# RETRACING THE FODTSTEPS OF OUR FOREFATHERS...



Susan Kelekian



Photo by Garbis Bogosian

A view of the peaks of Mount Ararat. The Church on the right is located on the site of St. Gregory's imprisonment.



# RETRACING THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FOREFATHERS...

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#### **READING IS A BLESSING**

"Son of man, hear what I say to you: open your mouth, and eat what I give you." And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back.

... "Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. And he said to me: "Son of man, eat this scroll, that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.

(Taken from the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel. Chapter 2:8-10; Chapter 3:1-3)

Yes! Books are for eating, not for exhibiting. They are for spiritual and intellectual digestion, not for visual ornamentation. Books are still the most powerful factor in the shaping of human life. In spite of continued predictions about the impending dominance of audio-visual and electronic materials, I believe that the printed word makes a stronger and more permanent impact and can never be replaced.

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Imagine a world without books. What a barren existence! From the beginning of the world, man could not confine himself to oral expressions. Signs and symbols became part of self-expression. From the earliest hieroglyphic expressions to the alphabetical system devised by the ancient Phoenicians, man created different forms of written expressions. In this sense, one can say writing is as old as man himself.

In our Armenian tradition, from the pre-Christian era we have had the tradition of religious script used in the ancient temples dedicated to the pagan gods. Of course, the creation of the Armenian alphabet by St. Mesrob Mashtotz is the cornerstone of Armenian history. In the beginning of the fifth century (406 A.D.), when the alphabet was presented to the Armenian people, the entire country experienced a kind of religious and national transfiguration. Indeed, there is great significance in that the Armenians recognized the fifth century as the *golden age* of their history. It reflects the philosophy of the Armenian people, recognizing the vital importance of the written word in human life.

The more than 25,000 manuscripts, now in the possession of the Armenian people in both Armenia and the diaspora, that have survived the centuries of destruction, constitute only a small segment of a rich heritage of the written works which the Armenians considered their greatest possessions.

With the invention of the printing press, a new era dawned in Armenian cultural history. In 1512—just sixty years after the invention of the printing press—the Armenians printed their first book in Venice. Since then, the printing press has never stopped wherever Armenians live. Today, book production has reached its highest rate in Yerevan, Armenia. In many countries in the diaspora, daily newspapers, periodicals and books continue to add to the ever-increasing heritage of the written word in Armenian culture.

#### Preface

My young friends, I touch upon all this simply to tell you how important and valuable books are in human life and in our Armenian heritage. Here in the United States I have been impressed and inspired by the sight of people reading wherever they may be, not only in schools, homes, and libraries but even in subways and buses. Reading, I believe, is the inextinguishable source of personal enrichment. Tell me what books you read, and I'll tell you who you are; for books are the companions you choose and they stay with you as long as you do not abandon them.

There were times in our immediate past history when some of our forefathers could not read because they did not have the opportunity to attend school. Today, thank God, the rate of literacy amongst Armenians is very high. Reading has become an absolute must, for it does to our minds what food and water does to our bodies. It is my firm conviction that the caliber of our people and the quality of our nation will become higher still, if we become even more avid readers.

It is, therefore, imperative that our parents encourage their children to make reading an important part of their lives. And the best example parents can set, is by reading themselves. We must develop a sound and solid policy of personal and group reading.

Although we do have quite a number of books about Armenian history written in English or translated into English, there is still much work to be done in the preparation of such publications that may enrich our knowledge of Armenian history and our consciousness of our national ethos. Not only textbooks, but also the type of books which can be a "school at home."

The present publication is a small contribution toward creating that "school at home." During my travels as Prelate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, I was often asked by parents and young people about the availability of books

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concerning Armenian history. Most were seeking "elementary" books for school-age children, particularly of junior-high school age.

This volume is not intended to serve as a text for Armenian history. It is intended for young students who want to become acquainted with some significant aspects of Armenian history. Rather than providing a comprehensive history of the Armenians, it focuses upon certain moments, events, or persons, important to Armenian history. Each chapter is presented in short story form. It is meant to give the reader a "taste," with the hope it will serve as an *hors d'ouevre* for the meal to come.

With these ideas in mind, I asked Susan Kelekian to collect material and to prepare the text for this book. The present volume is the product of many months of research and writing. She has written a "painless" history, quite often presenting a story in a conversational form, with a modern setting. I hope that as a first attempt it will be received with understanding and proper attention. Since this is going to be the beginning of other similar projects, I would appreciate your written comments and suggestions.

The Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church renders this type of service with the hope that our people will find in such publications a constant source of religious and national instruction. I am sure your response will be a stimulating factor in the pursuit of such projects.

I want to express my deep thanks to: Susan Kelekian for her tireless efforts in preparing the text; to Rev. Oshagan Choloyan for his help in preparing the maps and illustrations; to Iris Papazian, of

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#### Preface

H. Prim Co., Inc., who offered valuable comments on the text and is responsible for the book's graphic production, and sincere thanks to some friends whose financial contributions enabled the Prelacy to proceed with this project.

Now, my dear fellow Armenians, the book is in your hands, where it belongs, for in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "It's the good reader that makes the good book."

"Eat what is offered to you. Eat this scroll and fill your stomach with it." I hope it will be as "sweet as honey."

Archbishop Karekin Sarkissian

New York April 1977

## **RETRACING THE FOOTSTEPS**

### OF OUR FOREFATHERS. . .

#### Chapter I

#### THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

ROM the distant beginnings of man's memory, Mount Ararat rises out of the haze that covers the lofty Armenian plateau. This is the tallest and the most famous mountain of Armenia. Many legends were told about this double-peaked mountain in the centuries before Christianity came to Armenia.

The snow-capped mountain was so important to the ancient peoples of the Middle East that it was even mentioned in the Bible as the place where Noah's ark came to rest after the great flood. The Old Testament tells us that the flood was sent by God to punish the wicked who did not trust their creator. Only Noah, his family, and the pairs of animals chosen to embark in Noah's great ark were to survive this disaster. When the waters subsided, the ark touched land on Mount Ararat. Noah, his family, and all the animals disembarked, then, in "the land of Ararat." \*

Noah had three sons—Shem, Ham and Japheth. It is said that the Armenian people are descended from Japheth.

#### The Tower of Babel

As Noah's family grew and spread out all over the earth, many people began to commit evil deeds. Those

<sup>\*</sup>You may read the full story of the great flood and the survival of Noah in the Book of Genesis, Chapters 6 to 8, of the Bible.

who had traveled to the south decided to build a city, and within that city, a tower even higher than Mount Ararat that would reach heaven. Displeased that these men dared to compete with Him, God mixed up their speech, creating many languages so they could not talk to each other and work together as one nation. He then scattered them in many lands.

Early Armenian writers tell us that among those who came to dwell in the prosperous city of Nineveh\* was the tyrant Bel. He wanted to rule over all the heroes and warriors who were giants among men.

Among these heroes was a prince, with grey eyes and curly hair, who was known to be both handsome and brave. His name was Haik, and as a youth, he had sworn to oppose all who sought to conquer the world. Although Bel was able to gain power over all the other heroes, Haik could not tolerate his harsh rule.

One night he gathered all his sons and his men around him. "This tyrant, Bel, will erase the word freedom from our memory," he declared. "Let us take our families and all our followers and move to the north, to the land of Mount Ararat. The mountains are so high, Bel will not bother to pursue us. We will again have our liberty."

Haik, his sons, his grandsons, and all his followers, set out immediately. As they journeyed to the north, they climbed up hill after hill, leaving behind the flat and fertile lands around Nineveh.

When they reached the top of a tall mountain, the

\*The ruins of this ancient Assyrian capital city are found in Iraq.

#### The Struggle for Freedom

stark beauty of the steep peaks ahead of them made them gasp. Haik's son, *Armenag*, who was born in Babylon, exclaimed, "Even the earth is free here, Father! You made a wise decision."

At the foot of this mountain, Haik won the support of the local people, who saw in him a wise ruler, and built a town.

"Since you love this land so well, Armenag," he said, "I will give this place to your son, Gatmos."

Haik and his followers traveled on toward the northwest until they reached a high plain, which the hero named "Hark" ('Fathers'), and built a village, which he named "Haikashen" ('made by Haik').

#### **Bel's Anger**

When stories of Haik's feats reached Bel, he was very angry. "All of mankind has submitted to my power," he bellowed. "How does this Haik dare to escape? If I do not defeat him, the other heroes will soon follow his example."

Bel sent one of his sons, with several escorts, to the land of Ararat to give Haik a message: "You are dwelling in a cold climate surrounded by ice and snow. By submitting to my rule, you will thaw the coldness of your exile. You may return to the warm and pleasing plains in my kingdom."

"The freedom of the mountains is far more beautiful than slavery in your fertile plains," Haik replied.

When he heard Haik's defiant response, Bel at once began to assemble his army. He called together the fiercest men in his domain, and set out to climb the mighty mountains of Armenia. His fury was so great that he did not care about the difficulties of the journey.

Gatmos learned of Bel's approach, and ran to warn his grandfather.

"You are the greatest of heroes," he said, "but listen. Bel is coming to attack you with his immortal braves and his colossal warriors. As soon as I heard of his plans, I immediately left my home to come to warn you."

#### **Battle of Giants**

Like a giant wave, Bel's tremendous army surged northward over the rocky crags, encircling Armenia's frosty summits. They paused in a great plain located between two mountain ranges.

Haik summoned all his men, armed them with bows, and met with them on the shores of Lake Van.

"We must mount our attack directly against Bel, seeking him out immediately in the midst of his army, or we will die," he warned them. "Our families will fall into his hands. We must make a show of strength and scatter his army."

Confident of victory, Bel's men were casually spread out all over the plain when Haik approached with his tiny army. Bel himself, bold and tranquil, was standing on a little hill next to the river that flowed at the foot of the western mountain range.

Haik was pleased to notice that there was a considerable distance between Bel and his army. The tyrant was a striking figure, wearing an iron helmet, and armor made of glittering brass, with armbands and thigh-bands. On his left' side he had strapped a double-bladed sword, frightening to behold. In his right hand he held a lance; in his left a heavy shield so polished that it reflected the sun like a mirror. He was surrounded by the most terrible of his warriors.

But Haik was not daunted. He placed Armenag and his two brothers on his right side, Gatmos and two other sons on the left, for all were skilled marksmen and daring swordsmen. He then arranged the rest of his troops behind the front line in a triangular formation.

As they entered into battle, the earth shook with the force of their combat. Many giant warriors fell on both sides. Surprised at the bravery of Haik and his men, Bel again climbed the hill by the river to await the arrival of the rest of his army.

#### **Bel's Fate**

Haik understood the tyrant's plans. Taking his great bow in his hand, a bow so powerful that no other man could even bend it, Haik approached the hill.

Bel leaned on his lance, fearlessly watching Haik's advance. As Haik reached the foot of the mound, the tyrant called out, "At last you have come to surrender! Put down your arms and follow me back to Nineveh."

"The freedom I have known in the mountains of Armenia will live forever in my heart, and in the hearts of my people," Haik replied, his steel-colored eyes flashing.

He stepped back and aimed a three-feathered arrow at Bel's chest. The arrow hit its mark. Bel fell

heavily to the earth, roaring. His men knew from the terrible thud that their leader had fallen, and they fled, dropping their shields in the confusion.

Haik built a town on the site of the battle, which to this day is known as *Hayotz Tzor*, or "Valley of Haik." Our noble ancestor, who was willing to face death rather than give up his freedom, named the hill where Bel and his soldiers fell *Kerezmank*, or "the tombs."

For many hundreds of years, our distant ancestors fought against the powerful empires of the south—the peoples of the plains—to protect their freedom and independence.

The legend of Haik was born of this struggle.

As we have seen, Haik fought, not to kill, but to defend the freedom of Armenia, because he believed as we believe today—that without freedom, men, women, and nations lose their dignity and become slaves.

In some ways, the struggle of Haik and his followers is similar to the American war for independence. How many lives and battles were lost in order to gain and maintain the kind of life in which people could make their own choices according to their own beliefs?

We all can easily understand why Haik is considered the founding father of Armenia and has been an inspiration as a symbol of freedom, through all difficult periods in Armenian history.

The Armenians are "Hye" not simply as descen-

#### The Struggle for Freedom

dents of Haik, but also as his followers in maintaining the spirit of struggle against oppression.



Photo by Boghos Boghosian

Statue of Haik Nahabed, sculpted by V. Nourijanian, in Yerevan.

#### Chapter II

#### ARA THE FAIR

HE legendary Ara the Fair, a descendent of Haik, was known throughout the ancient world as an especially handsome man. His harmonious features were accented by his fair skin. His brown eyes seemed to glow with strength. Tall and powerfully built, he walked, rode, and entered into battle with more grace than any other man in memory. Because of his great physical beauty, he was called Ara the Fair.

After the death of his father, Aram the Brave, Ara became ruler of Armenia, paying tribute to the powerful king of Assyria, whose name was Ninus.

Ninus was a very vain man who sought to rule the entire world. He resented the power which Aram the Brave had gained in the lands to the west and north of Armenia, and also wanted to avenge the death of his ancestor, Bel. For years he thought about the best way to eliminate the entire Armenian race.

"There could be no greater happiness on earth," he confided to his beautiful young wife, Shamiram, who was hardly more than a child, "than to see every last descendent of that rebel, Haik, perish."

"But Ninus," she replied, her deep brown eyes wide with early wisdom, "do not weaken yourself by pursuing the grudges of your ancestors. Bel was killed many years ago. He was armed. He defended himself,

#### Ara the Fair

but Haik was a better warrior. If you travel north to fight the Armenians, you will leave our own city of Nineveh unprotected. Your enemies could seize power."

"But Shamiram, these Armenians dare to defy the great Assyrian empire. They cannot go unpunished!" he exclaimed, pounding his fist against a stone bench in his garden, which was fragrant with apricot blossoms.

"This young ruler, Ara the Fair, has done nothing to harm you," she argued. "It would be wiser to kill a newborn fawn because its grandfather had escaped your grandfather in the hunt."

The only argument important to Ninus was the possibility of losing his kingdom. He decided to allow the young Armenian king to rule without interference, all the while inventing vile dreams of bloody revenge. He took great satisfaction in imagining violent deaths by torture for the Armenians, and told Shamiram about them. The most horrible death of all he planned for Ara the Fair.

#### A New Love

The young queen of Assyria bore children. She grew older, but remained beautiful like many women who lead pampered lives. As the servants cared for her small children, she often wandered in the palace gardens, thinking about the heroic Armenians who were so courageous they even challenged the mighty kings of Assyria. She began to pity Ara the Fair, afraid that her husband would bring an untimely death to the brave young monarch.

Her interest in the king of the mountainous land to

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the north grew daily. She often summoned travelers who arrrived in Nineveh from Armenia and questioned them at length about their ruler. Shamiram became absorbed in stories of Ara's bravery, and sighed when she heard about his strength and manly beauty.

The more her husband desired Ara's death, the more she became devoted to his image. Her interest grew into a passion. Shamiram would carefully look at the hawk-like nose, small, close-set eyes and sallow skin of her husband. She realized one day that she had grown to hate him for his ugliness in appearance, as well as for his wicked greed for power and his loathing for the innocent Armenians. The descendents of Haik had become a charmed race in her mind. Each day she longed for the moment when Ninus would dismiss her from his presence so she would be free to dream of Ara the Fair without interruption.

Surrounded by her husband's loyal servants, and separated by her position as queen from all others, she could speak of her feelings to no one. Her passion became an obsession.

#### The Queen's Opportunity

Hated by many of his subjects, and even by his ministers, one year Ninus was forced to flee his court and journey to Cyprus. Shamiram was selected to rule the great Assyrian empire.

At last, she told herself, I am free to win the love of Ara the Fair and have him for my husband.

This had become her one desire in life. She sought no other benefit from her power. She selected advisers

#### Ara the Fair

who were said to resemble the Armenian king in appearance, and began to send lavish gifts to the surprised ruler. Shamiram selected jewels and fine horses, handmade golden goblets decorated with beautiful designs, and the rarest flowering plants from her gardens. Each gift was accompanied by the same message:

Satisfy my longing to be yours and I will make you king of the great Assyrian Empire or allow you to return to your people with all the riches you desire.

Ara refused again and again. Having heard of Ninus' secret plans to kill him, Ara was afraid that the queen was, in turn, attempting to trap him. Ara was also very devoted to his wife, Nevart. To Ara the greatest pleasure in life was spending time at home with his family. He loved to invent amusements for his children, and had taught them all to ride horseback. He found that his love for his wife had increased with the years, and always tried to be kind, tender, and considerate toward her. Ara thought his wife's smile was far more beautiful than all the presents which Shamiram had sent to him.

Hearing refusal after refusal, the Assyrian queen grew very sad. She tried to distract herself, spending more time on state affairs and with her own children, but in vain. She could not forget Ara the Fair.

#### A War for Love

One day while Ara was riding in the countryside, a messenger came to warn him that the Assyrian queen, Shamiram, was advancing on Armenia with a great army. Convinced that her promises of love were only part of a plan to conquer Armenia, he swore to defend his land and his people to the death.

