

Surviving Massacre: Hagop Arsenian's Armenian Journey to Jerusalem, 1915-1916

Hagop Arsenian
and Arda Arsenian Ekmekji



These pages are excerpted from Hagop Arsenian's diary of his deportation from his native village of Ovajik in Turkey and his harrowing journey to Jerusalem (1915-1916). After months of hardship in Meskene, "one of the most infamous stations of the Armenian deportation," where he and his family barely escape massacre, Arsenian's status as a professional pharmacist finally allows him to leave for Aleppo. He and his family ultimately find refuge in Jerusalem – where, in a twist of fate, he is inducted into the Ottoman Army. Arsenian's diary, as well as his memoir of later years as a pharmacist in Gaza during the British Mandate, has been translated and edited by his granddaughter, Arda Arsenian Ekmekji, and published in 2011 by the Haigazian University Press as Towards Golgotha: The Memoirs of Hagop Arsenian, a Genocide

Hagop Arsenian & Hrout Gulemerian
Adabazar, December, 1910.
Source: The Library of Congress.

Survivor. *The Jerusalem Quarterly thanks Arda Ekmekji and Haigazian University Press for permission to publish an abbreviated version of her preface (pp. xvii-xxi) and excerpts from two chapters (pp. 123-141) of Hagop Arsenian's diary that detail the later stages of his journey.*

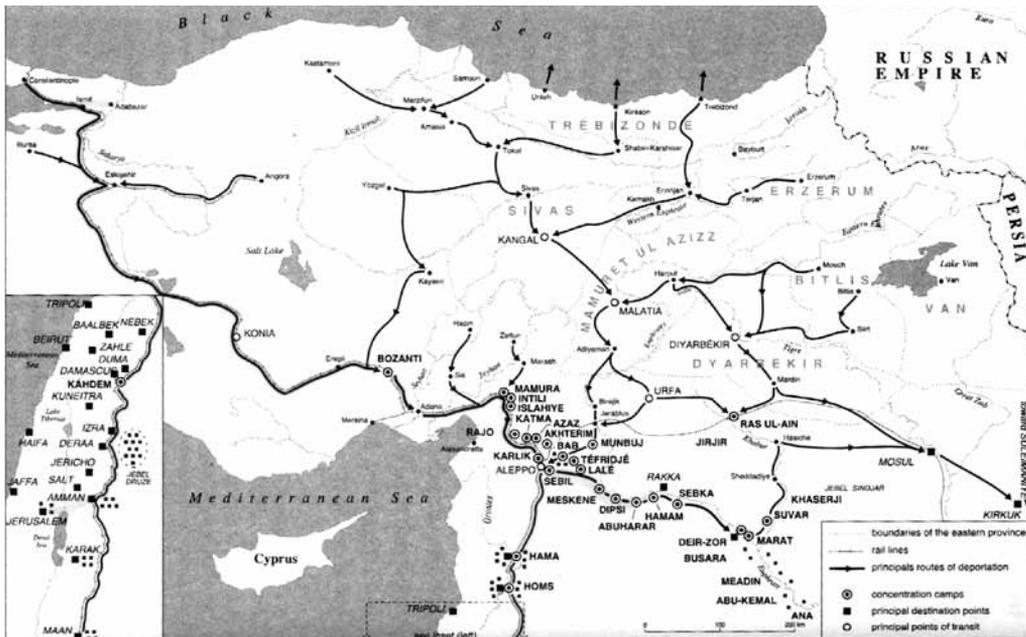
Towards Golgotha: A Preface

My grandfather (*Medz hayrig*), the pharmacist Hagop Arsenian (1880-1963), lived until the ripe old age of eighty-three. Of an extremely inquisitive and adventurous nature, ten days before his death, he undertook a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem and in spite of an ailing foot, ventured to climb the hundred stairs leading to the Golgotha Chapel in order to inspect the reconstruction works initiated by the Armenian Church. On the way down, he slipped, and further complications resulting from his diabetic condition aggravated his situation, eventually leading to his death on September 30, 1963, in Jerusalem, far from his native Ovajik (ancient Nicomedia), in modern Turkey.

