizes; a five-hundred-ruble bill was larger. There was one artful guy who gave Enok fifty rubles for all the sweets instead of five hundred rubles and even asked for change. Enok gave him all his cash but was short one hundred rubles. The "kind buyer" told Enok not to worry about it and to give it to him later. Happy Enok ran to me with the good news and bragging about his quick turnaround sale and handed me the fifty rubles banknote. Of course, I slapped and scolded him and sent him home with a directive not to come ever again.

*Chapter 34 My Entrepreneurship and Passion for Music*

Back in 1923, our mother got the hang of making soap for sale, the craft that she had learned from her mother. However, soon soap began to appear in stores in sufficient quantities, and she had to give up this occupation. Our mother did not like to sit idle; soon she began offering services as a midwife, taking deliveries at homes on call. Somewhere there is a long list of living people who half a century ago Mother delivered to this world. Surprisingly, I could not remember any single case of her deliveries that ended unsuccessfully. She could even determine the wrong position of a fetus and correct it. In response to my multiple questions about how she learned this trade and how she ventured to do it, Mother would stubbornly reply with the same answer, saying that it was a gift from God. She said that once in her dream God spoke to her and gave her this knowledge and his blessing. I certainly doubted the truthfulness of her explanation; however, I never challenged it. No matter what, the fact was she was very good at what she was doing.

In 1923, Yervand and I got ourselves musical instruments. Yervand bought a tar, and I a tambourine. We quickly mastered the basics of playing the instruments and began to improve our technique by playing in the company of our numerous friends. We were good friends with the sons of Shushan-baji, and often visited their standalone single-story house, which still stands right across from *Druzhiba*<sup>169</sup> movie theater on Lenin Avenue. Along with them stayed their relative from Kirovabad, a young and cheerful guy by the name of Aleksan, who we became friends with as well. By the way, Aleksan always carried a gun. Frequently, our visits ended with feasts followed by a family

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<sup>169</sup> Friendship (Rus.)

duet. Yervand and I played popular tunes to the pleasure of friends and our own. During holidays, we often visited our other friends and relatives and always found ourselves at the center of attention.

Since May 1924, my commercial activity at the bazaar had declined. The economy of the country was on the rise. Sugar, candies, kerosene, and other products and essentials became widely available. As a result, the sources of my income for the past three years, the coupons for water, saccharin, and kerosene were terminated, and the procurement department of *BukSoyuz*<sup>170</sup> where I was getting them from was liquidated.

Among our neighbors, many were carpenters. Per agreement with one of them, Uncle Arakel Tokhunts, I began working with him as his apprentice on July 8<sup>th</sup> of 1924. We worked on a two-story house in the township of Bailovo. This building still stands there across the Bailovo bazaar. There I worked for about a year and learned some carpentry. At that time, both blue and white-collar workers were entitled to free tram passes. However, I often had to walk to work from Armenikend to Bailovo<sup>171</sup>, mostly because I, as an apprentice, had to get there early, before the time when trams began operating, to set the workplace in order and have tools ready for the master. Often, I brought the waste of our work home to heat our apartment. In April 1925, the construction of the house was complete, and I got separated from my colleagues and never worked with them again. I was only an apprentice and had not yet fully learned the ropes of carpentry; therefore, it was hard for me to find a job as an independent contractor, and I had to be content with occasional

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<sup>170</sup> Baku Union.

<sup>171</sup> Approximately 5 miles distance.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

earnings working with different masters. While working, I was attending evening general education courses in Armenian.

Back in November 1924, Yervand married Grachiya, and it was a great joy for our family. Soon, in the autumn of 1925, their first child was born, daughter Amalia. Grachiya worked in the library at the *Vodnik*<sup>172</sup> Club, which was next to the park of the 26 Baku Commissars. I often carried little Amalia there to Grachiya for breastfeeding. In 1926, Yervand got his own place and moved out with his family into the same apartment he still lives.

Life became much easier and more satisfying. Finally, after all we had experienced, we enjoyed it.



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<sup>172</sup> Club of marine workers.

*Chapter 35 My Fondness for Literature | Kislovodsk |  
The Labor Exchange Office*

My passion for art was not limited to music alone; I was also fascinated by literature, endlessly reading, and purchasing books for my library. In 1927, I even began writing for the editorial office of the “Armenian Communist” newspaper and soon became quite an active correspondent.

Since 1922, I became an active member of the *Lozovsky*<sup>173</sup> Club of Working Youth. The club was in a one-story building and had a small concert hall with a stage. In the northern part of the club, there was a small fruit tree garden where on warm days we organized a buffet, had tea, and played popular board games such as backgammon, checkers, chess, and dominoes. Nowadays, in the place of this garden was built a decent spectator room with a good stage and foyer. The cultural life of the club was quite active: daily evening concerts and dances, literature and drama clubs, choir, etc. Music was mainly folk played on national instruments such as *tar*<sup>174</sup>, *kamancha*<sup>175</sup>, *duduk*<sup>176</sup>, *zurna*<sup>177</sup>, etc. Since 1926, I took an active part in the club’s life. I was especially passionate about the drama club, which was headed by the club deputy director, artist Tigran Tafisto<sup>178</sup>. I was a deputy director, played supporting roles in several plays, and I also was a constant prompter.

In August 1927, Yervand and Grachiya had their second

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<sup>173</sup> Solomon Lozovsky - a prominent Communist and Bolshevik revolutionary, a high - ranking official in the Soviet government.

<sup>174</sup> Iranian long-necked, bowed string instrument, shared by other countries in Caucasus region.

<sup>175</sup> Iranian bowed string instrument used also in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Turkish & Kurdish music.

<sup>176</sup> An ancient double reed woodwind instrument made of apricot wood. It is indigenous to and popularized through creation and composition by the people of Armenia.

<sup>177</sup> Zurna, like the duduk, is a woodwind instrument played in central Eurasia, Western Asia and parts of North Africa.

<sup>178</sup> Stage name.

daughter, Zhanna. I continued carpentry as an apprentice at various construction sites as an apprentice at various

Construction sites. Since the summer, I worked on the construction of the *Krasnyi Zheleznodorozhnik*<sup>179</sup> house, which now stands on *Porokhovaya Street*<sup>180</sup> in the *Zavokzal'nyi*<sup>181</sup> district of the city. In the autumn, I suddenly began feeling bad. My heart rate increased, colic appeared, and I was thin and weak. The work was always hard; I had to carry heavy wooden beams and bales of boards on a construction stretcher to the upper floors. There was a huge country boy who was also an apprentice. When we carried the stretcher, and he was in front, I had a hard time keeping up with him. When I was at the front, the guy whistled at me gleefully and pushed me to walk faster. At that time, I was registered at the *First Polyclinic*,<sup>182</sup> which is now in front of the 26 Baku Commissars metro station. There was one good female doctor there, an Armenian by nationality, Doctor Antonova, who after examining me and listening to my heartbeat, silently left the office to come back with two young doctors. I still remember how she pointed at me and said, "Listen to his heart. That is an example of how a broken heart sound." Dr. Antonova instructed the front desk to register me for a resort card, and the referral to a sanatorium treatment. And on one fine December day, a representative of the Trade union came to the construction site and gave me a referral for treatment in a sanatorium in the town of *Kislovodsk*<sup>183</sup> along with a train ticket. A day later, I was already on the train that was

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<sup>179</sup> Red Railway Worker.

<sup>180</sup> Gunpowder Street.

<sup>181</sup> Trans Railway Station – city district, as Armenikend mostly populated by Armenians.

<sup>182</sup> Each city district had its own clinic, where patients could be seen by doctors of all disciplines.

<sup>183</sup> Sour water town (Rus.) famous mineral water resort in the North Caucasus region of the Mineral Waters.



taking me for the thirty-six-day treatment and health procedures.

Upon my arrival, a representative of the sanatorium met me at the station and took me by car to the “The Red October” sanatorium. Thus, began what now might seem like a fairy tale. Each patient was given a suit of white matting fabric and a resort card for free travel around the town and visits to all spectacular events, including theaters, cinemas, and concert programs with visiting artists and creative teams. I want to especially note, the excellent service, treatment, and nutrition every patient was entitled to receive. An ordinary day would start with breakfast. On the bell, you would go to the dining room and take a seat at your assigned table full of abundant food. There were butter and cheeses, salami and sausages, red and black caviar, pastries, delicious and unknown to me dishes, jugs full of juices and cocoa, and a lot of staff at your service offering more food if you wanted. That is how it was then, the real communism. Subsequently, I was given a ticket for the return trip home and taken to the station.

While still at the sanatorium, I decided to start writing a play on a revolutionary theme and began to sketch out the plan. Upon my arrival in Baku, I continued working on it and finished it in March 1928. I named my first play “The Struggle for Freedom”. It was about the events of the Civil War. The main character’s name, as you probably guessed, was Yervand. I presented my manuscript to the editorial office of the “Armenian Communist” newspaper, which in its turn sent it over to *AzLith*<sup>184</sup> with their recommendation for publishing. Soon, to my satisfaction, the play was approved with the following annotation, “The play *The Struggle for Freedom* by the

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<sup>184</sup> Azerbaijan Literature Committee.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

author Kocharov A. is allowed for performances in clubs with the right of a manuscript.” The play was first staged in the Lozovsky club in May 1928. The premiere was successful. After the final third act, the artists and staff lifted me and carried me out to the stage under the applause of the audience. Later, I wrote other plays, including *Juda*, an anti-religious comedy in two acts, and a one-act comedy. I have quite an interesting story that I will share in the next chapter.



*Chapter 36 The Road Bandits*

In May 1928, Yervand, while vacationing with his family in Stepanakert, met with his friend, the former chairman of the Railway Workers' Union nominated for the post of the CEC<sup>185</sup> of the NKAO. He offered him an accountant position at the CEC and, through the Commissariat of Education, to organize a brass band. That was a very attractive offer, and soon Yervand and his family moved to Stepanakert and took up his duties. In addition to the wind instruments band, he also organized a string orchestra. In the summer of the same year, we visited Yervand and stayed at his place for a while. In the next year, we made another visit and had a good family time. Yervand had always welcomed us with hospitality and had never hesitated to reach into his pocket to please us with the freshest fruits and vegetables and tasty food. At the same time, Bagrat, our distant relative from my mother's side, happened to be vacationing nearby Yervand's place. Bagrat oversaw a grocery store in Bailovo, and Mother, in one of her conversations with him, asked him to employ me, and Bagrat promised to help.

The summer flew by quickly, and it was time for me and the kids to return to Baku. Mother had to stay with Yervand for a little longer. I remember that day, August 28, when we boarded a big bus and along with about thirty other passengers departed for Yevlakh Station to catch a train to Baku. The passengers on board ended up being very social. There were many stories told. We laughed at some jokes and sang songs. At the stop in Agdam, an Azerbaijani man got on the bus. He introduced himself as an Agdam Financial Inspector and told us a story about how two nights ago, three bandits made their way into

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<sup>185</sup> Central Executive Committee of Communist Party.

the office of the NKVD<sup>186</sup> chief of Agdam and shot him to death. Two of the attackers were detained, but the third one jumped out of the window and got away.

We continued our journey. It was close to ten o'clock in the evening, and we were about ten kilometers away from Yevlakh, near the small town of *Zyargar Tapa*, when our bus suddenly stopped. I looked through a window and saw a group of armed men surrounding the bus. I counted seven or eight peasant-dressed, bearded Azeri men in *papakhas*<sup>187</sup> armed with rifles and daggers hanging on their belts. The men began loudly and menacingly shouting, directing everybody to get off the bus with their belongings. It was scary. When everybody was out, the gunmen immediately apprehended the bus driver, ordered him to raise his hands over his head, and walked him away. They also grabbed the Financial Inspector, whom they knew by name, hit him several times on the head with the rifle butts, and took him away as well. The rest of the passengers were divided into two groups, a group of men and a group of women and children. I ended up separated from Enok and Lusik. Two of the bandits stayed to guard us, and the rest immediately pulled out daggers and began cutting the ropes that were used to tie passengers' luggage behind the bus. Hurrying each other, they began carrying things somewhere into the darkness. Finished with the luggage, bandits approached us and threatened us with the daggers, and demanded all the money and valuables. Seeing that they would reach me soon, I pulled out our travel money from my pocket and slipped them into my socks; however, frightened, I put it back in the pocket, and when one of the bandits approached me, I unquestioningly gave the

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<sup>186</sup> The predecessor of KGB.

<sup>187</sup> Mutton Fur hat worn in Transcaucasia and surrounding regions.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

money to him. Women took off their jewelry; one elderly woman had to remove the gold coins from her traditional Armenian women's head decoration. When the gang completed their detour, their leader commanded, "*Hamysini gyryn.*"<sup>188</sup> We all heard it. The women immediately broke into tears and pleaded for mercy. It was very scary. Next to me stood trembling a tall and lean man, the manager of the Stepanakert transportation department. I came up with the idea of slowly stepping back to hide in the dark. Keeping my hands up, I began backing away. However, as soon as I made two steps, one of the bandits hit me in the back and told me that he would kill me if I attempted it again. I obediently followed his order. A few minutes later, the bandits ordered us to get back on the bus, and two of them brought our driver. We quickly got on the bus, and it drove off. The gunmen were standing on both sides of the bus, thus reminding me of a firing squad and raising my great concern about their intention. We kept our breath short and lowered our heads down, so we could not be seen from outside. As the bus was passing the bandits, they began waving at us and scornfully mocking us with "*Yahshi yel.*"<sup>189</sup> It occurred to me that they might give a volley at the bus and kill us all at once. Seriously, why would they leave the corpses at the crime scene, if they could have the driver haul them away? Looking at other passengers, I saw in their eyes that this thought came not only to me. All the passengers rushed to the front seats and in one voice began screaming at the driver, "Drive! Push the pedal! Quickly! Come on, come on ...". In a few minutes and after making sure we were out of the shooting range, we finally calmed down a little and began to breathe more evenly. In the

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<sup>188</sup> Kill them all (Tur.)

<sup>189</sup> Have a nice trip (Tur.)

late evening, we finally made it to *Yeolakh*<sup>190</sup>. When the bus stopped, we like battered children began hugging and kissing each other. Some were crying and screaming, " Help us, we got plundered."

A crowd of sympathetic bystanders quickly formed around the bus. Soon arrived the town officials and escorted everyone to a hotel. Almost immediately, two militiamen began questioning us about the circumstances of the raid and making a list of the stolen items. Later, rumor had it that a group of the NKVD men had gone to the scene of the crime but was ambushed and disarmed. The town panicked. People fled to their homes, shops, and institutions that were still open. In the morning, people were talking about a reversed development of last night's NKVD raid. In this new version, the NKVD arrested eleven men, and we would soon be invited for their identification. And indeed, a couple of hours later a group of adult victims was taken to a Caravanserai. There in a courtyard stood several men guarded by armed militiamen. We were instructed to pass by each of the men and take a good look at them to see if we could recognize our offenders. But alas, how to recognize them, if none of them were bearded; however, some of them were freshly shaved though. Most of the men had no hats on them. One of them had a whip in his hand, another a wood stick. They all look like ordinary people, all seemed to be calm and looking indifferently at us. I went through in my turn, rather complete my civil duty than identify someone. The elder Armenian woman, whose gold coins were taken from her head ornament, recognized in one of them her abuser. Later, another woman identified another man who painfully twisted her hand and took off her diamond ring. These two men were put in a car

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<sup>190</sup> Railway junction town.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

and taken away, probably to prison. When we returned to the hotel, we were surprised to learn that one of the female passengers got one of her stolen suitcases back. To our question, the woman admitted that she managed to get it back because her brother worked in the militia and somehow found the suitcase. I had no doubts that the bandits were local militiamen, who, in collusion with our chauffeur, committed this scurf. By the way, we never learned the fate of the Finance Inspector. Perhaps he was the main target of the raid. My main concern now was to get out of the situation, as I ended up with no money and with two kids to take care of in the strange town. Fortunately, I was able to telephone Yervand in Stepanakert, and the next day our mother came to Yevlakh and brought us some money.

In my suitcase that was never recovered, among other things, there were several manuscripts of my plays and a couple of my dear books.

This is how this story with the big road bandits ended.



*Chapter 37 I Am a Salesclerk | The Meeting with Armenian Writers | First Love and Disappointment*

Bagrat kept his promise, and in the middle of September, he hired me as a salesclerk for a produce shop. It was a small satellite shop of a larger grocery store managed by Bagrat located in proximity. In the main store, there were two male clerks, an Armenian and a Mountain Jew, Haik, who both lived nearby. An elderly Azerbaijani worked in the produce shop. It was a clumsy, good-natured, big joker man with a few extra pounds.

At that time, workers and employees were entitled to receive provisional vouchers at their workplaces. The vouchers were good for a food purchase in limited quantities at a discounted price. For instance, there could be a voucher for 50 or even 100 kilograms of potatoes, etc. We always sold a lot of potatoes, delivered to us by truckloads and dumped into big piles directly on asphalt. Customers then would sort and pick potatoes on their own, directly from the pile, choosing the best and laying the rest aside. They would bring their potatoes to a clerk to weigh, show the voucher, and pay for them. By the end of my first working day, when there were no customers around, I noticed how my partner mixed the rejected potatoes back into the pile. To my astonished glance, he joked and explained to me that if he did not do it, tomorrow he would be walking without pants and in debt to Bagrat. When I heard that, the famous saying came to my mind, "If you are among the blind, better close your eyes." The same practice applied to the sales of other products. After some time, my partner quit the job due to some family circumstances, and I ended up working on my own.



## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

The time came when I began to pay attention to girls. In 1928, my sister Lusik had a friend by the name of Varduhi, who often visited our home. Slim and attractive, Varduhi became the first girl I laid my eyes on. We were friends and frequently met at the Lazovsky club. At that time, correspondence between young people was common, but with Varduhi, we did not make it that far. Without disclosing the details, I would say that I did not like something in her behavior, and our relationship ended in 1929 before it even really started. Years later, when I was already a married man, Varduhi, through my sister, began corresponding me some signs of sympathy, but they remained unrequited. She was still single at that time and lived with her mother. I have not seen her for a very long time, until last year<sup>191</sup>, when we accidentally ran into each other on the street. I hardly recognized her in a modestly dressed old woman and was surprised to learn that she had never married.

In the same year 1929, I met another girl; we became friends and began corresponding. Eliza was a pretty and cheerful girl with good manners, living a highly active life. She also lived in Armenikend and was active in the Lazovsky club, where she participated in the Drama club. I had serious intentions about Eliza, but my sister Lusik wanted me to get back with Varduhi and had repeatedly insisted on me breaking up with her. One evening, cheerfully pacing in high spirits of the excitement to see Eliza, I was heading to the Lozovsky club. I walked into the hall and found my Eliza smiling and dancing in the arms of some strange guy. Many young guys were standing around and watching the two dancing. Some of them were screaming indecent hints, encouraging my opponent to get closer to Eliza, but she continued dancing and laughing. The guy raised his

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<sup>191</sup> 1976

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

thumb, signing to his friends that everything is under control. I immediately left the club in anger and jealousy and went home. That night, I wrote Eliza an angry short letter. Unfortunately, I do not remember literally what I wrote there, but I remember that my message ended with a large and lyrical cross and my last words to her were, "This black X cross I am placing on you and all other girls." On the next day, through my friend, I sent this letter to Eliza and left her forever.

God works in mysterious ways. Four decades later in the early 70s, I met Eliza on my morning suburban train commute to work. It happened to be, that she was also working outside of the city in the small town of Kishli as an accountant. We talked for quite some time, reminiscing on our youth. During one of my regular trips, I returned two of her letters to me that I had preserved in my archive. She was very surprised to learn that I kept them all this time. Well, the time took its toll on Eliza. She looked much older than she was, was deaf and sluggish in her movements, and had wrinkled eyes. But her voice and glitter in her eyes remained the same as I remembered them. Later, I learned that she was childless and lived with her third husband. She divorced the first one and buried the second.

On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1929, the first conference of the Armenian and Azerbaijani writers<sup>192</sup> took place in Baku. I was among those invited. The meeting was held in the assembly hall in the present building of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. The Armenian delegation was represented by the prominent Armenian writers and poets, *Nardos, Atrpet, Vahan Mirakyan, Derenik Demirchyan, Vahan Totovents, Stepan Zoryan,*

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<sup>192</sup> Considering the constant tension between two nations, this was a positive step towards improvement of relation between two neighboring republics.

*Alazan*,<sup>193</sup> and others, headed by the famous Armenian writer and playwright Alexander Shirvanzade.

Standing on the podium, in a nice dark suit, with a smoothly shaven face and combed back grey hair, Shirvanzade gazed at the audience through his pince-nez, and in good Russian, opened the meeting by introducing the Armenian delegation. I sat in the hall and listened with fascination to the speech of Shirvanzade. "My secretary Alazan," he began in a firm voice, "...a young poet with a good future and the favorite of young ladies; Nardos is our talented writer, author of the novels, *Death, Killed Dove, and Friend*." At this moment, into the hall entered our famous and revered poet Avetik Isaakyan. Apparently, he was not daring to go to the presidium, and noticing an empty chair next to me, sat down, and looked around, slightly shaking his head in response to the greetings of others. Shirvanzade noticed Isaakyan's arrival and continued, "Let me introduce to you our famous poet Avetik Isaakyan. I'm not afraid to say that this is the most outstanding poet and unparalleled among us." Isaakyan, who apparently did not hear Shirvanzade, turned to me and asked, "What did he say?". I briefly repeated what was said. Meantime, Shirvanzade continued his speech, and next, he introduced Vahan Mirakyan and others. The introductory speech of Shirvanzade was followed by presentations of the writers from both delegations, and by the evening, the ceremonial part of the meeting was over. In the following days, the Armenian delegation met with the leadership of Azerbaijan and visited various enterprises of the republic.

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<sup>193</sup> Some writers were going by their pen names.

*Chapter 38 The Fallacy of the Youth that Almost Cost Me My Life*

I continued working on my own in the produce shop. Haik and I became friends, and we were often getting lunch together. Haik was a cheerful and energetic young man, younger than me by five years. He enjoyed the full confidence of Bagrat. One could say, he was his right hand, carrying out his various assignments, often associated with trips around the city. Haik knew when and how to keep his mouth shut.

One summer day, he suggested going to the *Primorski*<sup>194</sup> Boulevard after work and spending the evening together. We arrived from Bailovo to the city, and at the *Intourist*<sup>195</sup> Hotel, we boarded a phaeton that took us to the place where Lenin's Museum is located now. I told the coachman to wait for us here for a few hours and promised him good tips. I should mention that I had my three-day proceeds with me hidden under my shirt, as I planned to hand it over to a cashier in the morning. Haik and I strolled along the boulevard until we came across a big restaurant from *Narpit*,<sup>196</sup> located right on the seashore. We were seated and given a menu and began ordering food and drinks without even looking at their price tags.

The food was good, and we consumed it with a significant amount of alcohol. Several times I called a waiter to order more drinks and dessert, paying deliberately like a show-off, taking money out of the stock of banknotes from under my jacket. I remember how once again I called the waiter and told him to bring me a bottle of cologne. At this time, I noticed that Haik

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<sup>194</sup> The boulevard on the embankment in the center of Baku.

<sup>195</sup> Foreign Tourist.

<sup>196</sup> People Commissariat of Provision.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

was not at the table, and I did not see him in the restaurant's hall either. The waiter came back with a cologne. Laughing, I told him that he was a fine fellow and gave him ten rubles and asked him to bow. With gratitude, the waiter took the money and lowered his balding head towards me, and I, loudly laughing, poured the entire content of the bottle on his head. Pleased with the tip, the waiter walked away, wiping his head off with a towel. Haik soon returned, and intriguingly smiling, conspiratorially pronounced, "Let's go to women."

I immediately agreed, "Yea, let's go." We jumped into a phaeton. It was a different one because the one that was supposed to wait for us was gone. Haik named the address, and a few minutes later we were standing in front of a one-story house near the present Azerbaijan Drama Theater. We walked into a small courtyard where a young woman was already waiting for us at the door to the first floor. Haik told me that he would go with this woman, and I needed to go up to a balcony and pointed up to a tall, fat cow-like woman standing on the balcony wooden staircase. I turned to Haik and said that I am not that drunk to go with such a woman, but he was already gone. Reluctantly I began walking up the stairs, looking at the woman beckoning me with the movement of her index finger saying, "Oh, what a sweetheart. Come to me." She opened the door, and we entered a narrow, long, and dark corridor. The woman told me to follow her and warned me to be quiet, as her neighbors were already sleeping. I followed her, but my heart was restless. In the darkness, the woman opened another door. At this moment, I got a feeling of the danger of walking into a trap, and almost momentarily sobered up. We stepped into a room; to the right, there was a table with a few chairs, a simple

*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

iron bed opposite the table, and an old wardrobe, standing just a bit from the table.

