



Story of Hripsimeh Iskenderian's Story  
(20 Ar. Chikhar 1915, 12/19/65)

I was born in 1900, in Sisna, a village in the Harput district of Turkey. When I was a child, our family moved and settled in Mamret el-Aziz, another town in the same district.

In 1914, Armenian houses were being searched for guns. By the help of traitors, the Turkish government uncovered lots of guns which were hidden in graves and gardens. After the massacres of Adana in 1909, Armenians had improvised and stockpiled these guns to be used for defense in the event of another wave of massacres.

When the war broke out, 25 Tashnak and Hunchak notables of our town were rounded up and tortured in prisons. This was followed by three groups of 300, 600, and 1500 youth who were banished to unknown destinations. These young men never returned back. All the Armenians of Mamret el-Aziz were overtaken by fear and anxiety.

Then came the shocking news that all the remaining Armenians of the town were to be deported but we did not know where.

At dawn one morning in June 1915, gendarmes knocked at doors ordering every family to get ready. Those families who had children below the age of ten, were to apply to the government to get donkeys for transportation. My father applied and got ~~the~~ two donkeys. He bought one more and loading our belongings we set off.

I remember very well that my mother had made lots of cakes from one and a half tins of butter which we had, so that in case we found no food on the way, we would eat the cakes. We filled two big sacs of cakes most of which broke into crumbs due to the abundance of butter.

For me the saddest moment was when I departed from my books which my mother had filled in a box.

Ours was the first caravan. We were 900 in number.

Edem Bey was the officer in charge of our caravan. It was evening and we were ordered to encamp near Moulla Koy village. We unloaded our belongings. Some were calling to find members of their families who had lagged behind or had mingled with other groups. Children went asleep immediately. Elders were ~~x~~ whispering to each other in the ~~dark~~ dark.

In the morning Edem Bey made the following tenderly declaration: "My dear brothers and sisters. Your destination is far and your path is through a desert. If you have any valuables and extra money, you can entrust them to me for safety. You may be pursued by Kurds and Arabs on the way and I am the best man to keep your valuables until you reach your destination."

Many believed and surrendered their valuables to Edem Bey. Whispers spread among the people: "Look! Look! Two sieves have filled up with golden bracelets and necklaces, and a third is half full!" Curiously I drew nearer and ... truly two-and-a-half sieves full of golden ornaments and jewelry!

After a while we were ordered to set off. Under the supervision of the gendarmes we ~~x~~ reached a village which they were calling Zouk. We passed the night in the khan (inn).

Next morning Edem Bey had another order: All male members of the caravan had to present themselves to Edem Bey because he had important things to say. Some hesitated but they were told that they had nothing to fear. All males went except some who had put on women's clothing.

Hardly an hour passed when an order was issued that the caravan would move before it was hot. Women, girls and newly-wed brides were terror-stricken. There were cries of "Our husbands! Our fathers! Where are they ... We won't go before they come ..." Some refused to move but the gendarmes, mingling in the crowd, sometimes by persuasion, and, at times hitting the rebellious with the ~~butt~~ butts of their guns, moved the caravan onward. Women were depilating themselves and hitting their chests.





Children were crying and screaming, "Papa! Papa! My brother! My brother!" You can imagine the woe and sorrow among the bewildered crowd! At that moment I remember very well my mother's encouraging words. Raising her voice and putting accent on each word she said: "My girls, my children, do not weep! Take care that you do not give up your honour! Don't be deceived by tender words and do not be scared of death! Our husbands and our brothers have departed for good and will not come back! They are martyrs! Be brave and do not give up your honour! If necessary resist and be martyred! Now the angels in heaven are watching ~~xxx~~ us to see what attitude we shall take. Are we going to be afraid and backdown or we must heroically stand up to all sorts of insults and torture and be faithful to our Christian Faith."

At noon, when our caravan was halted near a village for lunch, about a hundred women and girls gathered around my mother to hear her talk.