When the powerful armies of Assyria and Armenia entered into battle, Shamiram instructed her soldiers not to kill Ara the Fair, but to capture him and bring him to her side unharmed. Unable to control her desire to see the handsome ruler, she had decided to wage war against Armenia, although she had once advised her husband against that very same course of action.

The Armenians fought bravely, but the Assyrian army was so large that it seemed when one Assyrian soldier fell, another would run to take his place. The Armenian forces were scattered, and in the confusion, Ara was killed by Shamiram's men.

The victory was a tragedy to the Assyrian queen. Crazed by her grief upon hearing of Ara's death, she roamed the battlefield among those who were searching the dead for valuables, looking for Ara the Fair. His corpse was at last found among the bodies of his brave soldiers.

Shamiram could not believe that this man, to whom she had devoted her life, was dead. His handsome face had grown cold. His eyes lacked expression. She had her servants dress him in the finest armor and place his body on a bier at the entrance to her tent. She felt that the power of her love would not allow him to be dead. As the Armenians regrouped their army to attack the Assyrians, Shamiram proclaimed, "My

#### Ara the Fair

Drawing by K. Kaphadarian.



Section of an artist's rendition of the reconstructed design of the wall-paintings in the small hall of the palace at Erebouni from the first millenium B.C.

gods will come in the bodies of lions. They will lick Ara's wounds and heal them. He will be saved."

After several days had passed, even Shamiram was forced to admit that neither her passion nor her gods could bring Ara back to life. Utterly shattered by the disaster that her own love had caused, she secretly had Ara's body buried at the bottom of a ravine. She then ordered one of her advisers who resembled the Armenian king to put on Ara's clothes.

"The gods have healed Ara's wounds and restored him to life," she proclaimed throughout Armenia. "Our fondest wishes have thus been fulfilled; our marriage has been celebrated. We must give thanks to the gods as the source of our happiness."

Shamiram erected a new monument to the gods, and offered many sacrifices to them. Her actions convinced everyone of the truth of her claims that Ara was alive, and his soldiers put down their swords.

#### The Queen's City

Not wishing to leave the land of her beloved, Shamiram lingered for many weeks on the Ararat plain, which, as the ancient historian Movses Khorenatsi says, had been named after Ara the Fair. She took advantage of the warm summer days to wander among the valleys and plains, which were covered with wildflowers in bloom, and took comfort in these walks. Seeing the beauty of the countryside, the purity of the air, and the clarity of the streams that seemed to spring up everywhere, she said to herself, I should build a city in such a healthy region. And I will build a palace, so I can spend the summer in Armenia amid all the beauties of nature.

After touring the Armenian countryside, and considering several possible sites, she chose to build her city on the shores of Lake Van. Shamiram summoned ten thousand workers and six thousand craftsmen who were masters of the arts, from Assyria.

Movses Khorenatsi relates that these workers began their task by constructing the magnificent canals of Shamiram Su, bearing the queen's name. These canals still stand today. She then divided the Assyrians into work forces, with the most accomplished artisans to direct them. Within a few years, these men had built a magnificent city with multi-colored palaces of stone, all surrounded by strong protecting walls with doors of brass. Shamiram directed her men to use the waters from the canals to irrigate the city, and imported plants from many lands to create the most beautiful gardens ever seen.

Shamiram slowly recovered from her passion for Ara the Fair. She thought she would try to repay the Armenian people for the damage which her love had done them by building the astonishing city of Van.

The legend of Shamiram and Ara the Fair indicates that since ancient times, the kings of Armenia have considered themselves not only kings, but also fathers of families. For Ara the Fair and many other Armenian kings, the family was the source of true happiness. To him, Shamiram was an intruder who

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sought to destroy the sacred honor of his family. He has served as the symbol of this ideal to Armenians throughout history. Ara proved himself 'fair' not only in physical beauty, but also in his devotion to spiritual ideals.

#### Chapter III

#### TIGRAN THE GREAT

"STEADY, steady," Tigran reassured his hesitating horse as they halted on a small hill overlooking the field where the Parthian army was going through its war exercises. The young Armenian prince had spent most of his youth as a hostage in the court of the Parthian leader, Mithridates the Great, who wanted to assure the good behavior of his conquered Armenian subjects.

As Tigran sat astride his horse, he thought of his great-grandfather, Ardaches, the founder of the Armenian nation, who had tried to create a great Armenian empire. His dreams were destroyed by the powerful nations to the south whose armies surged northward and spread out over Armenia—first the Seleucid people of Syria, then the Parthians. Tigran had grown to hate his captors. He considered them wild, coarse tribesmen. Compared to the Armenian court, where Greek rule had greatly refined the manners of the people and had given them a taste for the theatre, the Parthian court was almost devoid of amusements. Although they made an effort to seem well-mannered, the longer he stayed in their midst, the more disgusting he found their crude personal habits and rude conversation.

Tigran was no fool, however. Certain that he would one day be king of his beloved Armenia again, he

spent much of his time studying the Parthians' strategy in battle. As nomadic tribesmen, they had become expert riders. Rather than directly face another army, they would use the tactics now known as guerilla warfare.

Lost in his thoughts, Tigran was startled by a messenger from Mithridates the Great.

"You must come at once," the man said. "There is news from Armenia."

#### **Unexpected News**

The great hall of Mithridates' palace was crowded. Men in brightly colored robes, with long swords dangling from their sides, were shouting and laughing. When Tigran entered, all fell silent.

The young prince walked directly toward the brilliant fighter who had made the Parthians rulers of a vast empire. He was filled with mixed emotions of admiration and hate every time he saw the older man.

"Your messenger says there is news from Armenia."

"Your brother is dead, Tigran," Mithridates told him, looking him straight in the eyes. "You will now be king of Armenia."

Tigran was shocked. Saddened by the news of his brother's death, he was also hopeful that he would be allowed to return home. Perhaps he could fulfill his great-grandfather's dream of a united and powerful Armenian empire.

"You will leave in two weeks for Armenia, but

#### Tigran the Great

first we must sign a treaty. I will only allow you to go back to your people if you give me the seventy valleys that fall along our northern border."

Tigran reflected for a minute. These valleys were valuable territory, but a small price for his freedom and the opportunity to return home to his people. "All right," he agreed.

#### Pursuing a Dream

Tigran personally selected the horses for his new army's cavalry units. Since Armenia was famous throughout the ancient world for her fine horses, this did not present as great a problem for the new king as did the creation of a disciplined army. For the special cavalry, he chose the best riders from among the sons of the Armenian nobles. It was a great honor for the young men, who felt very grateful to Tigran for selecting them. The king was thus able to tighten his control of Armenia's nobles, who had often been haughty and rebellious in the past.

As his mighty new army marched off into battle, Tigran was confident that his years spent watching the Parthian army would surely benefit his people. He first led his troops into the seventy valleys which he had given to Parthia in exchange for his throne. He then seized Sophene, or Armenia Minor, expanded his empire into the Caucasus, and then east as far as the Caspian Sea. These conquests proved Tigran's genius as a general.

To the north of Armenia was the kingdom of

Pontus. The ruler of this rapidly-expanding country, Mithridates Eupator, \* hated the Romans, who had conquered the Greeks and were spreading their domains throughout the ancient world. A descendant of both the ancient Achaemenid (Persian) and Greek rulers, Mithridates wanted to reestablish the glory of Greek rule by capturing the territories that had once belonged to the Greeks. Trying to conserve the strength of his army for the struggle against the Roman Empire, he did not want to weaken his men by fighting against the Armenians. He sent ambassadors to Tigran to propose an alliance.

Tigran immediately realized that his own plans would best be served by signing a treaty with Pontus. His ambition was to defeat those who had once crushed his great-grandfather's empire—the Seleucids of Syria and his former captors, the Parthians.

The two rulers agreed that Mithridates would limit his conquests to lands in the west and north. Those regions to the south and east could be conquered by Tigran. To seal the alliance, Tigran was to marry Cleopatra, Mithridates' sixteen-year-old daughter, who was well-educated in Greek culture.<sup>†</sup>

When Mithridates the Great of Parthia died in 86 B.C., Tigran felt that he was at last able to extend his empire to the south. Although the Parthians were still powerful, he felt that without the leadership of this

<sup>\*</sup>In Armenian, Mihrdat. Not to be confused with Mithridates the Great of Parthia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>†</sup> To ensure peace between countries, kings in ancient and medieval times would often marry the sisters or daughters of other kings.

#### Tigran the Great

brilliant general, their army would be in chaos. Tigran advanced into Atropene, Gordiene, part of Mesopotamia, then moved into Adiabene, Mygdonia, and Osrhoene. The Armenian army continued further into the Parthian territory of Greater Media and captured its capital, where Tigran had once been a hostage. He then began to use the title "King of Kings," once reserved for the Persian emperors.

His troops, led by the ever-triumphant cavalry, took Cilicia, Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) and part of Palestine. Then, in 83 B.C., he was invited to Antioch and offered the throne of the Seleucid Empire of Syria, Armenia's long-time rival. This was the greatest triumph of his career—the king, who as a boy, recalled with bitterness how the Seleucids had broken up his great-grandfather's Armenian empire, now would rule those who had once ruled Armenia. He himself had become king of an empire far beyond Ardaches' dream.

This empire was the largest ever ruled by an Armenian king, and the stories of Tigran's conquests inspired Armenian kings for centuries to come.

#### Tigranagert

By the year 70 B.C., Tigran's power was at its height. Since his vast empire stretched to the south of Armenia, the capital, Artashat, had become inconvenient. Tigran wanted to build a new capital city that would be closer to the center of his realm. This city, which has since disappeared, would be called Tigrana-



Tigran the Great's Empire

#### Tigran the Great

gert.\* The city was carefully planned, and was filled with beautiful palaces. Tigran had the royal palace itself surrounded by an immense park. Near his residence was a forest filled with animals, and pools stocked with fish. The "King of Kings" particularly enjoyed hunting.

Tigran the Great dreamed of making his capital the most dazzling city in the ancient world. He ordered the Armenian nobles to move to Tigranagert. He transported families from Armenia, from Cappadocia, from Cilicia, and even Jews from Palestine. Encouraged by his refined, well-educated wife, he wanted to make his city a great center of culture and learning, and especially encouraged people to come live there who spoke and read Greek. He had famous Greek actors come to Tigranagert to perform the best Greek plays—both comedies and tragedies. One of Tigran's sons, Artavazd, who later became king, even wrote plays in the Greek language himself.

Tigran had realized the one goal toward which he had labored all his life. Armenia had become a powerful empire. He never suspected that the alliance with Pontus, which once had proved so helpful, would one day bring destruction to his empire.

#### A Mightier Enemy

In 88 B.C., Tigran's ally and father-in-law, Mithridates Eupator, king of Pontus, declared war

<sup>\*</sup>This Tigranagert is not to be confused with the modern city of Diarbekir, called Tigranagert by the Armenians. The first city was at a different location, but in the same region.

against Rome. He succeeded in pushing the Romans out of Asia Minor and crossed into Greece, reaching as far as Athens. The Roman legions under the General Sulla then defeated Mithridates. In 74 B.C., Mithridates again declared war on Rome, and was completely defeated in 70 B.C. Chased from his own land, he sought refuge at Tigran's court.

The Roman general, Lucullus, demanded that Tigran send him the king of Pontus. Tigran refused to betray his father-in-law. Lucullus invaded Armenia, and surrounded the city of Tigranagert while Tigran was out trying to raise an army. Tigran then returned, sure that he could easily defeat the smaller Roman army. Tigran was so confident that he was careless in planning his attack. The Roman army surprised his famous cavalry, scattered his army, and forced the Armenians to retreat.

During the next year, Tigran and Mithridates raised another army, and used the Parthian battle tactics to harass the Roman forces without ever facing the entire Roman army. They inflicted many losses, and caused the Romans to lose confidence. When winter began in 68 B.C., the Roman army rebelled. Lucullus went back to Rome.

The great Roman general, Pompey, was sent to replace Lucullus. He combined his army with the Parthian army, and joined with one of Tigran's own sons to attack Armenia.

Tigran realized he could not defy Rome forever. Seeking to keep his own kingdom, he asked for a truce.

#### Tigran the Great



Silver tetradrachmas of Tigran the Great.
Already over seventy years old, Tigran set aside his pride. He took off his purple cloak, worn only by kings, and then rode into the Roman camp. He bowed down before the Roman leader and gave him his crown.

Once the "King of Kings," Tigran was only the king of Armenia again. He had to give all the other lands he had conquered to Rome and was forced to pay tribute to the Roman Empire. The great Armenian Empire, Tigran's one dream in life, had been destroyed.

Although his empire was short-lived, this great ruler left a permanent mark on Armenian history. Not only have his deeds inspired Armenians throughout the centuries, but also his love of culture and the arts has made Armenian culture richer. Through the contributions of the people from many lands whom Tigran brought to Armenia, Armenia's artists were stimulated to create new works of their own by colorful new ideas. The cultural wealth of Armenia was in this way increased for centuries to come.

# Chapter IV

# THE CONVERSION OF ARMENIA TO CHRISTIANITY

T the time Christ was born, life in Armenia was very simple. Only some of the nobles and the priests of the old religion went to school or had private teachers. Most of the people of Armenia shared problems common to the rest of humanity. Would the weather be favorable for their crops? Would they or their children be stricken with illness? Would the king wage war against foreign rulers? Would their men be killed in battle?

Although their lives were filled with routines that followed the seasons of the year—spring sowing, autumn harvesting—or major events in life—birth, adolescence, marriage, death—there were so many things the ancient people of Armenia would not understand. Why did it rain one week and not the next? Why would the farmer's wife be taken sick and not the potter's wife? Even such simple things as the reason why the sun rises in the east every morning, but sets in the west each evening, were mysteries to them. Long before Christ's birth, they had begun to explain each mystery by starting the idea that a god, or invisible spirit, was responsible for the events they could not understand. Over the centuries, the gods of Armenia had been given names. The feelings of the people toward these gods



Ruins of the Armenian pagan temple at Garni, in Armenia, from the third century B.C.

were direct. They always tried to please the gods by giving them gifts, or offerings. If the gods were pleased, the course of events would favor the people. When the gods were angry, misfortune and disaster would result.

Since the people's lives were so closely connected to the natural rhythm of the earth, most of these pagan gods were thought to be connected with nature, the moon, the sun, and the stars.

Aramazd, or Ahura Mazda, the god whose worship was spread by the Persian prophet *Zoroaster*, was identified with the sun. He represented the forces of light, or good, as opposed to darkness. At first a very moral faith, the worship of Aramazd, called Zorastrianism, became little more than fire worship. In modern Iran, some people still follow this religion.

The Armenian god, Mithra, or Mihr, was also connected with the sun. When the sun shone, the Armenians believed this was Mithra's blessing.

Mithra's wife, Anahit, was considered the source of all womanly virtues. She was worshipped as the goddess of motherhood, of the fertility of the soil, and of the life-giving waters without which their crops would not grow. The people also believed she controlled the mountain lakes and streams which gave them their drinking water. Responsible for the earth in which they planted their crops and the water which they needed to live, she became the most important of the gods. The Armenians thought she was loving, understanding of human weakness, and forgiving. They built many temples in her honor, and filled them with rich



Bronze head of Anahit from Satala, now in the British Museum.

gifts. Special statues of Anahit were made of gold. That is why she was sometimes called *Voskedzin*, meaning "born of gold," or *Voskemayr*, meaning "mother of gold."

The most popular goddess was Astghik, the goddess of love and beauty. She was often identified with the Greek goddess, Aphrodite. The rose (*vart*) was her favorite flower, the dove her favorite bird. Her festival, called *Vartevar*, was held at the beginning of summer.

The ancient Armenians were very superstitious, and believed in imaginary spirits and monsters. They also thought that oak and poplar trees were sacred to the gods.

The pagan priests became very wealthy and powerful. The common people would make gifts to the gods, which were kept by the priests. They sometimes received as much as one-fifth of the riches which the Armenian kings would bring back when they defeated other armies or conquered foreign lands. The priests owned vast amounts of land. They even had their own armies, and did not have to pay taxes to the kings. Their sons did not have to serve in the king's army. The position of priest was hereditary, passed down from father to son.

### The New Faith

As the years passed, many Armenians began to feel that the pagan gods were not protecting their country. In spite of all their offerings made to please the gods, foreign armies came and stole their horses, burned their houses, and carried off their women and chilren. Even gifts of gold and silver no longer seemed to make the gods happy. They only made the priests rich. The farmer who had offered sheep to the gods would see his crops wilt during a dry summer. As foreign armies passed through Armenia, each with different gods, the people began to wonder which were the right gods.

Just at the time that many Armenians had begun to doubt their gods, a man named Thaddeus, one of the twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ, came to Armenia to spread the new faith called Christianity. Saint Thaddeus told the people that the gods they worshipped did not exist. He explained that there could not be many gods, each with different interests. Only one God, who created the universe, existed. He taught the people what the Son of this one God had taught him that they should love and help one another. He told them that riches were not important to this God, who could only be pleased by good behavior, not by gifts of gold or silver. Those who would lead good lives in this world would have great wealth of spirit in the next. He taught them about the Ten Commandments, and the life and good works of Jesus. These examples, he said, would show them how they could live in peace with their own families and with their neighbors. The people of the world should not act according to their superstitions, but should base their treatment of each other on this higher code of conduct.