“Take a seat, dear,” said the woman, patting my cheeks with her two fingers, and pointed me to a stool. She walked out of the room, having said she needed to wash her hands. My suspicions would not leave me alone. Is it really a trap? I sat down on the stool, took off my peaked cap, and put it on the table. Suddenly, I heard something like a quiet hoarse breath. I strained my ears and determined that the sound was coming from under the bed. Holding my breath, I ducked down and looked under it, and ...oh my God, there were legs of someone's pants, ending with a pair of two huge shoes. There was a man under the bed.

Mumbling some song under her nose, the woman returned to the room.

“Can I wash my hands too?”, I asked, unexpectedly.

“Sure, a hand wash basin is in the corridor.”

I got up from the table and walked out to the corridor. In the twilight, I noticed a glass door, opened it, and found myself on the balcony overseeing a street. I looked down. It was high, but with no hesitation, I jumped over the railing down onto the pavement. I landed unsuccessfully, badly hurting my right knee. In a minute, I heard someone shouting, “Bastard. Ran away, hmm...”. Right above me on the balcony stood a huge man menacingly waving his fists at me. In fear that this dude could come down and finish me off, I somehow crawled down the street for about a hundred meters, crossed the street, and took refuge in one of the entries into an apartment building. I stayed there for several hours until dawn then walked out and hired the first man that I found, who for the decent monetary reward, carried me on his back to my home.<sup>197</sup> After spending a

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<sup>197</sup> Distance of about 5 kilometers.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

week at home, I gradually began to recover and soon returned to work.

In a conversation with Haik, we concluded that obviously in the restaurant, the two women sitting at the table next to ours noticed that I had a large sum of money. They called Haik and asked him if we cared about their company. Haik suggested they join us at our table, but the women politely refused, referring to the late time, and offered us to come to their place instead. Haik agreed and went with them to find out where they live and then came back for me. Later, I was twice in that ill-fated area, but could not find the house. To my request to show me the house, Haik said that he had forgotten where it was. A lot of what Haik had said raised many questions I had no answers for. But one thing was clear, that night I was in great danger, but fate again was favorable to me.



*Chapter 39 Illness of Amalia and Enok | My Marriage*

I was making good money working in the produce shop, and after a while, I even began buying things for home: a samovar, a sewing machine, and a large figured antique cupboard, which we still have in our apartment.

Yervand with Grachiya and Zhanna continued to live in Stepanakert, and Amalia, the round-faced, red-cheeked little plump girl, was staying with us. I loved my niece very much and often was bringing her gifts. I hired a tailor to sew her a coat, a hat, and a hand sleeve out of red ivy, and often was taking her in this outfit with me to the Lozovsky club, where everyone admired her beauty and appearance. Suddenly, at the beginning of 1930, Amalia became ill. Neither treatment by home methods nor the efforts of a doctor did not work, and her condition continued to deteriorate. We were all very worried about her, and I was ready to do anything to help her get better. I found a well-known, private pediatrician, doctor Bron, and several times brought him in on a hired phaeton to see Amalia. As it turned out, she had bilateral lung inflammation, complicated by whooping cough. The poor girl suffocated from coughing attacks. She laid pale in the bed, groaned hoarsely, and rarely opened her eyes. It was hard looking at her without tears. I often held her in my arms and walked around the rooms. We ended up telegraphing Yervand, and soon he, Grachiya, and their little, blue-eyed Zhanna came to Baku and stayed with us until Amalia became better.

Back in 1928, Bagrat got under his control another, larger than his first, grocery store, conveniently located not far from each other. Bagrat reassigned me from the produce shop to the new store and hired another clerk. I was a hard worker, loyal to



## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

Bagrat, and deaf and blind when necessary. I realized that I was an unwitting accomplice in his under-the-counter schemes, but there were not many choices for me to choose, either you are in or out, with all the consequences of being unemployed. I was the only provider for our family, and I could not afford to lose a good job. Besides, Bagrat was my relative and my mother asked him to hire me. Bagrat was an influential person with good connections, an arrogant manager, strict with subordinates, and didn't give much slack to the customers. It seemed like he was not afraid of anybody. He often mentioned that in 1922 he served as the first Minister of Commerce of Armenia.

Since 1926, our Enok has been carried away by the music, and with Yervand's help, began learning how to play the mandolin. When he became a little older, he began attending the Lazovsky club too. In 1929, under the guidance of the famous tar player Misha Chagalov, the Orchestra of Folk Musical Instruments began functioning in the club. Enok joined the orchestra, and there he soon got attracted to the kamancha. He was often bringing the instrument home and practicing.

At about the same time when Amalia began recovering from her illness, Enok fell ill. He was lying in his bed and complaining about pain in his right side, nausea, and weakness. Even so, he sometimes quietly played his kamancha. We thought he just caught a bad cold and did not worry much about it. However, during one of the visits of our district doctor<sup>198</sup> Sveridov to see Amalia, we asked him to look at Enok too. After his examination, the doctor looked at us strictly and

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<sup>198</sup> People in the Soviet Union had been assigned to the polyclinic near their residence, and in cases when a patient had a fever or other conditions that prevented him or her to go to see a doctor, doctors per patient request would come and visit them at their homes.

said that he could not believe we waited for so long to call a doctor when the boy was in such a condition. He told us to immediately take Enok to a hospital and wrote a reference note for the admission. Overwhelmed by the bad news, I immediately ran out to get a phaeton, and with Yervand, we drove Enok to the Semashko Hospital, where he was operated on the same day for acute purulent appendicitis. According to his attending doctor, everything was so neglected that if we brought Enok two or three hours later, he could die of the rupture of the cecum with subsequent peritonitis. Enok lingered in the hospital for a long time. It was a pity to see him lying pale and exhausted, smelling badly of nauseating rot. He had to be operated on for the second time to remove the pus. I remember how during the first few days we fed him juice only, squeezing it out of fresh mandarins. A month later he was discharged from the hospital and gradually got back on his feet.

On March 1, 1930, Yervand and his family returned to Baku. In a couple of weeks, he found a job in the accounting department of the Centralize Produce Storehouse. At the same time, he began to direct a brass band with Sanai-Shirketi, and in the future, he dedicated himself to music.

Lusik had a school friend, Astghig, who was also going by Asya. Asya had often visited our home. We first became friends, and then in 1929, began corresponding and seeing each other. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1930, Asya and I held a solemn engagement, and three months later, on January 9, 1931, we got married.

The economic situation in the country in 1930 hanged for the worse; there was a shortage of food. The government had to introduce, the so-called Card system to control the distribution of food among the population. However, even with the cards in your hand, you still were not guaranteed to get the food. I have

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

done everything possible to ensure our family is provided for. Enok had often visited me in the store, and I was sending him home with a stock of sugar, tea, vegetable oil, etc.

In the middle of 1930, I quit Bagrat and took a transfer to work in a grocery store in *Bibi-Eibad* township, and a couple of months later, I was transferred again, this time to a grocery store # 72 in Bailovo. Unfortunately, I did not get along in the new place, to be precise, with one person, a guy by the name of Kolya. He was a notorious drunkard and brawler, who behaved defiantly towards me. Knowing that his brother was a militia inspector, I decided not to wait before things might take a nasty turn, and in July 1931, quit the job. I had begun looking for a new job, but nothing suitable was coming across.

Literally, at this time, someone told me that there was a man from Yerevan who arrived in Baku to recruit young Armenians for study in Armenia. I found and met this person, and without hesitation, wrote an enrollment application for the Philology Faculty to the rector of the Armenian State University.



*Chapter 40 Yerevan Medical Institute | Oriort Varsenik*

At the end of August 1931, I received a postcard in Armenian. It was a notification of my acceptance to the Armenian Medical Institute, with classes starting on September 1<sup>st</sup>. Guided by the course of my fate and hungry for education, I left my young wife, pregnant with our first child, and with two pennies in my pocket, I left for Yerevan. Much later, thinking about the correctness of my decision, I realized that this was a measured and determinant decision for me and my family. If I would not take advantage of this opportunity, what would be the prospects for my future? For health reasons, I was unfit for physical work, and my lack of education, poor Russian, and bad handwriting <sup>199</sup> would prevent me from succeeding in white-collar jobs.

It should be noted that in those days, to be admitted into a college, you did not have to take entrance exams. It was just enough to show a document of completion of high school. The preference for admission was given to representatives of the working class and peasantry, and only then to the people of the white color class and others.

Upon my arrival in Yerevan, I was given a place in the school dorm and began attending classes. I often corresponded with Asya: she was still working. In December, I received a telegram from Yervand notifying and congratulating me on the birth of my son. In January 1932, I went to Baku for the winter break. On my return to Yerevan, I took with me some tools from home, and upon my return, built a nightstand. I used it as a study desk

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<sup>199</sup> For an unknown reason, the author had a unique way of holding a pen or pencil. He was placing it between his index and middle fingers pointed down under an angle and supported the tip of the pen with his thumb.

and as my dining table and locker. The students at that time were entitled to receive one piece of laundry soap a month, but many, for some reason, were not taking it. I knew that in Baku, soap was in deficit, and began asking my classmates for their student IDs and was receiving their soap. I managed to collect fifty pieces of soap that way and stored them in my locker, now equipped with a padlock. Soon, I obtained permission to go home, and as a good student received a free pass for a train ride. On the stop in Tbilisi, where I had to change the train, I ran to the nearest bazaar and profitably sold ten pieces of soap, and with part of the earned money, bought some dried fruits and other sweets to take home.

My vacation flew by quickly, and I had to return to Yerevan. I noticed that in Baku, the calico fabric was much cheaper than in Yerevan. I sold the remaining soap and bought forty meters of calico and resold it in Yerevan with a good profit.

Living in the dorm was harsh. The building was still under construction, rooms were damp from the freshly plastered walls, and firewood for iron stoves to heat rooms was supplied with interruptions. Practically, students were left to live on their own. The supply manager of the school was a maiden in her fifties, a thin and intelligent person, whom everyone called *Oriort*<sup>200</sup> Varsenik. However, Oriort Varsenik was not a good fit for her position; she was lacking the skills needed for a successful manager. Once, there was an unpleasant incident, when a portable ladder, broke under one of the library employees, and she hurt herself. The ladder was needed for the library's normal functioning, and Oriort Varsenik was puzzled by how to fix it. I offered her my hands and had the ladder fixed by the next morning.

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<sup>200</sup> Miss (Arm.).

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

Happy Orion Varsenik promised to keep me in mind for any future needs for my carpentry skills.

At the end of the school year, during the summer break, I went to Baku for Asya and Yurik and brought them to Yerevan. Most of the students at this time were gone, and we moved into one of the vacant rooms.

On one occasion, Oriort Varsenik asked me to walk through the classrooms and examine all the benches and stools for needed repairs and told me to sort any out, for which she promised to pay me for the repairs. Armed with a hammer, I inspected about two hundred stools and benches and found only five or six of those that needed repairs. I was not very “pleased” with my finding but quickly came up with a solution plan. With the help of my hummer, I increased the amount of work to about eighty benches.<sup>201</sup>

I called Oriort Varsenik over. She came, examined my suspect holds, and agreed on a decent reward to fix them. She gave me some nails and then left. Per my estimate, it would take only a couple of hours to do the job, but of course, it was not in my best interest to finish it so quickly. Asya with Yurik came into the room. I told her the story, and we laughed at my undertaking. I worked unhurriedly over the repair, and only three days later, reported to Oriort Varsenik that her task had been completed. Over the summer, I did a lot of work for Oriort Varsenik: built new and fixed old animal cages, repaired laboratory cabinets, and even fixed the floor in one teacher’s house.

Yurik grew up a little and began to crawl, breaking and throwing everything he could get his hands on. The summer

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<sup>201</sup> The famous Russian proverb, “If you want to live well, know how to spin,” would be an appropriate explanation for this action.

break was about over, and students began to return to the dorm. Among them was Asya's younger brother Manvel. Last winter, not without my help, Manvel entered the preparatory branch of the Medical Institute, and now he was a freshman. I was worried about the time when all the students would return to the dorm, and we would have to vacate the room. I appealed to the People's Commissariat of Healthcare of Armenia with the request to help our family with housing. They must have called my school because I soon was invited to the dean's office and received the keys to one of the laboratory's rooms, where they used to keep animals. The room was awful, dark, impossibly dirty, and stinky. Windowsills, a door, and the door frame were torn, apparently by dogs. For the next three days, I secretly from Asya was scraping and cleaning walls. I brought in many buckets of water, and washed the floor, trying to bring the room to a presentable condition for Asya. However, my efforts turned out to be in vain, as Asya, perhaps influenced by her brother, decided to return to Baku.

My fate kept testing me; I was on my own again. It was hard to survive only on the 300 grams of bread I was getting daily with my bread vouchers. Most of the students were getting food parcels and money from home, but not me. Untidy and malnourished, I was doing my best. In other schools, especially agriculture and veterinary schools, students were receiving at least seven hundred grams of bread. Some schools even offered breakfast and hot lunches. To my disappointment, our school did not have such a privilege. Instead, we were assigned to a diner for unskilled construction workers. Outside of the diner, there were two huge wood-burning cauldrons, like those used to prepare bitumen for the roofing, where they cooked a soup. Believe me or not, the soup was made of sliced green tomatoes

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

and nothing else, not even a drop of oil. Hungry workers and students crowded around the cookers to get their bowl of this green gruel. Then, we had to go into the diner to get a second meal, usually, it was wheat or barley porridge with no meat. A food distributor would knock the porridge into your bowl with a ladle, and drop, depending on your luck, 30 to 40 grams of it onto your plate. The porridge came with two matchbox size pieces of bread.

At the end of the freezing January of 1933, Yerevan got pounded by unusually heavy snowfall that knocked down some dilapidated houses in our area. In addition to my constant malnutrition, now I was facing another challenge - the cold Armenian winter. My winter wardrobe consisted only of the worn coat I had bought for my trip to Kislovodsk and a pair of worn-out shoes. The City Council passed a decree obliging all institutions to clean the roofs of their buildings from snow. Once, I went to the office of Oriort Varsenik, and I found her talking with two men. As I understood, she was looking for someone to shovel the snow from the school buildings' roofs, but they did not agree on the price. I approached her and said that I could call a few friends, and we could get all the roofs clean for her. Having agreed on the price, I invited two students, the pockmarked guy Airapetyan Ruben and the lumpy giant Narinyan Avetis. They both were also from Baku. We climbed a fifty-meter roof and began to shovel the snow. We worked for two days; it was terribly cold and slippery, and we worried about falling off the roof. Yet, everything turned out all right, but not without any consequences. I caught a cold but soon recovered. Airapetyan was less lucky; he got bilateral pneumonia and was admitted to the hospital. Later, the poor man had to quit his studies and return to Baku, where he later



*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

died of tuberculosis. Avetis was not injured, but he was not a good student, and soon quit the school and returned home, where he later died of peritonitis after an operation for his appendicitis. During the summer break, I hardly managed to get the approval for my transfer to Baku and left Yerevan.



*Yerevan State Medical Institute*

*Chapter 41 Return to Baku | New Home | Hooligan's Story*

While I was still in Yerevan, Asya with her mother and Yurik went to Karabakh to visit her native village of *Dolanlar*.<sup>202</sup> That meant upon my return to Baku, I, at least for a while, would continue living a “bachelor” life. However, I was still happy being home. A few days later, Mother with sad eyes told me about the strange thing that happened in our home in my absence. A suitcase with some of my and Asya’s belongings disappeared from our room. It was a large, capacious suitcase where we kept the most valuable things, such as my dress costume, shirts, and Asya’s wedding dress, our wedding gift (a set of gilt glasses), new bedding, and other things. Asya and I occupied the smallest room in our apartment, the one in which my mother later stayed. The suitcase was always lying on the top of a dresser in our room, covered with a blanket. Its disappearance was strange because nothing else in the room, or the apartment, was lost. There was an impression that the thief was tipped by someone who had been in our apartment and was familiar with its layout, and possibly even with the suitcase contents. Regardless of how this mystery remains unsolved.

On the first day of September, I began attending classes at the Azerbaijan Medical Institute, and a few weeks later, with Yervand’s help, got myself a job. Yervand had a brother-in-law by the name of Dzhumshud Tumasov, who was the director of a sewing shop located on April 28<sup>th</sup> Street, and per Yervand’s request, he hired me to work there. Dzhumshud was a good man and a great administrator.

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<sup>202</sup> Currently, Arevashat (arm.), translates as Sunny.

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

My working day began at three in the afternoon and ended at eleven in the evening. My job responsibility was to buzz at every hour for a ten-minute break for employees. The rest of the time, I was free to study for my classes. The shop worked on a two-shift schedule, employing about two hundred workers, and operating on the principle of accepting individual orders for tailoring clothes from customers' provided fabric and other materials, including fur. There were only a few master furriers.

In the fall of 1933, my family received an order and keys for a room in the basement of an apartment building standing next to the building where we lived with Yervand. The room used to be a pantry for tenants. I remember how Mother and I broke the cement floor and dug down to about a half of a meter to increase the height of the room, as it was extremely low. Quietly and secretly from our neighbors, we collected cement scrap and dirt, carried them away from the building, and scattered it in different places. When we got done with the groundwork, I poured concrete on the floor, painted the ceiling and walls, and did some carpentry work. In October, Asya and Yurik returned from Karabakh, and we moved into our new place.

During my free time at work, I occasionally walked around the shop and watched the process and single operations. Observing the furriers and how they use patterns to create a component or the entire piece of cloth of the right size, as well as their fur cutting and sewing techniques, I soon mastered the skill of sewing coat collars. Housekeeping in the shop was poor; piles of fabric and fur trim accumulated on the floor under the worktables and were rarely swept and scrapped. I noticed that among the scrap were many small but still sizeable pieces of fur. With the permission of the craftsmen, I began collecting those pieces, secretly made copies of the patterns, and began

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

fabricating fur collars at home. As I have mentioned, the room we moved into was very small, but it was adjoined by a tiny kitchenette, where I set up to sew the collars.

Every week I fabricated two to three collars and sold them on Sundays at a flea market. I also sold some to female students at my school. It was a good boost to our family budget. Considering me receiving bread vouchers at school and work, I would say we were doing not too bad.

One day in the spring of 1934, a young man approached me at work and asked me to call him over his uncle who worked at the shop. The young man was interested in updates on his order of a coat for his wife. I recognized this guy right away but did not show it. He was one of the notorious scoundrels, who terrorized Armenikend with fights and robberies. There were still ten minutes before the next break, and I told him that he would have to wait. We sat down, the guy looked at me and suddenly pronounced, "Hey, I know you. Do not be surprised, but a few years ago, I and my friends wanted to kill you." I looked at him with dismay and surprise, knowing who I was dealing with. But the guy continued, "We wanted to kill you because of one girl.

If you remember, I approached you at the Lozovsky club and wanted to entice you to go with me to the abandoned eastern part of the 26 Baku Commissars Park, making up a story about a guy whose sister you molested, and now he was waiting for you there to settle things down. Meantime, my friends were hiding there to finish you off, but then a boy came up to you, and you had left with him, promising to return, but you never did. "

I remembered this story. It was Enok who came for me at the request of Mother. At that time, our aunt's<sup>203</sup> husband from

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<sup>203</sup> The author obviously meant his aunt Guli.

Stavropol was staying with us for a few days and was leaving to go back home that day, and Mother wanted me to take our guest to the train station. I had to rush home and could not return to the club that night. "Two weeks later," continued the guy, "we were sitting and drinking at my uncle's house and talking about you, and our debt to kill you."

At this moment, one of the workers came up to me and interrupted our conversation, "Are you sleeping *gatso*?<sup>204</sup> Did you forget to give us a buzz? I need a smoke." I looked at my watch. Oh my God, I delayed the break for ten minutes. I quickly pushed the button, and all workers began coming out to the street, among them was my interlocutor's uncle. The guy immediately turned to him and asked, "Uncle, do you remember, about six years ago we sat at your place and were talking about killing a guy by the name Ashot? This is the guy." His uncle came up to me and embraced me in such a manner like he wanted to protect me from someone, and ironically said to his nephew, "Oh! rascal! Oh! charlatan! Ashot is such a nice, modest guy. Why did you want to kill him?"

Ten minutes passed, and I called from the break. When all people walked back to work, I said to the guy, "Why did I have to be killed because of some girl? If you could have just told me to leave her alone, it would all end there. She wasn't the last girl. There were plenty of others.", "Yes, you are right, but who then was thinking about it? We were young, and our blood was hot. "We said goodbye to each other and went separate ways to never see each other again.

Of course, I did not really believe they would kill me then, but they could have beat me hard.

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<sup>204</sup> A young man (Georgian).

## *Through the Crucible of Life Part II*

At the end of the school year, our institute was organizing anti-malarial brigades to inspect remote districts. I volunteered to go and joined two doctors as a paramedic and spent the next two months in Kirovabad. Because of this trip, I had to resign from my job at the shop, where I worked for the last eight months.

In the summer of 1935, at the end of my fourth year in the Medical Institute, as part of my training program, my classmate, Yervand Manukyan, and I were sent to the Mardakert district of NKAO. The harvest season was in progress, and we spent the first two weeks in the fields near the village of *Margushevan*, and the rest of my training time I worked as a physician in the Mardakert dispensary. The trip was very educational; I benefited greatly from my observations and the things that I had learned.



*Through the Crucible of Life Part II*



Ashot and Asya with Yurik. Baku September 1935



Ashot and Asya with friends





*PART III*  
*DR. KOCHAROV*







*Chapter 42 In Martuny | My First Medical Position |  
Zorik*

At the beginning of 1936, after successfully passing the Federal Examination, I received my doctor's license, and per the order of the People's Commissariat of Health, was assigned to work in NKAO. Upon my arrival in Stepanakert, and reporting to the Region Health Department, I was appointed to the post of the Chief physician of Martuny district hospital and dispensary in the village of Martuny.

I had never been to Martuny before and found it to be a hot, dusty, not-so-green town located amongst bare hills. As I was entering the hospital, I almost collided with a man in a white medical gown. It was Dr. Mesrop Shatakhyan, who I knew from my years at the Yerevan Medical Institute, where he was studying on a course ahead of me. Mesrop, originally from Armenia, worked in the hospital per the same job placement order as I and lived here with his mother. In the late afternoon, I met with District Health Inspector Anna Barsamova. She introduced herself, and after a short conversation, she suggested that I should rest today and report to HR tomorrow morning. My day was long, and I did not mind doing it. At late night, Mesrop stopped by and told me that his mother was never happy here, and had long insisted on their return to Armenia, often crying and scolding. He would want to leave, but the Ministry of Health would not let him go, referring to the lack of doctors to replace him. However, now with my arrival, the situation changed, and he decided to leave tomorrow and asked me to keep our conversation a secret. By noon the next day, the hospital already knew that Dr. Shatakhyan had fled. Barsamova

asked me if I knew anything about Shatakhyan's whereabouts, but I said that I did not.

On the same day, I officially took the office as the Chief Physician. The hospital building had four wards: one male, one female, and two maternity wards. It also housed the office of the District Health Inspector, a waiting room for outpatients, and procedural and dentist offices. In the basement, there were a food storeroom and a laundry room. A small kitchen building stood nearby outside of the hospital. The staff was small and consisted of two paramedics, a medical practitioner Benik Karamyan, an experienced elderly midwife Glafira Sergeevna Romanova, several nurses, and technical personnel.

At lunchtime, a teenage boy came up to me and said that his father invites me to their garden. I had no idea who that could be, but the boy was so persistent that I had to give in. The boy led me to the garden at their house, where I found a group of men and women sitting around the table under the shade of a grapevine. We all met; the host's name was Madat. While we were having a conversation, women began servicing the table by bringing in plates of fresh, right from their own garden vegetables, salads and other snacks, kebab, and drinks. Madat and I became very close friends in the future. During all thirteen years of my service in Martuny, we worked and often spent time together. Since the day of my final departure from Martuny in 1951 and to this day, we are still regularly corresponding.

A few weeks later, after I arrived in Martuny, Barsamova left for Baku with her husband for a vacation, and a month later, the District Executive Committee received a letter from the Republican People Commissariat of Health stating that Dr. Barsamova, who worked in the district for three and a half

years, was now released from her duty in Martuny, due to family circumstances. On the same day, by the order of the District Executive Committee, I was appointed to the position of District Health Inspector. Later, this position changed its title to the Head of the District Health Care Department.

I moved into the apartment vacated by Barsamova, and in December 1936, Asya and Yurik came to stay with me.

At about the same time, Dr. Medjid Medjidov joined our hospital as an infectious disease specialist, specializing in malaria treatment. Later, in 1937, our staff grew by two more doctors.

Things were going well for Yervand as well. He organized and directed a jazz orchestra and became a quite famous maestro in Baku. He worked in *Azgostrada*<sup>205</sup> and performed in the city Officers Club, concurrently at a cinema theater, and later in the Intourist hotel. I remember seeing posters in large colorful font announcing, "The Concert of a Jazz Orchestra under the direction of Y. Kocharov." During one of my trips to Baku, I went to see two of Yervand's concerts in one day, one in Dzerzhinsky Park and the other in the Intourist hotel.