As a young girl of twelve, I vividly remember his funeral in the St. James Armenian Convent. Hundreds of people, Armenians and Arabs, accompanied the coffin of Jerusalem's oldest pharmacist to his final resting place in the small cemetery adjacent to the Calouste Gulbenkian Library in the Convent.¹ "Baron Arsenian" or "Abu Noubar," as he was called by Palestinians, was a well-known figure in Jerusalem. Through the years, any Armenian visiting the Holy Land had to complete the pilgrimage with a stop at the Arsenian pharmacy, which, before 1948, was located on Mamilla Street,² and during the Jordanian era, was known as "The Jerusalem Grand Pharmacy" on Rashid Street outside the city wall, jointly run by my grandfather Hagop, and my father, Noubar Arsenian (1912-2003).³

As a child, my grandfather impressed me as an accomplished, happy and relaxed man, proud of his family and dedicated to them. Every summer, he would gather his grandchildren, the six elder ones, and take us on excursions. He loved the outdoors and enjoyed watching us play games like Monopoly and Scrabble. Anybody looking at the family scene would never have suspected that this man had had a single day's worry in his life. Endowed with an amazing sense of humor, he would recount endless anecdotes and instill in us a sense of duty and responsibility. To him I owe my introduction to the intricacies of the Armenian alphabet, language and grammar, the instruction of which he undertook more as a religious duty than as a labor of love. Sometimes, while watching me and calling me "Ardanoush," his hazel eyes would freeze, probably evoking painful memories of which nothing was betrayed nor ever relayed to us.

In July 1996, thirty-three years after his death, an Arsenian family reunion took place in my home in Beirut on the occasion of my niece's, Natasha Carmi, graduation from the American University of Beirut (AUB). It was during this brief visit that I first laid eyes on the manuscript written in my grandfather's handwriting.



Hagop Arsenian's Deportation Route. *Source: Based on Map courtesy of Raymond H. Kevorkian.*

The manuscript of Hagop Arsenian is composed of two parts: an earlier one, compiled in 1919, describing his childhood, university education and eventual deportation from Turkey (1915), recounting the horrible day-to-day events of their exodus and their *via dolorosa* all the way to Jerusalem (1916). The second part describes the Arsenian family's post-genocide struggles and life in Palestine between 1919-1940.

An attempt to read the beautifully inscribed document written in perfect Armenian proved to be quite an arduous task for me. On the other hand, my father, who was quite familiar with his own father's style and reading of illegible medical prescriptions, read it quite smoothly and without much difficulty. It was then that we had the brilliant idea of requesting my father to voice record the entire document on tape.

After the death of my father in 2003, the transcribing of these memoirs became more significant and precious to me and thus I undertook the task of translating the whole manuscript into English. I felt that a journal so meticulously archived and chronicled deserved a larger audience than the families of the victims of the Armenian Genocide. As previously mentioned, this book is entirely based on the autobiography of Hagop Arsenian, and covers the period from his birth in Ovajik in 1880 to 1940 Gaza (Palestine). The deportation and immediately ensuing period (1915 to 1920) seem to have been carefully chronicled with daily reports of events.

But the Genocide memoirs and the testimony of the survivors' accounts⁴ are not mere narrations, but as Shirinian explains,⁵ "...[they] have a status and function in Armenian culture as well as in Armenian collective memory....for it is through other people's

memories that the individual completes his own experience, which in the end attaches him to the community to which he belongs.”⁶ I therefore found it appropriate, or should I say imperative, to consult other survivors’ memoirs and add background references, contextual notes and annotations in order to provide the relevant historical milieu and to underline the authenticity of the memoir by juxtaposing contemporary references.

*Arda Arsenian Ekmekji
Beirut, April 24, 2011*

From Hagop Arsenian’s Diary

Meskene-Aleppo-Jerusalem June 9, 1916 – January 19, 1919

The destination of all those Armenians is Aleppo⁷. Here they are kept crowded in all available vacant houses, khans, Armenian churches, courtyards and open lots. Their condition in Aleppo is beyond description.

Walter. G. Geddes⁸

On June 9, 1916, special carriages were sent from Meskene to transport the professionals and artisans. I, with all the members of the family, thus returned to Meskene. I was elated and hoped that we were taking the first steps to return to Aleppo and gradually end our terrifying and hellish fate. This was a good omen for better days to come, since we were returning from the road to the slaughterhouse. However, when we arrived at Meskene, the military commander⁹ looked at me very coldly and ordered me to return to Abu Harar in the next two days, arguing that my presence with this group had been a mistake. Apparently his aim was to collect a bribe, as I learned later, but I was in a state of total collapse and depression, for to return to Abu Harar surely meant certain death.

To find means of avoiding this, I immediately appealed to the commander through the mediation of his “arak companions”: the *aghas* of Akshehir and Adabazar. The mediation succeeded and I was allowed to stay in Meskene without undertaking any specific job. Due to the medicines I had ordered from Aleppo for fifteen gold coins, I managed to survive and feed my family. . . .