St. Thaddeus gained many followers in Armenia.

Among them was the beautiful Princess Sandoukht, daughter of King Sanadruk. The princess had heard about the unusual teachings of St. Thaddeus. One night, she covered her royal gowns with a plain cloak and slipped out of the palace unnoticed. She wanted to attend a secret meeting which the Christians were holding that night. She heard that St. Thaddeus was going to be the speaker.

When the princess entered the large, dimly-lit room on the outskirts of the city where the Christians had gathered, no one recognized her. She chose a dark corner in which to stand, and waited to hear the words of this teacher from Palestine. Many of the people at the meeting had partially covered their faces. Because the king did not like the new religion, the Christians had to meet secretly.

Finally, St. Thaddeus entered. He began to speak of the Son of God and how he had taken all the sins of mankind upon himself and had died on the cross to save the world's peoples. He spoke of the miracles which Christ had performed, and of the Resurrection. As he talked, his face radiated the strength of those who speak the truth. Princess Sandoukht sensed honesty and purity in every word uttered by this teacher. He was so different from the greedy pagan priests and men who surrounded her father like hungry mosquitos. The princess was deeply moved by this experience.

#### An Important Choice

Week after week, Princess Sandoukht secretly attended the Christians' meetings. One night after returning home, she did not sleep at all. She prayed until morning for the courage to become a Christian herself. She knew her father would be very angry. That morning, totally at peace with herself, she went to the Apostle and asked to be baptised. The sacrament was performed amid great rejoicing. The Christians were sure that since his own daughter had now been converted to their religion, King Sanadruk would no longer try to break up their meetings and chase their leaders out of the country.

These faithful Christians were wrong. Princess Sandoukht tried very hard to explain Christianity to her father. The king was not interested in the well-being of his soul. He preferred to go hunting during the day, watch strong men fighting or wrestling, and spend his evenings eating and drinking wine. He only cared about the comfort and pleasure of his body. He was very angry with Sandoukht when he learned that she had become a Christian. He would not allow her to see the other Christians, and had his guards watch her night and day. He forced her to attend the great feasts which he held in the palace every night. He gave her lavish gifts—unusual birds, small caged animals, beautiful silk gowns—but she hardly noticed them. She would not give up her new religion.

The king became furious at his daughter. "How dare you accept this foreign religion? Do you know what the Armenian people are saying? They are whispering to each other that their king is a fool, and your conversion proves that even the gods have abandoned them!" The king paced back and forth as he shouted at his once-beloved daughter. His face had turned bright red with anger. The veins at his temples pounded visibly with the force of his heartbeat.

Princess Sandoukht sank timidly into a chair. Her face remained calm. She gazed firmly into her father's eyes. "The Christian God does not come and go with foreign armies," she asserted. "He is a God of kindness, truth and wisdom. These virtues are as much Armenian as they are Jewish or Roman. They are the same all over the world."

"How dare you defy me!" the king exclaimed. He suddenly rushed toward her and grabbing her shoulders, began to shake her. Seeing the tears welling up in her eyes, he stopped, and for a moment, gently stroked the smooth skin of her cheek as he had done when she was a baby. Then, just as abruptly, he turned away.

"Take her to the dungeon and place her in chains," he ordered the guards. "Perhaps that will make you appreciate your father more than your religion," he muttered in a hoarse whisper.

# A Royal Example

Princess Sandoukht could hardly move at all in prison, her chains were so heavy. Her limbs became numb. Fed only once a day, she grew thin and weak. Her strength came more from her faith and prayers than from food and physical comfort. She cried almost every evening as she tried to sleep, but more because she knew she could not change her father's mind about her

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religion than because she missed the comforts of the palace. Her faith never waivered.

Throughout Armenia, everyone talked about Princess Sandoukht and her imprisonment. Those who were not Christians became very curious about the new religion that had changed the princess so much that she disobeyed the king himself, her own father. Many more people came to the Christians' meetings, and many more were converted. The pagan priests grew anxious that they might gradually lose their power and wealth if this religion continued to spread. The priests complained to the king.

"These Christians call their Christ the King of Man," the clever priests told King Sanadruk. "Now that your own daughter defies you and chooses to go to prison for her King, the Armenian people are saying that this King must be very powerful indeed."

The king became livid with anger. "Fetch this rebellious woman!" he roared at the palace guards.

"And you," he shouted, poking the chief priest of the goddess Anahit in the chest. "You take your friends and get out of here. Go count your gold pieces, polish your statues!"

The startled priests backed away from the king, frightened. No one had ever dared to talk to them in such language.

"Get out, get out!" he bellowed, just as Princess Sandoukht was brought into his presence.

King Sanadruk was shocked at his daughter's appearance. Her once-beautiful robes were tattered and

filthy. Her face was thin and haggard. Her dark eyes, however, seemed more lovely than ever. For an instant he wanted to run to his little girl—the same little girl who, since his wife's death, would never sleep at night until she knew he was safely in bed. He wanted so much to embrace her; to see her eyes shine with happiness again. Then he remembered how she herself had betrayed him and made him look foolish to the priests and to the people of Armenia. He ordered the guards to lead her to a table near his throne, then sent the guards away.

As Sandoukht watched, the king placed a crown and a sword on the table.

"The choice is yours," her father told her. "Either you give up this idle religion and sit by my side as ruler of Armenia, or you choose death by the sword."

Princess Sandoukht looked up at him. She felt very tired. Her months of imprisonment had seemed like years. She felt far, far older than this man who stood before her.

When she finally spoke, her voice seemed very weak. "Father, I wish I could make you understand that I am no less a faithful daughter to you because of my new religion. Being a Christian has even made me understand you far better than I ever did before. Christ did not condemn those who put him to death, but prayed for God to forgive them because they did not realize that he had come to help everyone, and wished them no harm."

"Are you trying to say that I don't understand

you?" the king began to shake with his fury. "Choose, child!"

The princess lowered her eyes. She stood there for a minute, completely motionless and silent.

"Choose!" the king bellowed.

Princess Sandoukht slowly raised her hand and reached out toward the table. She first touched the crown. Her fingers moved slowly over the cold metal, the smooth precious stones. Her hand dropped to her side again. She hesitated, then again raised her hand.

The king watched with disbelief as she lifted the heavy sword and handed it to him. He felt as if he himself had been stabbed.

Princess Sandoukht became the first Armenian martyr. She was the first Christian to lose her life in Armenia for her faith. Until modern times, many Armenian women have equalled Sandoukht's devotion to her religion. The fact that the first Christian to die for her faith was a woman, and that many other women martyrs followed her, has given Armenian women the strength to cling to their beliefs in times of national and personal crisis.

After St. Sandoukht's death, King Sanadruk wanted to rid Armenia of the religion that had made his own daughter choose death. He ordered that all Christians should be killed, including his sister, Vogouhe.

Another of Christ's twelve Apostles, St. Bartholo-

#### The Conversion of Armenia to Christianity

mew, had come to the northern part of Armenia to spread Christ's teachings in that region. Both St. Bartholomew and St. Thaddeus were also martyred by King Sanadruk's soldiers.

Because the Christian church in Armenia was founded by two of Christ's Apostles, it is called the Armenian Apostolic Church.

### Chapter V

# THE STORY OF ST. GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR [Krikor Loosavorich]

RING Trdat of Armenia, who was crowned in 287 A.D., was an unusual king. Very tall and handsome, he was also known for his great strength. Left fatherless at an early age, he was raised and educated in Rome. Trained in the military arts, he developed considerable self-control, following the Roman example.

Trdat's physical power became legendary. It was said that he once swam across the Euphrates River, wearing all his heavy armor, to join his comrades on the other side. On another occasion, he saved the life of the Roman general, Luscinius, by standing at the entrance to the leader's tent and single-handedly fighting off at least a dozen assailants. He was armed only with a sword.

When Trdat's father, King Khosrov I, had been ruler of Armenia, the Parthian kings of Persia, called the Arsacid dynasty or family, were overthrown. A new family of rulers known as the Sassanians seized power. Their leader, Ardashir I, became king. He thought that the Parthian rulers who had been in power since the time of Tigran the Great had adopted too many Greek and Roman customs. He believed that since the Romans

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were their enemies, it was wrong to embrace the Roman gods and abandon the old gods who had protected Persia. He wanted everyone to return to the old Persian customs and traditions, including the Zoroastrian religion. He thought everyone should worship Ahura Mazda again. His ideals inspired the Persian people and made Persia strong again.

Ardashir sought to make Persia even stronger. He worried about the country's unfriendly neighbors, but most of all about Armenia, because King Khosrov was a cousin of the Parthian kings whom he had chased out of Persia. He was afraid that Khosrov might try to help his cousins regain power, so he decided to wage war against Armenia before this could happen. Ardashir also wanted to chase Armenia's ally, Rome, out of Asia. Although Ardashir's army was strong, he could not defeat the combined Armenian and Roman armies.

Ardashir did not give up. The best way to solve his problem, he thought, was to have King Khosrov killed, then march into Armenia with his army. He sent a cousin of Khosrov's, named Anak, to Armenia with his wife and children to carry out this plan.

One day while they were out hunting together, Prince Anak killed King Khosrov. As he was fleeing the country with his family, he was caught and killed by the angry Armenians. Only one member of his family, a son, survived.

According to many early historians, the boy, named Gregory or Krikor, was taken by a Christian relative to the city of Caesarea in the Roman territory of



Relic of the Right Hand of St. Gregory the Illuminator, from the collections of the Armenian Catholicosate at Antelias.

Cappadocia. There were many Christians there, as well as many Armenians.

#### The Young Christian

Krikor was a very thoughtful child. Although he enjoyed the company of other children, he also loved to take long, solitary walks in the green hills around Caesarea. In the spring, when the cherry and apricot trees in the orchards around the city were in bloom and the grapevines in the vineyards were pushing forth their first pale green shoots, he would sit among the plants and imagine he could hear the sap running in their veins. As he grew older, he came to love the rough, rocky slopes of nearby Mt. Argaeus best of all. When he wandered on the mountainside, with the wind blowing into his face, he felt as if he, too, were a part of God's marvelous world of creation. He thought about Christ in the Wilderness, and realized that when He was away from the cities of Palestine, He must have felt much closer to God.

Krikor would return from these hikes brimming with excitement and energy, his face almost burning with radiance. All who saw him could not help but be drawn to this dark, slender young man who spoke with such enthusiasm that whatever he said seemed fascinating.

Krikor was very devoted to his studies, and became very learned, but he still liked to spend time with the simple Armenian shepherds and peasants he would meet on his walks. He loved them for their very simplicity. He was saddened, however, by the thought that they did not know the inner peace and joy that his Christian faith, shared with his foster parents, brought to him. The peasants were constantly afraid of making their gods angry. The farmers were afraid an evil spirit would harm their crops. The shepherds were afraid some naughty god would carry off a stray lamb.

Krikor wished more than anything that someday he could free all of Armenia from these superstitions that made the people slaves to their fear of the gods. He felt ashamed, too, that his father had killed the Armenian king, and made the Armenian people slaves to another master—the Persian king.

When Krikor grew up, he married a young Christian woman from a noble family. They had two sons, Vertanes and Aristakes. As their children matured, Krikor and his wife decided to live separately so each could pursue their Christian beliefs and serve God to the fullest. Krikor went to Armenia, where he began to preach the Christian faith. Moved by the strength, or fervor, of his belief, the people to whom he preached were very impressed. He made many converts.

### Imprisonment

While Krikor was preaching throughout Armenia, King Trdat and the Roman army had defeated the Persians, and Trdat was crowned ruler of Armenia. Because Trdat had been brought up among the Romans, he shared the Roman nobility's dislike of Christians. He felt that the gods had kept him from ruling so long

#### The Story of St. Gregory the Illuminator

because there were too many Christians in Armenia. He issued a proclamation stating that Christians were to be arrested. Among those brought before him was Krikor. When he learned that this Christian preacher was the son of his father's assassin, he ordered that Krikor be thrown into an underground pit at the fortress of Artaxata.

For thirteen years Krikor remained in his underground prison. He would never have survived were it not for the kindness of a widow, who secretly brought him food and water and lowered them down to him on a rope. Krikor, who was so fond of the company of his fellow man, at first felt lonely. When he did not choose to be alone, his solitude was not so pleasant. He passed the time praying, thinking about his childhood and his own children, and of the many kind people whom he had met in his travels. He began to feel even closer to God, just as he did as a youth when he wandered in the countryside around Caesarea, and he no longer felt lonely.

#### The King's Madness

King Trdat continued to have Christians arrested. Those who would not renounce their religion were either put to death or forced to leave Armenia. Among the martyrs was a Christian girl, Hripsime, who was so beautiful that the king insisted on having her as his wife. She repeatedly refused. Finally King Trdat grew so angry that he had her executed along with the other women Christians who lived with her.

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After Hripsime's death, King Trdat began to feel very guilty. He began to wonder whether he was right in having so many people killed just because of their religion. These Christians hurt no one, he thought. His beliefs in the old gods were so much a part of him, however, that he started to be afraid the gods would punish him for these thoughts. This inner struggle between old and new ideas soon changed the king's whole way of thinking. He began to suffer from spells of madness. At such times, he imagined that he was a wild boar. He would suddenly stand up, snort and bellow like a boar, and run off into the woods. He would often disappear for days at a time. Because he was so strong, the people of Armenia were afraid of him.

The periods of madness became more and more frequent, and his sister was forced to rule in his place. Every possible cure was tried. The Armenians offered the richest sacrifices and offerings to the gods, praying to Anahit, Ahramazd, and all the other deities to cure their monarch. The king grew steadily worse.

At last Trdat's sister remembered Krikor. She recalled that the Christians used to say that he could perform miracles. She finally convinced her brother that if this man's faith were so strong that he could survive for more than a decade in a pit in the ground, perhaps his God could help.

### Succor for the King

Krikor was lifted out of the pit and brought before the king. The man had grown so thin that Trdat could not imagine how he had the strength even to stand up. Krikor seemed to be made of air—or rather, of fire. King Trdat was fascinated by the sight of him.

Krikor slowly walked toward the king. Nobles and their wives, soldiers and servants, everyone who was in the palace crowded into the room, eager to see what would happen. Krikor stopped when he was only three feet away from Trdat. Then he turned toward the crowd.

"Leave us," he commanded.

The king nodded his agreement.

The courtiers, in their brightly colored velvet and silk gowns and robes, turned and left the room, followed by the more plainly-clad servants. The king's bodyguards hesitated.

"Go," the king ordered. "This man is too weak to do me harm."

Trdat silently wondered how Krikor had survived his imprisonment. He himself felt weak. The burden of despair about his own future had weighed so heavily upon him. "Tell me," he at last asked Krikor, "where did you find the strength to go on living?"

"In Christ and in God," Krikor replied. He looked down at the massive king, who sat slumped over in his throne. "What troubles you so much, Your Majesty? I was once deeply troubled by my father's evil deed. I felt that as the son of Anak, I was also responsible for the Persian conquest and occupation of our land. When you returned to Armenia and ascended to the throne, I felt as if a great burden had been lifted from my heart. Christ taught his followers that those who sincerely repent of their crimes will be forgiven and saved. Can you forgive the sin of my father?" Krikor reached out and touched the king's hand.

Trdat was deeply moved by Krikor's words. He had been so involved in his own problems. He was touched that the saint had such strong feelings for the Armenian people. "Tell me, what happened to you after your father's death?"

Krikor began to tell the king about his childhood in Caesarea, about his Christian upbringing, and his youthful dream. When he told King Trdat about his desire to convert the Armenians to Christianity to free the Armenian people from their fears and superstitions, the king sighed.

"Your Majesty," Krikor began gently, "It is time for you to tell me what bothers you so much that even when you are well you are silent and thoughtful."

Impressed by the range of the saint's understanding, and by the fact that he bore him no ill will for his imprisonment, Trdat relaxed. For the first time he spoke about his guilt and uncontrollable feelings. He told Krikor how the image of the beautiful, innocent Hripsime appeared before him each time he closed his eyes; how the blood of the slaughtered Christians filled his dreams.

The two men remained alone for hours. Outside the chamber, the palace guards and nobles waited impatiently. At last the two men emerged, so deeply involved in their own conversation that they hardly noticed anyone else. For days King Trdat spent most of his time with Krikor.

At the end of a week, Trdat summoned the nobles of Armenia. The nobles were shocked. The king appeared to be his old self again. They were even more shocked by the king's announcement that he had accepted the Christian faith.

"I want all of you, and your families, to be instructed in the Christian teachings. As you can see, my health has been restored. This miracle is the result of my recognizing the evil in my past actions and begging the one true God for forgiveness."

Krikor had indeed worked a miracle. Henceforth, the king declared, Christians were no longer to be persecuted, but honored instead. Christianity was to be the official religion of Armenia. The year was 301 A.D.