After an hour we were ordered to walk. Among the men who went to an unknown destination to be exterminated was my father and my brother's brother-in-law, a 24 year old man, who had grown up as an orphan. He used to get financial help from my brother in New York.

On the third day we reached a village called Bakher Madani. In the morning a declaration was made that all girls above ten years of age must go to the tent of Edem Bey. He had instructions to give them.

It was a strict order. All the girls ~~xxxxxx~~ assembled together. My mother told me, "Listen my girl, if the Bey proposes marriage, refuse him. Tell him "No!" straight in the face! The end is death. Your fathers and brothers are martyred and are watching you from heaven. If you yield your honour and falter in your religion, they will be overcome with grief and they will weep. Don't be scared. I will come with you."

She walked with us and we reached the foot of a hill where the Bey's tent was fixed. There were guards at the entrance. We went in. The Bey was seated on some cushions. Without moving from his place, he said, smiling: "Buyurunuz" (Welcome) and pointed to a place for us to sit. My mother stayed outside with some other women.

"Welcome, my children" said the Bey. "I am glad to see you all." Continuing his speech he went on: "It is my wish to see you all married, have a family and bear children. We have orders to deport you to the Arabian desert, You will be wandering there hungry and thirsty and many will die. I want to save your lives by marrying each one of you to an Effendi and you will live comfortably. If you refuse you will fall prey to the Kurds and gendarmes."

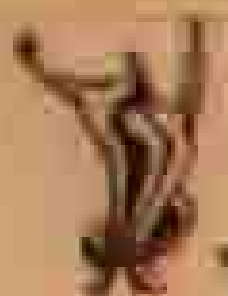
All the girls were quiet and nobody uttered a word. The Bey repeated his wish and again nobody gave an answer. He turned to a Turkish woman who was sitting next to him and they started talking together. I turned back to a girl and said, "Let us tell him that we don't want to change our religion and become Turks." A few of us said together, "We don't want to change our religion!"

The Bey answered with an angry voice: "Get out and vanish! Go to the Kurds and Arabs! Go to hell!"

After eight days of walking we reached Diyarbakir. On the way our mothers would tell us not to show our faces to the gendarmes; to wrap our heads with rags; to rub mud on our faces instead of washing. At nights elder women would rarely sleep. They would watch and guard the girls and children. They would do this by turn. Occasionally one would hear the moaning of children. One would say, "I want my brother ..." and another, "I want my papa. Why is my papa not coming?" They would cry until exhausted and then fall asleep.

Reaching Diyarbakir we encamped on the flanks of the Tigris river. In the morning we heard that Edem Bey had left and that someone else had taken over his job. A new order was issued which said, "Place all your belongings on the bank of the river and let no one touch them." Meanwhile all the donkeys, carts and means of transportation that were given to us were confiscated, and the coachmen turned back. Gendarmes





were guarding the piled loads. A few women with their children approached to get some provisions but were whipped back. At that moment an offer was made by the gendarmes and other government officials: "All those who renounce their faith to become Turks and accept the "Hak dini" (the true religion) will not go further. They will stay in Diyarbakir and live peacefully."

Everybody was looking at each other. Many were saying, "It is better to stay an Armenian and a Christian and die on the roads from hunger, rather than be a Turk." 30 families from all our caravan went and renounced their Christian faith and became Turks. Surprisingly, instead of being settled in Diyarbakir, they were told to stay with the rest, with one difference: They had to veil their faces. The next morning they were ordered to join us <sup>our</sup> march, being subject to contempt and insults.

That evening ~~the~~ villagers had come to our camp to sell us bread made of barley. We bought and gave to the children who were weeping from hunger and exhaustion.

Next day after walking an hour we came across to infants deserted in the fields. It looked as though mothers from other caravans, incapable of carrying their babies any further, had abandoned them in the fields, half-dead, to the destiny of nature.

They were bad days. Every evening, dead-tired from walking, we used to sleep in the fields putting a stone or our shoes under our heads, to serve as pillows.