Every day, I used to spend my time visiting the occupants of the nearby tents: the spiritual pastor, Prelate Father Stepanos,¹⁰ as well as the father of the priest Seropé Bourmanian and other friends from Adabazar. But I was still worried and kept thinking of a way out of this situation. If we continued without any occupation, the whole family was going to be subjected to hunger. Finally, I contemplated the idea of acquiring a job in Aleppo. This was my and my family’s only means of salvation, but how was I to get there? It was strictly forbidden for any refugee to enter the city without official authorization.

Making use of the absence of the officer, I asked his assistant to permit me to go to Aleppo, claiming that I would collect some money that was waiting for me there and return to Meskene.

On July 13, 1916, leaving my wife and sons Noubar and Norair in Meskene under the protection of my father-in-law, I left with three *Izmitsi* friends to Aleppo. On the way we were subjected to terror and fear, when the Arab tribe known as Enezé¹¹ followed our cart at full speed to rob us and probably kill us. However, our cart driver, Souren from Adabazar, was very skillful and drove the cart at full speed for three hours without slowing down so that the robbers could not catch up with us.

In the evening when we reached a *khan*, one of our horses died of extreme exhaustion. The next morning, the charioteer was obliged to acquire another horse so that we would continue our way to Aleppo that night. At Aleppo also the *gendarmes*, the policemen and the guards were pursuing the Armenians, busy arresting all the refugees who did not have permits, imprisoning them and finally sending them to Deir Zor.

At first I sank deep into depression, but to have reached Aleppo only to return to Meskene without any solution would have been the greatest proof of my failure and helplessness. Therefore, ignoring all dangers and risks, I decided to stay in Aleppo and apply to positions in official circles. Among the friends who had accompanied me, some were obliged to return to Meskene for the second time. Whereas I, upon the recommendation of some friends and acquaintances, made contacts at night when the pursuing and control slackened. In order to acquire a position as a military pharmacist, I made the necessary contacts and applications, even in broad daylight, at great risk and fear of being arrested at any moment.

Sometimes, I also visited the pharmacy of Roupén Effendi Ezajian,¹² where I met a number of other refugee pharmacists who complained about their search for work having been fruitless. However, I refused to be defeated and continued to make contacts day and night through people of good status. Finally, after spending ten days uninterruptedly looking for a position, I presented my recommendations and affidavits to official circles.

Eventually, I was accepted to the position of military pharmacist and permission was granted to me to travel to Jerusalem in my newly assigned duty there. I was eternally grateful to the old military physician *Kaimakam* Baghdassar Bey, who did not spare any means or effort to find me a position. I immediately went to an Armenian tailor in Aleppo to have my military uniform made.

On July 25, 1916, wearing my military uniform, I took a deep breath and roamed freely in Aleppo, without any fear of being followed or arrested. I felt reborn again; I became a new man. Before leaving Aleppo for my newly assigned post in Jerusalem, I wrote an official letter to the Military Governor requesting him to transport my family from the Meskene deserts to Aleppo. After working for three days on these formalities, I was advised to go to Jerusalem and apply from there. However, I did succeed in getting a cable sent by the head of the refugee commission to Meskene requesting that my family not be sent to *Sevkiet* until the official *vesika*, confirming their belonging to a military family, was issued to them. Satisfied with this situation, relieved and



Awkaf Building, Mamilla Road - Jerusalem. *Source: Library of Congress.*

comforted, I left for Jerusalem on Sunday, July 28, 1916.

In the train, I was accompanied by our honorable compatriot, Levon Effendi Zakarian, travelling under the new name forced upon him, Ali Haydar Bey. He was on his way to Tripoli to assume his new position as inspector of the Sericulture Department.¹³

On August 3, 1916, I finally reached Jerusalem and immediately went to *Sourp Hagop* (St. James) Church in the Jerusalem Convent,¹⁴ where with great pomp and ceremony they were celebrating the installation of their new Patriarch, the Catholicos Sahag of Sis,¹⁵ exiled by the Turks. It was a welcoming surprise to attend this event that uplifted my spirits and consoled my mind, especially after *walking to our Golgotha* for long months, witnessing and being exposed to horrible scenes. Here was I in the Holy Land, at this Holy site of St. James, a spectator to such a great event.

After the church ceremony, I was led to the room of my former employer in Bolis, Onnig Effendi Kurdian.¹⁶ Shortly we were joined by another compatriot, Deacon Boghos Varjian, and we reminisced about our past and present. After spending one evening at the inn in the Convent, I moved to the room assigned to me by the priests.