Throughout the rest of the ancient world, Christians were being killed because of their religion. Still their numbers increased. News of the events in Armenia gave many the strength to cling to their faith.

### Spreading the Faith

After Trdat issued his proclamation, Krikor journeyed to Caesarea where he was ordained a priest and consecrated as a bishop by the Bishop Leontius. He then returned to Armenia, where he resumed the task of converting the people, this time with the king's blessing. At the head of an army, he traveled through Armenia, chasing the pagan priests from their temples and shattering the idols. On the sites of many of these temples, churches were built.



The Cathedral of Etchmiadzin as it appears today.

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#### The Story of St. Gregory the Illuminator

One night, Krikor had an inspiring vision. He dreamed he saw Christ descending to earth near the ancient city of Vagharshabad, and then four crosses appeared. He immediately understood the meaning of this vision. On the site of the largest cross, he had the great cathedral *Etchmiadzin*<sup>\*</sup> constructed. On the sites of the other three crosses, chapels named after Saints Hripsime, Gayane, and Mariane were built.

All of the people of Armenia helped to build the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin. The king, so it is said, even carried heavy stones all the way from Mt. Ararat. King Trdat's sister and wife carried soil used in the construction in their aprons.

St. Krikor, also known as St. Gregory the Illuminator, was made the first Catholicos of the Armenian Church. He proved an excellent administrator. He divided Armenia into various Dioceses, with a Bishop at the head of each provincial division. He established schools for prospective priests, and encouraged the sons of former pagan priests to enter the priesthood.

St. Krikor did not think only of Armenia. He also made a major contribution to the expansion of Christianity in Georgia, and eventually sent his grandson, Gregorius, to Georgia to head the Diocese there.

Prior to his death, St. Krikor retired from his position as head of the Armenian Church and retired to a life of solitude as a monk in the mountains of

<sup>\*</sup>Meaning, 'the place where the only-begotten descended'.

Armenia. His son, Aristakes, became the second Catholicos.

As King Trdat and St. Krikor had planned the construction of churches throughout Armenia, they seemed to foresee their country's future. Each church was built with walls and fortifications around it, as if they knew that future generations of Armenians were destined to have to fight to protect their faith. The walls also served to unite the religion with the concept that it must be defended at all costs. This idea, more than any other, has since determined the course of the history of Armenia.

# Chapter VI

# MESROB MASHTOTS

FTER Armenia had become a Christian state, it was still difficult for the priests and bishops to talk to the people about the teachings of Christ. Although the Armenian nobles often spoke Greek or Persian, the villagers and ordinary city dwellers spoke only Armenian. There was no Armenian alphabet, so anyone who wanted to write even a letter had to do so in Greek or Persian.

When the priests and monks tried to discuss Christianity with the people, they had to read the Bible in either Greek or Syriac, and then retell the story of Christ in their own words in Armenian. During church services, one priest would read the Bible in Greek or Syriac, and another would translate it at the same time into Armenian so the people could understand. This was very difficult, since there were not enough educated priests to translate the words of Christ properly in each church throughout Armenia.

In the late fourth century, Armenia was divided in two by the Greek ruler of the eastern Roman Empire, also called the Byzantine Empire, and the Persian king. Shortly afterwards, Saint Sahak was elected Catholicos. He was a descendant of St. Gregory the Illuminator, and was very interested in culture. He personally made many copies of the Bible by hand. Saint Sahak was



Statue of Mesrob Mashtots and a student, outside the Madenataran Manuscript Repository, Yerevan.

#### Mesrob Mashtots

troubled by the knowledge that the people in Armenia could not read and write their own language because there was no Armenian alphabet. He felt disturbed most of all because the Bible had to be translated for them, and they could not read first-hand about the miracles which Christ had performed.

Saint Sahak's feelings were shared by the king of Armenia, Vramshapuh, a very good and wise ruler. The two leaders decided to entrust the task of creating an Armenian alphabet to a monk, Mesrob Mashtots, who was a well-known scholar. He had served as the king's secretary until 394 A.D., when he decided to become a monk. Mesrob was a very well-educated person who had taught many Armenians about the word of God. He himself had felt a great need for making the Bible directly available to the people.

Catholicos Sahak summoned Mesrob to Vagharshabad, and discussed this problem. They reviewed the work of a monk known as Daniel the Syrian. This monk had devised an Armenian alphabet which at first seemed very good. For two years this alphabet was taught to students in Armenia, but Mesrob then began to realize that it was not good enough. Again he met with Saint Sahak.

"There are still many words in our language that cannot be written with these twenty-two letters!" Mesrob sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"Mesrob, I want you to continue this work," the Catholicos told him.

"This Daniel the Syrian is a very learned man. I

am not sure, Your Holiness, that my knowledge is equal to the task."

The Catholicos stood up, and walked over to St. Mesrob, then gently touched his shoulder. "Do not worry," he reassured him. "You know Armenian, Greek, Syriac, and Persian fluently. Who could be better qualified? And the spirit of the Lord will sustain you. Although you may feel that you are confined in a pit of the spirit like the pit in which St. Gregory was imprisoned, such trials do not last forever."

Mesrob looked up at the Catholicos, who once had to face the possibility of death by traveling to the Persian court. The Persian King of Kings had not approved of Sahak's election to the post of Catholicos, and had summoned the new head of the Armenian Church to his presence. Many Armenian priests had feared that their leader would not return alive, and had advised against the journey. Sahak succeeded in so impressing the Persian monarch that he had gained not only his confidence, but also his support.

The scholar priest felt ashamed that he himself had waivered, even for an instant, in the strength of his faith. He rose to his feet with a renewed determination to serve his people and his church. As his eyes met those of the Catholicos, Mesrob knew that Saint Sahak had understood his feelings completely. They both smiled.

"I was thinking of traveling to the city of Amida, then to Edessa, with my students, to consult other scholars about this problem. We will leave as soon as possible."

#### Mesrob Mashtots

"May God bring success to your efforts and hasten your return," the Catholicos told him as he departed.

#### The Missing Letters

St. Mesrob went on a fruitless journey from one center of learning to another in the Middle East, searching for someone with sufficient knowledge of Armenian to help him create letters to represent the sounds missing from Daniel the Syrian's alphabet. He himself worked for many months on the task from dawn until he would fall asleep over his work and his lamp would burn itself out at night. He used his knowledge of other languages well, and slowly the new alphabet took shape. He created a phonetic alphabet one in which each symbol represents one sound, and each sound was represented by one letter.

Mesrob worried a great deal. There were still a few sounds he found difficult to represent. Were they combinations of sounds, he wondered, or separate sounds in themselves? He labored for weeks and weeks over these difficult letters, studying, designing, redesigning, and praying.

Again one night he fell asleep over his work. At last he roused himself and decided to go to bed. He had been working on the alphabet for so long that all he saw when he closed his eyes were letters. They seemed to dance before his eyes, separating into long rows, then closing their ranks; sliding into one long line, then spiraling into a circle. He forced himself to think of the village of Hatzig in the province of Taron where he had been born. He remembered the peasants bowing with respect before his family as they would pass through the streets. He recalled the many times he would slip out of his home to attend the peasants' festivals and watch them sing and dance in the street. They would sing ancient songs about the pagan kings and gods of Armenia, and, clapping their hands, display their prowess at dancing. He loved the simple people of Armenia, and wanted to bring the Bible to them in their own language so that Christ would be as close to them as the old pagan deities had been.

As St. Mesrob finally slept, he saw his letters again. This time a hand was writing them on a rock—but the hand filled in the missing letters. They were perfect! The alphabet was completed!

Mesrob awoke with a start and thanked God for this miraculous inspiration as he wrote out the entire Armenian alphabet. Before returning to Vagharshabad, he stopped in the city of Samasota to see an expert on hand-drawn letters named Rufinus. St. Mesrob showed him the thirty-six letter alphabet. Rufinus drew the letters again, demonstrating how to make them more easily read and more graceful in appearance.

St. Mesrob rushed back to Vagharshabad and excitedly showed the Armenian alphabet to St. Sahak.

"Any Armenian word can be written with these letters!" St. Mesrob exclaimed.

The two men sat for hours. St. Sahak thought of the most difficult Armenian words. St. Mesrob was able



Calligraphy by Minas Minasian.

The Armenian alphabet.

to write each word.

"This alphabet is a masterpiece," the Catholicos at last declared.

### An Important Task

SS. Sahak and Mesrob at once began the task of translating the Bible into Armenian. Many copies of this translation were made by the students to whom St. Mesrob taught the new alphabet. Each person who learned to write the thirty-six Armenian letters taught them to someone else. Together with the greatest scholars of Armenia, St. Mesrob worked at translating all the writings about Christianity by the saints and learned bishops into their native language. New schools were established at all the monasteries in the eastern part of Armenia. Armenians at last were able to learn to write their own language.

When St. Mesrob began teaching Armenian to the people in western Armenia, the Greek governor objected.

"We want only the Greek language taught in our schools," he insisted. "Why would anyone want to read Armenian?"

St. Mesrob consulted St. Sahak on this matter. They decided that St. Mesrob should travel to Constantinople to ask the emperor of the eastern Roman Empire, Theodosius I, for special permission to teach the new alphabet in the schools in the western part of Armenia. Soon, throughout Armenia, Armenians were able to read and write their own language. The alphabet was a great success.

#### Mesrob Mashtots

At the monasteries, under the direction of SS. Sahak and Mesrob, many ancient Greek manuscripts of great value which are still read today were also translated into Armenian. This work has proven very important to the rest of the world, since some of the Greek originals have been destroyed. Without the Armenian translations, the writings of many wise men who lived in ancient times would have been lost to the world forever.

Now that they were able to write in their own language, many Armenian scholars began to write original books in Armenian. What we today call the Golden Age of Armenian Literature had begun. Among the most famous of these writers was Movses Khorenatsi, whose history of the Armenian people has preserved many facts, customs, folk tales and poems which are very important to Armenians all over the world since they tell us much about the cultural past of the nation.

Without the efforts of St. Mesrob, the future of the Armenian language would have been very uncertain. As many Armenians say today, the thirty-six letters of the Armenian alphabet formed the most powerful stronghold of Armenian identity. They have been compared to an army that has defended the Armenian national identity for over 1,500 years.

The story is told of an Armenian mother who, dying under the whips of the Turks while holding her newborn child, wrote the Armenian alphabet in the desert sand so that the vision of the Armenian letters would never be lost.
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A famous poem by the modern Armenian poetess Sylva Gaboudikian stresses the importance of the native language:

Behold, my son, wherever you may be Wherever you may wander under the moon Should you erase your mother from memory Do not forget your mother tongue.

One of the most important figures in the preservation of the Armenian national heritage, Mesrob Mashtots is honored by Armenians throughout the world. The Madenataran manuscript repository in Yerevan is probably the largest edifice built in his memory, and countless Armenian churches and schools in several countries are named after him.

# Chapter VII

# ST. VARTAN AND THE BATTLE OF VARTANANTZ

HIS, too, shall be our fate," said Vassak Siuni as he, along with nine other Armenian nobles, watched while a dozen Christian nobles from Georgia were led out into the desert by a company of Persian soldiers. The Armenians had been taken to a high walkway outside the palace of the Persian king, Yazdegerd II in Ctesiphon, so they could see what happened to the Georgians.

"Whatever shall we do?" another noble asked out loud. The others were all asking themselves the same question.

"I, for one, would rather die than bow down to the Persian firegod, Ahura Mazda," said Vartan Mamigonian. The others all fell silent when he spoke. They respected him very much. He was the grandson of the great Catholicos Sahak, who had died the same year that Yazdegerd had become king, 439 A.D. The previous king of Persia had made Vartan Commanderin-Chief of the small Armenian army in order to please his grandfather. Like St. Sahak, he always wanted to do whatever he felt was right, no matter what the consequences.

"But Vartan," replied Vassak, who had been made the Governor, or *marzpan*, of Armenia by the king,



Photo by Boghos Boghosian.

Statue of Vartan Mamogonian by Yervant Kochar, in Yerevan.

"we'll be killed or driven into the desert just like these Georgians if we don't worship Ahura Mazda tomorrow morning with the king. What good will we be to Armenia when we are dead?"

"The worst part is that tomorrow is Easter Sunday," a short, stocky noble from the north of Armenia added. "This Persian king is very cruel to demand that we turn against Christ and our Christian religion on the very day of His Resurrection. If we bow to the fire god tomorrow, we will bow to the fires of Hell forever. I agree with Vartan. Death is better."

"If we should all be put to death, who will lead our army? Who will watch over our wives and children? Who will protect our churches?" another demanded.

Vassak again spoke. Well-educated and from a good family, he had shown promise as one of the future leaders of Armenia. In recent months, however, many Armenians said he had been a little too eager to please their Persian masters. "If Christ knows that in our hearts we have not turned away from Him, I think He would not mind if we bow to Ahura Mazda just once to save ourselves. That way we can return home to Armenia and prepare to resist if these Persians try to force their religion on us. We can raise a larger army. We can organize ourselves," Vassak insisted.

"Perhaps we can appeal to the Roman Emperor for help," the stocky man suggested. "The Emperor would not desert fellow-Christians."

"If we pretend to accept their religion," Vassak continued, "we can return home quickly. It should not

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be difficult to fool these Persians."

"Sometimes I wonder whether you are fooling the Persians or us," a thin, dark man who had so far remained silent suddenly said. Startled, the others turned to look at him as he leaned his tall frame against an archway. "Power has changed you, Vassak—you who used to talk about justice and the need to treat the peasants in a Christian way when they broke the laws of the land."

Vassak laughed, but his laughter was forced. "You will see from my deeds what Armenia means to me. Power *has* changed me. I have learned that sometimes in order to survive, we must bend our ideals a little."

But how far must we bend? Vartan asked himself as they were taken back to their quarters by the Persian guards.

#### The Old Religion

The Persian king Yazdegerd II, who awaited the Armenians at dawn on Easter Sunday, had decided that in order to make the Persian Empire stronger, it was necessary to have all its people follow only one religion. Like his ancestor, Sapor, he felt that the old Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, or Mazdaeism, in which the god Ahura Mazda was worshipped, was the best religion. In 448 A.D., he had issued an edict commanding all to accept Zoroastrianism. In the beginning of 449, he had sent one of his most trusted men to Armenia to oversee that country's conversion to his religion. This man had placed the Armenian Church under the control of the Persian ruler, appointed a Persian priest as Chief Justice of Armenia, and made Vassak the governor. The Persians thought Vassak would be so pleased with his new powers that he would not risk losing his position by disobeying the orders of the Persian king.

The leaders of the Armenian Church had already stressed their loyalty to the Christian faith. In an official statement sent in the form of a letter to the Persian king, they declared:

From this confession none can ever shake us, neither angels nor men, neither sword, fire, water, nor any bitter tortures. . . . If you choose to leave us in the free exercise of this faith, we on our part will exchange you for no other lord on earth; neither, however, will we own in heaven any other Lord than Jesus Christ only, besides whom there is no God.

Yazdegerd had been so angered by these words that he had summoned the ten nobles to his magnificent capital city of Ctesiphon. The nobles had finally decided to pretend to worship the fire god. The Persian king was so pleased that he gave them rich gifts, and sent them back to Armenia with troops and 700 Zoroastrian priests who were to instruct the people in the pagan religion.

The Armenian people were very upset to see these priests, or *magi*, try to close down their churches, but they were at first afraid to resist. Finally there was a confrontation. The people in the village of Angegh in central Armenia, under the leadership of their priest, Ghevond Yerets, fought with a group of Persians one Sunday. Armed only with sticks and stones, they forced the *magi* and their followers out of the church and held mass all day. Christians rushed to the church to attend the services.

The chief priest, called a *mokbed* in Persian, decided the Armenians would not give up their Christian religion. Vassak, however, hoping that Yazdegerd would be pleased, brought troops from his native province of Siunik to discourage the people from rebelling again. As Governor, he was afraid he would be put into prison or would lose power if the king thought he could not control the people.

The bishops then called a meeting of clergy and nobles. They learned that Vartan had only pretended to have accepted Mazdaeism. He joined them in their decision that the Persians must be driven out of the country by force.

Vartan's men soon captured or killed many Persian soldiers. They also arrested Vassak, who promised them he would support the Armenians, and was released. Many fire temples were destroyed. Vartan was at his headquarters when he was warned by the Christians who lived to the north, called the Albanians, that the Persians were about to attack. He led his army against them and won a great victory. The Albanians who had been forced to fight in the Persian army deserted and joined Vartan and his men.

While Vartan was away, Vassak had begun to attack his own Armenian people on the Ararat plain. Vassak thought that if he could thus convince them that it was better to pretend to be good Mazdeans, the Persians would leave them alone. He thought that as time passed, the Persians would relax their control of Armenia. The Armenians would one day be able to worship in their churches openly. The Persian king would be sure that Vassak was loyal. He hoped that one day the Persian king would make him king of Armenia, since there was no one left from the old family of kings.