In the summer of 1937, I began working on remodeling the hospital. I demolished the walls between several small rooms, thus widening the corridor and creating two additional decently sized offices. Then, I bought paint in Baku, found, and hired a brigade of painters, and arranged their arrival in Martuny. They repainted all the rooms with oil paint, which at that time was a novelty for Karabakh. The exterior walls of the hospital had never been plastered and had numerous cracks favored by birds for nesting. I hired more artisans who plastered and whitened them. Later, I built 255 meters long and 1.5 meters high stone

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<sup>205</sup> Government body overseeing all activities of the Estrada genre.

fence around the hospital. Over the fence, I had artisans install half-meter tall, beautiful, wooden grills. A heavy-duty wooden gate completed the work. Now, the hospital was well protected from unexpected guests, livestock, and animals.

The hospital, except for a mare going for some reason by the male name Zorik, did not have its own transportation. Zorik was mainly used to deliver water from *kyagriz*<sup>206</sup> for hospital needs. Occasionally, I used Zorik for my business trips. Zorik was a light chestnut color and riding her was just a pleasure. She walked with her head up at a steady and even pace. You could even drink a glass of tea and not worry about spilling it. Zorik was well-subordinated to the commands, and the whip in my hands was just a formality. However, as in one saying, "There is always a drop of tar in a barrel of honey," the horse had one bad habit. Sometimes it stumbled on its right front leg, and a couple of times I fell from it and got slightly hurt. Asya also traveled on Zorik. Once in the autumn of 1937, I had to go to Stepanakert on an official business. I saddled Zorik, and we set off on the shortest road that went through the village of Ningi and further through Haghorti. Past Haghorti, all the fields, and hills along the road were strewn with flocks of sheep led by *chabans*<sup>207</sup> from the summer pastures. Suddenly, I heard loud barking and saw a pack of about two dozen huge, monstrous, shepherd dogs rushing in my direction. There were no doubts of their intention. Fearing for my life, I turned off the road and led Zorik to the nearest tree, which happened to be a tall pear tree, and managed to get on it straight from the horse and climbed up. Frightened by the approaching barking, Zorik zigzagged and disappeared into a nearby gorge. I did not have

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<sup>206</sup>A spring.

<sup>207</sup>Shepherds.

to wait long for my pursuers. Huge watchdogs surrounded the tree and began jumping up in the air trying to reach me. Their snarling and salivating jaws, armed with huge fangs, were sometimes in the range of my hand reach. I began shouting for help, but shepherds were too far away to hear me, and probably in half an hour, someone heard me, and shepherds came and drove the dogs away. Only after I was convinced that the shepherds with the dogs retreated to a safe distance, did I come down from the tree and went to look for Zorik.

However, my adventures with Zorik were not over yet. On the evening of the next day, I was on my way home from Stepanakert, and while passing by a collective farm, five or six sheepdogs jumped out of the dark and loudly barking, rushed towards me. The area around the road was open, and there were no trees that I could see. Zorik, as if she assessed the situation, turned into a full gallop. I sat firmly in the saddle but was afraid that Zorik would stumble again, and I would fall as easy prey for the dogs. Fortunately, this did not happen, and soon the barking began to subside and stopped altogether. It sounded like the dogs turned back to the farm. After making sure that we were safe, I stopped the horse and dismounted. My poor, glorious Zorik stood all wet and was trembling, and so was I. Feeling deep gratitude, I hugged Zorik by the head and kissed her several times. I took Zorik by the bridles, and walking side by side, we continued our journey. After letting Zorik rest for about half an hour to come to herself, I got back on the saddle, and we got home by midnight.

For many years, Zorik served faithfully, but time had been taking its toll. She slowly grew old, became blind, and died in 1943. It happened when I was out of town. Some day in the autumn of 1937, I came out of the hospital and noticed



a private phaeton that just returned with passengers from Agdam. Suddenly an unexpected idea came to me.

I approached the cabby and asked him if he were willing to sell me his horse and the phaeton. He said he would not mind selling it for the right price and asked for ten thousand rubles. However, after bargaining, we agreed on seven thousand two hundred rubles. Now our hospital had decent transportation.

1938 was the most successful and fruitful year of my work in Martuny on improving the quality of medical services and its territorial expansion. Back in 1937, I concluded that it was time to think about the further renovation of the hospital. The main reason for this decision was the close location of the outpatient rooms to the hospital wards. The doors of the offices and wards were coming out into the same narrow corridor. During the reception of outpatients, the corridor became overcrowded and noisy. In addition, in cold seasons, visitors would bring in dirt and mud, thereby violating the basic standards of hygiene. I could no longer tolerate such a situation and decided to proceed with the implementation of my plan. I made a deal with Tagavert collective farm, located about fifty kilometers from Martuny, for the purchase and delivery of one hundred twenty, four-meter-long oak beams. At the same time, I bought a lot of shingles and stones and had them stocked at the construction site of the new outpatients' hospital unit. According to my verbal description of the building floor layout, one engineer from Stepanakert drew me an architectural plan, and we proceeded to work on concrete foundations and masonry. The work was on the schedule, but we lacked wood boards. I ended up reaching out to the People's Commissariat of Health for help, and with great difficulty, was able to purchase, not wood boards though, but logs. A month later, they were delivered to

the Goradiz railway station. By that time, I had already hired a team of saw millers to saw the logs into boards. Work again began to boil, and six months later, the construction of the new outpatient unit was complete. It housed a couple of offices, eight doctor's rooms, and a good size waiting room. With this new addition, the hospital could now accommodate up to 45 inpatients.

At a decent distance from Martuny, there was the territory called *Agburun* stretching right up to the town of Agjabedi. This territory was well known for its vast sowing areas, where during harvesting, worked a significant number of collective farmers from the nearest districts. Malaria, dysentery, snake bites, and work-related injuries were common occurrences among the workers, and we had to maintain our medical personnel there. As I have mentioned, we did not have reliable transport for such distant trips. In the understanding of our needs, the Region Health Department provided us with a temporary lorry, which enabled us to arrange frequent trips of medical brigades to the fields and remote villages.

Soon, near the hospital, by the order of the Commissariat of Education, a kindergarten and a maternity hospital were built. In the next two years, I expanded the provision of medical services to the population by opening paramedic posts in the villages of Karakend, Kendhurd, Mingy, Gavakhany, Tsovatekh, Sykhtorashen, and lowland villages of Kuropatkin and Gevorkavan. During the same period, I attained the opening of medical posts in Chertaz and Norshen and upgraded the status of the Karakend paramedic station to a medical station, providing all three with horses, so doctors could make visits to the nearby village.

*Chapter 43 In Search for Father's grave | Benik Karamyan*

Literally, from the very first days of my service in Martuny, I dreamed of going to Shusha and visiting my father's grave, but such an opportunity has never arisen yet. Once, being in Stepanakert on official business and having a car and a driver at my disposal, I decided on the way back home to make a stop at Shusha. I bought some food and drinks and went on the road that looped up all the way to the town. As we were approaching the outskirts of the town, I noticed a cemetery and pointed it to my chauffeur.

My problem was that I had never been to my father's grave and did not know its exact location. In that severe winter of 1919, the day of my father's funeral, I stayed at home with my sick mother and kids. However, in 1914, when I was nine, I attended my grandmother's funeral and knew that on her first-year death anniversary a large tombstone was placed over her grave; I also knew that my father was buried next to my grandmother. Having all this in mind, I was confident that I would be able to find my father's grave by finding the tomb of my grandmother. I was even thinking about talking to Yervand about transferring Father's remains to Baku. The chauffeur was aware of the purpose of this trip and parked the car at the entrance to the cemetery. I knew approximately which way to go, and soon reached that place and began to search for my grandmother's tomb. But everything around was in vain. I walked along and across all the nearest graves but could not find the one I was looking for. Resentment and the rushing memories of my father excited me to the depths of my soul. Frustrated and with tears in my eyes, I furiously continued my

search, moving from stone to stone, desperately calling for Father, "Papa, Papa! Where are you, my father? I've been looking for you." Over the decades, many tombstones in the abandoned cemetery collapsed, and it could have happened with my grandmother's tombstone as well. It could have fallen with the inscription down and be the reason I would not be able to find it. A long time passed before I heard the voice of my chauffeur shouting from the top of the hill, "Doctor, we must go. Look, it is already dark." Exhausted and depressed, I got into the car, and we drove back to Martuny. Determined, a few months later, I made another unsuccessful attempt to find Father's grave.

Every year Mother visited us in Martuny in the summers, and sometimes she and my family were vacationing in Kendhurd, Karakend, Haghorti, or Gishi. On one such trip to Kendhurd, Mother, Yervand, Enok, and I went to Shusha. Again, we walked for a long time among the tombstones looking for our father's grave. At one moment we heard Mother's voice and saw her leaning over a fallen modest tombstone, and preaching, "*Khagortetsi*<sup>208</sup> our children have already grown up and live well. Only you left us so early." We, the brothers, exchanged glances. Our faces shone with joy and undisguised satisfaction; finally, we found our father. Unfortunately, our jubilation was short-lived. Mother suddenly got up from her knees and said that she was wrong, and it wasn't our father's grave. We kept searching but found nothing. To this day, sad thoughts and memories of my unfortunate father have not left me. Having lived a short and hard life, he left this world without a trace.

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<sup>208</sup> Resident of the village of Khagorty (Arm.). Mother never addressed her husband by name.

We did not even have a single photo of him, as he was never photographed.

In 1938, the constructions of a kindergarten and a maternity hospital were finally complete. Well-equipped, spacious, and bright rooms of the kindergarten could accommodate up to sixty children. The first head of the nursery was my wife Asya, who previously worked in the Health Department as a secretary.

On August 3, 1939, in Martuny was born our beloved daughter, *Irochka*.<sup>209</sup> In 1940, we solemnly celebrated her first birthday in Kendhurd.

I continued working on expanding the geography of medical services. In the summer, per my agreement with the Tagavert collective farm, I received a warehouse building located on a hill near the village of Red Bazaar at the disposal of the District Health Department and began to repair it. After the renovation of this two-story building, we organized several wards and offices for outpatient patients on the second floor, and on the first floor, a dining room, laundry, and storerooms. Upon completion of the construction, the medical center in Tagavert was transferred to Red Bazaar. Doctor Allahverdyan agreed to relocate to her new place, where to this day she continues working as the head of the hospital for over forty years and earned the recognition title of the Honored Doctor of Azerbaijan. Along with Dr. Allahverdyan in the same hospital worked my dear friend Benik Karamyan. I visited them in 1974; the hospital was even more expanded and well-organized, and the staff worked together as a team.

Benik graduated from the Stepanakert Medical College in 1936, the same year when I graduated from my medical school

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<sup>209</sup> Diminutive for Ira.

and was commissioned to work in Martuny as a paramedic. By the time of my arrival at Martuny, he had already worked there for about a month. I immediately liked him for his modesty, honesty, and responsible attitude towards his work. Benik was an educated and knowledgeable paramedic, and I respected and trusted him with everything. He has never given me a reason to regret it.

One day in June 1938, Benik persuaded me to go with him to his village, Tagavert, to pick cherries for jam. I agreed, and we went there on the phaeton. The coachman was a nice Russian guy by the name of Kolya, who got us to the village before dusk. In the morning, we grabbed some food and drinks to go and went to the garden. There, among other trees, grew three cherry trees. We had a good time picking cherries from the trees and having a picnic under a mulberry tree. Having picked two large wicker baskets of cherries, we hung them on both sides of the phaeton and set off to return to Martuny. We descended to Red Bazaar. The road then went along a plain and later up the hill towards Mt. Khyazaz. Our horses were strong and well-fed, so we easily reached the top of the mountain and began going down a loopy road towards the river near Amaras monastery. It was a wide dirt road with low or no shoulders, in parts passing dangerously close to precipices into a deep gorge.

As we began to descend the horses began accelerating and going faster and faster. I had noticed that Kolya was having a hard time keeping them under control, and when they went to a gallop, I realized that we were in serious danger. Benik and I jumped to our feet and kept anxiously watching the development of the situation. I shouted to Kolya to be careful and to try to stop the horses. Rising clouds of dust made visibility difficult, but I noticed a small section of a straight road

ahead of us and hoped Kolya would also see it and manage to stop the phaeton. However, we momentarily slipped through the straight portion of the road, and our phaeton, like a feather driven by the wind, continued scudding down. Kolya vainly did everything possible to hold up the horses. However, they continued their impetuous movement, and it became clear that this adventure would not end well. I shouted to Benik to jump and jumped myself. I am not sure how many times I rolled over on the ground, but when I got up to my feet, I felt pain in one of my knees and shoulders. Lame, I ran down the road, and passing several turns, found Benik sitting on the roadside. Seeing me and my miserable appearance, I was completely covered in dust and my shirt, tie, and trousers were torn apart, Benik was barely suppressing his laughter. "Oh, Doctor, what's the matter?". His remark made me laugh too, as he did not look any better. "Where's the phaeton?", I asked Benik, but he had no idea. I ran forward, and my limping friend followed me. Past another turn, we found Kolya sitting in dust right in the middle of the road, weeping and nervously fingering in his hands what was left of the reins. The phaeton was not around, and Kolya did not know what happened to it. Oh my God, this was all I needed then.

The late 30s were rough years.<sup>210</sup> If something, God forbid, happened to the horses or the phaeton, these cherries could turn out to be a big problem for me. For the damage to the state property, I could be put on trial, and with the help of my "well-wishers", accused of deliberately damaging the state property, which was a much more serious accusation.<sup>211</sup> But my luck was

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<sup>210</sup> The Great Purge or the Great Terror was a campaign of political repression in the Soviet Union which occurred from 1936 to 1938.

<sup>211</sup> Accusation of being the enemy of the people always meant detention in the

still with me. We found the horses and the phaeton less than a quarter of a mile down the road, standing safe and sound, surrounded by a group of collective farmers. As it turned out, the horses somehow caught the clay fence with the harness and stopped. A brigadier of the farmers invited us to a small factory, where during the mulberry harvest season, they were brewing moonshine, better known as arakh and tutovka. We washed the horses and the phaeton, washed, and treated our bruises with arakh compress, and brought ourselves to order. Our host treated us with some food and arakh. We rested in high spirits and set off on the road, cheerfully recalling our adventure.

In the same of 1938, at Benik's request, I hired a native of Kaghartsi, a graduate of the Stepanakert Medical College, medical assistant Rebekapo Avakyan. I had a vacant position in Kaghartsi and appointed her there as the head of the paramedic office. Later, I learned that Benik and Rebekapo knew each other from the same college and were in relation. They got married the next year.

In the summer of 1940, an intelligent and far-sighted Benik shared with me his dream to continue his education at the Yerevan Medical Institute but was afraid of taking exams. I decided to help my friend and turned to the Director of Martuny High School whom I was well acquainted, and he issued Benik the Certificate of an Honor student, which allowed him college admission without taking exams. I was deeply sorry to let my good friend go but really wanted his cherished dream to come true. By the autumn, Benik left for Yerevan and began his studies. When we opened a new hospital in Red Bazaar, I transferred Rebekapo there, where she still works as a paramedic for thirty-seven years now.

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concentration camps, AKA Gulag.



### *Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

In 1941, Benik was drawn to the front as a medical assistant. After the war, he continued his study in Yerevan, and for every summer break, visited Red Bazaar. Near Red Bazaar there was the village of *Sukhtorashen*<sup>212</sup> with its own paramedic station. I transferred the head of the station to another place and appointed Benik to the vacancy, giving him the salary of the assistant of the State Health Inspector. Later, when I was no longer working in Martuny, Benik graduated from the institute and became a doctor, and was appointed the head of the Chertaz medical station. In 1959, vacationing in Karabakh, I visited Chertaz and spent two wonderful days with Benik. A year later, my friend moved to work in Red Bazaar, where he still works as a surgeon in the hospital.

My brother-in-law Manvel graduated from the Yerevan Medical Institute in 1937 and married his classmate Anik (Anna) Agalarova. In 1940, he was drawn to the Army<sup>213</sup>, and Anik with their six-month-old daughter Elmira had to move to Baku to stay with Manvel's parents. After a while, I arranged for Anik to work in Martuny. From the very first day of work, Anik showed herself as a courteous, industrious, and responsible employee, and soon won the sympathy of the entire team.



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<sup>212</sup> Garlic village.

<sup>213</sup> Read my comments above.

*Chapter 44 The Beginning of War | Trip to Tbilisi*

Left without Benik, I only once went with inspections to different villages, accompanied by my new paramedic Musheg Grigoryan. Musheg was an amazingly quiet and reticent person, which alone did not prevent him from being a good executive specialist. He was indifferent to literature and music, did not play any board games, and in companies sat silent and serious. Musheg was a great guy, but he could not replace my all-around developed friend Benik.

On that last trip on Saturday, June 21, 1941, Musheg and I stopped for the night in Norshen. On the next morning, we went to visit Karakend, and after finishing our business there, we had a bite and headed back to Martuny. Sunday afternoon turned out to be extremely hot, and we stopped at a river, bathed, took a short rest, and set off to continue our trip in the late afternoon. A few kilometers to Martuny, we met a man in his sixties walking toward us, leading on a leash a donkey laden with a pile of freshly cut grass and a boy, most likely his grandson, sitting on the top of the pile. I must say that the man drew my attention with his outrageous appearance. Firstly, he was red-haired and had a big red *Budyonov*<sup>214</sup> style mustache. Secondly, he had an old military cap with a varnished leather visor. Such caps were worn before the 1917 revolution in the Czar Nicholas times. We greeted each other, and I curiously asked the man if he had served in the tsarist's army. The man responded positively and added that he had even managed to be captured by Germans. Then, he asked us if we knew about the radio announcement, and added, "Germans have gone to

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<sup>214</sup> Legendary Red Army cavalry commander, famous for his big, long, and dense mustache.

war with us again.” I did not take the man’s words seriously and only replied that they would not dare attack us again, and we walked away.

When we got to Martuny at dusk, the town looked unusually dark; there were no lights in windows and on streets’ lamp poles. Seemed like something was going on, people in a hurry were walking in different directions and there were horsemen in uniform going from house to house, calling men to the *Voenkomat*.<sup>215</sup> I went there too and joined the crowd of draftees and their relatives gathered around the building. Work in the Commissariat was in full swing: standing and walking around military and perturbed civilians, abuzz conversations, endless phone calls, shouting, and weeping of women, etc. In a word, real chaos reigned in the Commissariat. We were first ordered not to disperse and wait, but later were dismissed and instructed to report back first thing in the morning. On the next morning, before going to the Commissariat, I stopped at work. There I learned that my bookkeeper’s, Ivan Antonetz’s, desk was sealed yesterday, and he was drafted into the army. I also learned that a military medical commission was created, and I was appointed its chairman. Those men and women from Martuny and the nearest villages that were subject to conscription were taken for the medical examination. If found fit for service, they would be dispatched to the army. In the first week of July, a few of my paramedics and nurses had been drafted and sent to the front.

Musheg was drafted a little bit later and sent to the front, where he was captured by Germans, and returned home only in 1946. A year later, he married a young paramedic Goharik, and in another year, Musheg, as a prisoner of war, was sentenced

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<sup>215</sup> Military Commissariat.

along with his wife and one-year-old son to be deported to the Altai Territory in the Far East. In 1964, Musheg returned home, where he still lives with his family and works in Martuny.

Soon, food and other supplies disappeared from stores' shelves, and life became harder. A few months into the war, in the town streets appeared first wounded, and many households had begun receiving the Death notices for the fallen soldiers.

In August of 1942, I received a telegram with the order to report to the Main Central Sanitary Administration of the Transcaucasia Front in *Tbilisi*.<sup>216</sup> On my departure, I took with me a few bottles of *tutovka*<sup>217</sup> and pastries. Manvel's wife Anik gave me another bottle of arakh for her mother living in Tbilisi. I also had another place to visit. In Tbilisi lived Uncle Simon and Aunt Olenka, our good neighbors in Shusha.

Upon my arrival in Tbilisi, I first went to visit Anik's mother, where I was planning to stay overnight, but nobody answered the door. From the next-door neighbors, I found out that they were at their *dacha*.<sup>218</sup> I had to return to the train railway station to drop off my suitcase in the storage room. Then, I headed to Uncle Simon's place, where I was cordially greeted as a loved one. On the very next morning, prepared for the worst, I headed to the Sanitary Administration, but the head of HR was out of the office, and I was told to report back in a few days. I had never been to Tbilisi before, so I took this opportunity to see the city.

On the third day of my waiting, I met a young Armenian paramedic, who like me came to Tbilisi for the mobilization.

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<sup>216</sup> The capital city of Georgia also known by its Georgian name Tiflis.

<sup>217</sup> Mulberry vodka was strongly associated with Karabakh and considered as a good gift to others.

<sup>218</sup> A vocational home or a cabin outside of a city.

When she found out my name and where I came from, she suddenly asked me if I was the same Dr. Kocharov who saved many people from snake bites. She read about it in the Armenian newspaper *Communist*.<sup>219</sup> I admitted that I was the Dr. Ashot Kotcharov she read about. During our conversations, I learned that she was married, her husband was fighting at the front, and that they had a two-year-old daughter, who she left with her relatives. I also learned that she worked as a midwife somewhere near Kirovabad, and here in Tbilisi, she was staying at her husband's aunt's place. Through my conversation with her, another day of waiting went by quickly. When the time came to say goodbye, the woman invited me to go with her to her aunt's, but I refused. In my opinion, it would not be appropriate if she showed up at her husband's aunt with a stranger. However, she said she already thought about it and would introduce me as her brother, whom the aunt has never seen. I was still hesitant and resisted her proposal, but in the end, gave in to her perseverance. The woman pointed a finger at the nearest window and said that her aunt was there and standing outside waiting for her to come out. I looked and there was an elderly woman. I met the aunt, and we went to her place. They lived near the railway station in a big old house. I found the aunt to be truly kind and hospitable. She was living with her husband and a daughter who served in Tiflis as an anti-aircraft gunner and was coming home only once a week. They also had a son who was fighting in surrounding Stalingrad, but they had not received letters from him for a long time. Soon, Aunt's husband returned from work, who happened to be my namesake Kocharov. He was a polite and serious man, the director of some salt supply company. I spent

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<sup>219</sup> On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1941, there was an article about the author.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

two days with these hospitable people. Every evening before coming to their home, I was buying the famous *Kakhetian*<sup>220</sup> wine in a neighboring shop, and we had a good time at the meal. I went out several times with the woman to walk around the city. I want to make sure my reader would not develop any misconceptions about my relationship with this young woman; it was purely reciprocal friendship. Two days later, my new friend, as the mother of a young child, was released from the military service. I took her to the railway station and helped her to get through the crowd of other passengers to her carriage. We quickly said goodbye, and I raised her in my hands and squeezed her through the partially open window into her carriage compartment. I had to return to her aunt's place for my belongings, but nobody was home. I knew where they were hiding the door key and got into the apartment. I stayed there for a while, hoping to get to see these lovely and kind people and thank them for their hospitality, but they lingered. I closed the door behind me, placed the key back into its place, and forever left that house and headed to Uncle Simon's place.



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<sup>220</sup> The region in Georgia famous of its good vine.

*Chapter 45 Uncle Simon's Story | Kind Chkheidze*

I showed up at Uncle Simon's place right on time; my hosts had guests, and a bottle of tutovka from my suitcase came in handy. By the way, everyone liked it very much. Soon, the guests dispersed, and Uncle Simon and I continued sitting at the table, talking about this and that. During our conversation, I asked him about how they had managed to escape and leave Shusha, and here is his story:

"That ill-fated morning of March 1920, I got up late. Awakened by the shootings, I quickly dressed and went out. Before I could fully open our gate to see what was going on there, a crowd of about twenty people, all from our and nearby neighborhoods, forced themselves into our courtyard. They were shouting and screaming about something terrible that was happening, and from my understanding, askers entered the upper quarters of the town and attacked Armenians, killing the innocent, looting, and burning their homes. And now, they could be here any minute. I immediately closed the gate and rushed to the basement where I kept my rifle and cartridges. Upon my return, I told everyone to sit quietly, climbed up the ladder to the roof, and made my way into the attic. There I found a small hole in tin roofing sheets that was facing directly at the gate. Having positioned myself in the attic, I began watching the street. I stayed there probably until noon, but nothing, apart from the sounds of distant shootings, was going on. I was about to get down when I noticed two armed askers walking down the street in front of our house.