On Monday, August 4, I presented my affidavits and the recommendations I had gathered from Aleppo to the *Menzili* Chief Physician and was selected to become military pharmacist at the *Bilingi Waten Khastakhanesi*, the former French Hospital,



Jerusalem 1919, from right to left: Hagop Arsenian, Noubar, Father Arsen?, Norair, Simon Gulemerian, two unidentified officers. Source: *Kassakhian Photo Collection*.

where I started working on the same day. My happiness was truly indescribable, but my main worry and concern now was to get my family out of the Meskene desert and join with me as soon as possible. Two days later, I presented a petition to *Menzili Mufattesh* (head of the Fourth Army Commissariat), Rushen Bey, requesting the transfer of my family to Jerusalem. For a whole month I waited impatiently for a response to my petition.¹⁷

Finally, I received a cable from Meskene, stating that there was great fear that they will soon be taken into *Sevkiyet*. Disheartened and distressed, I went to meet with Rushen Bey; the telegram in my hand and tears in my eyes, I begged and pleaded with him to save my family from danger and grant me a *vesika* to allow them to join me. He was a kind-hearted man with a conscience, so he immediately wrote a cable addressed to the Prefect of Aleppo and gave it to me to take it to the post office. At the same time, he was generous enough to give me a fifteen-day leave to go to Aleppo and bring my family to Jerusalem.

On September 14, I left for Aleppo and the journey to reach my family as soon as possible was full of trouble. On the 18th, I reached Aleppo, where Vramshabuh Seropian gave me the good news that my family had already arrived and that they were staying at such and such *khan*. I rushed there and oh, what great joy and fortune it was to find them all alive: my wife Hrout, my Noubar and Norair, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law, my brother-in-law and my two sisters-in-law¹⁸ who were all allowed to go to Aleppo based on my petitions. Not wanting to waste a moment, we



Hagop Arsenian (center) with fellow army officers, May 1918. Source: Kassakhian Photo Collection.

took the train the very same evening to Jerusalem. On the way, we spent two days in Damascus and one day at the house of the wife of our friend *Fezji Manoug* in Deraa.¹⁹

Finally on September 25, 1916, we all arrived in Jerusalem. I was by now relaxed and my mind was at peace. I felt an inner happiness that I had succeeded in saving myself and the eight members of my family from the slaughterhouse, simply by a stroke of luck. After fourteen months of deadly and torturous exile, arriving in Jerusalem and settling as a family in one of the quarters of the Armenian Convent was of the utmost bliss and happiness. Gone were the fearful swords and bayonets of the *gendarmes*, gone were the *gachken*, *khekhen*, *chekhen* shouts which struck us like lightning and filled us with terror and fear. Gone were the insecure days and the deadly Damoclean sword²⁰ which had

haunted us for weeks. Also gone were our marching days like the errant Jew – walk, walk, always walk. Now my mind was preoccupied with all the family members and friends we had left behind, and who still did not have the good fortune of escaping that destructive, painful fate.

Towards the end of December 1916, I received new orders to leave the hospital and join the third contingent (*Firqa*) recovery center *Niqahat khane*, which used to be in the suburbs of Jerusalem in the Jewish quarter of Bukharlare. At the beginning, this change affected me very negatively; however, later I was very happy because the work was not too tiring and I could also benefit from food rationing, *erzag*, to sustain a family of eight, since the market was extremely expensive and buying anything during wartime was very difficult.

Ten months after settling in Jerusalem, on the night of November 6, 1917, we received military orders that we were to be drafted immediately because the British army was advancing towards Jerusalem.²¹ I was extremely worried and in a dilemma: should I take my family with me or leave them at the Convent? After thinking it over for twenty-four hours and consulting with my friends, I finally decided to leave alone.

The city of Jerusalem was in great turmoil, all the Turkish soldiers were in a hurry to withdraw. On the morning of November 9, 1917, I unhappily parted from my family and walked with the soldiers towards Nablus, a difficult and tiring distance of sixty kilometers to the North.

On the evening of Sunday, November 10, 1917, rumors began circulating that the British army had reached Wadi Sarar.²² Grippled by the fear of being separated for long periods from my family and using the pretext that I needed urgently to be with them, I obtained permission from the military head and took a carriage to return to Jerusalem that night. However, halfway through the journey, I started reflecting on the gravity of the mistake I would be committing by this act and the exposure of my life to great danger, so I returned to Nablus. After managing to collect enough food rations, I remained there with the other soldiers, until one evening we received orders to proceed to Mas'oudiye²³ station on foot. There was torrential rain, and the night was dark and thick; the roads were full of mud that reached up to our knees, but we had to obey since this was a military command.

The next morning we reached Mas'oudiye, muddy and drenched. The same day we were sent by train to Damascus, and when we stopped for a few hours in Deraa, I went to visit my friends there. However, when I returned, I found to my great dismay that the train had already left with all my personal belongings. For two days, I did not move from the station, sleeping in the open air, in that cold weather, with neither a blanket nor my coat, both of which were in the wagons of the train. I shall never forget that first night through which I shivered until morning. Finally, two nights later, I rejoined my contingent and soon we were officially notified that the British had occupied Jerusalem on December 9, 1917.