#### Vassak's New Plan

Vartan returned to Artashat in thirty days, and forced Vassak to flee to his native province with his army. There was not enough food for his men in the mountains of Siunik. A few starved, while others grew very weak.

Sitting in his castle surrounded by the loyal members of his family, Vassak began to resent Vartan. He realized that without the Persians, the Armenians would choose Vartan to be their leader. He knew that the Persian king was very angry, and was bringing an army from the south to join with the army which he had left in northeastern Armenia for the winter. He decided to join this army.

Vassak then sent word to Yazdegerd. He told the Persian king that most of the Armenian people supported him, and that Vartan and his men represented a small minority of the people who were rebelling against Persian rule. There was no religious issue involved, he claimed. Vassak was sure Vartan would be defeated, and to prove his loyalty and that of the



Map of Armenia at the time of Vartan.

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Armenian people, he and his army would join the Persians in putting down this rebellion.

Since the Roman Emperor at Constantinople had already said that he could not help the Armenians, Vassak realized the struggle was hopeless. He thought if Vartan were defeated, the people would give up this stubborn resistance that had only brought them misfortune.

## The Battle of Avarair

After a forced march, Vartan brought his men to the plain of Ardaz, on the banks of the Tghmout River, near the village of Avarair. The Persian army was approaching on the opposite side of the river. In their multi-colored, glittering garments, the 300,000 men dazzled the Armenians with their splendor and number as they marched over the plain and set up their camp. There were elephants in great numbers with the Persian army. From the silks draped on their horses, Vartan recognized the "Immortals," a cavalry unit that had been given this name because whenever a man in its fighting force fell wounded, another would ride up to take his place from the reserves. The spectacle of this tremendous army was frightening. The forces of Zorastrianism were indeed powerful.

In the midst of the Persian army, Vartan saw Vassak, playing at being king among his men.

Vartan turned to address the Armenian army. He read to the soldiers from the Bible, and then told them, "He who has conceived that we wore our Christianity as one does his garments, now finds that he can no more divest us of it than he can of the color of our skin, and, let us so hope, never will be able to the end."

Many clergymen were present, among them the priest Ghevont Yerets, who had led the first rebellion against the Persian religion, and Catholicos Hovsep. With the permission of the Catholicos, Ghevont Yerets also spoke, pointing out that the Persians mentioned peace only with the plan of killing those who would not give up their Christian faith. He called upon the soldiers to think of the sacrifice of Christ in choosing death upon the cross, and, in like manner, to dedicate themselves to their Christian faith.

All those in the Armenian army who had not been baptised received this sacrament. All through the night, communion was given to the soldiers. Everyone prayed. At dawn, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated.

Mushgan, the commander-in-chief of the Persian forces, could not help but notice the presence of the Catholicos, the bishops, and priests. He was furious as he watched the morning religious services. "This Vassak is a liar," he remarked to his armor bearer. "Yazdegerd will be very interested to learn that these Armenians are rushing into battle with prayers on their lips and crosses in their hands."

The day was May 26, 451 A.D. When the last notes of the Liturgy had melted into silence, Vartan issued the call to battle. The Persians were waiting.

At first, the battle went well for the Persians. Mushgan was able to push back the left wing of the

#### St. Vartan and the Battle of Vartanantz

Armenian army, commanded by Vartan himself. Then Vartan took the offensive, pushed the Persians back across the river, chased off the Persian Immortals, and surrounded Vassak and his elephants. Mounted on a great white horse. Vartan fought bravely. His men were inspired by the sight of their leader in the front ranks. his horse rearing and charging as, sword in hand, he fought with no concern for his own safety. Vahan Ardzruni, commanding the right wing of the Armenian army, forced the Persian left wing to lose ground. In the hand-to-hand combat that followed, it was obvious that the greater size of the Persian army was to decide the battle. The Armenians fought in a frenzy. When darkness fell, bringing an end to the fighting, the dead were counted. 1,036 Armenians were killed, among them Vartan Mamigonian. 3,544 Persians fell on the battlefield. The Armenians had fought bravely and well.

# The Struggle Continues

The Battle of Avarair was but one in a series of battles fought by the Armenians to retain their religious freedom. Catholicos Hovsep and Ghevont Yerets were martyred in the following years. Vartan Mamigonian's nephew, Vahan, continued the struggle. Mushgan's army advanced into Armenia, and the Armenian army was scattered, but the spirit of the Armenian people was not crushed by this defeat. Guerrilla-style resistance continued under Vahan's leadership until, in 485 A.D., the Persian ruler Nikhor at last granted the Armenians religious freedom and made Vahan the Armenian marzpan.

Each year, Armenians throughout the world mark SS. Vartanantz Day. The Battle of Avarair has come to symbolize the struggle for freedom of conscience. The Vartanantz War does provide an excellent example of the spirit of endurance that characterizes the Armenian people, enabling them to survive thousands of years of war and persecution.

The heroes of the Battle of Avarair are among the most popular in Armenian history. A new statue of Vartan Mamigonian was recently unveiled in Yerevan. Many Armenian churches, including St. Vartan Cathedral in New York City and Sts. Vartanantz Church in New Jersey, have been named after the men who were willing to die for their convictions on the Ardaz Plain in 451 A.D.

# Chapter VIII

# ARMENIANS IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Ni Sahakian sat straight up in the chair at her desk. "Why, they don't even mention the Armenians in this book!" she exclaimed out loud. She slammed her history book shut. "Let me ask Hagop. He'll know."

Ani carried her history book with her to her brother's room down the hall. She was thirteen years old, and in the eighth grade. Her class at school had begun studying world history. This week they were studying about the late Roman Empire and the Middle Ages. Her brother, Hagop, was twenty-one, and a senior in college. He had decided to major in Armenian studies, and planned to go to graduate school. He wanted to be a professor.

"Hagop, look at this. I was reading in my history book about how the eastern Roman Empire and Persia were always fighting in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus. But the authors don't even mention Armenia. Where were the Armenians then? Look at this book." She handed him the history book, then sat down on the edge of his bed.

Hagop leaned back in the old-fashioned dentist's chair a friend had given him and paused to take off his glasses.

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"Well, for centuries, Ani, the Armenians were caught right in the middle. As a result of the struggle for power between the eastern Roman Empire, called the Byzantine Empire, and Persia, Armenia was finally divided in two in 387 A.D. Since Persia was more powerful at that time, the Persian king was to rule the larger eastern part.

"In eastern Armenia, the Persians allowed the Armenian kings to remain in power until 428 A.D., even though Armenia still was forced to pay homage to Persia. From 429 on, Armenia was ruled by *marzpans* chosen by the Persian king. Remember learning about that in Sunday School when you studied the life of St. Vartan?"

"That's right, Hagop. Vassak, the traitor, was a marzpan."

"Byzantine Armenia was ruled by military governors named by the emperors in Constantinople, then called Byzantium, and now called Istanbul by the Turks. Because the Roman Empire had also become a Christian state (in 313 A.D.), the Armenians felt they would be happier under Byzantine rule.

"Whenever the Persians tried to force the Armenians to give up Christianity and accept the Persian pagan religion, many Armenians would flee to the Byzantine half of Armenia. Some even went as far as Constantinople.

"In 591, after another war between Byzantium and Persia, the borders were again changed. Since the Byzantine Empire was then stronger, the boundary was



King Gagik Ardzruni of Aghtamar presents a model of the Church of the Holy Cross of Aghtamar, which he had built, to Christ. This bas relief is one of many encircling the Aghtamar Church, which was built between 915 and 921 A.D. The church is representative of the rebirth of Armenian architecture after the eighth century. Its ornamentation displays the wealth of sculpture in Armenia at a time when that art was condemned in the centers of the Byzantine Empire. moved to the east. Gradually the number of Armenians living in the western part of Armenia increased.

"Then, in the seventh century, the Arabs conquered Persia. The new Arab rulers, called the caliphs, began to fight against the Byzantine Empire. Many of their battles were fought in Armenia. The general who led the Byzantine army in the most important battle against the Arabs was an Armenian, named Vahram. This battle, fought in 636 A.D., was a total defeat for Byzantium. The Arabs then marched into Syria and Armenia. Western Armenia still was controlled by Byzantium.

#### Arab Rule

"Life in Armenia changed as rapidly as the Arab rulers. One would treat the Armenians kindly. The next would order that large numbers of people be killed. In the eighth century, when a group of leaders called the Abbasids seized power, conditions grew worse. Many of the nobles fled to the west with their families. They left behind their homes and their lands. Many other nobles were killed. Arab nobles moved in and took their places."

"But Hagop, what did the Armenian nobles do when they reached Byzantium?"

"Many settled in the capital and other large cities in Asia Minor. Some became merchants. Others rose to positions of great power in the government or army. Several emperors were even Armenian."

"How did the Armenians ever become that powerful?"

"Well, Ani, men became emperors in many ways. Sometimes they would marry into the emperor's family. Sometimes they would imprison or kill the previous emperor. The Emperor Heraclius I was of Armenian origin. He was descended from the Armenian Arsacid royal family. His dynasty continued in power from 610-711 A.D. During the ninth century, almost everyone in a position of power in Constantinople was Armenian, or part Armenian. Many famous scholars were Armenian, too. Of course in order to become emperor, one had to be a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, so Armenians who sought important positions changed their religion.

"The Byzantine army included countless Armenian officers and soldiers. The famous general, Narses, commanded the army during the reign of the Emperor Justinian. At the same time, there were sixteen other Armenian generals serving in the army."

"Did any of the Armenians who moved to Byzantium ever return to Armenia?" asked Ani.

"Very few, if any. The Armenian soldiers were usually sent away with their families, often to Italy or Greece. I guess the Byzantine rulers were afraid that if there were too many Armenian soldiers in Armenia, they might rebel.

"The large number of Armenians in the Byzantine army did bring about many changes in it. For example, since the Armenian officers were nobles, and the soldiers were common people, they behaved differently toward each other than did the Greek officers and

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soldiers. The Armenian commoners were supposed to place their lives and property at the disposal of the lords. The Armenian soldiers gave their officers blind obediance for this reason. This behavior soon spread throughout the entire army.

"During the ninth and tenth centuries, the Byzantine military governors in Greece were often Armenians. These men had several churches built in Greece. One or two of them that resemble churches in Armenia are still standing today. These churches had carvings depicting scenes from the Bible or the lives of the saints on the outside church walls. This was never done on native Greek churches."

# **Outpost of Culture**

"Hagop, what about art? Did the Armenians influence Byzantine books and art very much?"

"At one time, sculptors were not allowed to create statues in Byzantium because some of the Greek monks thought this form of art was not pleasing to God. They claimed sculptors were makers of idols, and were breaking one of the Ten Commandments. As a result, sculpture only continued to develop in the distant provinces along the borders of the Empire, especially in Armenia.

"Because people in the provinces didn't speak classical Greek, they began to write their literature in the spoken language of the times—what is called the *vernacular*. This had a very great influence on Byzantine literature and the arts as a whole. The use of Greek as it was actually spoken widened the range of subjects about which authors could write.

"And since Armenia had been in close contact with Persia and the east for centuries, many fresh forms of culture, especially legends and folk tales, came to Byzantium and the western world by way of Armenia."

"You said the Greek monks didn't like sculpture. Were there any other differences between the Greek and Armenian Churches?"

"Many differences, Ani. As a matter of fact, religious questions caused some of the major problems that the Armenians had with their western rulers.

"The Greeks looked on the Armenians as dissenters. They thought that the Armenians had changed the Christian faith and were wrong. So the Greek church leaders tried to force the Armenians to accept their beliefs. Many of the Byzantine emperors thought that if the Greek Church controlled the Armenian Church, then Armenia would be more closely tied to the empire. The existence of the separate Armenian Church made the Armenians feel more independent. This attitude annoyed the emperors very much. They didn't have the wisdom to understand that by weakening the Armenian nobles and trying to change their religion, they were weakening Armenia. When the Arabs and Turks invaded the Byzantine Empire, there was little resistance on the eastern frontier in Armenia. If they had stationed Armenian soldiers in Armenia, and allowed the nobles and Armenian Church greater freedom, Armenia would have served as a strong



A Khatchkar, or stone cross, from Old Julfa, now in the collections at Etchmiadzin in Armenia.

outpost to drive off invaders. Who knows, maybe ... "

"Ani, Hagop, dinner's ready." Their mother's voice interrupted them. "Come on downstairs."

Hagop continued, "Maybe the Turks would never have been able to conquer Asia Minor at all. Maybe Armenia would still exist today.

"Because the emperors were so concerned about increasing their own power temporarily, they brought about their own ruin. They just couldn't fight off the Turks. And the Armenians grew tired of being told what to believe and what not to believe, and they grew angry at seeing their kings and nobles killed."

"Come on, Hagop, let's go downstairs. We can talk later. Can you tell me more about the Turks?"

"Sure, Ani." Hagop loved to discuss Armenian history. He was very pleased that his sister finally was taking an interest in his favorite subject, and also felt proud that he had been able to answer all her questions.

# **Chapter IX**

# THE ROLE OF THE ARMENIANS IN THE CRUSADES

GEORGE Sahakian looked with pride at his two children as they walked into the kitchen and sat down for dinner. Both were good students, had many friends, and had become very kind and considerate people, always ready to help others. He and his wife, Sirarpi, were both college graduates, and wanted their children to be interested in studying, but they did not want to force them. They always tried to provide encouragement, and had saved money ever since they were married for their children's education. They had both worked their way through college, and wanted to enable their children to devote a little more time to studying and a little less to earning their tuition money than they had been able to do.

The Sahakians had been pleasantly surprised when Hagop had decided to major in Armenian studies. Both the elder Sahakians had been born in the United States of immigrant parents. They had spoken Armenian at home as children, but they always wished they were able to read and write Armenian.

Now that Hagop was bringing home dozens of books on Armenian history and culture, the Sahakians were reading and learning with their son. This common interest had brought the family closer together. Hagop was even helping them to improve their pronunciation of spoken Armenian.

"Here, Ani, have some meat," Mr. Sahakian said, passing her the platter of roast beef. "What were you two talking about all this time?"

"The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire," Ani said proudly as she spread her napkin on her lap. "We're learning about ancient and medieval history in school. I was reading about how the Roman Empire was divided. The authors didn't even mention the Armenians when they were discussing the eastern part of the Empire and Asia Minor. So I asked Hagop what happened to the Armenians during that time.

"Please pass the pilaf."

"Mom, this roast beef is perfect. Nice and rare," Hagop remarked.

"Before we came downstairs, I was telling Ani that the Byzantine emperors were wrong in trying to control Armenia by weakening her." Hagop had resumed his history lesson.

"And what about the Crusades?" Mrs. Sahakian reminded them. "The Christian Greeks of the Byzantine Empire and the European Crusaders who wanted to free the Holy Land from the Turks hurt each other almost as much as the Turks did. The Armenians wound up right at the center of the disputes.

"More salad, Hagop?"

"Thanks."

"Well, what happened during the Crusades?" Ani asked.

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Map of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia.

"The Armenians really became involved because their lands in Armenia had been seized by Byzantium. The emperors would offer protection to the Armenian lords in return for their land in Armenia. Officially, the emperors would exchange a plot of land in central Asia Minor for the Armenians' land in Armenia. The last Armenian king of the famous Bagratid family, King Gagik II, was forced to retire and was given some land near Caesarea in 1045 A.D. Caesarea was where St. Gregory the Illuminator grew up, remember?

# An Old Dispute

"Because the Greek and Armenian Churches were different, and members of each church thought the others were wrong, the Greeks tried to force the Armenians to give up their form of the Christian faith. The Armenians didn't want to. For hundreds of years, the church leaders argued about which Christian beliefs were right. Much ill feeling arose because of these disputes.

"This, in turn, led to rivalry between the Greek and Armenian nobles. As a result, several Armenian kings were put to death, among them King Gagik II, and his sons.

"At this time, Ani, a new era in Armenian history was about to begin. By the end of the eleventh century, many Armenians had settled in the coastal area of eastern Asia Minor along the Mediterranean Sea in the region called Cilicia, or *Giligia* in Armenian. There weren't many Greeks living there, since most of the inhabitants had been killed or chased away by the Seljuk Turkish invaders from Central Asia.

"Among the Armenian nobles who had settled with Gagik II in his new domain near Caesarea was a prince by the name of Roupen. Angered by Gagik's murder, Roupen gathered a number of Armenians who were willing to rebel against Greek rule. Since Byzantium had sought to repopulate Cilicia with Armenians fleeing from the Turks, Roupen considered Cilicia the ideal place for a new Armenia.

# A Brave Course

"Roupen and his followers moved into the mountains of northwestern Cilicia, from where they could defy the authority of the Greeks. He then declared independence from Byzantium.

"Constantine I, his son, succeeded in enlarging the new Armenian state. Byzantium was, of course, upset by the rebellious Armenians, and had planned to send an army to defeat them, when the European Crusaders, led by Godfrey of Bouillon, arrived in Cilicia. Estimated at 500,000 in number, the Crusaders army had just freed Palestine from the Arab and Turkish yoke.