From Diyarbakir to Deir ez-Zor we were searched eight times, one by one, for money and valuables. A woman had hidden her 200 gold Pounds in a pitcher of water. She slipped and the pitcher broke. The gold coins scattered causing laughter to the Bey who had the coins collected for himself. He ordered all the pitchers broken. He found no more, because, meanwhile women had hidden their coins in other places.

In a distance of two days walking from Diyarbakir, we came across to four wells full of corpses.

Near Mardin local people were coming and asking Armenian girls to be their wives. The girls always refused. Here the government astonishingly distributed fresh bread to the deportees which we ate with great appetite.

In our camp a moslem woman approached us with a young man. Caressing my head, she removed the wrapping. Holding me under the chin she raised my head and showed my face to the young man, then said to my mother: "Woman, do you give your daughter to my son to be his wife?"

My mother, frowning, turned to me and said, "Girl, didn't you rub mud to your face this morning? Cover your face and turn back!" Then she turned to the woman and said, "I don't want to marry my daughter." The woman, pretending not to hear, removed a necklace from under her veil and put it around my neck and showed me some golden ornaments hoping to charm me with them.

I started weeping. My brother's wife Arousiac who was near by pressed me on her chest. Removing the ornaments she gave them to the woman and told them to go away. It took some effort until we got rid of them.

It was late in the afternoon. We were ordered to get ready to move. We did not enter the city of Mardin. Always following the near-by paths, we moved down the slope. For a moment it so happened that I found myself alone with my mother. The caravan had split into two parts and it happened that we were in the middle. All of a sudden a pebble hit my head. I turned my head and saw a great multitude of people at the foot of a hill. Some were sitting and the others standing. They were watching us. Suddenly, a gendarme, holding the reins of his horse, stood by me. Addressing my mother he said, "Kari (woman), leave your daughter and give her to me." I was frightened. My mother, a very heroic woman, shouted to the stranger: "I won't give my daughter! You have no right to take her! Your king does not allow you to take our daughters!" Turning to me she said, "Do not weep my dear. Say the Lord's Prayer three times, and also "The Guardian of All." The gendarme was stubbornly insisting and trying to detach me from my mother. My mother, holding me tight, did not give way. I was trembling all over. After a while I told my mother in a





trembling voice, "I said the prayer three times." "Repeat all over and this time add to it, "He Taketh Care of Us." I had hardly reached the third round when the gendarme let my hand and went away.

The other half of the caravan had approached us. We joined them and continued to walk. It was dark and they were leading us through a field. The thorns of the weeds were hurting our feet and we were sometimes stumbling. After walking one and a half hours in the dark, a voice reached our ears: "We are in the wrong path. Turn back!" We turned back crying and moaning. At midnight we reached a place where we were ordered to encamp. Tired and exhausted from the endless journey, we lay down on the ground and slept. The elder women, as usual, would stay awake by turn, to keep watch on us.

In the morning a rumor spread that the government in Vêran Shêhir ("Ruined City." In some maps, "Virangehir") would improvise one donkey to each family that had children below ten years of age. That town was not far away.

My mother gave instructions to my brother's wife Arousiac to go with her mother and improvise a donkey for us, because, my brother's elder daughter Haygouhi was nine years old and the small child Zarouhi was seven. My brother himself was in New York. My mother stayed with us.

Suddenly, Haygouhi got up and with a child's simple-mindedness said, "Grandma, look how they are pulling Loucine and she is refusing to go! They are all crying!" Then, pointing her finger in another direction, she said, "Look! Look! They are also pulling one there!" My mother told Haygouhi, "Sit down my dear, don't stand up!" Just at that moment a few gendarmes stood in front of us. My mother clasped her granddaughter Haygouhi tightly and the gendarmes tried to pull the child. They were hitting her with their guns but she was still resisting. The two children and we were crying and screaming at the peak of our voice. No body came to help because every family had its own problems. There were cries and laments all over. The gendarmes, trampling on the two flanks of ~~her~~ my mother's body and beating her incessantly, succeeded in separating her arms. I wanted to help but I couldn't. I was terrified. They took Haygouhi and went away!