The askers passed by the gate, but suddenly one of the children of the sheltering began loudly crying, and the askers returned. For a few minutes, they stood listening to what was

happening behind the gate and then made several unsuccessful attempts to open it. Having failed, one of them climbed onto the shoulders of the other and was about to jump into my courtyard, but in return, received a bullet from me and fell dead. The second asker ran away in a panic. I checked around and came down, opened the gate, and with the help of my nephew Tigran, dragged the dead asker across the street into the neighboring yard. Taking his rifle, we returned to our courtyard. Tigran, who served in the Tsarist army as a non-commissioned officer, picked up the rifle of the dead asker and climbed onto the roof of the house across the street. Now, the gate was under the cover of crossfire.”

At this moment, Aunt Olenka came in with glasses of hot tea and began to chide Uncle Simon for the late conversation, saying that I was tired and probably want to go to bed, and he was to lecture me here. But I stood up for her husband and asked Uncle Simon to continue with his story.

“Close to the evening, I noticed your shivering grandfather approaching our gate,” continued Uncle Simon looking at me, “He began knocking on the gate and shouting in a trembling voice, ‘ Simon! Simon! Open the gate. Askers want some fire. Give it to me, or they’ll kill me.’ Go away, Uncle Shamir, go away. We will not open the gate to you. They are deceiving you. All they want is to get into our courtyard and kill us all.” shouted I back. “ Your grandfather slowly turned back and silently walked away. I have never seen him again, surely askers killed him. A few minutes later, four to five of them showed up at the gate. Among them, I recognized the one that ran away earlier, leaving his dead comrade. The askers began demanding us to open the gate for them, promising not to touch us, otherwise, they would kill everyone. Having received our



refusal, they began to swear and opened a desultory fire. Meantime, one of them attempted to break the gate with an ax. At that moment, Tigran and I almost simultaneously fired back, killing one of them and wounding another. In the fire exchange, Tigran got shot in his right hand and could no longer shoot. I wounded another asker. The remaining two picked up the wounded and disappeared in the dark. Tigran and I came down to the courtyard. We both realized that this was all we could do. By the morning, askers will return with reinforcement. We could not stay there any longer.”

“Olenka, Olenka, pour me another glass of tea,” Uncle Simon said, interrupting his story. Aunt Olenka was sitting in another room and sewing something. She brought more tea for her husband and began reproaching him again for the late conversation. She offered me tea too, but I refused and said that I wanted to listen to the story to the end and asked Uncle Simon to continue.

“So, listen, Ashot,” having drunk half a glass of tea, continued the brave old man, “I gathered all the people in a circle and explained the danger of the situation, and insisted everyone leave our courtyard and try to get out of the town. In my basement, I had large stocks of various clothes and suggested that those who wanted to could go down there and wind around themselves as many rolls as they could but do it as soon as possible. Who knew what awaited us all ahead, and you could always get some money for cloth? Having said and done so, in half an hour, under the cover of darkness, we quietly left our courtyard and went up the road. Soon, another group of about fifteen people joined us. We decided to get to the Karkarut Trail and descend to the western outskirts of the town and get to the road to Lachin, and then from there, take a turn to

a country road towards our destination: the Armenian village of Karin-Tak. We reached Karkarut. The trail zigzagged among surrounding tall cliffs and soon began almost vertically going down. It was an exceedingly difficult walk, especially for the elderly and young children. The word was put out to walk quietly, observe silence, and try not to create even the slightest sounds or stir rocks under the feet. Somewhere halfway down, when we were at about the same vertical level with the outpost overlooking the barracks, we spotted a group of askers standing by a campfire. We were so close to them that we could hear their speech. We continued our descent by walking the narrow path one by one in a chain string. But suddenly, an unexpected event that could cost all of us our lives, occurred.

Among us, there was the family of our neighbor, painter Avak: Avak himself, his three children, and his eighty-year-old mother. The poor old woman was tired and began lagging and quietly calling her son. Several men approached Avak and demanded he calm his mother down. Avak, with his two-year-old son in his arms, returned to his mother, but could not make her get up and continue the walk. Avak returned and joined the crowd and his two other children. However, the old woman began calling her son's name again, jeopardizing the lives of many. Frightened people surrounded Avak, "Do you want all of us to die because of you? Go back immediately, and this time makes sure her voice is not heard again, otherwise, we'll kill you and your family." Unfortunate Avak had no choice but to go back to his mother again, and this time after his return, we never heard her voice again. Rumor had it, that he strangled her, and some evil tongues even said he cut off her head.

By morning, we safely made it to Karin-Tak; the village was abandoned. We went on, climbed Mt. Chakhmakh, and from

there our paths parted. People dispersed to different villages.”

That was the end of Uncle Simon’s story. We wished each other good night and went to bed. Stirred by what I just heard and by my own memories of that time, I could not fall asleep for a long time.

On the next morning, I went to the Sanitary Administration again and finally met the head of the HR, 1st Rank Captain Chkheidze. I stood waiting in the reception room to be called in. A glass partition was separating Chkheidze’s office from the reception. Behind the partition hung heavy curtains, but if desired, one could look inside the room through the gaps between single curtains. A young Lieutenant was in the office, and I heard and saw how Chkheidze was shouting and cursing at him, hitting hard over his desk with blows of his fist. After a few minutes, the tomato-red-faced Lieutenant came out and walked away in rush. Well, I thought, looks like I got here at a bad time. Who knows where and how far the captain would send me being in such a bad mood? I was about to walk in when a young and beautiful woman crouched from somewhere behind and flashed into Chkheidze’s office right in front of my nose. I looked through the curtains again. The minute the captain saw the lady his mood instantly changed. He shook her hand with delight, and in return, received her coquettish smile. A short conversation ensued, and the lady left the office. Happy-looking Chkheidze was rubbing his hands. I opened the door and walked in.

“May I come in, Comrade Captain?”

“Yes, come in, Comrade.”

After introducing myself, I showed him my documents. Chkheidze carefully examined them and asked me what kind of doctor I was. I said that I was currently holding an

administrative position but had training and experience in general medicine.

“Have you ever performed surgery?”

“I have never worked as a surgeon because it was not part of my training.”

Chkheidze had asked me several more questions, including about my family and where I was from. I explained that I was from Nagorny Karabakh and have two children and a wife who was not working at the moment. “Aha, understandable,” said the captain and pressed a call button, and the same Lieutenant walked in. Chkheidze, addressing the Lieutenant, said, “We have more than enough doctors from the units that retreated from the front. Why the hell are they sending us more doctors? Write a determination letter and send this doctor back to the disposal of his local Commissariat.” The Lieutenant saluted, and we both left the office. On the way, he asked me which Commissariat dispatched me and told me to wait. I sat down on a chair and thought about what just happened in the office. Was it a prank or a joke? Are they really going to send me back home? However, the Lieutenant soon appeared with the determination letter signed by Chkheidze, handed it to me, and told me to report back tomorrow to the Finance department to get my travel allowance. I looked at the letter. It stated the following, “Due to inability to use Dr. A. Kocharov, as a surgeon, he is being dispatched back to your disposal.” I could not believe my eyes. It is a sin to evade the military service, but honestly, I was not particularly eager to go to the front. I had enough money to buy my train ticket and decided not to test fate and leave today. I walked out along the corridor to the exit, making my way through many doctors and paramedics waiting for their disposition and dispatch to military units. These were

men and women of different ages and ranks. Many looked withered, and most of them were from the retreated and disbanded units. Some of them were wounded and wore bandages.

On the way to the station, I stopped at a bazaar to buy myself something to eat on the road. Suddenly, there was a loud sound of sirens of the air alert warning; German planes appeared over the city. From the different parts of the city rang out shootings of anti-aircraft artillery and machine guns. People in the bazaar fled in a panic in different directions. Vendors began closing their shops, but I managed to buy what I wanted.

The air alarm finally turned off, and I headed to Uncle Simon's place. At dinner, I pulled out another bottle of tutovka from the two that I still had in my suitcase, and we had a good time. However, I needed to leave to catch my train. It was not easy for me to farewell these fine and kind people.

For the few days that I had spent with them, I grew fond of them. After dinner, we hugged and kissed each other, and I left to never see them again. A few years ago,<sup>221</sup> I learned that Uncle Simon and Aunt Olenka were no longer alive. My dear ones, rest in peace!

There was pandemonium at the train station. Working my elbows, I managed to get to my train and enter one of its carriages. All the seats in the carriage were taken, but I found an empty luggage compartment located above the upper sleeping shelf and climbed into it. It was terribly tight there, but I was glad that I was on the train and would be home soon. I decided to have food and a few shots of tutovka, and then sleep until we get to Yevlakh Station. I pulled out the bottle and paper bags with the food from the suitcase, sliced kielbasa, tomatoes, and

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<sup>221</sup> In 1970s.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

cucumbers, and in anticipation of a small feast, began pouring tutovka into a glass and ... Oh my God! Instead of tutovka, viscous doshab came pouring into the glass. As it turned out, Anik sent her mother not tutovka, but doshab, and ironically, it happened to be the last bottle left in the suitcase. My mood was certainly spoiled, and I hastily finished my meal and dropped to sleep.



*Chapter 46 Guilty Without a Guilt*

Upon my return to Martuny, I resumed carrying out my duties. The war was in full swing, and so far, events on the fronts were not developing in favor of our country. Germans captured *Mozdok*<sup>222</sup> and advanced to the outskirts of Moscow, Leningrad, and Stalingrad. Many refugees from Nazi-occupied territories, in particular from Belorussia and Moldavia, began arriving in our region. I remember one Jewish family of Defter, several members of whom I had employed.

With the approach of the front lines, the government began deporting unreliable people from Baku and other large cities and relocating them into rural regions, including our district. Among the deportees, there was an attractive young woman who arrived with her mother. They were assigned to live in the village of *Shekher*, where she began teaching Russian at the village school.

In the winter of 1943, the military medical commission had been meeting almost every day, commissioning more and more people to the front. Draftees from the nearby and remote villages were arriving at the Commissariat on these cold winter days on foot, accompanied by their relatives carrying a bagful of clothing and food for their men who were about to be dispatched to the front. The head of the Commissariat's 1<sup>st</sup> Department was a certain Aznavour, a vile and petty person without a twinge of conscience. I cannot without acrimony remember how during one of the commissioning days, this drunken bastard entered a hall and with salty saliva and erupting eructation, approached one of the draftees and ordered this shy and modest peasant to get on a stool, and on his orders,

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<sup>222</sup> Town in North Caucasus region.

stand on one and then on another foot, while simultaneously raising his hands. The poor guy in fear of the authorities had to obey the orders of the new Herod and clumsily perform his commands, while the scoundrel with a contented look on his face laughed at the guy and called him a dog's face. Having received his satisfaction, Aznavour, told the man to get off the stool because he was a dummy and did not know how to dance. Humiliated and depressed, the man got off the stool, wondering why he deserved to be treated like that.

A new command of the draftees was commissioned and was immediately ordered to go on foot to Agdam. As it was customary, a representative of the Commissariat accompanied the command to the town's outskirts. Drunk Aznavur walked on the right side of the column of men going to war and yelled at them, demanding to shout hurray, "Are you deaf, donkey heads? Shout hurray, quickly." The scoundrel had nothing human living in him. He neither had any pity for the departing, maybe forever, men, nor respect for their families. Aznavour was also a big greedy bribe-taker and swindler well-known for deceiving people by taking large sums of money and food from them, in promise to release their men from the service or send them to the rearward troops, and not fulfilling his part of the deals. On the days when the draftees to who he made his promises were to be commissioned and groups formed, Aznavour would delegate his subordinates, and then disappear to avoid facing the deceived people.

Young and healthy Russian-speaking women had also been drafted and sent out to the course of the machine and anti-aircraft gunners. In early March, I received a call from the Party District Committee, with the order to report immediately to the office of the First secretary. Wondering what it was about, I



walked in and found the First Secretary himself, the chief of the region NKVD, Colonel Oganessian, the region Military Commissar, Colonel Khachaturov, and the region General prosecutor Papazian. The First Secretary introduced me to the group as the head of the Health Department and the Head Physician of the military-medical commission.

"Are you aware that tomorrow you have a medical board?", the NKVD chief sternly asked me.

"Yes, I do, and we are already working on preparing the premises," I replied.

"Well," continued the Colonel menacingly, "listen, among the draftees, there will be a young woman from Shekher, and if she, being healthy, will be released by you from the conscription, you will go under the tribunal. Do you understand?", drilling me with his eyes, said Oganessian. I did not say anything. "You can go no," added the Colonel. Discouraged and intrigued by the conversation, I left the office.

Only a couple of days later, I learned the background of my invite to the Committee office. As it turned out, familiar to you, Aznavour, father of three, had an affair with the teacher from Shekher. Recently, he left his family and was about to marry his mistress. Upon learning of this, his wife wrote a letter to the Party's District Committee, demanding the Party's involvement in bringing the stumbled member of the Party back to his family. This letter was the reason for my call to the district committee.

Late in the evening, I heard someone calling me from outside. It was Aznavour. I invited him to come in, but he refused and asked me to come out. It was cold, and I threw my coat over my shoulders, put on galoshes, and went out. I could hardly see Aznavur's face in the darkness. "Tomorrow, on the

commission," began Aznavour, "there will be a woman from Shekher. It is very important to me that you will give her some article for unfit for the service. She must not be drawn into the army."

"What are you talking about Aznavour?", recalling the previous conversation in the party committee, I responded, "How can I release her from the service if she turns out to be healthy?"

"That is not my business. Do whatever needs to be done, but she stays here," said Aznavour rudely and left.

However, it was not the end of my day's troubles. About ten o'clock in the evening, the telephone rang again. This time it was Barhudarov, the chief of the district in the department of the NKVD, asking me to come immediately to his office. I had been acquainted with Barhudarov and considered him a very cunning and insidious man and had always been on alert when meeting him. Barhudarov was a very influential person in the district. The only one who he reckoned with was the Party's First Secretary. Even the Chairman of the Executive committee was afraid of him. His authority increased, even more, when he successfully conducted an operation to seize the personnel of the *Mozdok*<sup>223</sup> military enlistment office. When the Germans approached Mozdok, a group of officers of the city military commissariat, having concocted fictitious travel documents, fled the town with their families, and on several trucks and cars, managed to get to the Red Bazaar, where they were arrested by NKVD.

Barhudarov began our conversation from a distance, complaining about some of his health issues and asking about my recommendations. When he had finished the introduction, he moved on to the matter, "Listen, yesterday an old woman

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<sup>223</sup> Town in Ossetia.

came in and told me that her only daughter was being drafted into the army and that without her and her help, she alone would not survive. She cried a lot, asking me to help to retain her daughter with her. You know, I felt so sorry for the woman that I promised to do something about it, and now you must help me to fulfill my promise." As I learned afterward, Barhudarov also sighed for the woman from Shekher, but unlike Aznavour, his plans for her were limited only to an intimate relationship.

"How can I help you?", I said, pretending that I had no idea who he was talking about.

"Think of something and give her a detachment of sickness, and she will take her mother and move out from here. By the way, tomorrow she will come to the commission."

"But how can I do that, Comrade Barhudarov?"

"Are you a child?", the NKVD chief said, raising his voice, "Give her a suitable article and that will do it."

"I am not sure how I can do it," I mumbled.

Suddenly, he got up and twice struck his fist over a table and menacingly pronounced, "Go and do what I said."

Irritated and upset, I went out and wandered home, thinking about how I managed to get stuck in this nasty story. At any outcome of this case, I would be in trouble. Why did this slut have to end up in our district? I did not say anything to anyone at home. I went to the bed, but for a long time could not fall asleep. I was still tortured by the only question, what should I do? In the end, I decided to follow the law, meaning if the woman is healthy, she would be drafted, if unhealthy, she stays.

In the morning at breakfast, I drank two glasses of tutovka and went to the commissariat. The waiting room was full of

recruits and mourners. The commission began, and soon among the others appeared the reason for my troubles.

“Do you have any complaints about your health?”, I asked her our ordinary question.

“No, I have no complaints about my health,” responded the woman.

To make sure of that, I sent her for an examination by a general physician and gynecologist and instructed them to thoroughly examine her. The doctors were unaware of what was going on here and found her healthy. On the same day, she was sent to the army.

As I suspected, troubles did not take long to wait. A few days after the commission, I ran into Aznavour, who shook his head and said, “So, you did everything your way, didn’t you? It is alright. I am also a man and will not remain in debt for long.”

Cunning Barhudarov, on the contrary, acted differently. If he was ignoring me before, now he smiled every time he saw me, shook my hand, and politely talked about everyday topics, never bringing up the Shekher woman. I was not mistaken in my perception of him; he was much more dangerous than Aznavour. Soon he called me to his office and requested me to urgently create a reference document with statistical data for the past year about the number of sick men, women, and children, and deaths among patients, indicating the cause of death for each case. I left his office completely discouraged, having no idea how to make such a reference because we did not keep track of such records. When I came to my office, I called a medical assistant and sent him to all the rural medical stations to collect and deliver me all the records for the last year, giving him two days for it. Then, I closed myself in the office and began to compile data on the district. Three days later, the

requested document was lying on Barhudarov's desk. A week later, he called me in again. This time, he demanded data on the expenditure of bandages for the last year, how much was received, how much was spent, and the average amount of bandages used on one patient. I tried to politely object, saying that no one ever asked for such data from us. But the *chekist*<sup>224</sup> burst into a tirade, "Are you trying to make a fool of me? This request came from above, demanding urgently to give them this report, and you here are pulling my brain. Go and bring me this information in two days." Two days later, I brought him the report on bandages. In the following weeks, Barhudarov continued making new inquiries. Now he wanted records about the number of my trips to the medical stations, the number of personnel working under me, their characteristics, etc. I was exhausted and irritated. Working on this nonsense distracted me from my direct work. My irritation gave way to anger when one of our neighbors, who happened to be working for Barhudarov as a typist, informed me under strict secrecy that immediately after I leave his office, Barhudarov sends my reports to the stove. I also learned that he summoned some of my subordinates at night to talk to him and was asking them questions about me.

At around this time, Yurik's eyes went bad. Local doctors suspected trachoma, and I had to take him to Baku to be seen by the then famous Professor Warshavsky. Fortunately, it was only a spring cataract that could be easily treated. We stayed in Baku for another day and headed back to Martuny.

Upon my return to work, I learned that Barhudarov, through the Military Commissariat, summoned all the unsuitable or not liable for the military service people, accounted for about one

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<sup>224</sup> NKVD officer.

hundred and twenty, and made them be reexamined. At the same time, he called in doctors not from Stepanakert, like we have always done, but from Agdam. I was fully aware of what Barhudarov was trying to achieve; he hoped to find healthy people among the released from the service and accuse me of being a bribe-taker and sent to a military tribunal. That would be his payback for my actions in the case of his passion. However, not all those who know how to move pieces on the board are good chess players. He made a big mistake in giving preference to Azerbaijani doctors. Agdam's doctors came to the matter objectively and confirmed my diagnosis for all one hundred and twenty commissariats, and even the one whom I recognized as fit for non-combatant services was commuted as unfit. If he were smart, he would call Armenian doctors and would get what he wanted. Armenian doctors, under fear of a mighty NKVD, would definitely "discover" violations in my work and get me into big trouble.

At the end of June, I took my family on a vacation to Kaghartsi. When I returned to Martuny, there was a telegram from Baku waiting for me. The telegram was about my conscription to the army. I immediately sent a phaeton to Kaghartsi to bring my family back to Martuny, and on the next day, left for Baku to report to the Republican Military Commissariat. Two days later, I was already on my way to Moscow, accompanied by a group of twenty-six other doctors drafted from different parts of the republic.

*Chapter 47 Troubles in Kuibyshev*<sup>225</sup>

Because of the active military actions and not fully restored railroads, travel to Moscow by the shortest railway route through Rostov and Stalingrad was impossible. Therefore, we, the group of doctors, crossed the Caspian Sea on a steamer to *Krasnovodsk*<sup>226</sup>, planning to travel by train from there. It was my first sea sail, and I got seasickness and all that comes with it.

Krasnovodsk was a town surrounded by sandy steppes and rocks and immersed in unbearable heat, dust, and zillions of flies. We barely made it on time to catch a train to *Tashkent*<sup>227</sup>. It was one of those slow trains with many long stops, and we got to the destination only on the morning of the day after. We liked Tashkent with its well-groomed streets, parks, and plenty of trees. First, we went to a public bath and then had fragrant tea in a teahouse at a local bazaar where I, by the way, bought two kilograms of raisins. Someone from our group said that it would be nice to stay there for three days. Someone else jokingly supported this idea, saying that we did not have a wedding to attend and there were no reasons to rush. However, our girls had a different opinion, and a day later, we were back on a train. This time our path laid through Kazakhstan, along the Aral Sea to Kuibyshev. Salt was everywhere, outside our window as a part of the boring and endless seashore landscape, and at every train station, we stopped where many merchants were selling it by the buckets. Someone mentioned Kuibyshev salt was in a deficit and could be easily traded for food at bazaars. Few people from our group, including me, decided to

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<sup>225</sup> Former Samara.

<sup>226</sup> City in Turkmenistan.

<sup>227</sup> The Capital City of Uzbekistan.

go for it. For this, I asked our young ladies to sew me a bag from my towel. At the next stop, I bought two buckets of salt, dumped salt into the stitched bag, and placed it under my head.

It was hot June, so I was sitting in our compartment wearing a T-shirt with 3,000-rubles hidden under it in a waistband. Our personal documents were kept by our headman, appointed in Baku. When we were passing through Chkalov, someone said that all the government institutions had been evacuated to this city, and even Kalinin himself was there; but not Stalin, who was still in Moscow. I should mention that in every city we were given a military ration, usually consisting of bread, sugar, canned food, sausages, dried fish, etc. From each city, I had mailed home letters written along the way.

On the morning of July 5, 1943, we arrived in Kuibyshev, and I got off the train to drop off my next letter. Someone said we had a half an hour stop, so I had plenty of time to find a mailbox. I was on my way back to the train when I heard a radio loudspeaker announcing an important government message. The pillar with the loudspeaker was immediately surrounded by a crowd of civilians and military; I rush there too. The radio was reporting on the latest developments in the major battle on the *Kursk Arch*.<sup>228</sup> Like everybody else around, I stood listening to the fascinating voice of Levitan<sup>229</sup> and lost my sense of time until I saw my train taking off. I ran towards it and was only about ten meters away from it, and even had my eyes on the step I was going to jump on when right in front of me, another train from the opposite direction swept at a high speed. Unfortunately, this train was exceedingly long and when its last

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<sup>228</sup> The biggest tank battle of World War II.

<sup>229</sup> Yuri Levitan, a legendary radio announcer during WWII; so-called the "Voice of the War."



car passed by, I saw the tail of my train disappearing behind the horizon. I sighed sadly and raised my hands in despair. Someone behind sounded, "Ah, poor fellow, he just missed his train." Depressed, I went back to the station and walked into the military commandant's office, and in detail explained my misfortune to the Commandant. After he carefully listened to my story, the Commandant requested my documents. I had to admit that I did not have them with me, as I left them on the train, but it could be easily confirmed by calling the next station and finding our group's headmen. However, my interlocutor was obviously unimpressed with my explanations. He said that he had heard many such tales, hinting that I could be a German spy or a saboteur. In other words, I had to be detained and investigated. The Commandant got behind his desk, made some notes, and a phone call. Soon, two soldiers armed with rifles walked in, and the Commandant ordered them to take me to the city's Commandant office.

Outside on the busy city streets, trams were crowded with people scurrying in different directions, and pedestrians were rushing under the drizzling light rain about their business; the city lived its daily life of wartime. And here I was in the middle of it, walking busy streets under the escort of Red Army soldiers. Finally, we made it to the city Commandant's office, where I was handed over to guards, taken to the basement, and locked up in a cell. There were several other detainees: a drunk peasant lying face down on his bunk, two peers who seemed to be thieves, and an elderly man, loudly cursing someone. Soon, one by one, they began calling us in for questioning. When it was my turn, I walked into an office room with a few officers inside. One of them, a gloomy Major, began interrogating me, "You were detained at the train station. Why and how have you

found yourself there and who are you?"

"Allow me to correct you, comrade Major. I was not actually detained; I reported to the station Commandant's office myself," I replied and told him my story. The Major, having thought a little and consulted with others in the room, decided to hand me over to the regional Military Commissariat.

I was back on the streets, now accompanied by one soldier. When we got to the place, I ended up repeating my story to a new group of officers. One of them, a Captain, suggested sending me to the city Military Commissariat, saying that they would send me to the front.

"Excuse me, Comrade Captain," I cautiously intervened into the conversation, "if I don't get to Moscow, they would consider me a deserter and I would be wanted. All my documents and my personal file are there, and when I get there, I would still be mobilized and sent to the front. So, what is the point of sending me to the Military Commissariat now?"

"What do you want, young man?" , politely asked me a silent so far Major, looking at the awkward man dressed in one dirty T-shirt standing in front of him.

"I would like to get your permission to purchase a ticket at my own expense and leave for Moscow," pronounced my pitiful voice. Not sure how, but I convinced the Major, and soon was walking to the railway military ticket office, holding a cover letter with a ticket purchase invoice certified by a stamp and a signature. The letter stated the following: "It was proposed that you issue one ticket to the Moscow Station purchased by cash to the bearer of this document." I breathed a sigh of relief, thanked the Major, and walked free. In a couple of minutes, I was already approaching the train station.