"The Armenians as well as the Greeks and other Christians of the east at first eagerly welcomed the Crusaders. They looked upon the western armies as saviors who would free Christian pilgrims to the Holy Places from harassment by the conquering Turkish armies.

"When the Armenians learned that the Europeans planned to set up independent states in Palestine, Syria, The Role of the Armenians in the Crusades

and eastern Asia Minor, Constantine and his followers decided that the Crusaders would be ideal allies. Crusaders states to the east of Cilicia would act as a buffer zone between Cilicia and the Turkish advances from Asia. The Armenians also thought that Byzantium would be less inclined to attack them openly if they sealed an alliance with the Europeans.

"The Crusaders were delighted by the friendly reception given to them by the Armenians, who supplied them with much-needed food, men familiar with the terrain, horses, and arms. Without this aid the Crusaders might not have been able to conquer western Syria.

"To cement this new alliance, as was the custom, the Count of Edessa married Constantine's daughter, and Baldwin, Godfrey's brother, wed Constantine's niece. Constantine was given the title of *Comes* in addition to his Armenian title, *Baron*.

"When Constantine's son, Thoros I came into power, the Crusaders helped him to expand his territory. The Turkish hordes from Central Asia began to move into Cilicia from the northeast, and for many years, Thoros was forced to concentrate on safeguarding his realm from the Turks.

"Thoros' successor, his brother Leo I, invaded the Adana plain and captured the cities of Adana, Mamestia, and Tarsus. He then marched on toward the Mediterranean coast.

"By this time, relations between the Armenians and the Crusaders had become strained."



This page from an Armenian manuscript is representative of the work of the artist Thoros Roslin during the Golden Age of the Armenian Miniature.

"Why, Hagop?" Ani interrupted.

"Because they were no longer merely allies. They had become rivals. The Armenians were disappointed because although they had given so much aid to the Crusaders, the Crusaders had not really helped them at all. They even began to dispute ownership of certain fortresses and pieces of land.

"When Byzantium formed an alliance with the Turks and both the Crusaders states and Cilicia were forced to cope with constant Turkish raids, the Armenians and Crusaders set aside their own disputes."

## Strange Alliance

"Why would the Byzantines ever want to encourage the Turks, Hagop?" Ani inquired.

"Byzantium wanted to weaken the Crusader states, and had been plotting against the Armenians for years. The Turks' desire to increase their own lands and wealth was made even greater by the gold Byzantium paid to them for their attacks upon the small Christian countries in eastern Asia Minor. Finally, the Byzantine armies invaded Cilicia, defeated both the Crusaders and the Armenians and occupied the plain of Adana. Leo, after fleeing into the Taurus Mountains, was forced to surrender. He died a prisoner in Constantinople in 1141. The Greeks killed his oldest son.

"One of Leo's sons, Thoros, who was also imprisoned in Constantinople, was not killed because of his youth. In 1143 he escaped from his prison and fled the city disguised as a merchant. He soon reached Antioch, where Raymond De Poitiers gave him aid. Thoros then set out for the Cilician Amanus Mountains, where he was joined by several thousand Armenians, who had been hiding from the Greeks. They soon recaptured many cities, including Adana and Sis, and were joined by most of the Armenians. Since the Crusaders in Antioch and Edessa were busy fighting the Turks, they could not assist him, but he was soon joined by two of his brothers who had taken refuge from the Byzantines in Edessa.

"The Byzantine emperor sent an army of 12,000 against Thoros, but these troops were soon scattered. A Turkish army was likewise defeated by a combined army organized by Thoros and the Crusaders. In 1156, Thoros signed a treaty with the Turks in which they recognized his right to Cilicia.

"Angered by Thoros' success, the Byzantines began to send agents to the Crusaders who told them that the Armenians were really their enemies. Thoros had captured a fort back from the Byzantine Greeks which had belonged to the Crusader Knights Templar. The new leaders at Antioch felt Thoros should return this fort, which he eventually did of his own accord. The same year, the Armenians and Crusaders seized Cyprus, and in 1157, tried to capture Caesarea.

"The Byzantine emperor then invaded Cilicia in 1158. Thoros met some reverses, but the Crusaders finally convinced the emperor to recognize Thoros' right to Cilicia. The emperor agreed on the condition that Thoros not wage war against Byzantium.

#### The Role of the Armenians in the Crusades

"In 1169, Thoros died, and his brother, Mleh, known for his cruelty, seized power. After more than a decade of plots, counterplots, and constant battles, with the Crusaders, the Armenians, the Turks and the Greeks constantly changing sides, the Third Crusade, led by Frederick Barbarossa, arrived in Asia. The great Moslem leader, Saladin, had seized Jerusalem in 1187. This new wave of Crusaders planned to expel the infidels from the Holy Land.

## To Gain a Crown

"Thoros' nephew, Leo, who was then in power, began to dream of being crowned King of Cilicia. By assisting the Crusaders, he did gain the promise of a crown from Frederick."

"What happened, Hagop?" Ani inquired eagerly.

"Before Leo could be crowned, Frederick died. Leo realized that the most secure crown of all would be one given by the Pope himself. He sent representatives to Pope Celestine III in 1195 to make inquiries. Leo still was dreaming of allying Cilicia with Byzantium, hoping he could eventually regain Armenia itself for his people. He did realize that the only road to such a treaty lay through religious compromise. The Greek bishops demanded that the Armenians give up their independent church. The Armenians refused.

"Leo then turned to the west. He knew that by doing so, he would gain the eternal hatred of Byzantium.



Coins of King Leo I of Cilicia

"Pope Celestine, a clever diplomat, saw that by crowning Leo King of Armenia, the Crusaders from Europe would gain a permanent native ally and a base for their activities in the east. All of Europe supported the Pope, who in turn made very few demands on the Armenian Church. These demands were accepted in form by the Armenian bishops.

"At last, in 1199, a delegate from Rome presented Leo with the Pope's gift of a golden crown. The Armenian leader was crowned and anointed king by Catholicos Abirad. He took the name and title of 'Leo I, by the Grace of the Roman Emperor, King of Armenia."

"This marked the beginning of the Cilician kingdom. Armenia's formal ties with Europe brought her into the spotlight of international affairs at the time. The major cities of Cilicia became important trade centers.

"In the twelfth century, Armenian literature and art attained new heights of achievement. St. Nerses Shnorhali was one of the great writers of this period, called the Silver Age of Armenian literature.

"Some of the greatest Armenian miniatures were painted in Cilicia at this time. The works of two great illustrators, Thoros Roslin and Sarkis Bidzak, are still admired today as examples of the best illuminated manuscripts created during the Golden Age of Armenian miniatures.

"Your dinner must be ice cold, Hagop," Mrs. Sahakian said.

"I almost forgot about it," he admitted.

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"You know, Hagop," Ani remarked. "I thought world politics had only become complicated in modern times. It's really amazing that our ancestors could have survived so many wars. And it's interesting that they weren't always fighting against hostile people on religious grounds."

"You know, Ani, the Europeans finally grew tired of having to fight the Greeks before they could even attempt to protect the Holy Places. The Fourth Crusade was directed against Byzantium."

# Chapter X

## THE GENOCIDE

*EGOOR, aghchikus,* come here, sit down," the old man said as he shuffled into the living room of the Armenian old age home where his granddaughter was waiting for him. He sat down heavily in an overstuffed armchair. "*Inch bes es,* Ani? How are you? Sit here." He indicated a chair next to the reading lamp.

Ani Sahakian deposited her school books on the end table and sat down. She often stopped by to visit her grandfather on the way home from school. The elderly Mr. Sahakian used to live with her family, but after he had a stroke the previous year, he needed more care than her family could give him. One day, after visiting a friend who lived at the Armenian home, he decided to become a resident himself.

"Your eyes are just like your grandmother's, Ani. So large and dark. She was a wonderful woman.

"Tell me, Ani, how's school?"

"Well, Grandpa, I have a lot of homework this month. I've been doing pretty well, but sometimes it's hard to keep up."

"You're a smart girl Ani, you can do it."

"Grandpa, you know next week is April 24. I have to write an essay for my English class about an event in the life of a person in my family, and I was thinking that if you would tell me about what happened to you in
1915, I could write about that."

Propping his head on his hands, the old man replied, "I don't know, Ani. I don't like to talk about it."

"Grandpa," she said gently, "when I was younger you promised you would tell me about it when I was twelve years old. I'm thirteen now. Please Grandpa?" She leaned forward in her chair and touched his arm.

The old man looked up at her. His eyes were full of tears. He sat there, silent, for a minute, then began to speak.

"I was exactly your age at the time World War I broke out. My father, my uncles, and two of my brothers were drafted into the Turkish army. By March of 1915, we no longer received letters from them, so we assumed they were dead.

"It was not until November, however, that the orders were given in our town, Afion Karahissar—that's where the Turks now grow their opium—for the Armenian women and children to pack their belongings. My mother told us one day that the government had decided to send the Armenians to an area in the east. She said the Turks promised to have new homes waiting for us.

"We were given three days in which to pack. We spent the time sorting through our clothing and household goods, deciding what to take, what to sell, and what to discard. At last we were ready. We set out for the edge of town on three wagons loaded with food, water, and our luggage. Besides myself there were my mother, my two sisters, my younger brother—your

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great-uncle Tavit, my two aunts and their children, and my grandparents. We were just part of a long procession of Armenian families, some in wagons, some on donkeys, but most on foot.

"When we were just a few miles outside of town, the Turks stopped us and informed us that they needed our horses and donkeys for the army. We should take along only what we could carry.

"For several days we walked. Many of the older people could not keep up with us. As our distance from Afion Karahissar increased, so did the cruelty of the Turks. Stragglers were prodded into line with bayonets, or killed. Bands of brigands, or *chetehs*, would descend upon the caravan of exiles and steal our valuables. Those who resisted were often slashed to pieces or bayonetted and left to bleed to death.

"Soon everyone was exhausted. We began pleading with the Turks who were supposedly protecting and leading us to let us camp in one place and rest for a few days. Finally they relented. We were joined by Armenians from a few other villages who were traveling along the same road.

"After we had been there for several days—don't ask me the exact location, I was only a child—one night I was awakened by shrill screams. The smell of smoke drifted into our family's make-shift tent. We all ran outside to see what was happening. There was no moon that night, but we saw silhouettes of women and children running madly from the flames. They were so frightened that they were running in every direction, even bumping into one another and increasing their panic and confusion. The camp had been set on fire. And then I saw the most frightening sight of all. Whenever anyone tried to leave the camp, they were pushed back by the Turks. Some were bayonetted or knifed to death. The Turks preferred not to use up their bullets on the Armenians.

"The fire was spreading quickly between the closely-packed tents, fast approaching ours. First my sisters panicked, and joined the running throng. My mother ran after them, hoping to bring them to their senses so we could discuss a possible means of escape. But then my one sister fell, and was trampled by the mob. My mother fell, trying to save her. I felt so helpless hearing the moans of my mother and sister, but as I started to run to save them, my aunt held me back.

" 'You'll die too,' she told me. 'At least try to save your other sister.'

"My aunt had pulled my younger sister, Acabie, out of the crowd, and she was standing next to me, shaking with sobs. I took her hand, and we turned and looked around. The fire had not yet reached our end of the camp, and I noticed that the Turkish guards were only scattered around the outside near our tent, which was right on the edge of the encampment. Suddenly I had an idea. I pulled Acabie back inside our tent.

' "But Kevork, we'll burn to death,' she protested.

"I covered her mouth. 'Quiet, we're not going to stay here.' I slowly lifted the back edge of our tent and carefully looked out. The closest guard was about 100

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feet away from us. He was looking in the other direction, toward the fire.

" 'Acabie, you go first,' I said. 'Crawl on your stomach away from the camp, and don't make a sound. I'll follow you. Go!'

"I pushed her forward to help her get started, then when she was about 25 feet away, I slid out myself. I soon caught up with her. It wasn't easy for her to slither along the ground in a dress. I saw that her face was pale with fright.

"We had forgotten that the field in back of our tent had been used as a garbage dump by the campers, and it was all we could do to keep from vomiting. Twice Acabie stopped, unable to go on.

"'Kevork,' she moaned faintly, 'go on. Save yourself. I can't bear any more of this. I would rather die.'

"Each time I waited until she regained her strength. Finally, when we had left the camp far behind us, we stood up and ran, our sides aching from exertion.

"We spent two days hiding in the fields near a village, then were discovered by Kurds, who were kind enough to take us in. We worked for them as servants until one day Acabie was kidnapped. She was a very pretty girl, by then twelve years old, and someone must have wanted her for his wife. Searching for her was useless, so I ran away the following day. Finally, after months of hiding along roadsides and in the mountains, forced to steal food to survive, I reached the city of Van, which had been captured by the Russian army. I never saw my sister again."

The old man sighed deeply, and looked at his granddaughter. "You are so lucky, Ani, to be spared such a childhood. Sometimes I wish that I could have plucked out my eyes, so that they would never have seen the horrors I witnessed. I wish I had been born deaf, that I would not have to remember the screams of the dying."

He leaned forward in his chair and buried his head in his hands. "Ani," he whispered. "Ani, all the crimes that you read about are nothing compared to what happened during World War I. Every person living in this old age home has his story, most of them far more horrible than mine. It is at night that it all comes back, in our dreams. As if the world had gone mad. As if man were no longer human."

### Self-Defense

"But Grandpa," Ani interrupted. "Why didn't the Armenians resist? I don't understand. The tradition of defending their lives and religion was so much a part of Armenian history."

"In some cities and towns the Armenians did defend themselves, Ani. In Van, for instance, when the Armenians saw that the Turks had massacred large numbers of Armenians in the surrounding provinces, and killed their own leaders, they barricaded themselves into the old city of Van and fought off a large Turkish army for over a month. They were finally saved when the Russian army, led by Armenian volunteer units,

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liberated the city on May 16, 1915. The citizens of Shabin Karahissar, the hometown of the famous General Antranik; the residents of Ourfa; others in the Zeitoun and Sassoun regions; and the most famous of all—the residents of the villages around Musa Mountain, called Musa Dagh by the Turks—all declared they would prefer to die fighting then to be led off to slaughter like farm animals. But only the residents of Van and Musa Dagh escaped the wrath of the Turks. The people of Musa Dagh were rescued by the French after defending themselves for forty days. You must have heard about the book by the German author, Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, which relates the story of their resistance. Few survived the other attempts at self-defense.

"The Turks used these few instances to excuse their policy of exterminating the entire Armenian nation. It was only one week after the residents of Van resisted the deportation order that the Armenian community leaders and intellectuals in Constantinople were arrested on the night of April 24, 1915 and sent to the interior of Turkey. Of course the Turks had been massacring and deporting the Armenian population of Asia Minor since the beginning of the year, but they were looking for an excuse to apply the same policy in the capital. They were afraid that their plans to eliminate the whole Armenian nation would be apparent to the foreign diplomats and residents there, who would protest to their own governments.

"Another excuse which the Turks gave for their

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Photo courtesy of Dr. Stephen Svajian.

General Antranik Ouzounian.

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behavior was the existence of Armenian volunteer units in the Russian army. These units were formed in 1915, and were joined by some Armenian men who had managed to escape the massacres and reach Russianheld territory.

"The fact that one of these legions was led by the former member of Turkish Parliament, Garekin Basdermajian (Armen Garo), was pointed out by the Turks as yet another sign that the Armenians were rebellious traitors who must be killed to protect the security of the Ottoman Empire.

### **General Antranik**

"General Antranik was no more popular with the Turks."

"Grandpa, who was this General Antranik? People mention him a lot, but no one seems to know very much about him. What did he do?" Ani inquired.

"As a youth, General Antranik had been a *khempabet*, or group leader, among Armenians in the Sassoun region who were protesting the harsh rule of the local Kurds and Turks. At one time, his name alone was enough to frighten the Turks. He later fled Turkey, and helped to lead Bulgarian forces to victory against the Turks in the Balkan Wars. The news that Antranik was fighting with the Russian units, first in Persia, then on the Erzerum front, was not well received in Constantinople during World War I.

"Antranik's presence did help morale among the Armenians. Tales of his youthful daring had already



The Martyrs Chapel at Antelias.

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made him a hero. Popular songs had been composed to celebrate his feats.

"Although the Armenian legions fought well, the early success of the Russian army in Armenia did not last long. By July 31, 1915, the evacuation of Van was ordered. The timing was disastrous. When the Russian army and the Armenian units reoccupied the city in September, then advanced to Moush and Bitlis in the early months of 1916, there were few Armenians left in those towns to liberate. Antranik had opposed the 1915 retreat. By 1916, the Russians had designs of their own on Turkish Armenia. Fearing the strength of the volunteer units, they ordered them dissolved. Their members were absorbed into the regular Russian army."

"The Armenian soldiers weren't very happy about that, were they Granpa?"

"They were very angry, Ani. General Antranik openly criticized this action.

"When the Russian army retreated after the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Transcaucasian peoples —the Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis—were left on their own. They formed a confederation. As the Turkish army advanced into Georgia and Armenia, the Georgians favored submission. The people of Azerbaijan, who were of Turkish origin, barely concealed their desire to have Armenia overrun by the Turks so they could unite with their 'brothers' from the west. Resistance was left on the shoulders of the Armenians, who were not experienced enough to assume such a responsibility.