When the tragic news reached my sister-in-law Arousiac and her mother, they arrived lamenting and depilating themselves, but it was too late.

The same order again: Everybody should be ready to move. The gendarmes on their horses, and we were to follow on foot. It was a hot day and there was no water to drink.

We reached Vêran Shêhir. They robbed us here also. Here we paid one gold Pound for some water, but it wasn't enough to quench our thirst. At Vêran Shêhir we heard that all those who want to go to Aleppo should pay four gold Pounds for transportation. Those who still had some money or ornaments paid the fare. They took them to a nearby village, saying that they would travel by train. Next day, surprisingly, they returned back and joined the caravan. They were told ... "The railway is blocked. Go back now, we will call you later."

Arousiac's mother could not walk any longer due to fatigue, thirst and the grief of her grand-daughter Haygouhi's loss. We left her on the road and went ~~xx~~ away.

After walking for seven weeks with unspeakable hardships, we reached Deir ez-Zor. It was dark when we entered the town. Next morning, when the news spread that Armenian refugees had arrived in town, a group of local Armenians came to see us. During those days, not many refugees had arrived in the desert-town yet. Among the visitors was a widow named Hadji Loussia. She was fortyish. Later this widow took care of me for three years like a true mother. The visitors told us some encouraging words, then went away.

Hadji Loussia returned the next day and took a few families, including ours, to her home. My mother implored her not to let us down "to these dogs." "They took away my grandchild Haygouhi and I am afraid that they will take away my daughter Hripsimeh,"





she told her. My sister-in-law Arousiac implored her the same way. Hadji Loussia consented to give us refuge in her house and take care of us. Later Arousiac lived separately with her little daughter Zarouhi. She used to work as a maid in Arab families.

Hadji Loussia was a ~~truly great~~ kind-hearted woman with a truly great soul. She and her late husband, Hanna Abdo, were Armenian Catholics, natives of the town. Her husband had been a prosperous merchant. She was quite rich (This sentence has been deleted from the manuscript). She would go to the refugees' camps and distribute food and aid to her kinsmen. She would boil water in a large laundry pot and wash the orphans with her hands and break the lice on their heads with her nails. She had one son, Zahed.

My mother was not feeling well, both physically and spiritually. She was cruelly beaten on the way by the gendarmes and she was overcome with grief for the loss of her granddaughter Haygouhi. She called a priest, made her confession, and, in the evening of Saint Mary's Day (the Sunday in mid-August) 1915, she passed away.

Not many days passed when the town-crier of Deir ez-Zor declared that the Armenian refugees would be deported towards Salahiye (a village about 30 km. before Abu Kémal on the Iraqi border).

During these days the Prelate of Zeitun, Hovhannes Vartabed Karanfilian arrived in Deir ez-Zor. He was immediately imprisoned. Hadji Loussia sent a mattress and a blanket for ~~him~~ His Holiness. Shortly after his imprisonment, the Prelate died. Four days after his death, orders arrived in Deir ez-Zor that he should be hanged. They returned the mattress, expressing regret that the blanket had been used as a coffin for the Prelate's burial.

One day rumors spread that they were gathering orphans and all those interested to be taken to an "Orphanage." My sister-in-law Arousiac and her little daughter Zarouk (abbreviation of Zarouhi) joined the group. Arousiac hoped to be a supervisor or so in the "Orphanage." I told Hadji Loussia that I wanted to join because I wanted to be together with Arousiac. Hadji Loussia did not allow me to go before she would go ~~and~~ herself and find the facts. She went.