On the one hand, I was extremely worried about my family's safety; on the other hand, I felt comfort that my family was saved and would no longer face the danger of war and hunger. For ten months, I ached to see my children, as I remained separated from my family getting not a single word from them.

I went to the office of the Red Crescent and paid five Turkish pounds when I heard that I could get news of people from the occupied countries through the International Red Cross.²⁴ But months passed by and I was still without news of my family in Jerusalem. Sometimes I thought of defying all dangers and taking the risk of deserting the army and joining my family. But I still lacked the courage for such a reckless impulse. While I was worried about them and wanted to join them, I feared for myself. To expose my life to danger now was foolhardy, especially that the Turks were still suspicious of Armenian soldiers and were waiting for a chance to arrest us, particularly as we were getting news that the Armenians had started revenge raids on the Caucasian front.

One day, I completely lost my mind when I heard that the leader of all criminals, Enver Pasha, had ordered that all Armenian soldiers, without exception, be gathered and sent to the forced labor *ameleh* troops, which meant another way of totally annihilating us. They had done this before in what was known as the White massacre, when they had exterminated thousands of young Armenian men, sending them to dig impossible roads and exposing them to extreme hardship without water and bread.²⁵

One day in Damascus, the Turks started indiscriminately arresting Armenian refugee families, without differentiating adults, infants, males or females. The police and the *gendarmes* were active in executing this plan to spread terror and fear

everywhere. For the past three years, after being subjected to all forms of torture and persecution, only a handful of the Armenian people had survived by pure chance and luck, despite all the dangers; now here again the Turks were determined to destroy what was left of these refugees, through monstrous means and practices.

The Armenians we used to see in the market, the shop owners, the family men, were all being arrested and thrown into dark prisons. For twenty-four hours these insane massive campaigns continued. Later, we did not know why, the persecutions slowed down, perhaps owing to German and Austrian mediation. The women and children were set free and only the men of military age were detained. I was haunted by the idea that very soon I too would definitely be arrested, and a new misfortune would befall me.

One day in early September, my commander informed me that I had received orders to proceed to the war front to join the 8th Command. I concluded that this was a plot hatched by my commander as a result of the personal antagonism he bore towards me. I was extremely upset and depressed. Undoubtedly this time the danger of dying was unavoidable as we used to receive, on a daily basis, the sad news of the demise of many of our military acquaintances who had been martyred at the front. What caused my deepest pain was the fact that after having miraculously survived so many dangers and atrocities in the past three years, now that freedom was so close, I had to go to the battlefield and die without even having the chance of seeing my loved ones for the last time.

On September 12, 1918, I bid farewell to all my friends, and met with the Reverend Father Garabed Mazloumian at the Prelacy. I said goodbye to him and with eyes full of tears, I gave him my will, stating that in the event of my death, he should ensure the education and care of my children Noubar and Norair.

The following day, on September 13, I moved with my mates from Damascus to Tulkarem²⁶ where the military operations headquarters were located. The next day, we stopped at the station of Samakh on the banks of the Tiberias sea. I so wished to visit the city of Tiberias where my friends Onnig Kambourian's and Garabed Dayan's families resided. We took a trip by ferry on the lake and for a while, I felt I was transported back to the Sea of Marmara, in Izmit. That evening I stayed at the Dayans' and early the following morning, with my friend Onnig, I visited the mineral spas and then took the train to Tulkarem.

On September 16, 1918, I reached Tulkarem and presented my affidavit. For a couple of days, I was obliged to stay as a "guest" in the house of Major Awni Bey,²⁷ whom I knew from Izmit, until my new post was assigned to me.

On Thursday morning, September 19, we jumped out of bed at the sound of cannon balls. The massive assault of the British army had already started on this front. Moved by curiosity, we went up to the roof and watched the whole battlefield in front of us.

This time the Turkish soldiers around me, filled with hatred and revenge, admitted their fear about this being the final and decisive battle of the British.

The cannon offensive continued for many hours, striking the Turkish front. A little while later, havoc was sown among the Turkish soldiers of Tulkarem; there was chaos everywhere, and the soldiers' main concern was to escape and desert the army. I, pretending to be unaware of all this, appealed to my superior to send me to the medical

post assigned to me. Since everybody was fleeing, this was a way to save face. The man looked at me, smiled at my naivety and as he packed and prepared to flee, he said he would shortly send me to my post.