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"It was during this difficult period, with the Turks approaching from the west, hundreds of thousands of refugees crowded into the region of Yerevan, disease and starvation everywhere, that the Republic of Armenia was born."

"And you were in Yerevan then, Grandpa, weren't you?" Ani asked.

"Yes, aghchikus, I was there, I was there." The old man closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Let me rest for a minute. Then we'll go on."

Ani reached out and took the old man's hand.

## Chapter XI

# INDEPENDENT ARMENIA

HEN the independence of Armenia was declared on May 28, 1918, the future of the Republic of Armenia was uncertain," the white-haired Mr. Sahakian said as he sipped the orange juice brought to them by the home's staff member who was serving mid-afternoon refreshments to the residents.

"Can you imagine that with a small army of only 35,000 men under the command of Generals Nazarbekian and Antranik, and a Russian colonel, the Armenians briefly held off a giant Turkish army. Forced to fight on two fronts—Transcaucasia and Turkish Armenia—the army's efforts were divided. In February, 1918, they were driven out of Erzinjan, and in March out of Erzerum.

"The Turkish army continued its advance, and entered Kars on April 25. The Transcaucasian government began negotiating a peace treaty with Turkey at Batoum, and was forced to give Batoum and the Armenian provinces of Kars and Ardahan to Turkey. The Turks were not satisfied, however.

"After Georgia and Azerbaijan declared their independence, Armenia's abandonment became more complete. Armenia's struggle became a life-or-death ordeal. Pushed to their last resources, the Armenians, fighting on their own for the first time since the

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Armenia in the twentieth century, depicting the boundaries of the Republic of Armenia in 1918, Wilsonian Armenia, and Soviet Armenia.

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fourteenth century, met the Turkish army at Karakilissa, Bash-Abaran, and Sardarabad, and assured their continued existence by putting up a fierce struggle. The Battle of Sardarabad has become especially famous. I was there, too, Ani, having fled to Yerevan when the Armenian army withdrew from Turkish Armenia. It was the most unforgettable experience of my life. Everyone-the young and old, rich (although who was rich in those days?) and poor-joined together to defend the Ararat plain, Etchmiadzin, and Yerevan itself from the Turks. Women and children carried water. Old men did whatever they could. Peasants came armed with spades and picks, ready to die defending their land. Bishop Karekin Hovsepian was there, encouraging the soldiers to fight. Everyone sensed that this was the ultimate battle; that if we lost, there would be no more Armenia. The people went into battle calling on the great Armenian warriors of history and legend to assist them-Haik, Tigran the Great, St. Vartan, David of Sassoun-and the saints. Countless prayers were said, and the sound of patriotic songs boomed across the fields almost as loud as the battle sounds themselves. It was a great national effort. And we won.

"Armenian independence was declared on May 28, 1918. In the Treaty of Batoum, signed on June 4, the Turkish government recognized Armenian independence. But the Young Turks and the Azerbaijanis had conspired to have only the regions of Yerevan and Sevan mentioned in the treaty. They coveted the rest of Armenian territory themselves."

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"But Grandpa, if the Armenians defeated the Turks in three battles, why were they forced to give up so much land?"

"The Armenian armies were weak, and poorly supplied, Ani. Besides, the Turks and Azerbaijanis soon banded together to form a blockade, and would not allow food or ammunition into Armenia. We had very little to eat. Many more died of starvation, or were so weak that even the slightest illness brought death.

## **Continued Resistance**

"Not everyone accepted the treaty because many felt we were forced to sign it. General Antranik, as independent and tough as ever, took refuge in Zangezur, in the southeastern part of Armenia, continuing the fight against the Turks there. He captured the town of Goriz, and managed to hold out until the Turks and Germans admitted their defeat by the Allies in November, 1918. If it were not for his efforts, Zangezur would have become a part of Azerbaijan.

"In northern Iran, Armenian and Assyrian units turned back the Turkish forces, and finally joined with the English at Mesopotamia. In the city of Baku, on the Caspian Sea, where there is a large Armenian community, Armenian officers and soldiers returning from the Russian army defended this oil refining center under the leadership of Rostom Zorian until September 15. With the Turkish army advancing, the few British soldiers there, along with half the city's 70,000 Armenians, then evacuated the city. When the Turkish army moved in,

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as many as 30,000 Christians were massacred, and property valued at millions of dollars was destroyed.

### **Rebuilding A Nation**

"In the meantime, the new Armenian government, with the Tashnak party in the majority, was faced with the task of rebuilding a nation. About 700,000 refugees had flocked into the area. The problem of providing food and shelter was a constant worry. The Turkish blockade did not help.

"The charitable organization known as American Near East Relief which had been assisting homeless Armenians in Turkish Armenia, began to send more and more of its funds, contributed by the American public, to Armenia itself. A U.S. government agency, the American Relief Administration, also helped. By the time the Near East Relief was terminated in 1929, it had raised and contributed \$85 million for the Armenian relief effort. Orphanages and refugee camps were built, and funds for food and clothing provided.

"The government began to establish itself, reorganizing the army, founding a university, and forming an economic base for the new country.

"After the Allied victory, Armenian forces reoccupied Alexandropol (Leninakan) and Kars, a region important because of its wheat fields. The Armenian army was also weakened by short wars with Georgia and Azerbaijan over border disputes. Internal problems, caused by Turkish, Tartar and Kurdish minorities within Armenia, who had been armed and incited by the Turkish government, were also a constant worry.

"The Armenian government, led successively by Katchaznouni, Khatisian and Ohandjanian, did manage to provide leadership on a level to inspire the hopes of Armenians around the world. After six centuries of occupation, oppression and persecution, the future of the Armenian people seemed to glow with promise. Armenians from the world's capitals sent gifts, money, or donated their own future to assist in the work at hand.

## Armenia Betrayed

"The luxury of seeing a dream become reality was not long enjoyed by the Armenian people. Armenia's independence was guaranteed by the Treaty of Sevres, signed in August of 1920, and the boundaries between Turkey and Armenia were decided by the American President Woodrow Wilson, the western champion of the Armenian cause. An uprising against the Turkish government in Constantinople, led by Kemal Ataturk, soon presented a new threat to Armenia.

"Armenia's delegates to the Paris Peace Conference at the end of the World War—the Delegation of the Republic of Armenia, led by A. Aharonian, and the Armenian National Delegation, led by Boghos Nubar Pasha, representing the Armenians of Turkey and the Diaspora—wanted guarantees of protection for Armenia included as part of Turkey's peace treaty with Europe and the United States. Woodrow Wilson wanted the United States to accept a mandate over Armenia,

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under which the U.S. would assist in the defense of Armenia. The American Senate was not so eager to assume responsibility for a foreign country, especially after the losses the American people had suffered during World War I. Although the American people as a whole gave both money and support to the Armenians, the Senate would not change its mind, and the American mandate of Armenia was rejected."

"That left the Armenians completely unprotected, didn't it Grandpa?"

"Yes, Ani. The world had abandoned Armenia.

"In late September, the Kemalist Turkish armies moved toward Kars. The Armenian government assembled a 35,000-man army to meet the offensive, but was unable to hold back the Turkish advance.

"The Kemalists had also succeeded in establishing ties with the Soviets, who were worried about the possible results if the western European nations held Constantinople and the Dardanelles. They themselves needed access through these straits to insure the free flow of shipping between the Mediterranean Sea and their own Black Sea ports.

"The Red Army had advanced into Azerbaijan in April, and the new Azerbaijani Soviet Republic began to claim the Armenian regions of Karabagh and Zangezur. Armenia had again been forced to send troops to guard her borders with Azerbaijan. This decreased the number of men available for the Turkish front.

"The Armenians were able to hold off the Turks

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until October 30, when Kars fell. The remnants of the Armenian army retreated to Alexandropol, which in turn was captured on November 7. An Armenian regiment was finally able to contain the Turkish advance in a battle near the village of Djadjour. The successful defense of Yerevan to the south was also a crucial victory for the Armenians.

"Little was left of the Armenian army by that time, and as always, food, clothing and ammunition were scarce. The Tashnak leaders frantically sought to end this war before the Turkish army could regain strength.

"Fearing that all of Armenia might fall to Turkey, Lenin ordered the Red Army in Azerbaijan to cross into Armenia under the command of the Armenian Bolshevik leader, Anastas Mikoyan. On November 29, a 'Military Revolutionary Committee' announced the establishment of a Soviet government in Armenia.

"Under pressure from both east and west, the Tashnak government accepted Turkey's harsh peace terms, and the Treaty of Alexandropol was signed late in the night on December 2. The treaty provided for Turkish possession of the province of Ardahan, the Alexandropol area; the disarmament of Armenia, and the annulment of the Armenian provisions of the Treaty of Sevrés, the treaty which had given so much hope to the Armenian people.

"On the same night, the Red Army moved into Yerevan, and accepted the reins of government from the Tashnaks Armenia was declared a Soviet Republic. "Although fighting broke out the next year between the Tashnaks and the Soviets in Armenia, a struggle which proved disastrous to the Tashnak supporters, one hope of the Tashnaks—and of Armenians throughout the world—was fulfilled by the Soviet Armenians. The new government, backed by the central government in Moscow, insisted upon changing the Treaty of Alexandropol. Turkey feared to refuse. Under the Treaty of Moscow of March 7, 1921, Alexandropol (Leninakan) was returned to Armenia, and the present Turkish-Armenian border was established. The Treaty of Kars signed the same year between Turkey and Soviet Armenia contained the same terms."

"What did you do then, Grandpa? Wasn't that the time when you came here?"

"Yes, Ani. I had received a letter. My brother, Tavit, had also escaped the fire and had made his way to New York. He had seen my picture in a group of photographs sent to America by the Near East Relief. He wanted me to join him in the United States, and had sent money for my passage. Although I did not want to leave Armenia, I was eager to see my brother again. I had actually given up all hope of ever seeing anyone in my family again. I thought all my relatives had been killed or had been burned alive when the Turks set our refugee camp on fire."

The old man fell silent.

Finally, it was Ani who spoke. "Grandpa, I've heard so many people say that Armenia could never have survived as an independent country. They say if

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the Soviet army had not come, the Turks would have soon destroyed Armenia. Others say that, in time, the Tashnak government could have rebuilt Armenia, and maintained her independence."

"I don't think anyone can answer these questions, Ani. It is easy to speculate about what might have happened, if. . . . If Europe and the American Senate had not abandoned us, our future would have been very different. I can't help feeling that a healthy nation is one that puts faith and hope in its own strength," the old man maintained.

"Great nations always act in their own interest, Ani. There are moments when a country will try to do what is right, but each country will follow its own concept of 'right' and 'wrong.' Governments create the most wonderful-sounding excuses to cover up their own bad behavior. The Turks, for example, claimed they were protecting their own national security by killing and deporting the Armenian population.

"The worst crimes in the world are often committed in the name of national security. That is why so many men felt a higher authority must pass judgement on world events, and why the United Nations was finally organized.

"We can only hope, Ani, that one day the Armenian people, and indeed all the world's peoples, will be guaranteed their rights. Perhaps one day we can have our lands in Turkish Armenia back. So much has happened in my lifetime. It is not easy to hope any longer." He sank back in his chair as if he were

#### Independent Armenia



Catholicos Kevork IV blesses the Armenian troops at Etchmiadzin.

exhausted.

Ani again noticed tears in his eyes. It seemed the memories of his youth were very powerful, as they are for so many elderly people. And his memories were not pleasant.

They sat there for a while without speaking, united in their thoughts.

"Grandpa, there is one more thing we can do," Ani said at last. "We can work to make our hopes become reality."

The corners of the old man's mouth formed a delicate smile.

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## Chapter XII

### THE ARMENIANS IN JERUSALEM

# RERUSALEM!

Hagop and Ani Sahakian were overcome with impatience as the bus which they had taken from the airport came into view of the famed city. Their mother was as eager as they were to reach the Armenian Quarter, where her own parents had met, and the St. James Cathedral, where they had been married before coming to the United States.

Traffic was as bad as in New York, Ani reflected as the bus pulled up in front of the modern hotel where they would stay. The city was a strange mixture of the very ancient and the very modern. There were tourists everywhere, mingling among the throngs of Jews and Arabs, Armenians and Greeks who made the city their home.

The elder Sahakians had decided to spend their summer vacation on a tour of Armenia and the Middle East. They felt that the trip, even though it would only last three weeks, would help Hagop with his studies, and would increase Ani's new interest in her Armenian heritage. Mr. and Mrs. Sahakian had both been anxious to see Armenia, and the glowing descriptions of Jerusalem—the Holy City—which had filled her ears as a child made Sirarpie particularly eager to reach the Armenian Quarter. After a week in Armenia, they had

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spent three days in Lebanon, where they visited the Armenian Catholicosate at Antelias. There they had toured the new headquarters of the ancient See of Cilicia, which had been the center of Armenian life during the time of the Crusades.

The Sahakians were the first in their group to assemble in the hotel lobby to wait for the sightseeing bus that would take them to the Armenian Quarter. It was mid-afternoon, and hot, but the dry heat was not as uncomfortable as the humid weather to which they were accustomed at home in New York.

Everyone in their group was Armenian, and as the bus approached the Monastery of St. Savior's outside the Zion Gate to the Old City, Ani could almost feel the collective excitement at the prospect of visiting the Armenian shrines.

As the group filed out of the bus, their guide, a young Armenian who actually lived in the St. James Monastery complex, began to relate the history of the chapel.

"Possessed by the Armenians since pre-Crusader times, the chapel is known for its altar. A fragment of the rock which was rolled away from the tomb of Christ is built into the structure. The rock was smashed by the Turks in 1244.

"According to tradition, St. Peter denied Christ in this courtyard. The Altar of Flagellation is located here. You will note that the tombs of many Armenian Patriarchs of Jerusalem are placed within the arches around the court."

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Photo courtesy of the Armenian Reporter A church service in the Cathedral of St. James in Jerusalem.

The group also visited the excavations nearby, where mosaic floors of previous chapels, some built as early as the fourth or fifth centuries after Christ's death, have been found.

Given a few free minutes before boarding the bus, Ani and Hagop wandered into the Armenian cemetery. The ornate tombstones attracted their interest. Hagop began translating the epitaphs carved into them. The words chosen by the dead said much about Armenian life in the Holy Land for the last several hundred years. One epitaph particularly struck his imagination, so Hagop copied it into a small notebook:

This is the refuge of the just. Sing Alleluia For the binder Of Holy Books For the monk Mekhitar\*

"Ani, can you imagine what it must have been like to live here in this monastery, spending your life binding the most beautiful hand-painted and handwritten editions of the Bible and other holy books? Or making the manuscripts yourself? Spending day after day perfecting the shapes of fine Armenian letters, filling the margins with fantastic flowers and birds? Turning your whole life into a prayer?

"You've seen pictures of some of the old Armenian books that are here in Jerusalem. They say the Armenian Patriarchate has one of the richest collections

<sup>\*</sup>Reprinted from Kevork Hintlian, History of the Armenians in the Holy Land. (Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1976), p. 62.

of manuscripts from Cilicia created during the Golden Age of Armenian Miniature Painting in the time of the Cilician kingdom. Only the Madenataran in Yerevan has a larger manuscript collection."

"I bet they don't have a larger or a smaller manuscript than the ones we saw in *Hayastan*. That one we saw was only about an inch high," Ani replied.

As they settled into their seats on the bus again, the guide resumed his narration. "Armenians have been in Jerusalem almost ever since there were Armenian Christians. According to tradition, a Queen Helena of Armenia built a shrine over the site where the head of St. James was buried in the first century. When the Holy Places were discovered in the fourth century and shrines built over them, largely through the efforts of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine and his mother, many Armenians came to Jerusalem. Letters written in the fourth century by the Armenian Catholicos Vertanes to the Greek Bishop of Jerusalem are still preserved today.

"One of the holy men who became a monk, Euthymius, came to the Holy Land from Armenia in the late fourth century. His devotion to God and the simple life he led, free from all luxury and comfort, inspired many to follow and imitate him. He became one of the leaders of monks in what was called the monastic movement.

"At the end of the fifth century, a European monk who visited the Holy Land said that there were more than 70 Armenian churches, chapels, and monasteries in the Jerusalem area. When the Persians invaded Palestine in 614 A.D., most of these buildings were destroyed and never rebuilt.

"After the Persians came to Palestine, the Greeks and Armenians together reconstructed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is built over the cave where Christ's body was placed.

"The Armenians gradually gained so much power that it was decided that they should also protect the rights of the Assyrian, Coptic (Egyptian) and Abyssinian (Ethiopian) Christians in the Holy Land. After the Greek Orthodox Church, the Armenians were the most powerful in the Holy Land. The Roman Catholic Church fell behind the Armenian Church in influence.

"The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox priests were always arguing over who had rights to what areas in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and so on. The Armenians used to defend their rights constantly on the basis of the recognition of their rights by the local political authorities and the laws related to the religious places."