At the ticket box office, I was informed that to sell me a ticket,

they must have a resolution from the station's Commandant's office located in the tall building across the Train Station square. In a minute, I was already entering the building and walking down a long dark corridor. There was a foyer adjacent to the corridor full of people watching the "*Volga-Volga*"<sup>230</sup> movie. I found the right office, but it was closed. Commandant must have left to watch the movie with others. I walked to the foyer full of people sitting and standing under the dense cloud of tobacco smoke, watching the popular comedy, periodically breaking off into loud laughter. Here they were, carefree lucky ones, and I was lonely, tired, and lost in a strange city among them. I impatiently waited for the movie to end and then went back to the office again. This time a Commandant was there, but he told me that his shift is over and suggested I come back later in the evening, and hurriedly left.

I had not had any food since that morning, but for some reason, did not feel hungry. However, to kill the time, I went to the nearest bazaar and bought a loaf of bread from a private vendor for 250 rubles. I continued to wander around the bazaar and bought a pack of *papiros*,<sup>231</sup> and began smoking one after another. Having calmed my nerves this way, I hurried back to the Commandant's office.

As I was approaching the entry door, I was stopped by a guard who said at this time of the day only the military could enter the building. None of my explanations and entreaties changed his mind, and I ended up presenting him with the most convincing argument, a hundred-ruble banknote. That worked as a green light, and in the next minute, I was walking the

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<sup>230</sup> The extremely popular Soviet comedy musical released in 1938.

<sup>231</sup> Traditional Soviet cigarettes of that time made of an inch of strong tobacco wrapped in see through rice paper mated with a hollow cardboard tube.

familiar corridor. Without delay, the Commandant put his resolution on the cover letter, endorsing it with his signature and the date. Joyful, I ran to the ticket box office, but it turned out my joy was premature. My misadventures were not over yet. In front of the building with the ticket box office stood another guard, who was also not indifferent to the ruble. In the ticket box hall, I ran into a long line of people waiting to get tickets. But before you could buy a ticket, you had to go through another barred window to get a resolution verifying the availability of reliable documents that entitled you to purchase tickets. A Lieutenant sitting behind the window looked at my document and said that it lacked the round seal of the Commandant. I ran back to Commandant, who when heard my request, indignantly shouted, "What the hell? A round seal? Are they fooling with me?". I ran along the beaten trail back to the Lieutenant, who was not happy to see me again. He boiled and screamed, "Until I see the round seal, I am not going to sign anything." I scurried back to the Commandant, "Comrade Commandant, why are you torturing me? The Lieutenant there said that without the round stamp, he would not sign. Please call him. Maybe he would listen to you." The Commandant picked up the phone and talked to someone about anything, but not me. He hung up and sent me back to the cashier.

I was both physically and mentally at my limits. Knowing that the Lieutenant would not sign my documents, I still went there with the intent to tell this bastard everything I thought of him. The consequences of such an act did not frighten me anymore. I was in such shape that I even had thoughts of telegraphing Asya and then ending my life under a train. Determined and mad, I approached the checkout counter and

found my torturer having fun chatting with some other Lieutenant.

My long life was rich with many events, sometimes extremely dangerous and desperate when the situations I was in seemed absolutely hopeless and my hands were falling in despair. And then suddenly, the holding strength of the very saving straw<sup>232</sup> had been pulling me out of the troubles. It happened again. A young, well-dressed woman walked up to the Lieutenant's office and stepped in. The Lieutenant got up and smiled as he greeted the woman. They shook hands and walked away, talking about something. At this moment, the radio announced the arrival time of the train to Moscow. I looked at my watch, forty minutes left before the arrival. Oh no, what should I do? At that moment, a woman in uniform approached the office and presented some documents to another Lieutenant who took a brief glance at them and stamped them.

"Well, what would be, would be," I grumbled under my breath and walked over to the counter. The Lieutenant looked at my document and asked, "Doesn't it have to have the round seal stamp?"

"What stamp? The stamp is there," I said stuttering.

"Well, God be with you!", said the Lieutenant, and with a wave of his hand, stamped the attitude. I could not believe my own eyes and rushed to get in line to buy a ticket, worried about the first Lieutenant that could return any minute and see me in the queue. But thanks to God, everything turned out fine, and within a few minutes, I was already sitting on a train taking me to the long-awaited Moscow.

Two days later, I finally arrived at the Soviet capital city. It was my first visit to Moscow. Now I needed to locate a

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<sup>232</sup> Referring to the saying, "The drowning man grabs a straw."

reference bureau boutique and find out how to get to the Main Sanitary Office. However, before I could get out of the station, I stumbled upon familiar faces. These were three girls from my group. They recognized me too and rushed to hug me. "Oh, Doctor Kocharov, what happened to you? Where were you? Why do you look like that? We were all worried about you, wondering if something terrible happened to you. God forbid, but we thought maybe you got under a train," interrupting each other, chirped the girls, who I was extremely happy to see.

The girls walked me to the hostel where our group was boarding. I found my suitcase but was not daring to ask about my two bottles of vodka, salt, raisins, and food that were gone. As Russians say, "*Na zdorovie!*".<sup>233</sup> I immediately took a bath, changed into clean clothes, and went to eat in the dining room assigned to our group. To my pleasure, we were set up to get three meals a day. We stayed in Moscow for approximately three weeks, mostly spending our time idling and wandering around. It seemed like the Main Sanitary Office forgot about us.

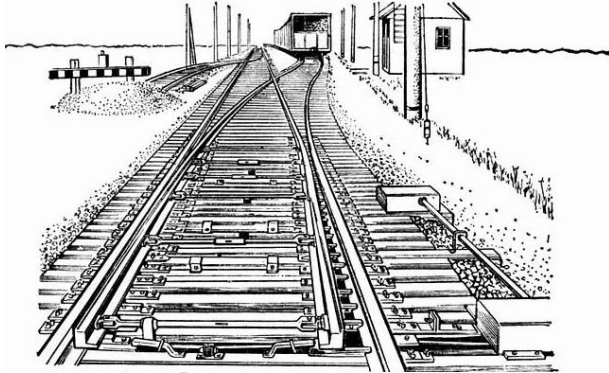
However, everything good always comes to an end. Soon, one by one we began to be called to the Sanitary Office for an interview. Most questions were about our medical credentials, work experience, and marital status. Later, we learned that only twenty doctors were requested from Azerbaijan, and since we were more than needed, seven doctors would be sent back. Besides our group, there were groups from other republics, and out of the total number of doctors reported to Moscow, fifty were sent back home, including two men and five women from our group from Azerbaijan. I was one of those two male doctors. Having said goodbye to Moscow, I left for Baku. While on the train, I decided not to return to Martuny, instead request

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<sup>233</sup> In this context, it means *Good for you*.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

my transfer to another district. After all, I perfectly understood how I ended up on the list of draftees and had no special desire to continue fighting the strong foes. As soon as I got home, I called Asya, and she and Yurik returned to Baku.



*Chapter 48 New Appointment*

In the middle of August 1943, the People's Commissariat of Health assigned me to work in the *Ishmailly*<sup>234</sup> district. Having left my family in Baku, I set off to travel first by train to Udzjar Station, and then by bus to far north via Geokchai to the district's central town of Ishmailly. My arrival at the place began with a curious incident; I was mistaken for someone else. As it turned out, the head of the local Health Department had been recently fired and everyone was expecting a new appointee and took me for him. It got to the point where one elderly Lezgi<sup>235</sup> man had almost torn my luggage while trying to pull it out of my hands as he was strongly urging me to stay at his place for the night. As I learned later, the old man thinking I was the replacement for the fired official, decided to invite me to his home and give me a good treat, having in mind to later ask me to help employ his daughter, a nurse in the town, rather than in a remote village that she was appointed to by her school.

In the morning, I met with the acting head of the Health Department, who during our conversation persuaded me to take over the medical station in the village of Kelbend. As she explained, a fifth-year med school student, who was currently working there, must soon return to Baku to continue his study. She gave me a note for the student and told me that effective today, I was officially appointed to the position of the Physician in charge of the Kelbend medical station. One of the office staff gave me a hint that the Chairman of Kelbend collective farm was here in town today and offered to introduce me to him. The Chairman, whose name was Petros, was glad to meet me and

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<sup>234</sup> Better known as *Ismaily*.

<sup>235</sup> Small Muslim nation of North Caucasus, one of the nations of Dagestan.



offered a ride to the village on an arba that was about to leave there. "You can put your luggage on the arba, get on that horse and follow it. I still need to wrap up my business here and will catch up with you soon," said the Chairman and pointed to the horse I needed to take. He joined us about halfway, and we got to the village by the evening.

The time of my stay in Kelbend held a special place in my life, not only because of the beautiful and peculiar nature, traditions, and customs of this place but also as a new stage in my professional development. In this remote village I was on my own and at last, had a unique opportunity to practice medicine and not be distracted by administrative activities. This period of my biography was also filled with acquaintances with amazing people and a succession of new memorable events, some being very adventurous.

On my first day in Kelbend, I stayed at the Chairman's home where he lived with his wife and three children. Petros was a middle-aged man with a slight physical disability as he had a twisted neck. Being a simple, rather ingenuous, and illiterate man, he knew when to raise his voice to get things done. We have befriended and managed to maintain a good relationship. On the next day, I took over the station, which also served as a doctor's residence. At that time, a young Russian nurse stayed there with her child and mother, but they moved out in a few days.

Kelbend, by the standards of that time, was a small village of only 70-80 mostly two-story houses surrounded by local stone fences. Some households kept a few goats, cows and even bulls, some kept bees. The village was situated on a lowland along a small rocky river that would dry up for the summer creating a water shortage for the villagers. It was not a rich village;

homes, as a rule, had been poorly furnished, and their friendly and hospitable inhabitants were dressed very modestly. It was wartime, and like in many other villages in the district, many families were undernourished and could hardly make ends meet.

The station was a quite decent distance from the village. It was a lonely two-storied stone house, standing on top of a hill, towering above Kelbend. On the second floor, there were two rooms, a medical reception room and an adjacent living room in which I stayed. The furnishing was poor, consisted only of a large old desk, several stools, an old couch, and a glass medical cabinet. Of the necessary supplies, I had a few bathrobes, bedsheets, and towels. The living room had two windows, one facing towards the village, with a great view of the entire Kelbend. The decor of my room did not differ much from that of the reception room, an old iron bed, a wooden dining table, and a couple of stools, in other words, a real dwelling of an ascetic. To get to the second floor you had to climb wooden stairs to a balcony with a doorway to the reception room. Under the balcony, there was a door into a walk-out basement with a utility room.

The area of responsibility of my medical station included not only Kelbend but many nearby villages. The nearest Armenian village, Keshkhurd, was about four kilometers east of Kelbend, and as Kelbend, it was also situated in a gorge near the slopes of wooded mountains. Further to the east, approximately twenty kilometers from Kelbend, in a hot valley, at a short distance from each other, stood Azerbaijani village Khalilu and populated mostly by Molokans,<sup>236</sup> the village of Kulili. To the

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<sup>236</sup> Ethical Russians of Spiritual Christian sect evolved from Russian Orthodox Church.

west of Kelbend, four kilometers and higher up into the mountains, there was a large and relatively prosperous Armenian village of Kirk; further west was the Lezgi village of Tahtasan. On the top of the mountain right above Tahtasan stood two Armenian villages, Shukurchu and Norshen, situated right in a forest and separated only by some two-three hundred meters. These two villages were distinguished by unimaginably clean air and a bird's-eye view of magnificent panoramic surroundings. Each of them had no more than fifteen households. For all the time of my work in Kelbend, I had visited them on calls only twice, and both times stayed there for the nights in patients' homes. During my practice in Kelbend, I have served all the above and some other villages. In a few months, I became well acquainted with the folkway and customs of the local people, and soon they began to recognize me, and my authority as a doctor grew steadily among them.

Malaria was one of the most common diseases in the Ishmailly region, and I had always kept a large supply of quinine ampules and pills, and in smaller quantities, such rare drugs as Sulfadiazine, Streptocid, etc. Once a month on my payday, I visited the District Medical Center and always stopped at a pharmacy to replenish my stocks of medicines. Once every two months, I traveled to Baku to see my family and used that as an opportunity to visit city pharmacies to stock up on medicinal herbs, flower extracts, and roots for preparing medicines. By the way, I acquired all these at my own expense. Following all the rules of pharmacology, and weighing all the components on the pharmaceutical scale, I had been preparing various liquid mixtures and drops. I got to the point where medical personnel from distant rural stations and occasionally even from the District Center began coming to see me for my

medications. I had my doctor's bag stocked with a dozen glass tubes filled with various medicines in liquid and steam-dried condition. In the bag's pockets, I kept dressings and bottles of different medicine and components of medications in a variety of colors, etc. In other words, I was always ready to go on calls and to prepare my medications at visiting sites.

Pretty often, I had calls from villages outside of my service area, for instance, from distant Armenian villages of Kandzyaka, Koshakend, and especially Tubikend. Occasionally, I traveled to some Azerbaijani villages also from outside of my servicing area, and still honored them and treated patients all the same. There were many cases when patients from remote villages, who had relatives living in Kelbend, would come to stay with them for a few days to be treated by me. In some instances, seriously ill were brought to me on arbas and carts. I must say, most patients or their relatives always rewarded me for my humble work, and it was pointless to refuse, as they would get very offended if I turned down their gratitude. It was part of our culture. The rewards were usually food, grain, or flour, but sometimes they would put money into my pocket. However, I must say that I have never demanded anything for my work and never accepted anything from the poor.

Asya had been periodically visiting me in Kelbend and staying for a few days and taking the provisions I received back home with her. This was a great support to our family, as getting food in Baku was problematic and limited to the quantity of the ration food cards. For example, bread was given only to children in an amount of 250 grams a day. After one of her visits, I, as always, drove her on an arba to Kulili, located by the road to Baku. There I stopped a passing passenger car and asked the driver if he were willing to drive my wife to Baku.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

Man wanted 2,000 rubles or a pood of flour. I gave him the money because half a pood of flour was worth 2,500 rubles at bazaars or at least 150 rubles per kilogram. For comparison, my salary was 1,100 rubles a month.

In every remote village, I had a household where I could stay overnight if needed. I have wonderful memories of Uncle Avanes and his wife Aunt Anushak. They had always treated me as a long-awaited guest and made me feel at home. The old folks lived way high in mountains in the village of Tubikend, a beautiful place immersed in the purest air and magnificent landscape of surrounding mountains and forests.



*Chapter 49 Nikolai-dai | Tigran from Chalmadin*

The two villages nearest to Kelbend, Keshkhurd, and Kirk, I had been visiting almost daily, and most of the time on foot. These two were located on opposite sides of Kelbend, and there were times when I had to visit both on the same day. To get to Kirk, I could take a good road, but preferred the shorter way, via the path looping up among numerous bushes of dog rose, wild garnet, and sumac. Sumac flowers were used to prepare a well-known acidic spice. By the way, I have never seen sumac grow in Karabakh.

In Kirk, I met and made friends with Uncle Nikolai and his wife, Aunt Arusyak. For a long time, until my very departure from Kelbend, we had kept an exceptionally good relationship, and I was staying with this hospitable family every time I visited Kirk and felt myself a welcomed guest in their home. Uncle Nikolai once warned me to always come to them, even when he was not home, adding that Aunt Arusyak would take good care of me.

Uncle Nikolai was a tall, thin man of about fifty-five, blind in one eye and slightly limping on one leg. He was a sociable and rather self-confident person, with a temperament that he sometimes manifested. As opposed to him, which is typical for Armenian families, Aunt Arusyak was a very modest and good-natured woman who looked a little younger than her spouse. They were childless and used to live in Baku for a long time, but for some reason moved to Kirk. The couple occupied a two-room apartment and lived an urban life, as much as it was possible living in the village. Their place was always clean and tidy. They used forks and knives at the table, etc. Uncle Nikolai always had a good stock of wine and tutovka, and we often had

it at dinner, always followed by long friendly conversations. While living better than anyone else around and enjoying the great prestige among the villagers, Uncle Nikolai officially was not working anywhere. I have always been curious about how he was making his living, to afford to live in such a big way. However, a long time ago, I learned not to ask too many questions.

Soon occurred one event that shed light on Uncle Nikolai's secret. One day in the middle of spring of 1944, I was awakened by the sound of an approaching horse's gallop. In a few minutes, through the open window, I saw two horsemen getting off their horses in front of my house. One of them was holding a third horse. "Doctor, we came for you. Our farm manager, Tigran, is very sick and is asking you to come to visit him urgently," shouted one of the horsemen. I hurriedly dressed, grabbed my doctor's bag, jumped on the spare horse, and we set off. From my companions, I learned that Tigran was running a farm near the town of Chalmandin. The road was good and straight, and soon we passed Kulili and continued our ride in the dark now through unfamiliar areas.

At one moment, a disturbing thought crossed my mind. What if I was in the hands of bandits? I asked my escort how much longer yet to Chalmandin and received a short answer, "Soon, doctor, soon. In a few more kilometers." In the distance ahead, I began hearing approaching dogs' barks, and by the sound of it, I could tell these were shepherd dogs. Soon, a gaggle of huge dogs presented themselves to our gaze. The horsemen advised me to position my horse between theirs. They knew the dogs and began calling them by nicknames. We slowed down and continued our way, now in the company of dogs, who kept their unfriendly eyes on me.

Finally, we reached Tigran's place. As I walked into the man's bedroom, I found my patient lying in a bed in a rather deplorable state. After performing an examination, I quickly recognized all the signs of malaria and immediately administered an injection and medicine. On the next morning, Tigran had already felt much better but asked me to stay for a couple more days. I agreed. Tigran, his wife, and two children lived in a three-room apartment. They set up a room for me next to the room used by Tigran as an office.

In the afternoon, to kill time, I wandered around the village, but there was not much to see: a dirty central square surrounded by inconspicuous houses, and poorly dressed inhabitants.

The population of the village was diverse, mostly Molokans, and some Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In the distance, you could see buildings of stables and barns for cows and small cattle. There were also dairy shops for bottling milk and whipping butter. Tigran oversaw this lucrative place. It took me not long to figure out that his word here was the law for everyone. I had witnessed how the Military Commissar of the Geokchai district stopped by, and Tigran ordered to give him five kilograms of butter for free. Later, showed up to the District Prosecutor and received his share of butter.

In the late afternoon, appeared a cashier-Azerbaijani with money for workers. He also brought some food and household supplies to distribute among the workers: sugar, pasta, soap, some inexpensive candies, cookies, etc. The cashier asked Tigran about how and how much he should distribute the food and the rest. Tigran looked at him, slowly folded three fingers of his right hand in a fist, and said, "That much. Leave everything with me and do not tell anyone about it and go



distribute money." The cashier pulled out a pack of brand-new bills from his bag and began to count out Tigran's salary. Tigran's eyes lit up when he saw the bills, "Wow, all the money you have are so new? Let me see the rest of them." Making sure that all the bills were new, Tigran called his wife and ordered her to bring an equal amount of their own money and exchange them for the new bills. "Well, now you can distribute," concluded Tigran. It was my turn to be wowed. There were over two hundred people employed on the farm. How could Tigran possibly have that much money that could pay a monthly salary to the entire farm staff?

Towards the evening, showed up one of the farm managers and began reporting something to Tigran. I recognized the guy, it was Andronik, an obese young man from Kirk, an inveterate rascal, and a scoundrel who raped a young fellow villager and somehow got away with it. From what I heard, the widowed mother of the girl lost her mind from the grief.

On the next night, when I was already in bed, through a thin partition separating my room from Tigran's office, I overheard a conversation between two men. It was Tigran talking to someone whose voice seemed familiar. Uncle Nikolai? It cannot be him. What is he doing here? But my doubts quickly dissipated when I heard Tigran saying, "Nikolai-dai, I know I promised you pelts, and I will keep my word as always, but not now. I just don't have it." "Tigran," retorted Nikolai-dai, "last time you also let me down. Look outside, hungry people are waiting for you. They brought you seven cows and big calves. People brought donkeys along with them. Give them at least barley, perhaps, and send them home before it gets too late. We can talk about the pelts later." Tigran agreed and woke up his storekeeper and ordered him to release the barley to the people

outside. Nikolai-dai was in a hurry to return home as well and asked Tigran to go out and receive the livestock from him. Now, I understood the source of Nikolai-dai's welfare; he acted as an intermediary between the villagers and Tigran, selling livestock bypassing the state and receiving a certain percentage of the revenue, mainly in the form of leather, barley, etc.

Tigran soon returned, and I overheard another conversation. This time he was giving business instructions to Andronik, to take livestock to *Agsy*<sup>237</sup> to slaughter it, sell the meat and give the pelt to Nikolay-dai. Andronik promised to handle it with no problems but added that he was worried about a draft letter he received from the Military Commissariat and problems he had with the Prosecutor. "Nonsense, cut out a few kilograms of good beef, add three kilograms of sugar, two kilograms of candies and noodles, and take it all to both. Just make sure they do not know about the other getting the same offering. By the way, I almost forgot, the Prosecutor asked for five thousand rubles to borrow, give it to him," added Tigran, smiling slyly.

On the third day of my stay, I decided to leave for home after dinner. Tigran and Andronik, who had also turned to me for help with his gonorrhea, felt better. Andronik gave me 1,500 rubles in the morning and said that he would visit me for more injections. Tigran gave me three kilograms of butter, a kilogram of sugar and sweets, a pound of wheat flour, and 4,000 rubles. I was refusing the money, but he insisted, "Have you lost your mind, Doctor? *Molotov*<sup>238</sup> himself does not make as much as I do. So, take it and put it into your pocket." Tigran lent me a horse and had someone take me outside the village to a safe distance from the dogs. I was riding home in a good mood.

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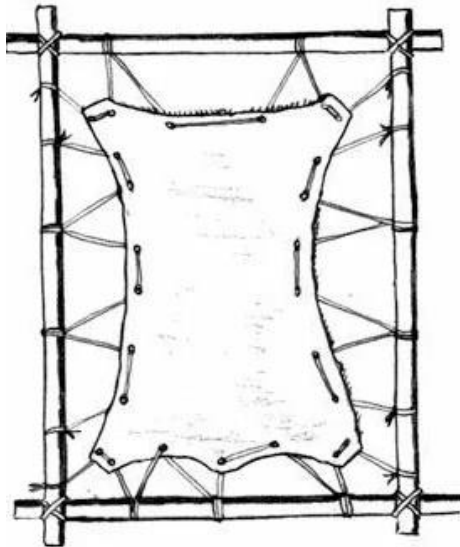
<sup>237</sup> Small Azeri town. Translates as White water.

<sup>238</sup> Vechaslav Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister and politician.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

Firstly, I had a decent amount of money in my pocket, and the food was worth several thousand rubles. Altogether, my earnings were equal to my annual salary. Secondly, I was glad to finally leave this aspen nest of crooks.

This was my first and last trip to Chalmandin, and I have never seen Tigran again.



*Chapter 50 Thieves | My Night Adventures | New Home*

Time passed. My “bachelor” life in Kelbend went on as usual. I was suffering loneliness and really missed my family. However, my responsibility for their well-being during this difficult wartime and my memories of my hungry childhood were solid motivating factors that helped me to overcome the hardship of living alone. Asya’s periodic visits, less often with Yurik, had been real breaths of air for me. Due to the remoteness from the village and the high hill location of my home, I did not have many guests, and during all my free time, I was left to myself. In the evenings, I would normally go down to the village to visit my patients, and on my way back home, stop by the village office and chat with someone for a little bit. Having finished my chores around my place, I would read books I was bringing from my rare trips to Baku.

As I have mentioned, from the window in my room, I had a great view of the village and surrounding landscape. You could also hear shouting and cries of arguing neighbors and spouses, the barking of yard dogs, and rare sounds of cars. Occasionally, especially in the winter, there were shootings, whistling, and screaming of men driving cattle away from attacking wolves, who in many numbers inhabited nearby. I loved occasionally to throw a coat over my shoulders, open the window, and watch the wolves. On the eastern side of my yard, right by the line where the descent to the village began, stood two mulberry trees. For some reason, wolves liked this place, and I often watched them sitting there on their hind legs staring at the moon.

With all the benefits of having this window, it had one essential drawback, a dark window meant an absence of the

occupier. Wartime was uneasy and harsh for all the villagers, especially for families of many and those without a provider. Experiencing extreme needs, some people decided that they could solve their problems by stealing from neighbors. There were several instances of break-ins into my home during my absence. My utility room on the ground level where I kept chickens and stored food attracted them like a magnet. Even a large padlock on the door would not stop them. They would break in and take all the food that I stored there, grain, flour, melted butter, potatoes, and onions, and the food I have been receiving monthly from the government as the rural doctor. I reported all the burglaries to the village council, but they could not find the perpetrators.