The caravan had crossed the "Big Bridge" and was heading towards Mosul, ~~via~~ via Chaddadé when Hadji Loussia reached them. Arousiac was extremely depressed and disappointed. She felt that they were taking the caravan not to an orphanage but rather to certain death in the deserts. She had regretted the decision she had taken and she wanted to return back but it was impossible. The caravan was escorted by gendarmes and the "Big Bridge" was guarded. She implored Hadji Loussia not to allow me run after them and said, "Take care of Hripsimeh. She may be the only survivor from our family." That was the last time we heard from ~~from~~ Arousiac and her little child Zarouk. They never returned back.

Later we heard from Arabs that the little boys and girls "to be taken to an orphanage" were burned alive in the caves near ~~the~~ Chaddadi and the rest massacred. The children were told, "Collect some weeds, we are going to bake bread for you." They were burnt in the fires instead. Green bushes of a certain type were added to the fires which produce a thick and poisonous smoke. Those who were not immolated by the fires, were suffocated to death in those caves by the thick smoke.

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The sister of Hadji Loussia, Saténig Hanum, used to live on the other side of our big yard. Her husband, Krikor Effendi, was a tailor. He used to keep in his house a refugee named Hovhannes and his sister Vartanoush. Hovhannes was to be my future husband. He was Krikor Effendi's apprentice.

After some weeks I went to "Emaret/khaneh" to work. Emaret/khaneh was a big place where about 300 refugees used to work for the government. They were all women and girls. Some would ~~comb~~ comb wool; others would spin it and still others would knit woolen socks for the soldiers. Our pay was one loaf of bread a day and one laddle of soup made of barley or millet. I worked there for about two years.



In the city of Deir ez-Zor there was no violence against the Armenians and no massacres. Refugees reaching the city (~~I think this sentence should be, "Refugees" "Survivors of the refugees reaching the city, A.C."~~) would encamp in the outskirts for some time and then they would be driven out towards Bagdad or Mosul. On the way they would be massacred by the savage Chechen\*tribesmen, or they would die from hunger, thirst and exhaustion.

Besides the Chechens, the Tcherkez also took part in the massacres. The ~~Arabs~~ traditionally hospitable Arabs committed no crimes against the Armenians. They would call us, "ukhteye" (an exclamation of pity).

\*Mr. Levon Varjabedian gave me the following information about the Chechen tribe of the Syrian desert:

"Most of the massacres in the deserts were executed by the Chechen tribesmen. The massacres in the deep caves around the town of Chaddadi are well known. These savage and ferocious inhabitants of the Syrian desert have originally emigrated from ~~R~~ Trans-Caucasia in Russia. Due to misery, filth and tuberculosis, their race is about to be extinguished. One of the few Chechen villages left (probably meaning "exclusively Chechen") in the Syrian desert is Safa, about 30 km. from Ras el-Ain. Between 100 and 120 Chechen families used to dwell there about 10 years ago."

Mr. Levon ~~Varj~~ Varjabedian is a topographer in eastern Syria, employed by the government. He has worked there most of his life. He is about 55 years old. His family lives in Aleppo. He is a relative of Dr. Dicran Varjabedian, radiologist in Beirut. He said that the caves near Shaddadé are situated about 5 km. from the city.

Hadji Loussia added the following information:

"When the refugees reached Deir ez-Zor, the governor of the town was Ali Suad Bey. He was a good Turk and did no harm to the Armenians. He was transferred to Bagdad, to become its Vali (governor). Then to Deir ez-Zor arrived the notorious Zaki Bey, as governor in 1916. It was this monstrous Turk who perpetrated most of the massacres on the Armenians. It was Zaki Bey who gathered, organized and used the Chechens as a tool to massacre the Armenians. He stayed less than a year?"

Hadgi Loussia's son Zahed got married in 1928 with an Armenian Orthodox girl. Zahed died in 1943 and his wife lived with Hadji Loussia in Beirut. ~~x~~ "When we were passing near Chaddadi" Mrs Zahed now recalls, "they pointed at a hill saying, "This hill was the slaughter-house of the Armenian refugees" (Apparently the victims were slaughtered and rolled on the other side of the hill).