When the group had gathered outside the Patriarchate gates, the guide, who was about Hagop's age, continued, "The Armenian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem covers about 150,000 square meters. The lodgings which you see along the approach are inhabited rent-free by Armenians. After the genocide in 1915, many Armenian refugees came to Jerusalem and were given shelter and food by the Patriarchate.

"The rest of the complex which we are about to enter includes the St. James Church, with several

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chapels, the Patriarch's residence, monks' cells, dwellings for nuns (no longer used for that purpose), the seminary, a library, a school for Armenian children who live in the Armenian Quarter, lodgings for pilgrims, a wooded area and gardens. Most of the buildings are separated by courtyards."

As they entered the gates, the Sahakians felt as if they were stepping back into time. Although a few modern structures have been built in the Armenian Quarter, the whole area still conveys an atmosphere of ancient mysteries.

When they stepped into the St. James Cathedral, Ani gasped. There was something very special about the dark interior of the church, which was built in the twelfth century over the place where the remains of St. James were said to be buried. Illuminated by hundreds of ornate golden oriental lamps suspended on chains from the ceiling, the church was the most beautiful Ani had ever seen. The altar was made of sculptured wood. The walls were decorated with colorful paintings of the Last Judgement, when all of mankind will stand up to be judged by God, paintings of the sufferings of the saints, and of the martyrs. The marble shrine of St. James, and the throne of St. James the Lesser-the first Bishop of Jerusalem-were also striking. On this throne, which is used only once a year by the Patriarch on the Feast of St. James, and whenever a new Patriarch takes office. an eternally-lit lamp burns. The throne itself is a mosaic of tortoise shell and mother-of-pearl worked into a complex design. Every inch of the church was so

beautiful, Ani did not know what to look at first.

The sunlit courtyard outside; the sounds of children at play reduced to a distant hum-all the world seemed so remote in this church where the labors of man to glorify God were so splendid. Suddenly Ani remembered the sun-whitened bones of the genocide victims which she had seen encased in glass in the altar of the church at Antelias in Lebanon. She thought of the Armenians from around the world overcome with emotion as they watched the eternal flame burning at the Martyrs' Monument at Dzidzernagaperd in Armenia. She recalled how she had walked down the streets in Beirut among groups of laughing children who only spoke Armenian. Then, a vivid picture flashed before her mind: the peasants in Armenia, with their wrinkled, knotty hands, lighting candles for their dead as soon as they crowded their way into the Cathedral at Etchmiadzin on Sunday mornings. Her grandfather's story, all the stories of what the Armenian people had endured over the centuries for the sake of their religion rushed through her memory. Silent tears began to stream down her cheeks as her eyes leaped from painting to lamp to mosaic.

This is what it was all for, she thought.

Hagop turned around and noticed that she was crying. He seemed to sense the reason.

He softly repeated the words that he had copied from the gravestone in the Armenian cemetery.

"This is the refuge of the just Sing Alleluia For the binder Of Holy Books For the monk Mekhitar."

It was almost dark by the time they returned to their hotel. As they sat in the bus, Ani felt very proud that although there were only about six million Armenians in the whole world, not even enough to populate New York City, the Armenian Church has achieved a place of importance among the world's churches. With so many Christian churches, she had been surprised to see that the Armenians were one of only three churches with the right to hold services according to their own rites at the places holy to Christians around the world.

## Chapter XIII

### REBIRTH OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

T must really be interesting to live in a cultural center like Jerusalem," Hagop Sahakian remarked to Berj Manougian, who was the Sahakian family's guide in Jerusalem. The elder Sahakians had invited the young man, who was a university student, to join them for dinner that evening when they returned to their hotel from the Armenian Patriarchate complex.

A tall and slender twenty-two-year-old, Berj was studying Armenian archaeology. When he and Hagop had discovered that they shared the same interest, the two became friends immediately.

"You could really spend a lifetime studying just the Armenian art and architecture here in the Holy Land," Berj replied. "Of course the fact that I do live in Jerusalem does simplify a lot of my work for my classes. The printing press at the St. James Monastery publishes not only books used in the churches, but also scholarly works. The library has a very large collection of books. Excavations are almost always in progress in one area or another of the Armenian Quarter, and I have often watched the experts working, carefully brushing away dirt and debris so as not to damage the ancient and medieval art objects or masonry which they have uncovered."

"Did you go to the school in the Armenian

Quarter?" Ani inquired.

"Yes, I did. At one point, my parents wanted me to enter the seminary and study to become a priest, but I hesitated. Since I wasn't totally convinced that was what I wanted to do, I felt it was better to attend regular schools."

"How long has the Seminary been here?" Ani was asking question after question.

"I can answer that one, Ani," Mrs. Sahakian laughed. "It was founded in 1843, then reorganized in 1921 by the famous Patriarch Yeghishe Tourian, who continued as its head until his death in 1930. It was further strengthened by Archbishop Torkom Gooshakian, who was the Patriarch of Jerusalem from 1931-1939. My father was always talking about these two men and what important work they did in helping the Armenian Church to recover from the genocide."

"That's right, Mom," Hagop remarked. "So many Armenian priests had been killed during World War I by the Turks that the task of rebuilding the Armenian church and training new clergy to take the place of the martyred priests was very important for the survival of the Armenian people. You know the priests were often the first killed in many Turkish towns, because the Turkish leaders wanted to make public examples of them. And they had destroyed the famous Monastery of Armash, with its Seminary, where many of the Armenian Church's most important leaders had been trained.

"The Seminary at Armash had been founded by

Patriarch Ormanian of Istanbul. The seven year course of study was very difficult, and the teachers were very strict, but many brilliant students profited greatly from this education. Ormanian and Yeghishe Vartabed Tourian were the principal teachers in the early years. When Ormanian was elected Patriarch of Constantinople in 1896, Tourian was made Dean. He had been teaching Armenian language, history, literature, philosophy and pre-Christian and Christian religion there since 1890.

"Many of the graduates of the Seminary at Armash were the very church leaders who were to place the Armenian Church back on its feet after 1915," Berj added. "Yeghishe Tourian himself was largely responsible for the rebirth of the church here in Ierusalem. He was elected Patriarch of Jerusalem on September 5. 1921, and immediately began the task of reorganizing the Seminary. He also improved the choir and the printshop. His joy in his work was a great example for others. One of the older priests at the monastery, who was a student at the Seminary during the 1920's, says that Tourian's inspiration moved almost everyone around him to work and study doubly hard. He made everyone feel that they were laboring to save the future of the Armenian Church from the Turks. When Tourian passed away on April 27, 1930, the extent of his achievements was evident. Dozens of young Armenian men had entered the priesthood after graduating from the Seminary, and were serving the Church all over the world. Jerusalem itself was once again thriving as a cultural center.

"Among those who had attended the Seminary at Armash and benefited from Tourian's instruction there were numerous Patriarchs of Istanbul and Jerusalem. The Catholicos Papken Guleserian (Cilicia See) was a graduate, as was Shahe Vartabed Kasparian, who was the founder and first Dean of the Armenian Seminary at Antelias, in Lebanon. We saw the Seminary there, too. Remember, Ani?" Hagop turned to his sister.

"That must be the newest school for training priests. All the buildings at Antelias are very modern, aren't they?" she inquired.

"You must have been daydreaming when we were touring Antelias," Hagop laughed. "You didn't hear a thing the guide said."

"You must really have been daydreaming," Mr. Sahakian chuckled. "Didn't you notice that most of the time we were there, Ani was staring at the altar in the memorial chapel? She wasn't even with us for more than half of the tour."

"You got me there, Dad. I guess Ani and I were both so wrapped up in our own interests that we didn't pay any attention to what was happening around us."

"So now, young lady," Berj told Ani with mock seriousness, "your guide in Jerusalem will instruct you in the facts which you should have learned from your guide at Antelias.

"The Catholicosate of Cilicia, which had been established in the city of Sis, was forced into exile along with the Armenian people by the Turks in 1915. In

### Rebirth of Religious Life

1930, Catholicos Sahak I Khabayan decided to convert an orphanage in Antelias, Lebanon, run by the American Near East Relief, into a residence for the Catholicos, a seminary, and a printing press. The Catholicosate was then established there.

"Personally worn out by the ordeal of the genocide and no longer a young man, he sought assistance in the task of rebuilding the Armenian Church in the Diaspora. Since the Armenian Church in Armenia was viewed with great suspicion by the communist party in the Soviet Union at that time, the Church in Etchmiadzin was hampered in its efforts.

"Catholicos Sahak summoned Archbishop Babgen Guleserian—remember he was also a graduate of Armash—and the younger clergyman was enthroned in 1931 as what they called 'Coadjutor-Catholicos.' This meant that although the actual catholicos was living, he could not carry out all the duties of his office, which were handled by the assistant catholicos, with the title of coadjutor, who had full catholicosal authority vested in him.

"During the five years in which he served, Catholicos Guleserian oversaw the founding of the Theological Seminary of Antelias, headed by Vardapet Shahe Gasparian. A printing press was also founded, and the monthly *Hask* (Ear of Corn) began publication. Books and brochures on Armenian religion, history and culture were also published, as were textbooks for use in the many new Armenian schools in the region. These schools were founded to serve the needs of the thousands of Armenians who settled in Syria and Lebanon during the first few decades after the genocide.

"As you know, the Arabs proved very kind hosts to the Armenians. They, too, had suffered much under Turkish rule, and gave the Armenians the free atmosphere they needed to recover from the tragedy of the First World War and begin to develop their culture again.

"Armenian priests, of course, were not the only ones singled out by the Turks for early death in 1915. They also executed artists, writers and leaders of the Armenian communities in Turkish Armenia. Without priests and intellectuals, the Armenians were left without leadership in culture. In the years during which the Armenian community was organizing and gaining strength in the Middle East, the Catholicosate at Antelias played an important role in helping to repair the cultural losses of the genocide through its printing press, in particular.

"After his death, Catholicos Petros Sarajian supervised the construction of much of the current Catholicosate complex. The Cathedral at Antelias, the memorial chapel of the Armenian martyrs, the residence of the Catholicos, and the seminary building were all erected. The two Catholicoi who followed, Catholicos Karekin I Hovsepiantz and Catholicos Zareh I (he was the first graduate of the Seminary at Antelias), continued the work of strengthening the Armenian Church and helping the communities in the Diaspora. The current Catholicos, Khoren I Paroyan, has been

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faced with the difficult task of leading his people during the vicious internal war that has taken place in Lebanon."

"It seems tragedy always follows the Armenians wherever we go," Ani remarked sadly.

"Yes," Berj agreed. "Lebanon had really become the new cultural center of the Armenians outside Armenia, just as Istanbul was before 1915. There are so many good Armenian schools—the Hamazkain Djemaran, the A.G.B.U. schools, the Haigazian Armenian College, the numerous churches, cultural centers, printing presses, publishing houses. And so many writers and artists."

"Don't forget the Armenian restaurants," Mr. Sahakian interrupted. "After all, food *is* a part of culture. Although a good dinner doesn't last as long as a good book!"

Everyone laughed.

Mrs. Sahakian returned to the more serious topic. "We can only hope that the current peace will last in Lebanon, and again enable our people there to lead normal lives, free from the daily fear of death. We have ourselves all been so lucky. You, Berj, have lived through war here in Jerusalem, but the rest of us only know what it is like through photographs and newspaper stories."

It was Berj who changed the subject after a long silence. "Did you see Etchmiadzin?" he asked. "I would love to go to Armenia one day. They say that the Cathedral at Etchmiadzin is very crowded on Sunday

## mornings."

"It was so packed, I never thought we'd get out of there alive," Ani said. "So many people, pushing and shoving to get in and out!"

"You know, Berj, we had heard that no one goes to church any more in Armenia, but it's not true. The farmers especially, from the villages around Etchmiadzin, come in large numbers with their families," Hagop added. "Many of them bring lambs to slaughter in the Cathedral yard. This is a very old custom. Then the meat is divided among the poor.

"The Cathedral itself is so beautiful, too. I particularly like the dome, although that was added after the rest had been built."

"We were really surprised that so many of the people in Armenia still believe in the church," Mrs. Sahakian said. "Since the communist party has been in power there fore more than half a century, we thought that by now most of the people would accept the party's stand that God does not exist."

"Well, you know that the church has been so much a part of the Armenian people for so many centuries, that it was very hard to convince the people to give up their beliefs," Hagop declared."One of my professors was telling my modern Armenian history class that in the 1920's and 30's, the new communist government was not sure of its position and felt that the strength of the Armenian Church was a threat to its own power. Since the church promises believers a better life in paradise after death, the party leaders thought that

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The Armenian Catholicossate at Antelias.

church members would not want to work for a better life and a perfect society on earth. As a result, the communist party strongly opposed the Armenian Church. During the late 1930's while Stalin was the Soviet Premier, the Armenians suffered a great deal. The government wanted to 'cleanse,' as they said, all elements from Armenian society that they felt were dangerous to the party and its new way of life. The Church was one of these.

"But during World War II, when the Soviet leaders came into closer contact with the western countries again as they were all fighting together against Hitler's Germany, they saw that the Church was not quite as harmful as they thought. A new era began, and continues today, in which the old controls over the church were gradually relaxed. The rebirth of the Armenian Church in Armenia then began, although twenty years later than in Jerusalem and Lebanon.

"Catholicos Kevork VI Choerekjian began this work. In 1944, he started a monthly called *Etchmiadzin*. He also opened the Theological Seminary at Etchmiadzin which now trains priests for the Soviet Union. Priests from the rest of the world sometimes study there, too.

"Another important event occurred in the late 1940's, when more than 80,000 Armenians, most of them from Syria, Lebanon, Greece, Egypt and France, moved to Armenia. These people needed churches. Several were reopened, as were a few monasteries.

"This work has been continued by the present

Catholicos, Vazken I, who has encouraged the rebuilding and repairing of churches and monasteries. He has also visited the Armenian communities in the rest of the Soviet Union and throughout the world. He has worked to improve the relations of the Armenian Church with the world's other religious leaders, as have the church leaders at Antelias.

"The position of the Armenian Church today is very solid."

"When you think about the fact that so many churches were destroyed and so many of the faithful killed in 1915, this is really amazing," Berj commented.

"When you think that half of the entire world's Armenian population was massacred or forced to starve to death or die of exposure by the Turks during World War I, the recovery of the Armenian people around the world is a wonder," Hagop added. "Wherever the remnants of the population of Turkish Armenia have gone, they have tried to create the nation that *should* have been. Imagine if all these fragments were joined together."

"If we could only have our land back!" Berj exclaimed. "Maybe someday, by some miracle, the world will suddenly begin to see how much we have suffered, and how they have passed us by as a people. There are only a few Turks and Kurds living in Kars, Ardahan, and the region of Van. Maybe we will have them back someday."

"Perhaps we won't live to see it, but you and Ani may," Mr. Sahakian said.

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"Do you think the world will ever change?" Ani asked. "Grandpa told me about what happened to Armenia after World War I. He said the largest countries always push their own interests, and small nations, like the Armenians, are caught in the middle. Has anything really changed at all?"

"I think that gradually the world will improve," Hagop said. "Because what Hitler did to the Jews during World War II was given so much attention, the world woke up to what could happen if people or countries ignore the rights of others. There have been setbacks, yes, but on the whole, I think the world is developing a conscience."

"Grandpa was telling me how important the United Nations can be," Ani added.

"He's right, Ani," Berj agreed. "And the reason the Armenians and all the other peoples of the world who have suffered are so important is that we must never, never, allow the world to forget what happend to us. I can't help believing that is why we, as Armenians, have kind of a sacred duty to the rest of humanity. By continuing our national life outside Armenia, by continuing to develop our culture, our very existence is a reminder to the world of the harm that uncontrolled hatred can do.

"For the sake of mankind, every time someone tells you that your last name is unusual, reply that it is an Armenian name. And if that person asks, 'What is an Armenian?' be sure to tell him. Tell him everything you have learned. Tell him what you learned from your

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grandfather. Tell him about what you saw on this trip. Talk until he will listen no longer.

"If, in his lifetime, each of the six million Armenians on earth can make one hundred people really understand that the world should not be ruled by the powerful on the basis of self-interest, then we will have avenged the unjustifiable deaths of every one of our ancestors. We must persevere. We must struggle."

No one spoke. Mr. and Mrs. Sahakian, Hagop, Ani, and Berj were all thinking about what it means to be an Armenian.

As Ani sat there, she suddenly felt a little older. She wasn't sure she understood everything Berj had said, but she knew she would never forget all the things she had learned on this trip.

The Sahakian family waited patiently in line for the U.S. Customs agent at Kennedy International Airport in New York to clear their luggage. At last their turn came. They had accumulated so many souvenirs on their trip that Hagop groaned from the weight of the suitcases as he lifted them onto the inspection counter.

"Passports, please?" the uniformed agent asked.

Mr. Sahakian handed him the four documents.

"Sahakian?" The man looked at them above the rims of his metal-framed glasses. "Sahakian. That's an Armenian name, isn't it? I have an Armenian friend..."

"He already knows," Ani whispered to her mother. ~

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