Once, someone hinted to me about a certain Bairam who was trading butter for bread, sugar, and canned herring with soldiers. As I learned, Bairam<sup>239</sup> was an Armenian and a father of three who had difficulties making ends meet. I went to his home and found an empty glass canister with remnants of sunflower oil on the bottom, and a small fabric bag with Asya's initials on it. I sympathized with Bayram; however, I had to stop the break-ins and reported him to the village council. The Chairman of the village council and the Director of the collective farm visited Bayram, and he confessed to his crime. For such a crime during wartime, Bairam could face severe punishment. The village authorities asked me not to file a report with the Prosecutor's office and promised to pay me back with the grain from Bayram's share that the farm distributes among

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<sup>239</sup> There was a tradition in Armenian families to give a newborn Muslim name if they had several miscarriages or premature deaths. It was based on the belief that when archangels come to take a life of the baby, they would go away if baby would have unchristian name.

the members. I felt sorry for Bairam and did not want to deprive his children of their father and agreed not to let the case go further. By the way, I have never been compensated for my loss and never asked for it.

However, the burglaries continued. Another time an attacker broke a window on the second floor, climbed into my room, and walked away with food and my military uniform. At that time, I participated in the military-medical commission and had been issued a military uniform. The commission often had day trips to villages, some of which I have never visited before. Among them were several Armenian villages: Gyurdjevan, Khngar, Bagliyan, Zangelan, the Azerbaijani village Trdjan, etc. I occasionally wore my uniform on my call trips to remote villages. But, back to the story of the last break-in. One local teacher informed me that he saw a young man by the name of Zhora at the Karamyan's bazaar, selling a military tunic, breeches, officer's boots, a raincoat, etc. I found this Zhora, who turned out to be a sixteen-year-old boy, wearing my wool sweater, a gift from Asya that I had no chance to wear yet. The village authorities searched his home and recovered the sweater, but the uniform was gone, most likely the boy already sold it. However, they found miscellaneous things from an earlier robbery of the village rural cooperative shop: scarves, combs, buttons, etc. Unfortunately for Zhora, that meant real trouble for him. It was one thing to steal from a private person, which could have been settled somehow, and another to steal government property. Having received several slaps in his face from the Chairman, Zhora confessed to his crimes. I never found out how this story ended for Zhora. The boy was still underage, and I hope that was considered during his sentencing. I learned my lessons and began doing a better job of

hiding food and valuable things. For example, I poured tutovka into bottles from medicinal mixtures and kept them in the medical cabinet, etc.

There were other happenings during my period of working in Kelbend that I would like to share with my reader. Some of them you could find to be funny, entertaining, and amusing. However, I would want to assure you that at the time I have experienced them, they were not fun for me at all.

One March night, I woke up from a need. The convenience was outside in the backyard. It was chilly out there; a thin layer of snow was still covering most of the ground. I threw on my coat, put my foot into galoshes, and went downstairs with an ax in my hand. As I finished with what I was doing and was walking back to the house, passing the door to the utility room, I heard a strange scratching sound coming from that direction. I listened carefully, but the sound stopped, and then resumed as I continued my walk. I gazed at the door, and despite a decent distance and the darkness, noticed a silhouette of some animal standing on its hind legs and scrubbing on the door. The wolf, I thought, trying to get to my chickens. I was going to throw an ax at it but quickly changed my mind, worried to miss and have nothing to defend myself. I quietly moved forward and felt like I was stepping on something solid. It was a log. The animal did not pay any attention to me, the hunger surpassed its instinct of self-preservation. I carefully lifted the log, and swinging with all my strength, threw it towards the wolf from a distance of about five to six meters. And ... I got it, the wolf fell to the ground and began to spin and tumble in place. I rushed to it with all my strength, losing my coat and one of the galoshes on the run. When I was about to strike the wolf with the ax, I noticed a long fluffy tail of my night visitor and it was small, for a wolf, size. It

was a thief fox. I turned the ax in and hit it several times on its head with the butt side of the ax, to not damage the fur. The fox fell still. At that moment, I felt cold and began trembling all over. I picked up and put on my coat, grabbed the fox by the tail, and with one galosh on, climbed up the stairs, dropped the fox at my door, and walked into the room to warm up.

However, remembering that foxes were good pretenders, went out onto the balcony and struck it a few more times.

Waking up in the morning after a sound sleep, I recalled my nightly adventure with excitement, because initially thinking that I was dealing with a wolf, I fearlessly got involved in a fight, having just an ax in my hands. Having quickly dressed, I came out to the balcony; the fox was still there. I went down, and from the very edge of the courtyard, began shouting down to the village calling Sereja, the eighteen-year-old son of Uncle Bagrat; both were avid hunters. I was friends with this family and often visited them and had occasionally been inviting Sereja to my place and regaled him with tutovka and food. Sereja heard me calling him but thought that I was asking him for breakfast.

“Thank you, Doctor. I already had my breakfast, and I am now getting ready to go to work,” he shouted back. I had to brief him about my last night’s adventure, and once again asked him to come up here and bring along a sharp knife. In a few minutes, Sereja was standing on the balcony and looking at the fox with surprise. “What can I say, Doctor? We cannot kill a fox with a gun, and you managed to kill it with a log. Good for you!”, he said delightedly with a smile. He deftly took the fur off the fox and took it with him to process and make it out for me. Later, I made a coat collar out of that fox fur and Asya wore it for a few years.



Since my friends were hesitant to visit me in my “eagle nest” place, and rather have me visit them, I have occasionally been organizing and inviting them for “bachelor” parties. We ate and drank and had a good time together talking and joking. By the way, the Chairman of the village council Avagum, who was an indispensable participant in these feasts, was the oldest brother of Enok’s *badzhanakh*<sup>240</sup> Khachatur.

One fine day, upon my return from a regular visit to Baku, our company gathered again at my place. My guests brought drinks and some food that were immediately placed on a table along with reserves from my stock and what I had brought from Baku. We were having a good time, when an elderly woman, who had often visited me with her health problems, walked into the room and asked me if I brought her medicine that I promised her to get in Baku. I did bring the medicines, but I was not in the right condition to search for them in my travel bags right now, and asked her to go home, promising to bring them to her tomorrow. But the old woman turned out to be stubborn and continued insistently requesting her medicine. Well, what can you do about it? I decided to do the same as my late grandfather Shamir used to do. I went into the reception room and poured some black tea brew into an empty bottle and handed it over to her with the following words, “Here it is, your medicine from Baku. Take twenty-five drops a day for the next three days and come back to see me again.” I knew there would be no harm from my “medicine” for the old woman and returned to my guests. What do you think happened next? Three days later, the old woman was back with a straw basket in her hands. At the threshold, she bowed to me and said, “Doctor-djan, God bless you! The pain in my chest is gone, and

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<sup>240</sup> Brother-in-law for two men married to two sisters.

I sleep well now. Let your shade be always with us! Take these modest offerings, please. My savior, everything is fresh and tasty for you," said the old woman, who pulled out of the basket a jar of honey, a jar of yogurt, and a dozen eggs. "Please save some of this medicine for me," she concluded. I promised to fulfill her request and sent her home.



I have always been a social drinker who liked to sit in a circle of friends and have a few shots for a good time. I knew my norm and had never abused alcohol. Once, I returned home in the late evening from a party, undressed, and got into bed. I lit a candle on a stool by the bed and began reading Victor Hugo's historical novel "99", but soon, under the influence of a decent amount of consumed alcohol, I quickly found myself in the arms of Morpheus. I am not sure how long I slept before I suddenly jumped up from a strong blow to my head, or to be precise, to my forehead.

The candle was off; sitting in the darkness, for a minute I thought maybe I was dreaming, but quickly dropped this hypothesis because my forehead was hurting. What if somebody in the house? My windows were dark, and someone could have thought that I was away and broke into the house.

I stretched out my hand to reach the ax, which was supposed to be on the stool, but it was not there. My heart began to beat faster. I quickly jumped out of bed, ran up to the switch, and turned on the light. I spotted the ax by the door and picked it up, then got on the floor and looked under the bed. No one was there. I then remembered a niche in the wall covered by a bedsheet I used for hanging my outerwear. The niche was quite

spacious and could easily accommodate one person. Perhaps someone was hiding there? Quietly on the tips of my toes, holding the ax in my right hand, I approached it and with my left hand quickly moved the bed sheet off to the side. No one was there. What was the matter? But I really was hit. I decided to check the balcony. Approaching the door, I stepped on something solid. It was a pomegranate. I looked at it and then at the ceiling. There were two more of them hanging from a beam. Damn it, everything now fell into place. One of the pomegranates that I hung under the ceiling for some reason decided to fall and drop on my head. And here I was, standing in the middle of the room, in the middle of the night, in my underwear, with the pomegranate in my hand, looking at it like Hamlet on a skull, and began cursing it with all the last words I knew. In the morning, I discovered that the book that was lying open on a stool was partially burned. I still have this volume as the memory of my nightly adventure that so scared me.

I already mentioned that my isolated living in a remote location had made me an attractive target for robbery and theft. We all know how petty crimes can sometimes take a wrong turn and go ugly. All this made me extremely careful and alert and drove me crazy.

One summer night, I got woken by a strange repetitive clunk sound coming from outside. I looked out through the open window but saw nothing strange or suspicious. If I was dealing with intruders, then they must be hiding under the balcony. Clunking stopped for a short while and then resumed, "dumb-top, dumb-top." What if someone was trying to lure me out? I thought and decided to stay inside. Driven by anxiety and terrible curiosity, I spent all night walking around the room. Damn loneliness, not a single soul around. Only at dawn, I

boldly went out and looked under the balcony and saw the wide-open door into the utility room that I apparently forgot to close last night and a tramping inside stray donkey. I spit out all my anger for my restlessness and insomnia onto this animal, scolding it with all the bad words. Having calmed down, I thought about what I should do with my guest. Luckily, I heard a woman down in the village calling her son to find their missing donkey. The boy shouted back, suggesting that wolves probably already ate it. I walked to the edge of the cliff and told them that their donkey is there, and they could come and take it; I also reminded them to bring a broom to clean after it.

For a long time, I have dreamed of improving our living conditions in Baku. Continuing to huddle in a small, damp, and darkroom with two kids was no longer possible. I began taking certain steps to change the situation.

In the spring of 1944, through a shadow broker<sup>241</sup> that I hired, found a nice flat in Armenikend, whose tenant, an old, bearded Jew, wanted to sell it. I conducted negotiations with the old man's son-in-law. We agreed on thirty-three thousand rubles, of which fifteen thousand would go to the old man, who was going to move to Russia. Having reviewed the terms of sale, I went back to Kelbend. Asya gave the money, including nine thousand rubles to bribe the housing authorities, to Verdi<sup>242</sup> to complete the transaction. Later, it turned out that this amount was not enough, and since we had no more money, Asya had to sell several poods of flour and ghee. She informed me about this

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<sup>241</sup> Apartments in the USSR were owned (with some exceptions) by the government and could not be legally sold. However, they could be traded for another apartment, including apartments located in different cities. That makes the described an illegal economic activity, punishable for all three parties involved.

<sup>242</sup> Ashot's brother-in-law, Lusik's husband.

in a letter. Unfortunately, she forgot that we were living during wartime and the censorship was reading all correspondences. We got in trouble. Asya had to report to the militia several times and was interrogated about the contents of the letter. The militia was interested to know who her husband was, where he worked, where did he get so much money, who was Verdi, who he has passed the bribe, etc. They were first going to evict us, but soon changed their mind and housed<sup>243</sup> a strange man with us and forwarded the case to the Prosecutor's office. I had to come to Baku several times to find approaches to the Prosecutor. I bribed him and his deputy with money, goods, and food; thus, I managed to get his disposition and agreement to solve the case in the court in my favor. In my next step, I approached the judge who was working on our case. However, he was not very cooperative and said that he had a busy schedule, and we would have to wait for several months. Now I had to "feed" the judge to speed up the consideration of our case. The court took place and decided the case in our favor. It ordered authorities to evict the person and offer him different housing arrangements.

Later, I offered the man several options to move out, but he did not accept any of them. Well, there are always alternatives. I gave a thousand rubles to our quarter's militia officer, and he carried the man's belongings out of our apartment. That was the last time we saw him.

In early summer, I became sick with a high fever and severe pain and swelling of my feet, fingers, and neck joints. I could hardly get up from my bed, and Asya and Yurik ended up coming to Kelbend to take care of me. I diagnosed myself with

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<sup>243</sup> Due to a shortage of apartments, it was common when several families shared same apartment unit.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

acute articular rheumatism and began to treat it with solid doses of sodium mixture, pyramidon, etc. Gradually, I began feeling better, and Asya returned to Baku, leaving Yurik with me for the entire summer. Before I got fully recovered, I began to see my inpatients and even made a few trips to villages, getting on my horse with support.



*Chapter 51 Chased by Wolfs*

In the fall of 1944, a young Azerbaijani from Khalilu showed up at my door with a request to visit the Chairman of their collective farm who had fallen ill. I quickly got ready, mounted my horse, and we set off. It was quite a distant trip of about 25 kilometers to the southeast of Kelbend. The road went through a steppe. The only “decorations” in the surrounding landscape were rare islands scattered around bushes of wild pomegranate and prickly dog rose. We reached the village in the evening, and I immediately went to the patient’s house. I found him lying on the floor of a large tidy and richly furnished nomad Turks-style room in a bed set over several magnificent carpets. The man was lying restlessly groaning in pain, and creakingly turning from side to side. My examination revealed that he was suffering from acute gastritis. I immediately applied a hot-water bottle, gave him pain relief drops, and asked a housemaid to bring him a cup of hot tea. While I was occupied with my patient, the hosts were preparing dinner. Men slaughtered two hens, and I could hear the good smell of cooking pilaf coming out of a cauldron. Good timing, as I was starving.

The pain relief medicine kicked off acting, and my man began feeling a little better. Soon, I, along with the others in the house, was invited to dinner. We sat down the Asian way<sup>244</sup> on the carpets, and in the comfort of soft ivy pillows surrounding us, began to eat. I ate well and had a few shots of arakh. I praised the hosts for the excellent pilaf. The Chairman commented that the pilaf was prepared out of the rice grown on their farm and ordered one of his men to give me five kilograms of it and write it on his account. He felt much better with much less pain. At

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<sup>244</sup> Sitting on own legs folded under the body.

bedtime, I gave him a sleeping pill and called it a day myself. In the morning, my patient was feeling much better; pain in his stomach appeared only during probing. "Doctor, I slept well, thank you! It seems that my stomach does not hurt anymore," said the Chairman. However, I still wanted him to continue to adhere to the bed rest and diet. My patient asked me to stay for one more day and I agreed, because, as I learned, some other people needed medical attention. I spent most of the morning and part of the afternoon walking from house to house seeing others and getting acquainted with the village and its surroundings. Khalilu was located by the road that led to Baku and was halfway from the Molokan village of Kululu to the town of Agsu. Several country roads led from the village to the west in the direction of Armenian villages.

At dusk, I stepped outside to get fresh air and ran into a familiar face. It was a teacher from my family village of Kendhurd. We greeted each other, and to my question about what brought him to Khalilu, the man said that he was in Baku on training when he received a telegram about his sister's illness and now was on his way to Kirk. He got here by car and now was looking for a ride. Having learned about the reason for my presence here, he asked me to help him out with a ride and go with him to see his sister. I saw that man was genuinely upset by the state of his sister. He even wept and showed me the telegram. I knew his sister; she was a married woman whose husband was in the front. "Listen, I visited your sister yesterday. She was sick for a while but was doing much better when I saw her. I am sure that everything will be fine," I said, trying to calm him down. However, the teacher continued to insist, and I ended up asking the Chairman for help and received his permission to take one of his horses. I left him more



medicine for the night and promised to return the next morning. We hit the road in complete darkness.

The horse that the Chairman gave me was a young and hard-nosed stallion. I left him under me, and the teacher rode my horse. All the way I had to restrain the stallion so that my companion could keep up with me. In about ten kilometers we reached a crossroad; one road led to Kendhurd, and the other to Kelbend. At the intersection, we ran into the teacher's two fellow villagers walking from Kirk to Kendhurd. Having greeted them, the teacher immediately asked the peasants about his sister and learned that although she seemed to have recovered, yesterday her father came to Kirk and took her on an arba to Kendhurd. The teacher was very happy about the news, joined the villagers on my horse, and went with them to Kendhurd, leaving me in the middle of the night on a road without even offering me to come with him for an overnight. It was rather a rare example of ignorance and ingratitude I have ever met during my work in Karabakh. Well, what could you do? Standing in the middle of nowhere in a ruined mood, I was hesitant to return to Khalilu, feeling shame to explain my early return, and decided to go home to Kelbend. I had good fifteen kilometers ahead of me.

In a few kilometers, I suddenly heard a rustling sound behind me. I turned around and saw several pairs of luminous points on each side of the road. Wolves. Wheatfields had been harvested on both sides of the road, and wheatears were transported to a collective farm grain bin, but piles of straw were still lying on the fields. The wolves chasing after me were running over the straw and making such a sound. The stallion also felt the danger and quickly went into a gallop. Recalling the unfortunate incident with Zorik, I was worried that he might

fall, or perhaps I could lose my balance and fall, and with so many wolves around, I would definitely find my end there. However, at the same time, I was afraid to hold the horse, as the wolves were catching up with us. At some point, the fields ended, and the sound of my pursuers changed from a rustle to a dull thud. I also began to hear sounds reminiscent of those produced by dogs playing with each other. The stallion, having raised its ears, continued zealously racing forward with all its might, and I, like an avid rider, leaned towards its neck, firmly pressing my legs against its torso, so hard that I even felt its ribs. I was holding on and prayed to the Lord not to fall.

Despite all the efforts to break away, the distance between us and the wolves kept shrinking. Suddenly, I remembered that not far from there, near the Avdan area, among several tall trees there was a *kyairiz*.<sup>245</sup> I was sure about the trees because I have seen peasants taking breaks under their shade. However, I was not sure about the distance to the place, but it was still a spark of hope. I turned the horse in the direction of *kyairiz*, and a few minutes later we reached the place. Without losing a minute, I climbed onto the nearest tree right straight from the saddle. Freed from me, the stallion instantly darted to the side and disappeared into the dark. The pack of wolves did not keep themselves waiting for long. There were six of them that appeared just a minute later after I climbed up the tree.

They surrounded it and evilly stared at me in an anticipation of their victory. I saw the glittering in their impatience eyes, and terrible, full of saliva, fanged jaws. Some of them sat on their legs, and the others nervously walked around, never taking their eyes off me. However, their patience lasted only a few minutes; the wolves got up and ran off somewhere, probably

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<sup>245</sup> Spring.

after the horse. The stallion had the advantage of five minutes, and I prayed it was enough for him to run far away, not only because of my human pity but also because of all the troubles that would fall on my head, if something happened to the horse. I reached out for my watch, which showed three in the morning. I did not dare to get down the tree, fearing that the wolves were somewhere nearby waiting for me. It was chilly. I was tired to the point of exhaustion and concerned about falling asleep and falling from the tree. To ensure my safety, I pulled my officer's leather belt from my trousers and tied myself to a thick branch.

In about an hour, I heard the voices of two people speaking Armenian. "Hey-Hey! Here! Come here!", happily shouted I and heard how someone said in a boyish voice, "Did you hear it? Someone is calling us." I shouted again, "Here, come to the kyairiz." In a couple of minutes, I noticed a boy and a man coming my way. I ducked down from the tree, so they could see me. My rescuers recognized me. "What's the matter, Doctor? What happened?", exclaimed the man in surprise, in whom I recognized a peasant from Kirk. I jumped down. My legs were numb from the cold and sitting on the tree. Accompanied by the man and the boy, I walked to the road, where the man's wife with two donkeys was waiting for them. The man offered me to get on a donkey, and we set off. On the way, I told my rescuers about my night's adventure. "That was trouble. Well-done figuring to climb on a tree, doctor. Thank God, everything ended well for you. Last winter, one woman and her son that were walking around villages begging for food were attacked by hungry wolves who tore them apart and ate them. We were returning from the mill, and glad we found you."

By dawn, we made it to Kelbend, the kind people dropped me off at my place and went their way. I walked into my room and

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immediately went to bed with all my clothes on, and instantly fell asleep. Having slept like I had dropped dead, I woke up at noon and ate something in a bad mood, being gnawed by the fate of the horse. I got dressed and was about to head out when I heard a horse neighing. Outside in my courtyard stood a horseman from Khalilu with the missing stallion standing next to him. I jumped on the horse, and we were back on the road and reached Khalilu by the evening. The Chairman felt good. He told me about how the stallion ran away from the wolves and was wandering around all night and returned to the village in the morning safe and sound. In the morning, I began getting ready to go home. The Chairman besides the rice gave me a pood of flour and a big turkey; from my other patients, I received two chickens and some money. Accompanied by the same man that brought me here, I got home by noon.

I was in Kelbend on May 9<sup>th</sup> when a long-awaited end of the war was announced. The collective farm slaughtered twenty sheep and distributed the meat among the villagers. The smoke of kebabs towered into the skies from all the houses around the village; people were celebrating the victory.



*Chapter 52 Bloody Night Fight*

In the spring of 1945, Nikolai-dai picked up a strong inflammation of his lungs and fell ill. I immediately went to see him and stayed with him for three days and left only after I became convinced that he was recovering. For the next two weeks, I continued checking on him, riding to Kirk every other day. Visiting my friends Nikolai-dai and Aunt Arusyak was always enjoyable; however, there was one circumstance that was spoiling it. The "circumstance" had a name, Zalim, a huge guardian dog of local breed. During the daytime, Zalim was held on a long chain, but I was still afraid to get near him, as even though I was not a stranger to this house, he always pounced on me, threateningly barking. He would run towards me, reaching the maximum length of the chain, he would get up on his hind legs growling and showing me his strong fangs that could easily bite my arm off. No matter how reliable the chain looked, I did not want to tempt a fate and began knocking on a window to have someone come out and let me in.

Once, in the fall of 1945, when I once again was visiting Nikolai-dai, he came out to meet me and led me into the house. Aunt Arusyak was not at home. Nikolai-dai was in a good mood and immediately walked me to the dining room and sat me at a large dining table with a samovar standing in the middle and a keg of wine. My host slyly smiling pointed to the vessels and said, "Which of the two we shall start with?" I chose the keg. Aunt Arusyak showed up right on time; we greeted and hugged like relatives. She rushed to the kitchen and soon returned with fresh chureks and plates of all kinds of delicious things. The wine was great. We sat at the table for a long time and had a friendly conversation and did not go to bed until

midnight. However, our dreams were short-lived; we were awakened by the loud barking of Zalim, the roar of some other beast-sounding animal, and a hubbub of struggle.

"Arusyak, Arusyak, quickly bring me my rifle. Hurry up!", shouted Nikolai-dai. I put some clothes on, went out of my bedroom, and ran into Aunt Arusyak rushing to her husband with the rifle. "Wolf," she said to me. We went out to the porch to join Nikolai-dai standing there in his coat draped over his shoulders. "You see, Doctor? The scoundrel snuck into our yard. Look how huge it is, must be the Alpha wolf." said Nikolai-dai, and took the rifle from his wife. Right in front of us, at about six or seven meters from the porch, Zalim fiercely fought with the night visitor. Opponents were worthy of each other. Growling and snarling, they bravely fought, trying to grab the enemy by the throat. Occasionally one of them managed to cling his fangs over the enemy's nape and push it down with a powerful head, trying to knock his opponent off. The animals were changing their positions so quickly that it was hard to tell who was there. No question, this fight was to the death. "I can't shoot," shouted Nikolai-day, "Bastards, won't stop for a moment. I am afraid to get Zalim." The fight continued, and you could tell that both animals were getting tired. Nikolay-dai shot in the air several times, but this did not stop the fight. The animals kept attacking each other until neighbors from the nearest houses began entering the yard. The wolf felt in danger and quickly retreated to the woods.

In the morning, we went out to look at the place of the fight. It was all covered in blood and scraps of wool, and the ground seemed to be loosened down to a considerable depth. We found Zalim lying in the yard under a tree with many torn wounds on his neck and sides. He did not touch the food brought to him.

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According to the stories of some hunters, a few days later, somewhere in the gorge, they found a wolf's corpse with a torn side and even seemed to have lost some of its skin. Later I learned from Uncle Nicholas that Zalim never recovered from that fight. He was infected with rabies, and he had to put him down.

1946. Back in the fall of 1945, I was asked to report to the District Health Department where I was informed that the leadership of the Martuny district was demanding my return. Back then, I refused to accept the offer, and now in March 1946, the Republic Health Ministry insisted on my urgent arrival. I made an agreement with the District Health Department to take vacation days for the last two years that I was entitled to. Just in case, I packed all my things, and on March 6, 1946, left for Baku.