Mr. Varjabedian told me that he knows a survivor from the Chaddadi massacres who lives in Aleppo. If he meets him, he will take his story and send it to me.

A.C.

When the war ended we went to Aleppo and from there we passed on to Aintab. I got engaged and was married to Hovhannes.

In Aintab I received a letter from my brother in New York. He had discovered that his daughter Haygouhi, who was seized by the gendarmes near Viranşehir, was in the German orphanage in Harput. In those days, members of families who had lost each other during the deportations, would give their names ~~in~~ and addresses to newspapers and in this way they would find each other. My brother was asking me to save Haygouhi and send her to the U.S.A.

My husband Hovhannes paid a certain sum of money to a camel driver to bring Haygouhi from Harput. After 15 days my nephew Haygouhi was back in Aintab.

It was a rainy night when we heard of Haygouhi's arrival. We went to the camel driver's house. We were all moved and shed tears of joy when we saw and embraced Haygouhi. She was pale and weak.





In 1921 we moved to Aleppo. Haygouhi stayed with us for a short time, then we sent her to her father, Michael Adjemian, in New York. There she got married with a certain Stephan Nalbandian. She has two daughters, Anahid and Zarouhi. We correspond with each other. A few years ago Haygouhi paid us a visit here in Beirut.

From Aleppo we moved and settled in Beirut. My husband Hovhannes passed away in 1938 in Aleppo. I have two girls and a boy. My son Iskender is in the plastics business. We live comfortably in one of the modern residential quarters of Beirut, Sin el-Fil.

Hadji Loussia, our dear benefactor, is also in Beirut. At her advanced age of 92, she is amazingly healthy, lively, and when she starts talking about the events in Deir ez-Zor, she doesn't stop unless interrupted!

Hripsimeh Iskenderian

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P.S. Hripsimeh Iskenderian's daughter wrote to Haygouhi in New York to write to us a brief account of her experiences between the time she was seized near Veran Shehir up to the time she entered the German orphanage in Harput. Miss Iskenderian also wrote to Haygouhi's daughter, who is "very much interested in Armenian history" to help her mother write the account. When we receive Haygouhi's story, we will send it to you. Haygouhi's account will make this interesting story complete.

A.C.

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Concerning the burning of children alive, this horrible act was not confined to the caves around Shaddade alone but it was something general. Every survivor from the deportations I have talked to knows an episode or something related to this fact. The following story was told to me by my mother :

My father's cousin Nishan Chelebian, now 88 years old, repatriated to Armenia in 1947 with his family. During the deportations he reached Meskéné. His brother and his sister-in-law being dead, he was taking care of their son. Near Meskéné they came and told him that they were taking the children to an orphanage. He consented. The little boy, his nephew, cried and was reluctant to go, but he was convinced. They were mounted on carts and taken away. After some time, the cart-drivers themselves returned to tell that the children were not taken to an orphanage but burnt alive somewhere beyond in the desert. Nishan Chelebian later fled from Meskéné.

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My father-in-law Moses was in the States during the deportations. His first wife and three children, Effie, Jack and Mihran, were deported. His brother Avedis, who had just returned from the States, was also deported. Jack went to the army. Effie and Mihran, while in the streets of Aleppo, were attracted by the news of "the orphanage", so they joined. When Avedis was fleeing from Meskéné, he saw some carts, heading clumsily towards the desert. In one of them he noticed two of his nephews, Effie and Mihran. He told them in Kessabian dialect: "A little beyond there is a bushy place. When you reach there jump from the carts and hide behind the bushes. Then come and join me. Be sure to return because they will burn you alive a little beyond."

Their mother and uncle Avedis died during the deportations. Effie and Mihran are in Los Angeles. Jack, who fled from the army, is also there. Effie was married to a cousin of my father, the late Jack Chelebian. In 1965 Jack paid us a visit. He wanted to see the places where he used to loiter, in Aleppo, during the deportations. We made the trip.

I can supply you with more of these stories, related to this particular phase of the deportations, if you care to have them.

A.C.