Soon “the enemy”²⁸ planes flew over and bombarded all of Tulkarem. Awni Bey, his brother-in-law and I crawled under the heavy walls of the building, hiding and trembling at the realization of the magnitude of imminent danger. When the air raids ceased for a while, we took advantage of the situation and went to the market. On our way we saw a lot of people killed by the raids. Suddenly, the bombardment resumed fiercer than before and, upon the recommendation of some Armenian soldiers, I joined them and we took shelter in a cave outside the town where we stayed for a couple of terrifying hours. It was impossible to get out of the cave for the British planes were flying like swallows all over to stop the escape of Turkish soldiers. The bombs fell like hail, and we, sitting in this hermit-like position, waited for the danger to abate a little in order to get out of the cave and run to the quarters where one of the soldiers told me that all the others had gone. The situation was quite critical. What should I do? Stay there, defect and hide, or join the retreating armies? In both situations, the danger was inevitable. I stayed a while longer with the soldiers under the thick walls and an hour later decided to retreat as well.

The planes over Tulkarem were flying very low and firing bullets on the retreating soldiers. We sometimes had to take shelter in the shadow of the stone buildings, but our slowing down was looked upon by the Turkish soldiers as a suspicious and treacherous move which was not in our interest at this stage. Units of British soldiers had by now advanced towards the town and we could see the reflection of their swords in the distance. One needed to have a bit of courage and stamina in order to be saved, but it was dangerous. Carrying some of my belongings, while the rest was carried by my companion, we slowly retreated by crawling on the ground, and in spite of the terrifying shower of bullets over us, we finally succeeded in getting out of Tulkarem.

Everywhere around me, we could see numerous wounded men and horses. Gripped by the fear and terror of being shot at any minute, we were suddenly stopped by two horsemen who halted our advance and asked us to raise our hands. Was this real or a dream? Had I really fallen prisoner to the Allied forces? One spoke English, the other French. As I was emotionally in a traumatized condition and filled with fear and sadness, tears began flowing down my cheeks. Finally, without danger, and without sacrificing my life, I had been liberated and granted freedom and salvation.

This was the utmost bliss since we were now in a free and safe area: no more bombs and cannon balls shelling us. We were on safe heights controlled by the British, while on the other side were the retreating defeated Turkish soldiers at whom the British were still firing. My inner happiness was indescribable, especially when I thought that soon I would see my loved ones; hence, in this happy mood I marched with thousands of prisoners of war like me. The roads were littered with the guns, carts, and belongings of the retreating soldiers, slowing us down and making our movement forward difficult.

On the eve of that Thursday, September 19, 1918, after walking for six hours

towards the sea, we once again received orders to return to the Tulkarem railway station where we were left without water the whole evening. We spent the following day, Friday, sitting under the sun, hungry and very thirsty, for the Turks had destroyed all the water tanks before retreating. I took out the phial of tartaric acid from my medicine case and put a few drops in my mouth to quench my thirst. I felt extremely ill those past two past days: the anxiety, the thirst, the hunger and fatigue, in addition to sleeplessness, had affected my health and I could not take another step forward.

Fortunately, on Friday evening we were transported in huge vehicles to Ras-el-Ain, where the officers were separated from the soldiers, and settled in areas surrounded by barbed wire. For the first time they gave us processed meat, *galetta*²⁹ and unlimited water, and each Prisoner Of War (POW), for a while, forgot his state and enjoyed the meal.

We spent that night in open air, and on Saturday morning, September 21, I woke up feeling ill and very weak. We were now POWs without any free will. I had managed to save only my luggage from all my personal belongings and had to carry it myself wherever I went since I did not have any attendants. We were arranged now in rows of two and had to walk for hours. The heat was unbearable; there was no water and the *matara* cup³⁰ was sold for one Turkish pound.

The proud Turkish generals of the Ottoman empire, who arrogantly used to humiliate and torture us Armenians, were now walking with drooping heads, unable to bear the heat and the hunger, fainting and collapsing every now and then on the ground. I moved forward with my inseparable bag and occasionally took a few drops of tartaric acid which, due to its soothing effect, allowed me to walk on and quench my thirst. Among all these soldiers, I was the only one who carried his personal effects and walked until we reached a station; we took the train and arrived at Lydda³¹ station towards evening.

The next day, Sunday, September 22, the official registration of the POWs took place and tags bearing our numbers were placed on our chests. The same evening we were transported by train to Kantara, travelling all night through the desert and passing by all the stations of the Turkish army, such as Gaza, Rafah, el-Arish and others, until we reached the Asian bank of the Suez Canal, where a large camp was set up for the POWs at the British Army Base.

We remained at the camp there for nine days. One evening it rained so heavily, drenching all our tents and flooding them, that we were forced to spend the whole night on our feet.