*Chapter 53 Back to Martuny | Arakel*

Having rested for about a month, I decided not to visit the Republic Health Ministry, but instead go to Martuny for a few days to first visit Asya's parents, whom I had not seen for three years now, and then to sort out the circumstances of my personal recall to the old position. On April 21, I took a train and the next morning arrived at Goradiz Station. I had just begun looking for a ride to Martuny when I came across one familiar MTS driver, who was just about to leave there and did not mind taking me along. By noon, we were in Martuny. The driver dropped me off at the building of the District Executive Committee. I did not even have time to put myself in order and pick up my belongings when a young man approached me and said that the Chairman of the District Executive Committee comrade Mosesov was urgently asking me to come to see him. When I asked if he knew what it was about, my interlocutor pointed with his eyes to the top floor of the building and said that there is the Executive Committee Session in progress and some people saw my arrival and wanted to see me.

Entering the meeting room, I was pleasantly surprised to see smiling faces of people I knew and Mosesov himself, getting up from their seats and walking towards me. We warmly greeted, and some of them I even hugged and kissed. I was seated directly on the presidium, and comrade Mosesov introduced me to the rest of the session's participants, and a few minutes later announced a break. After a brief conversation with me, Mosesov called his secretary and ordered her to quickly print and immediately bring him the order of my appointment to the position of the Head of the District Health Department effective March 23, 1946. To my astonishment and objection, Mosesov



smiled and said, "After your departure, the Department has been left unattended for a long time. The war is over. We need you here, so go take a rest today and resume work tomorrow."

This is how I was reinstated back in charge of the Martuny District Health Department.

On the next day, the acting head of the Department, Dr. Allahverdova, handed it over to me and left to work at Red Bazaar, where, by the way, to this day she still works at the local hospital. I was stepping into my position during the post-war period. Most of the population was living in poverty, there was a shortage of food, the grocery store's shelves were half empty, there were interruptions in food supply for hospitals and kindergartens, etc. Infectious diseases were rampant in the area, mostly malaria, and scabies. There was no medication to treat them with. The same situation was with other illnesses. In place of quinine injections, we had to administer ineffective 4% Akrekhin. There was no Wilkins' ointment for scabies, and we had to come up with a non-standard solution to get out of this situation. I remember how with a copy of the Executive Committee's order in my hands I traveled around nearby villages in search of a fat pig. The idea was to melt the fat, mix it with Sulfur and use this mixture as an ointment to treat scabies. But the fat pig had to be found first. Having traveled around several collective farms, we found only one more or less obese pig and got about two kilograms of fat.

At the same time, there were many other problems that affect the department's successful operation and required my personal immediate attention. The two major problems were supply and transportation. I had only one ambulance at my disposal, and even then, it was down and needed repairs and restoration. I got the mechanics of an MTS to work on it, and we

got it going. I hardly managed to get tires for it. We also removed the rear part of the car body, thus adapting it to a pickup truck.

Another problem was heating fuel, or rather firewood since it was the only fuel available in Martuny at that time. We must have heat for the hospital, clinic, maternity hospital, and laundry to be able to properly function. Before the war, it was a much easier task. In the summer, I purchased truckloads of wood logs for an entire winter, paying cash to the supplying villages. Now, the financial department required you to make purchases only through bank transactions, and this was not the same thing at all. I will give you just one example, but first I shall mention that shortly after my appointment to this position, there happened a significant rotation in the district leadership.

In early March 1947, I was summoned to the District Party Committee. When I walked into the First Secretary's office, there beside the Secretary sat another man.

"Do you need firewood?", the First Secretary asked me.

"Yes, yes, Comrade Balakyan, I could use a lot of it."

"So, here is the Chairman of the Ningi village collective farm who does not have enough money for the government bonds subscription but has plenty of wood logs."

I shall clarify that at that time, there was a campaign for public subscription to the government bonds. The population of each region was supposed to purchase certain amounts of bonds. This was one way for the government to fill in the gap in their budget. Failure to achieve the numbers was punishable by the leadership of the district.

"Help each other. Sign a sale contract, transfer the money to the farm and get your firewood," concluded the First Secretary.

Thanking him, the Chairman and I went to my office and drew up our deal. With the help of my secretary, the contract was immediately printed and certified, and on the same day, the accounting transferred money to the collective farm.

September came, but no firewood was delivered yet. I was sending my supply manager to the collective farm, and they promised to deliver it soon. A few more weeks passed, but I still did not have firewood. In October, I went to Ningi myself and returned with the promise of firewood delivery in two weeks. Two weeks passed, and there was no firewood. Twice more I had the supply manager go to the farm again, but it did not do any good. At the end of October when cold weather set in. I wrote a letter to the Party District Committee and copied it to the District Executive Committee and the District Prosecutor requesting their assistance in getting the contract fulfilled. The letter was accompanied by all the necessary documents confirming the signed contract and money transfer. However, in response, as the Russians say, "No response and no greetings." December was cold and snowy. I once again sent an insistent request for help to the leadership of the Martuny district, and once again it was left unresponded.

Once, by chance, I saw a large arched cart loaded with firewood parked by the Prosecutor's house. I asked the carter where the firewood came from and to whom it was intended to and received a discomfiting answer. The firewood came from Ningi to be delivered to the house of the Prosecutor. This answer infuriated me. Patients and children were freezing in unheated rooms, and firewood was being delivered to the Prosecutor. Angered, I returned to the Health Department and bitterly shared what I saw with my staff. One of the nurses, whose sister worked in the Executive Committee, informed me

that the other evening she saw four arbas loaded with firewood arrived at Martuny from Ningi. Now everything fell into place. I was writing my request letters to the recipients of firewood purchased by the Health Department for children and the sick.

January 1948. The winter is in its full swing. Patients in the wards are still cold. One of them wrote a complaint to the Regional Central Party Committee. Soon, a commission of three people arrived to investigate the complaint. Among others, they called me in for a conversation. I brought and presented to the commission all relevant documents, and in detail described all the actions and efforts my staff and I have taken to provide proper conditions for inpatients. However, as one would say, one hand is covering another, one of the commission's members raised his shoulders and said to another sitting next to him, "Sure, he wrote two letters and relaxed." I was disappointed to hear that. This bastard never questioned how the firewood ended up in the wrong hands: moreover, he was perfectly aware that my subsequent actions would not solve the problem, but only bring the wrath of all-powerful officials on my head. I have been there before and knew how it would all end for me.

Dear Reader, you have read this book so far and will understand why the difficult circumstances of my life could not have unaffected my health. Therefore, it is funny to hear nowadays when someone compliments me by saying that I look well-preserved for my age and, suggests that it was probably because I had lived a careless and easy life.

On one spring day in 1948, I went to a barbershop and was sitting in an armchair in front of a mirror when someone walked in and greeted the barber, "Good day, Petros!" "Good afternoon, Arakel-dai.", responded the barber. "What wind has brought you to us? How are your children?"

I looked in the mirror and recognized in the visitor the youngest son of Taque-aker.

“Well, I wish I could have a more positive answer for you. My poor kids are sitting at home without food waiting for me to bring them something,” answered Arakel, standing with a hurdzhin hanging over his shoulder and swaying on his feet. “I brought my wife’s ring to sell or exchange for flour. Do you know someone who would buy it from me? I don’t know what else to do. I can’t afford to go to Agdam, and I am too weak to walk there.”

I pulled the barber by his hand and quietly, so that Arakel would not hear and recognize me, told him to quickly finish my shave. Intrigued by my strange behavior, Petros hurried over, and in a few minutes, I was already sneaking out of the shop through the back door, beforehand having asked the barber to hold up Arakel until my return.



In those days, the Health Department was issuing a daily requisition to a local bakery kiosk for receiving bread for the hospital, and I ran there. A queue of people stood by the kiosk to get bread per their food vouchers. I walked inside through the back door and asked a clerk to wrap me up three loaves, promising to bring him a requisition within an hour. A few minutes later, out of breath, I was walking through the same backdoor into the barbershop back room. I called Petros over and asked him to invite Arakel to come here. No wonder Arakel did not recognize me; so many years passed since we saw each other. I named myself, and we hugged and talked for a while. There were many questions to ask and answer. I confessed to Arakel

that I overheard his dialogue with the barber and asked him to open his hurdzhin. When he perplexedly opened his bag, I put the bread into it and said, "Arakel, this is for your children." Arakel-dai, clutching his bag to himself and looking at me with a surprised and at the same time happy look, and selecting the correct words said, "May I be your oblation! Why? How come?". Then, he reached into his pocket, wanting to pay me, but I intercepted his hand and said, "Arakel-dai, what are you doing? You do not know something that I am about to tell you. Your late mother, unforgettable Taque-aker, may she rest in peace, almost three decades ago saved my family from hunger. She fed us bread in secret from her own family. How can I forget this? I am your eternal debtor. Take the bread home, your hungry children are waiting for you there, and come to see me again. I will help you with what I can." Arakel-dai thanked me again, gave me a warm hug, and left wiping his tears. We agreed that he would be coming to my office once a week and I would be giving him bread.

I had occasionally been visiting Kendhurd and often stayed overnight at Mirza-dai's house. On one such occasion in the autumn of the same year, I left Mirza-dai's house in the morning and went to check on the local medical post. Finished with my business, I unexpectedly felt a strong desire to stop by and look at the house, in which many years ago, we lived in misery and starvation and survived the severe winter. I found our former refuge in a terrible state of neglect; the door to the cellar was gone and trash and dirt were everywhere. I stood there for a few minutes, hard memories and horrors of the time spent here flew by like footage of a black and white movie. I left the place in sadness. On my way to my uncle's house, I noticed Arakel-dai standing in his courtyard and decided to talk to him.

He was greatly enraptured seeing me, and so was his wife Shushan, who came out to the noise and called us in. The interior appearance of the place was in line with the appearance of its owners. It could hardly be described as modest, but rather as screaming poverty and hopelessness. On my tactless question, how are they doing, Shushan bitterly sighed and said, "Ashot, we live badly. When Arakel was working as a night watchman on the collective farm, we somehow could make ends meet. All this changed when wolves attacked the farm on Arakel's watch and killed a horse. The collective farm imposed a fine on Arakel, and things turned bad on us. Now, most of his pay goes to pay off the debt." A child's cry came from the next room and Shushan hurried there and soon returned holding a baby dressed in tatters. Oh my God, these elderly people living in poverty, and look at them, they brought a child into the world. As if he was reading my thoughts, Arakel groaned and explained what the story was here, "Sorrow is around us, Ashot. Our daughter married two years ago. The child has been out for more than a year, but she and her husband were troubled and ended up divorced. Our daughter returned home with the child." Misfortune never comes alone, I thought to myself, they really are in trouble. Shushan brought some barley churek, one onion, four boiled eggs, and a half-liter bottle of tutovka with glasses.

"Ashot, forgive us for the simple treat. My sister gave me some food and tutovka for Arakel." I was silent all this time, thinking about how I could help these unfortunate people. Arakel-dai reached out to pour tutovka, but

I stopped him by lying that I was just from a table. I turned to his daughter and asked her to move closer to me and in the presence of her parents said to her, "Today is Saturday. On

Monday morning, I will be waiting for you in my office. I will give you a job in the nursery, and you will work and live there with your child. You will be getting three meals a day and all your salary you will be giving to your parents. Is everything clear?", I stayed with them for a little longer and left.

On Monday, the young woman came to my office, and I issued the order for her hire to a nanny position, but in fact, she worked as a dishwasher in the kitchen. I instructed a cook to feed her well and leave her something for dinner. I also arranged a room for her to stay in and provided her with bedding, etc. Arakel-dai's daughter worked and lived there until the summer and quit when she and her husband reunited. I felt good about the fact that I could somehow help and retribute this family for the good deeds of Taque-aker.

In the fall of 1948, Asya's father, Melikset, fell ill in Baku. He began complaining about pain in his stomach, nausea, and vomiting. It was unexpected and like a clap of thunder on our heads, because despite his age, he was still a strong man and an unwearied hard worker. He spent his days occupied with something, carrying ten heavy buckets of water from a kyairiz to home, working in his garden, and taking care of several hefty chickens. I remember he had two roosters, two tireless fighters who were always fighting for domination over the chickens. It was funny watching Melikset wearing a cap turned backward on his head chasing roosters with a stick and casting them with all the last words. But they did not care. At the first opportunity, they would jump into new battles. Tired to fight the rooster, my father-in-law came up with an original solution to the problem. He began placing roosters in the attic in turns, tying them to the roof rack and leaving them food and water. Consequently, he was punishing them one by one, to knock off their arrogance.



When Melikset got seriously sick, my mother-in-law and her granddaughter Elmira, Manvel's daughter, urgently returned to Baku from Dolanlar. Asya and our children were already there.

Earlier, at the beginning of the summer, the inspector of the district financial department, Ruben Gevorkyan, approached me and said that he and Dr. Anik Agalarova, Elmira's mother, were in love and asked for my help in receiving a blessing from Asya's parents. However, when I asked Anik about this, she fell into hysterics, wept, and cursed Ruben for daring to talk about something that was not true. However, soon an event occurred that made me doubt the sincerity of her words. In the fall, to protect Anik from Ruben's "infringements," I sent her to Baku for some training courses. Perhaps two weeks after Anik's departure, Ruben informed me that she dropped out of courses and would be coming back soon. Shortly after her return, while in the village of Khodjavend, drunken Ruben attacked Anik with a knife. When I found out about it, I immediately telephoned the Militia and had them detain him. Ruben was facing at least one year of imprisonment. Frankly, I was glad not to have him around. However, in a day, I found out from one of my employees that Anik had been visiting Ruben in detention and was even bringing him food three times a day. I called the police chief, and he told me that Ruben would have to be released because Dr. Agalarova wrote to the police a statement saying that she had no complaints about the detainee, that he was her husband, and asked for his release. I should add that Ruben was a widower and had a son, and his brother-in-law, Misak, was the head of the criminal investigation department. Ruben was let go, and soon he and Anik began living together. Unfortunately, ever since then, the relations between Anik and our family deteriorated and had never recovered.

*Chapter 54 Suvaryan from America | My Last Meeting  
with Avetik Isaakyan*

Back in the spring of 1948, people were talking about a certain Suvaryan who arrived from America in his father's village of Karakend. In 1913, Suvaryan's father borrowed money from one of his fellow villagers, and with his entire family, except for his older married daughter, left the village. Somehow, they managed to get to America and prosper there. Now, the son of Suvaryan came to visit his sister and return his father's debt. Suvaryan did not come with empty hands; he brought and donated a truck to his village collective farm and gifted a car to our famous poet, Avetik Isaakyan. I had seen Suvaryan several times when he was visiting Martuny in a big and beautiful car. He was a medium-height man in his fifties of rather intelligent and attractive appearance. He was always dressed well and tastefully, with an invariable cloak, over a dark suit and a beautiful hat on his head. He was coming to Martuny to see his fellow villagers, for whom he has always been a welcomed guest.

In October 1948, I was on official business in Norshen and initially planned to spend the night there. But when, by chance, I learned that Avetik Isaakyan was in Karakend, I wrapped up my business and immediately left in hope of getting to see him. I found Isaakyan sitting under a tree with a group of elderly men speaking about something. Leaving my horse to the care of locals, I quietly sat down on the bench, close to the poet. Isaakyan was dressed in a light summer tunic and striped pants and was holding a



hat in his hands. "...many old people to justify their physical infirmity, consciously add a few years to their age," spoke Isaakyan. "This is absolutely wrong, instead you should keep yourself in good shape and fight the aging." At this moment, a local teacher approached the speaker and whispered something in his ear. Isaakyan got up, said goodbye to the group, and left.

A few days later at an MTS<sup>246</sup> station in Martuny, I overheard a conversation between two chauffeurs, one of whom was a local resident. The stranger was asking the local guy to help him with gasoline. He added that he was supposed to drive Avetik Isaakyan to the Amaras monastery, but was low on gas, not even enough to cover one way. In support of his words, the driver pointed to a tree with Isaakyan standing under its shade. The local driver said that he would like to help but had no gas to spare. Isaakyan's distressed chauffeur began looking around in a search of someone else who could help him. I went up to him and told him to wait here for a few minutes and I would get him gas. Nearby there was a government truck company, and that was where I went during a short but difficult conversation with a manager, I was able to negotiate a deal; I got ten liters of gasoline, with a promise to return fifteen tomorrow. The happy driver filled up his car, thanked me, and was about to leave when he remembered something and asked me for the directions to Amaras. Thinking of a rare opportunity to spend time and serve our great poet, I offered to show them the way. The driver thought it was a good idea but needed Isaakyan's permission for it. "*Varpet*<sup>247</sup>, this young man helped us to get gasoline, and is offering to accompany us and show

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<sup>246</sup> Machine and Tractor Station, government repair shop and gas station in rural areas, servicing mostly collective farms.

<sup>247</sup> Teacher, maestro (Arm.).

the way to the monastery,” said the driver when we approached Isaakyan.

“Good, bless you!”, Isaakyan pronounced as he patted me on the shoulder.

I asked them to give me about five minutes and rushed to my office, where I told my supply manager that I will be gone for two hours and instructed him to get a hold of the woman who was raising chickens, choose the best one, and have it cooked.

In addition, he shall have one of my staff prepare a few cold starters and hot tea. All food must be ready by my return.

Soon, we were on our way. Isaakyan was sitting beside the driver, and I comfortably occupied the back seat, periodically pointing the driver in the right direction. When we got to the place, Isaakyan and I (the driver decided to stay in the car), walked through the only gate to the monastery courtyard. The yard was fenced with a high, collapsed in some areas, stone wall. All along the inner perimeter of the wall were attached numerous rooms of various purposes, from stables for horses, utility rooms, and guest rooms, to monastic cells. In every corner of the wall rose round stone towers. The main building of the monastery complex stood in the center of the courtyard. We found it in a deplorable state, with collapsed walls, dilapidated condition of the roof, and gaping windows with broken glass. The unkempt courtyard was in the same condition, scattered everywhere agricultural equipment, spare parts of trucks and agricultural machinery, and all sorts of other stuff. For probably half an hour, Avetik Isaakyan was silently walking in front of me, observing the monastery complex. By looking at his facial expression, I could tell that he was not happy with what he saw. He suddenly stopped, turned to me, and asked, “Son, under whose authority is this monastery?”

“The monastery stands on the land of the village of Sos and belongs to it.”

“And how is this building used?”, continued the poet.

“In the spring, they raise silkworm cocoons, store seeds, and equipment.”

Isaakyan shook his head with displeasure and muttered something under his nose, pulled out a notebook from his pocket, and began writing something. He made another round through the courtyard, continuing to take notes. When he finished, he returned the notebook to his pocket, and as if he were addressing an audience, loudly pronounced, “This is the historical and sacred place of our nation, how can we treat it so shamelessly? In this monastery our ancestors, nobility, military leaders, and clergy from many places of our country gathered and had secret meetings to make the crucial for our nation decisions to unite and organize a joint resistance to the conquerors of our country,” then addressing me, Isaakyan asked, “Have you, son, read David Beck?”

“Yes, Varpet, I have. I am familiar with the Armenian historical literature.”, I replied.

“Good for you! Long live!”, Isaakyan praised me.

He pulled out his pocket watch, looked at it, and said that we should probably return to Martuny. Breaking etiquette, I rushed to the car to ask the driver to help me convince Isaakyan to stop at my place to rest and eat.

“It would be great. I am hungry myself, and I am sure our poet would not mind either,” said the chauffeur.

As we reached Martuny, we drove to the hospital where I was staying, occupying two rooms. Excited, I got out of the car first and standing by the window of the front passenger seat, appealed to Isaakyan with an invitation to visit my apartment

for a short rest and to share with me my modest meal. While Isaakyan was pondering, the chauffeur interrupted a pause, “Yes, yes, Varpet, let us go. I’m starving, and there is no strength to endure.” Looking at both of us, Isaakyan said, “Alright, alright, you convinced me. Frankly, I would not mind having a cup of tea.”

We walked up to my place. I got my guests seated at a dining table and ran to the other room to make sure everything was prepared as I requested. I was pleased to see a boiled chicken, hard-boiled eggs, cheese, fresh herbs, pickles, still warm chureks, great hand-crafted wine, and tutovka. I called downstairs and had a nurse bring us a pot of hot tea and set up the table. While she was doing that I at Varpet’s request told him a little about myself.

The first glass we raised to the health of my dear guest, the prominent national poet Isaakyan. Varpet just sipped from his glass and ate a piece of chicken and snacked on something. The driver drank both tutovka and wine and ate well. During a short pause, I sneaked out to the other room and quickly had two shots of tutovka for courage and returned to my guest.

“My dear Varpet, may I in continuation of my toast, read you a passage from your poem Abul-Lala Maari?”

“Of course, I am thrilled to hear it,” pronounced a smiling, surprised Isaakyan.

“Abul-Lala Maari” was my favorite poem by Isaakyan. I have learned it by heart long ago, and often declared it to myself and recited it in a circle of friends and relatives.

I began with the excerpts from chapters three and four. Isaakyan attentively listened to my reading and when I finished, rapturously pronounced, “Bravo, well-done son. I did not

expect to hear such a brilliant performance from a doctor. How did you get to know it?"

"I am following all your creations, Varpet. The first time a part of this poem that you wrote in Gazarapet was published in 1909, in the third issue of the Gekharvest magazine of Garegin Levonyan, the son of the *Ashug*<sup>248</sup> Djivani."

"Wow, Wow! Bravo, son, Bravo! That's right!" He raised his unfinished glass of wine and declared a toast, "For your health son, for your family! I'm very glad I met you." Soon, he got up, and we began saying goodbye to each other. Isaakyan thanked me again and firmly shook my hand. In turn, I kissed his hand and wished him good health and a safe drive.



In the spring of 1949, people were talking about NKVD arresting Suvaryan for espionage. Rumor had it he was caught at a crime scene near the town of Agdam, radioing out information about national security. Some said he was already in prison, others that he was urgently deported out of the USSR. Nevertheless, nobody has ever seen him again. Suvaryan's story had unpleasant consequences for many Karakendtsis<sup>249</sup> who had been in contact with him. Many of his close friends were dismissed from their positions, including judge Abramov and the Region First Secretary of Party Committee Grigoryan. The Secretary of the Central Committee of Azerbaijan, Seidov, came from Baku to personally fire Grigoryan from his position. It was noteworthy that in his speech at the meeting of the party

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<sup>248</sup> A folk singer and storyteller (Az.).

<sup>249</sup> Residents of Karakend.

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activists, he did not forget to mention Avetik Isaakyan, “Why did this decrepit old man from Armenia come to Karakend? What did he forget here? Did he come here to meet the ardent spy Suvaryan?”



*Amaras*



*Chapter 55 Tsiling Ashot*

It is always sad and hard to hear about the unfair and tragic fate of passed-away young people; it is doubly bitter when it was the life of the only child. Unfortunately, this was the destiny of my unforgettable friend Ashot Abramov, who left this world at the age of twenty-two.

In the summer of 1927, I was visiting Stepanakert, where I stayed with Shushan-baji, our neighbor from Shusha, for several days. That was when at one of the youth parties I met Ashot, a quiet, slender, and pleasant-looking young man. As I learned later, Ashot had tuberculosis; however, it did not prevent him from having many friends. He was the only child of his parents who, originally from the village of Ashan in Martuny district, were permanently living in Baku. His father was a tailor and had his own shop on Nizami Street, across from the *Gosbank*.<sup>250</sup> When Ashot became ill and his doctors recommended, that he change the climate, his father helped him to move to Stepanakert, rented him an apartment there, and helped him to get an accounting job in the local drama theater. Ashot had been weekly receiving a food parcel from his parents, mostly sweets, dried fruits, and so forth, and money twice a month. In other words, his parents provided him with a financially comfortable living. During the time when Yervand was working in Stepanakert, I was visiting him every summer, and my friendship with Ashot had grown stronger. We were getting together almost every day and had a good time together.

Ashot masterfully played the mandolin. Without a twinge, I can say I have never met anyone else who could play as well as Ashot. He has adapted guitar or tar strings to his mandolin,

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<sup>250</sup> Federal bank.

thus achieving a wide range of sound, and with his magnificent skills, won people's recognition. His numerous admirers respectfully called him *Tsililing*<sup>251</sup> Ashot. Ashot often played on the radio and at youth gatherings. I remember how during summer evenings, we were sitting on a lawn, and with admiration, listened to the beautiful folk motifs Ashot extracted from his mandolin. He performed dance melodies especially virtuously and inspiringly. Skillfully conducting a mediator on all the strings at once he was creating an impression of a performing orchestra. Nevertheless, Ashot's public performances were also very artistic. The instrument in his hands seemed to be dancing, accompanied by Ashot's head movements. This was leaving an impression of him conducting for himself. Overall, Ashot's performance was very spectacular and impressionable. In the summer seasons of 1928 and 1929, our group of friends was often arranging picnics near Stepanakert, in the place called *Shyrshiran*<sup>252</sup> lost in thick woods. We grilled kebabs, drank a little, and had a good time singing, dancing, and having endless talks. Ashot had always been an active participant in those gatherings. I even have a photo of him sitting with his mandolin near another musician, a good tambourine player Ruben.