On the morning of October 2, 1918, we crossed the wooden bridge from the Asian side of the Suez Canal to the African side and took the train along the desert route which took us through the major Egyptian cities of Ismailiya, Zagazeg and Benha. After reaching the station at Quweisna, we had to walk to the POW camp which was half an hour away. Overburdened by my bag filled with medicines, I moved exhausted towards the barracks which were surrounded by barbed wire. From then on we were officially prisoners and treated accordingly.

A few days later, I presented a petition to my superior requesting that the necessary



Hagop Arsenian's tomb in Jerusalem, St. Prgitch cemetery. Source: Arsenian Photo Collection.

procedures be carried out to allow me to join my family in Jerusalem. For a long time, my request remained unanswered, although I was summoned a few times and questioned by the head of the POW camp. Life there was extremely difficult to bear, but we, the forty-five Armenian officers, settled in a special quarter and more or less tried to make our lives pleasant by exercising, singing, dancing, learning English and passing the time. In the evening, we sometimes had gatherings and tea parties.

On the feast of St. James (*Sourp Hagop*), since I was away from my *Home Sweet Home*, and since memories of previous celebrations would haunt my mind and depress me, I decided to hold a tea party at the camp and invited all my Armenian friends. Despite limited

resources, we had a very pleasant evening singing and reciting poetry, and for a short while, I pretended I was back home with my family.

One day, we read in the Armenian newspaper we had received from Cairo, the declaration of Noubar Pasha announcing the independence of Free Armenia.³² To celebrate our happiness, we decided to have a collective celebration. Some of the Armenians who had so far hardly uttered a single word were now inspired to make speeches, recite poetry and sing Armenian patriotic songs. This celebration extremely provoked the Turkish inmates and made them very infuriated. Getting a hundred Turks together, they plotted to attack us, but as we were told the next day, their leader advised them to control themselves and dismissed them to their quarters. Nevertheless, a messenger was sent to us requesting our leader to put an end to our partying.

The only way to get out of this camp was to appeal to the National Higher Commission of the ruling government in Cairo, not the military. Therefore, based on my petitions and the ones sent on my behalf from Jerusalem to that same office in Cairo, I was finally released when my papers reached me. Krikor Khatcherian, whose family was also in Jerusalem, was released with me too. On January 7, 1919, we reached Jerusalem escorted by two British soldiers.

My happiness cannot be described for after such stormy and eventful times, I was lucky to be alive and see my loved ones again. Upon my return to the family, I received the sad news of the passing away of my father-in-law; and thus, of the nine family members that had reached Jerusalem from Izmit, we were reduced to eight.

We thanked God that we were all together to celebrate the Armenian New Year (January 14) and the Armenian Christmas (January 19) of 1919,³³ which I spent

surrounded by my family in the happy and peaceful atmosphere of the Armenian Convent of the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Arda Arsenian Ekmekji, an archaeologist and historian, is Dean of Arts and Sciences at Haigazian University, Beirut, Lebanon. Her current research project is “Mother Armenia: The Role of Pioneer Women in the Genocide Surviving Process.”

Endnotes

- 1 After the 1967 war, the Armenian cemetery in the St. Savior (*Sourp Prgitch*) Church, which lay in No Man’s Land between 1948-1967, was reused. My grandfather’s remains were relocated in 1977 to rest near his dear wife Hrouth there.
- 2 Arsenian and Harami Pharmacy on Mamilla street
- 3 In 1960, The Minister of Health of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Dr. Jamil Toutounji, honored Hagop Arsenian and Noubar Arsenian for 75 years of joint service in the field of pharmacy.
- 4 Haroutiun Isgahedian, *Vgayaran Haygagan Tseghaspanoutyan*, (Anthology of Testimonies of the Armenian Genocide), (Beirut: G. Nazarian Foundation, 2010); and Verjine Svazlian; *The Armenian Genocide and Historical Memory*, Translated from the Armenian by Tigran Tsulikian, (Yerevan: Gitutiun Pub. House of the NAS RA, 2004).
- 5 Lorne Shirinian, “Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide as Cultural History,” in *Remembrance and Denial, The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 172; and *Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide*, (UK: Taderon Press, 1999), 22.
- 6 André Bridoux, *Le Souvenir*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), 26.
- 7 The Syrian city where most of the survivors of the Genocide first landed and where orphanages were established to take care of all the deported children. A compelling account of the situation is described by Martin Niepage, a German teacher in the city in 1917, in *The Horrors of Aleppo, Seen by a German Eye-Witness, a word to Germany’s accredited representatives*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1916); H. Kaiser, *At the Crossroads of Der Zor*, 3, comments “At one crucial location, the city of Aleppo, the struggle began not simply for the survival of individual deportees, but for what Armenian relief workers understood to be the survival of their whole nation.”
- 8 Ara Sarafian, ed., *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide 1915-1917* (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, Taderon Press, 2005) NA/RG59/867/243, 381.
- 9 The cherkez (Circassian) Hussein Bey is appointed as *Sevkiyet memuri* at Meskene in January 1916 and remains there till December 1916. Raymond H. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide, A Complete History* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 655.
- 10 Father Stepanos Hovaguimian, Prelate of Izmit.
- 11 Many survivors’ memoirs refer to this Arab tribe and its infamous reputation for plunder and murder. Vahram Dadrian in *To the Desert: Pages from My Diary*, trans. Agop J. Hacikyan, ed. Ara Sarafian (Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2003), 182, writes, “In the morning of the same day, [November 1916], hundreds of Chechen and Enezé highwaymen rounded up more than 60,000 refugees [in the Deir Zor area] and drove them under cracking whips, along the bank of a out-of-the way river toward the interior of the desert,” *ibid.*, 328, and “In the solitude of the desert Enezé and Chechen thieves suddenly surrounded the caravan and began to kill them with swords, axes and bullets. [9 March 1919]. Also, Odian, *ibid.*, 187, describes this Arab pillaging tribe, who not only robbed the Armenians and kidnapped their women and children, but had even stolen thousands of cattle and 3200 horses belonging to the Ottoman army, pp. 187, 222, 228. Stanley Kerr in *The Lions of Marash, Personal Experiences with American Near East Relief 1919-1922* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973) mentions Hachem Bey, chief of the Enezé tribe in 1920, who “was one of the most important opponents of the French occupation, help[ed] the Turks to oust the French from Aintab.”

- 12 An Armenian pharmacist in Aleppo, graduate of the American University of Beirut in 1901, cf. *American University Alumni Directory*, (Beirut:1992), 92; Odian, *ibid.*, 103, mentions visiting the pharmacy of Roupén Effendi in Aleppo, which was a meeting place for the Armenian doctors. His son, Bedros Ezadjian, was for long years the superintendent of Haigazian University in Lebanon.
- 13 Odian, *ibid.*, 66, 118, mentions Levon Zakarian, who was with him in Eregli in September 1915 and who later assumed the name of Ali Haydar Bey. He became the inspector of the Sericulture Department of the Public Debt Administration and often traveled between Aleppo, Hama and Beirut.
- 14 The Armenian Convent (*Vank*) in Jerusalem is more of a small town incorporating the Patriarchate, two churches, a seminary, school, library, and cemeteries, in addition to around 300 rooms rented to the laity.
- 15 Sahag II Khabayan was the last Catholicos in Sis, Cilicia.
- 16 Pharmacist from Izmit, where Arsenian worked in 1902.
- 17 Amirelai Ali Roshen Beyk was commander of the Jerusalem garrison, an Ottoman officer of Albanian origins. (JQ).
- 18 Krikor, Serpouhi, Simon, Verkine and Victoria Gulemerian.
- 19 A railway station on the Syrian-Jordanian border.
- 20 Another survivor, Vahram Dadrian, *ibid.*, 105, uses the same words upon reaching Jerash (Jordan), “No more will the terror of massacre hang over our heads like the sword of Damocles.”
- 21 As a military pharmacist in Jerusalem, Arsenian ironically had to serve in the IVth Unit of the Ottoman Army against the Allied Forces.
- 22 A station in the region of Beersheba in Southern Palestine.
- 23 Mas‘oudiye was a city in Palestine around five kilometers north-east of Jaffa.
- 24 In March, 1918, the American Red Cross sent a Commission to operate in Palestine and the Near East. The Commission reached Port Said on June 11 and commenced active operations in Jerusalem on July 4, 1918. *The Work of the American Red Cross during the War*. Chapter V: <http://www.vlib.us/medical/ARC/ARC5.htm> (October 2010).
- 25 G. Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide*, trans. Peter Balakian with Aris Sevag (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009) 291-294.
- 26 A city in Central Palestine, fifteen kilometers east of the Mediterranean Sea.
- 27 Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 472, mentions a Dr. Awni Bey, who was the Inspector of the Sanitary Services.
- 28 The Allied Forces.
- 29 Round loaf of bread, from French *galette*.
- 30 A small metallic cup.
- 31 Modern Lod, a city in South Palestine.
- 32 Armenia declared its independence on May 28, 1918. Cf. Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia, The Survival of a Nation*, revised second edition (London: Routledge, 1990), 256-257.
- 33 The Armenians of Jerusalem to date continue to adhere to the Julian calendar which has a thirteen day difference from the current adopted Gregorian calendar. Accordingly, New Year’s day is celebrated on January 14 and Christmas on the 19th instead of the 6th of January.