My friend was deeply in love with a girl by the name of Asya, who shared his feelings. They were seeing each other and were happy. However, that all changed when the girl's parents learned about Ashot's illness and strictly forbade her from seeing him. This was a big blow to Ashot. We often met and spent time in intimate conversations, occasionally meeting at a small cafe in a park located on the western outskirts of the town.

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<sup>251</sup> A string (Arm.)

<sup>252</sup> Waterfall (Arm.)

“You know Ashot,” my poor friend said as he sadly looked into my eyes, “you are saying Asya is avoiding me because she fears an outrage from her parents and suggests forgetting her. But how can I do it if my life has no meaning without her? How can I do it, if I see her every day from my office and fascinatingly watch her graciously dancing and singing while sweeping their home courtyard, pouring water into a samovar, or doing other errands? You know I don't need anything; I could quit my job to stop seeing her, but I would then just die missing her.”

I sympathized with him with all my heart, but to my regret, except for words of sympathy, I had nothing to ease his pain.

Once, Ashot informed me that he was offered a voucher for a sanatorium treatment in the town of Abastuman but turned it down. I was terribly upset with his irresponsible decision and strongly reproached him, wondering why he did that, and asked him to reconsider his decision. However, Ashot was persistent and said if he visited the doctor, the entire town would know about his illness, as everyone knew that the resort in Abastuman was specializing in tuberculosis treatment.

Summer was almost over, and I had to return to Baku. In a farewell, Ashot mentioned his plan to visit his parents in September, and we agreed to meet in Baku.

I was very happy when one day Ashot knocked on our door. We sat and had a long talk over a cup of tea when I suddenly remembered about a big upcoming concert at the Lozovsky club and asked Ashot if he had brought his mandolin with him. “Where am I going to go without it? It is always with me; my mandolin is now the only joy I have in my life.” “Do you mind performing at a concert in our club?”

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

“In front of an unfamiliar audience? Hmm ... and yet, what is there that I would not do for my friend?”

On the day of the concert, I went for Ashot to his parent’s home, a one-story house on 28th April Street. Ashot introduced me to his parents, and while I was exchanging pleasantries with them, he went to change. As soon as the door behind him closed, his parents approached me, and whispering began asking me to persuade their son to consult with Dr. Chernomordikov.

The doctor was a well-known private physician in the city and had a recognized reputation as the best specialist in the treatment of tuberculosis. He was practicing at home, where he had an X-ray machine and a laboratory.

“Ashot is all we have in this life, but he would not listen to us. If he does not begin his treatment soon, we are going to lose him. Help us,” wailed my friend’s mother with tears in her eyes. Of course, I promised to do everything I could. Ashot returned to the room and right away sensed that something was going on there. He looked at his parents reproachfully and began putting his favorite mandolin into a case.

“Listen, Ashot, I haven't been feeling well lately. There is still plenty of time before the concert. I was thinking about stopping at a doctor’s before we go to the club. I hope you don’t mind coming with me. It should not take long,” I made my try to lure him into the doctor’s office.

“Have they put you up to this?”, asked Ashot, who then turned to his parents and gave them an angry look, and then suddenly approached his father, and twice picked him up with the chair and placed him back. “Well, who's ill here? Me? Why are you doing it to yourself? Let’s go Ashot,” firmly pronounced Ashot king out of the house. I had no choice but to silently follow him.

We had a couple of hours to kill, and we went to my home. We had some tea, and I tried in every way to cheer up Ashot. I told a few funny jocks, that made him laugh, and it seemed like I was able to raise his mood a little bit.

We came to the club right on time for the concert. I introduced Ashot to maestro Tafisto. They discussed Ashot's repertoire and agreed that he would perform two tunes. The hall was filled with spectators, and the concert began. After a few performances, it was Ashot's turn to get on the stage. The audience warmly greeted him, and he began playing the folk melody "*the Dream*", from the song and lyrics by Shahaziz. For the entire length of his performance, the audience, mesmerized by the sound of music and Ashot's virtuoso playing was immersed in silence. What happened next was hard to describe. Ashot had yet to finish his last chord when dead silence reigning in the hall exploded with passionate shouts and applause. Many rose from their seats screaming, "Bravo! Bravo! Bis! Bis!", The next piece was also another folk melody, the "*Siretsi Yarys Taran*" from the song and lyrics by Avetik Isaakyan. The reaction of the public was even more intense. Ashot left the stage under a storm of applause and demands for an encore. Several times he had to return to the stage to bow to the audience until Tafisto asked Ashot to play another piece. This time it was "*Tsitsernak*"<sup>253</sup> from the song and lyrics by Dodakhyan. It was a total success. I forced the pale, agitated, and tired Ashot out to the street where I hugged and thanked him for the brilliant performance. I accompanied him to his home, where we said goodbye. A few days later, Ashot returned to Stepanakert.

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<sup>253</sup> A swallow (Arm.)

### *Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

In 1929, when Yervand was still working in Stepanakert, I once again went to stay with him while on a vacation and got to see Ashot. I noticed changes in his appearance and behavior. He was pale and grew thin, he reluctantly talked, and his speech was incoherent. I certainly did not let him sense me noticing how his illness had progressed since our last meeting.

Concerned about Ashot, we, his friends, decided to organize a picnic and among other girls invite Asya, thus giving them a chance to meet, and as we hoped, to reunite. One of the girls took it upon herself to persuade Asya to come to the party. On the next Sunday, a group of fifteen boys and girls, stocked with food and drinks and everything needed to set up an outdoor camp, left the town and descended down to the river that was running through Nikolai's mulberry grove. While boys were grilling, girls were setting a tablecloth directly on the lawn and serving plates with snacks and salads. We ate delicious kabab and drank fine homemade wine, which we toasted for friendship. It was fun; we talked, sang, and danced. Only Ashot and Asya, who were lost between her girlfriends, sat sad and downcast. During the feast, someone made another toast to drink to our friendship. It was our prearranged signal. The boys raised Ashot from his place and led him in the direction of the girls, who in turn also made Asya get up and were gently pushing her towards Ashot. They met and were forced to get closer to each other and shake their hands. Crying, Asya extended her hand to Ashot, and he silently shook it. We insisted they dance and then made them sit next to each other. I was watching them and noticed that they did not talk to each other. Close to dusk, we returned to town.

The time came for me to return to Baku. Ashot came to see me off at the bus station. "You're leaving, and I'll be lonely here.

When will I see you again? Perhaps in the winter when I come to Baku. I'll let you know," said Ashot. My bus took off. I saw how my friend pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and waved after me for a long time. Neither of us knew that it would be our last meeting.

At the end of March 1930, my mother brought me a letter that came a week ago, but she forgot to give it to me. The letter was from Ashot. For the first time, he admitted that he was seriously ill and informed me about his upcoming visit to Baku and asked me to see him at his parents' home. On the next day, I went to Ashot's parents' place, but no one answered my knocks on the door. From the next-door neighbor, I learned that they all left home three days ago for their village. Suspecting to hear bad news, I asked the neighbor if he knew the reason for their departure. "Their son, Ashot, suddenly died of pulmonary hemorrhage, and they all went to bury him." I stood there, dumbfounded by the news. "Oh, Mother, Mother, why did you give me the letter so late?" Utterly depressed, I walked home.

Ten years have passed. One day in the evening, I was riding back to Martuny from the village of Ashan, where I was visiting patients. I took the shortest route via a country road. The road went by the village's cemetery. When I caught up with it, I noticed among the graves a lonely woman dressed in black. I recognized her; it was Tsiling-Ashot's mother. I had no doubts she was there visiting Ashot's grave. With great excitement, I stopped, alighted from the horse, and tied it to a tree. The burial lot was fenced with a metal lattice. I took off my hat and walked through a wicket into the grave lot. In front of me stood a neat monument with a photo of Ashot holding his favorite mandolin. I silently bent down and kissed the photo. "Who are you?", the woman asked me.

"I was a friend of Ashot."

"What's your name, son?"

"I am his namesake."

The woman burst into tears. Involuntarily, my eyes got wet too.

"Did you really know him? Is it true that he has ever lived?", my friend's mother pronounced, as she continued to cry.

"Mother, don't you remember me?", I asked and reminded her about the youth party in the summer of 1928 in Shirshiran, when she cooked and brought us all sorts of snacks and delicious goluptsi, and the day when she and her husband asked me to convince Ashot to see doctor Chernomordikov.

"He did not want to listen to us at all. He refused to get treatment, and wrecked his and our lives," said the woman wiping her tears. I kissed the picture again, bowed and kissed the poor woman's hand, mounted the horse, and rode away.

The road continued up among the hills, frogs have started their dismal song, a sure sign the sunset was just around the corner. Several times I turned around, and the poor woman was still there, walking back and forth in front of her only son's grave. The last time I looked back from the heights of the village of *Siptakshen*,<sup>254</sup> it was hard, but I could still see her silhouette. In gloomy thoughts, I continued my ride. Soon the road began descending to the main road to Martuny, and I lost sight of the woman. Later, from Ashan residents, I heard that Ashot's mother was coming to the village from Baku every year and stayed there from May to September. Almost every day from the morning to the evening, she stayed at her son's grave.

Ashan was located in mountains right under a large cliff that contained a great danger to its inhabitants and their homes

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<sup>254</sup> White village (Arm.).



because of the frequent rockfalls.<sup>255</sup> The village had only one spring water source in the lowest part of the village. This represented a significant inconvenience for the residents of the upper part, as to get the water they had to walk down to quite a distance of about 200 meters. In memory of his son, Ashot's father had run a new water line from a distant source and built a spring station in the upper part of Ashan. Shortly after his death, grateful villagers named the spring after his son. I had a chance to drink from it. On the top of the spring headwall, there was a memorial plaque made of a facing stone engraved with "Ashotik's<sup>256</sup> Spring ", and many touching words, which I to my regret no longer remember.

Another ten years had passed. From my friends, I learned that Ashot's mother has passed away. In the autumn of 1950, returning by car from Norshen to Martuny, I decided to drive through Ashan since it was very close to Norshen. I had no official business there and went there with the only purpose to visit Ashot's grave. I already knew that soon I would return to Baku, and who knows if I will ever be in this area again. My driver stopped the car at the cemetery, and I went up a hill to Ashot's grave. To my great disappointment, I found it in a completely abandoned state. The metal gate was missing, the fence in some places bent down to the ground, the tombstone leaned on its side, the glass over Ashot's photo cracked, and the photo itself was damaged by water and time so that the image of Ashot was not seen. Sad, I stood there in silence, dumbfounded by what I saw. Here was the truth of life lying in front of me; we live, work, raise our children, have friends, and

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<sup>255</sup> Later, probably sometimes in 1950's Ashan village was relocated to the safest place near the village of Norshen.

<sup>256</sup> Diminutively affectionate for Ashot.

leave... in oblivion. I stood there for a few more minutes until I heard my driver yell, reminding me that it was getting dark, and we had to move on. I went to the tomb and kissed Ashot's photo.

"Farewell, my dear and unforgettable friend! Goodbye, Ashot-djan," pronounced I aloud. Depressed, I returned to the car, and we drove away. Absorbed in thoughts of the impermanence of our existence, I was silent all the way to Martuny.

My reader may wonder what happened to Asya? In the spring of 1941 in Baku, I ran into her near Armenikend Bazaar. She was walking towards me, holding a man in a military uniform with captain epaulets. Her other hand was holding a hand of a boy about seven years old. As we were passing each other, our eyes met, and she nodded her head and slightly smiled. I unwittingly remembered Ashot.

Later in 1956, I met her again in downtown. This time she was alone, and we could talk. She took a deep breath when we talked about Ashot. She told me about herself. Her husband was killed in the war in 1943. Tearfully, she said that their only son was ill with tuberculosis and that he was refusing to get treatment and was not listening to her. We said our warm farewells and parted to never meet again.

On May 2nd, 1973, I, like most of the Christian population of Baku, traditionally went to our cemetery. Walking along the path in a crowd of people, I noticed among the graves a familiar face. Looking closely, I recognized Asya's uncle, who I knew from Stepanakert. I approached him; he recognized me as well. We greeted and talked a little.

"How's Asya? I haven't seen her for a long time." Honestly, that was the only reason I stopped by. The man looked at me, then

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

extended his hand and pointed to my feet, "Here she is, right under your feet. You're standing on her gravestones."

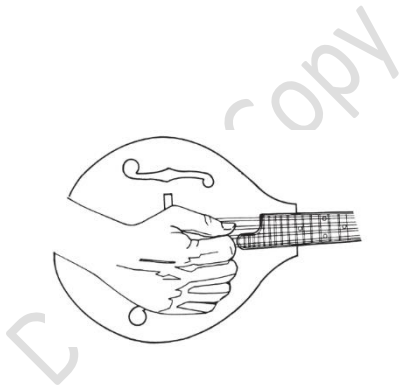
"How is that?", stepping back, I pronounced.

"She died in 1962 shortly after she lost her son Ashotik."

"Ashotik? Her son's name was Ashot?"

"Yes, she named her son Ashot. He died of tuberculosis in 1957 at the age of twenty-two. Here is his monument, next to his mothers," explained the man.

Stunned by what I heard, I silently looked at the monument. Truly, the ways of God are inscrutable.



*Chapter 56 Final Return to Baku*

Since 1949, I was considering quitting my job and returning to Baku. There were several reasons for this. The main one was the environment in which I had to work. The position of the head of the district Health Department assumed a wide range of responsibilities, not only for my direct professional medical obligation but also for all financial activities. Functioning in the environment of corruption, protectionism, Shakespearean intrigues, and prevailing arbitrariness of the local autocrats meant either to compromise with your principles or at best be dismissed and at worst to end up behind bars. Over the years, I have been repeatedly submitting resignation letters to my direct superiors, as well as to the authorities on the republican level, but they all were turned down. In late February 1950, after a long and severe stomach cancer, Asya's father died. His death even further increased my desire to finally reunite with my family. Time passed, the psychological and moral situation at work became unbearable and in January 1951, right before the session of the District Council, I turned in another resignation letter. This time my request was granted, and I was let go with the wording, "Due to health and family circumstances." I quickly wrapped up my ends there and on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1951, left Martuny.

Upon my return to Baku, I took a short break and in March 1951 resumed my career as a *therapist*<sup>257</sup> in the Polyclinic #15 in the small suburban town of Mashtagi. I reported to the Chief Physician of the local Hospital #7, Dr. Kazim Kazimov, who I knew from Kelbend, where he worked as the head of the Health Department of Ishmailly district. During my work in Mashtagi,

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<sup>257</sup> Primary care physician.

I had quite a friendly relationship with Kazim and often filled in for him during his absences. Smart and nimble, with a good knowledge of all loopholes of the system, Kasimov, as far as I know, is still working there in the same office.

In 1958, I changed my place of work to be closer to home, and for the next seventeen years, worked at the Medical Station # 5 in Lenin's district of Baku, and later, from 1968, until my retirement, in its branch in Novoromany township.

My health continued to deteriorate. Back in 1965, I had tinnitus and intermittent light dizziness, and angina attacks. In February 1974, on my way to work, I lost consciousness near April 28<sup>th</sup> Metro Station and fell, slightly bruising my head. I woke up in an ambulance taking me to a hospital, where I was diagnosed with a mild concussion. For a month, I was lying at home in bed and came to understand that I have developed sclerosis and spasms of the brain vessels. This was the first call. I did not want to wait for the next one. I submitted a resignation letter and on April 1st, 1975, retired at the age of 70,<sup>258</sup> thus ending my long professional career.

Our family life in Baku continued. There were both joyful and sorrowful days. Back in 1934, Enok married Araxia but had children only many years later. The eldest son, Volodya, was born in 1944, and the youngest son, Sasha, in 1946. Both sons followed in their father's footsteps and became musicians. Both graduated from the Azerbaijan Musical Conservatory, Volodya in a piano class, and Sasha in a violin. Enok was a well-known musician in Baku and the republic. His virtuoso playing of the clarinet and the duduk won the hearts of many fans of folk music. It should be noted that in the musical success of Enok, Yervand played an important role, teaching him how to read

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<sup>258</sup> The official retirement age for men at that time was 65.

notes and play various instruments. For many years, Enok worked in the Azerbaijan Orchestra of Folk Instruments and performed on the radio and television. Currently, he teaches a duduk class at Asaf Zeinally College of Music. For about twenty years of his life, he devoted himself to the improvement of this instrument. His efforts and persistence paid off, as he was able to achieve better timbre and a wider range of duduk sounds. Enok wrote and published the first manual for playing this unique instrument. In May 1960, our Enok was awarded the title of the Honored Artist of Azerbaijan. It was his big victory and a great joy for our entire family. We all were immensely proud of the fact that Enok has managed to raise our family reputation to a new level.

In the summer of 1955, while vacationing with my daughter Irochka in her native village of Dolanlar, Asya's mother died. The poor woman who survived her husband and their only son Manvel suffered from hypertension. I sent a coffin from Baku to Dolanlar and organized transportation of her remains to Baku, where we had a worthy farewell for her.

In 1956, in his graduation year from the Polytechnic Institute, my son Yuri married his classmate, Irina. In January 1957 they had their first child, my grandson Sereja, now a fourth-year student at the Construction Institute. Four years later in October 1961, Sereja's sister Liliya was born.

In 1967, for good organizational and quality work and the early completion of two compuses of the military hospital for the Baku Air Defense Region, my son Yurik received high recognition, and by the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR, was awarded the order of the Badge of Honor. In the same year, our daughter Ira, a student at the Azerbaidjan Institute of Oil and Chemistry mar classmate Amir.

In February 1969 came sad news about the sudden death of Lusik's husband, Verdi Israelyan. The circumstances of his death were quite suspicious; he died while on a business trip to Sabirabad.<sup>259</sup> According to the official version, he died in his sleep, poisoned by carbon monoxide from a wood-burning heating oven in his hotel room. However, given the fact he was in Sabirabad with an audit of local state farms, and the well-known cases of abuse, corruption, theft, and manipulations with cotton in the republic, the version of his accidental death seemed unlikely. Verdi was a well-educated man, an excellent specialist, and a good husband and father.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> day of February 1974, there came another tragedy. Yervand's and Hrachiya's younger daughter, Zhanna, went to bed and never woke up. It was hard to realize that our quiet, modest, and beloved Zhanna would no longer be with us.



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<sup>259</sup> Cotton reach region of Azerbaijan.

*Through the Crucible of Life Part III*



Ira and Yuri Kocharov



Irocka and Ira

Asya and Ashot Kocharov

Making wine



Enok Kocharov



Manvel Petrosyan



*Chapter 57 My Books*

As a child, I became very addicted to reading folktales and short stories by Armenian writers. One of my favorite books during my studies at the parish school was *Lusaber*,<sup>260</sup> the textbook in my native language. This book became my tabletop book until my admission to the Shusha Armenian Seminary. While in the seminary, my taste for literature expanded to Armenian poetry and fiction. I knew by heart and could recite many poems and sing popular songs, most of which I still remember. Later, in my twenties, I began buying books, some quite a bit rare and valuable, often spending my last money on them. I have also been purchasing rare publications of Armenian periodicals from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. However, a special place in my library belonged to historical literature. In 1930, I learned to read in Russian, which was not an easy task at all. In the beginning, I had difficulties with comprehension, but slowly increased my vocabulary and I even began buying books in Russian. To date, my library contains about three hundred volumes; most of them, of course, in Armenian. For decades, many people had access to my books, students, literary critics, researchers, and friends. At occasional requests of my friends, I was bringing heavy stacks of books to Nagorny-Karabakh. I enjoyed moral satisfaction from helping friends and promoting Armenian literature.

At the time of writing these lines, I was seventy-three years old. My health was undermined, and I realized that I was getting close to the end of my life journey. No one packs suitcases to go to another world, so as a man of foresight, I have

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<sup>260</sup> Morning star (Arm.).

long begun my preparations for the day. Twelve years ago, I bought a large plot in the Armenian cemetery and landscaped it. We buried our mother there.

In 1974, I registered my grandson Sergey in my apartment, so he could inherit it. In 1975, I made the last major renovation to it and finalized my will. However, there was one thing that I still needed to fulfill: the fate of my library, my dear spiritual child. Unfortunately, if my children could not read, but understood Armenian, then my grandchildren would not know their native language.

While in Yerevan in 1968, I visited *Matenadaran*<sup>261</sup> and had a conversation with its director about my library. Having learned that I have a good collection of rare books, including some signed by the authors of the last century, he asked me to donate them to Matenadaran. To my regret, I did not have such an opportunity.

In 1974 in Stepanakert, I made another attempt to find a new home for my books. I met a director of a local museum and agreed to donate my books. At the end of the year, the director came to Baku on his business and visited our home. He was pleased to see the content of my library and promised to devote a corner for my books in the museum and hang my portrait there. We agreed to create an act of donation with a list of books and magazines and verify it with his signature and the museum stamp. At parting, I gave him three early issues of the "*Hayreniki Dzain*"<sup>262</sup> newspaper, published in Armenia for the Diaspora, and about twenty issues of the Armenian Communist newspaper for 1920. For the entire year of 1975, I did not hear a

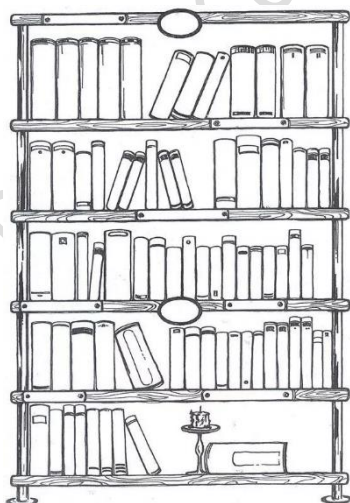
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<sup>261</sup> The museum, repository of manuscripts, and a research institute of ancient manuscripts.

<sup>262</sup> The Voice of Homeland.

### *Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

word from the man, but at the beginning of 1976, he showed up in Baku. He called me over the phone and said that he is with a car and could stop by and pick up all the books. To my question, if he had brought a stamp to probate the act of transfer, he said that he forgot about it, and suggested doing the paperwork during my next visit to Stepanakert. Concerned about the future of my books, I reminded him I was donating them to the museum for people, not to a private person, and suggested stopping by for a further discussion. He hung up the phone on me, and I have never heard from him again. I could only guess about his true intentions.



*Chapter 58 The Memory of Our Mother*

It is hard to find the right words to express the boundless love, care, and patience our mother gave to us, her children. Her heroic resilience and dedication empowered her to, despite all the odds, raise and put us on our feet. Being a widow at thirty-seven with five children on hand, this woman has made a real maternal feat.

In her youth, Mother was a beautiful, cheerful, and full-of-life woman. She was the soul in the company of her friends and a helpful friend to our neighbors, always ready to lend a helping hand. Mother possessed a good sense of humor, liked to joke cheerfully, and tell funny stories. She could even parody people, well imitating their voices, facial expressions, and gestures. Mother was also a great dancer with an exceptional sense of rhythm, gracefully performing Armenian dances. I have many times witnessed how during wedding receptions, her friends would push her into a circle of dancing guests and insist she danced for them. All that changed when a series of misfortunes dawned upon our family. The death of her mother and brothers, the tragic departure of her husband, and subsequent adversity and refugee life broke her down. Sparks in her eyes were gone forever, and we have never seen her smiling or laughing again.

Many years have passed, and her children have grown and are married with their own children, but her maternal concern and care for us have not changed. Living with Yervand, she helped around the house. Almost every day she visited Lusik. We brothers even joked that on a scale of our mother's love, we all were on one bowl and Lusik on the other. However, when one of us was sick or in troubled situations, Mother was always standing next to us.

### *Through the Crucible of Life Part III*

At the age of 85, she remained viable, but years were indomitably taking their toll. Soon she began to walk with a cane and later could not do it without help. By the time she reached 90, she could not leave home, and in the last year of her life, she was bedridden. On September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1974, Mother abruptly got a lot worse. For the next two days, she lay unconscious, and on the morning of September 20<sup>th</sup>, quietly died. We gave our mother a proper burial; many people came to see her off. According to our traditions, we conducted the seventh- and fortieth-day wakes, and by the first anniversary set up a marble monument with her photo. Our long-suffered and beloved mother left us, and we, three brothers and our sister orphaned.

I want to note the role of Yervand in our family. After the death of our father, he, still a young man, assumed the role of the head of the family. In addition to financial responsibility, his advice and personal examples helped us all to enter an independent life. We all are incredibly grateful for that and will never forget it.



*The time will come, and we brothers will leave the arena of life. While I am still breathing, I want sincerely to wish all of us to finish our presence in this world in dignity and to leave our descendants a good memory of us.*



*Ashot Martirosovich Kocharov*  
1905-1983









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