

Reverend Father
The Abbot Pascal Maldjian.

Letter
(1919)

Among those brought before a Court Martial was a young Catholic priest -- ^{Reverend Father} the ~~Abbot~~ Pascal Maldjian. As a boy of nine he had witnessed the great massacre of 1895, when his father was killed in Marash, along with eight to nine thousand other Armenians. That slaughter had been commemorated in the grim names given to certain quarters of the city: the section known as Boghas Kesan or the Place of Throat Cutting; and Kanle Dere, the Bloody Stream. The boy spent the next eight years in Jerusalem and eight more in Rome studying for the priesthood. On the very day of the assassination which triggered the World War at Sarajevo -- June 28, 1914-- he departed from Rome to assume his duties as Priest in the Armenian Catholic Church -- Sourp Purgitch, or Church of the Saviour, in Marash, reaching that city less than a month before the outbreak of war.

In 1916 Turkish gendarmes captured two Armenian guerillas in the mountains north of Marash as they were returning to their hide-away on Akhyr Dagh with a supply of groceries purchased in Marash from a Turkish merchant. The police, seeking the source of these supplies, enquired among the Armenians merchants and learned that ^{Father} the ~~Abbot~~ Pascal had recently purchased a considerable stock of provisions from one Nishan Yaghjian. Police came to the church for the priest:

"Are you a priest or a revolutionary?" one of them shouted.

"My business is to preach the Gospel -- only that!" he replied, whereupon one of the police struck him on the mouth. Taken to the court for a hearing, he denied the charge that he was in communication with the Armenian guerillas/ ^{and stated} that he had purchased supplies for his brother Pierre who had a small store at Intilli, serving the laborers on the railway. These goods had been shipped



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? in a caravan licensed by the police. The guerillas, in deed, testified that they had made their purchases from a Turkish grocer on a Sunday, when all Armenian stores were closed. Nevertheless, ^{magistrate} the ~~less~~ ^{priest} ~~the~~ ordered the ~~Abbot~~ and the grocer Nishan as well, to be transferred to Aleppo for trial on the charge of endangering communications between the Armies in the north and those in the south.

After a few ghastly weeks in the local prison, the ^{Reverend Father} ~~Abbot~~ Pascal, the grocer Nishan and about a dozen others were handcuffed and marched to Aleppo under escort of gendarmes. His bishop had provided a horse for the ^{priest} ~~Abbot~~, but he found it difficult to control the rather fractious animal while handcuffed, and begged the nearest gendarme to remove his bonds. Unable to secure this favor he cried out in frustration, and the commanding officer came to him. The ^{priest} ~~Abbot~~ offered him money, which the officer refused.

"Keep your money. You are going to need it! But I can see that you are to be trusted." He unlocked the handcuffs and rode beside the priest. "There are many innocent men -- great men whom we read about in history -- who have been punished unjustly. I believe that you are such a person."

The column moved slowly, for the other prisoners were on foot. On the second night at the village of Karabiyikli the humane officer assigned the ^{priest} ~~Abbot~~ a place beside him on the roof of the khan in order to protect him from molestation by certain members of his detachment. The next morning the officer -- an educated man from Urfa -- bade goodbye to the ^{Reverend Father} ~~priest~~, for he and his detachment were to return to Marash. He instructed the commander of the new escort to see that the ^{priest} ~~Abbot~~ was well cared for.

The remainder of the journey was leisurely, and harsh treatment came only at Killis. There the police searched the priest's belongings and confiscated his new shoes and linen. When they



discovered also a fork, spoon and table knife they beat him with a cow-hide whip.

"Don't you know that a knife is forbidden?"

On reaching Aleppo they reported for identification at the government building, and were then taken to the prison at the foot of the great citadel. ^{Father Pascal} ~~The Abbot~~ and Nishan the grocer were assigned to a filthy grotto reserved for those condemned to death. The floor served all purposes, including toilet 'facilities'. The next morning the prison doctor administered an injection which the Abbot supposed to be a sedative in preparation for execution. Noting his fear, the doctor whispered to him in Armenian -- to the astonishment and joy of the prisoner -- that it was merely an immunization to ensure his survival until the time of execution!

^{Reverend Father} The Abbot bribed a prison guard to carry a message to the Archbishop of Aleppo, asking for support, for prisoners depended on gifts of food from friends outside the prison, the regular diet being inadequate to maintain life. Thanks to the Archbishop's intervention, the harsh conditions of prison life were gradually moderated, until finally ^{Father} ~~the Abbot~~ Pascal came to be the cell-mate of a wealthy merchant of Aleppo and became self-supporting by teaching French. Among his pupils was a Moslem -- the son of the Mufti of Aleppo -- under arrest as a British spy. Later he ^{was} taken from the prison to be hanged on a scaffold erected facing the door of his own home.

^{Reverend Father} The Abbot was brought before the Court Martial only after nine months of imprisonment. Because contradictory evidence had been submitted in Marash he was acquitted, but not released from prison. "Turkish justice," noted the ^{priest} ~~Abbot~~, adding that this was better than release and deportation. Then by order of Jemal Pasha sixty



five of the one hundred and twenty prisoners were notified that they had been sentenced to death by hanging. Among these was the ^{Reverend Father} Abbot Pascal.

News of this was brought to the attention of Hagop Agha Kherlakian, a member of ^{Father} the ~~Abbot~~ Pascal's own congregation in Marash, also a deputy in the Turkish parliament. Hagop Agha first approached the Apostolic delegate to Constantinople -- Monsignor Dolchi -- who in turn went personally to the Sultan Abdul Hamid.

"You should see the Minister of Interior, or the Minister of War," said the Sultan. "I am here only to sign papers!"

Knowing that appeals to Talât Bey or Enver Pasha were useless, Mgr. Dolchi addressed a note to Pope Benedict, asking him to intervene, and when the Pope's appeal for clemency reached the Sublime Porte, the sentence of death for all of the condemned men was commuted to life imprisonment at hard labor. The guards congratulated the prisoners, commenting on the Sultan's clemency. These negotiations had taken time. For nine months the sentence of death had hung over the head of ^{Father} the ~~Abbot~~ Pascal.

At the time of reprieve, the Abbot's cell mates were a French Dominican priest Hyacinth Simon, and a Syrian Archbishop, each of them accused of treason. In order to satisfy a longing for the liturgy of his church, the Abbot borrowed from the Archbishop of Aleppo the items required for an altar, and set this up in the cell. Bread was easily obtained, but wine was prohibited. The problem was solved by having wine smuggled in a dark bottle under a layer of olive oil. The guard thrust his finger into the neck of the bottle, tasted the oil and allowed it to pass.



After twenty eight months in prison, the day of liberation came with the retreat of Turkish forces pursued by the armies of General Allenby and the Arab Prince Faisal. The Turkish evacuation was followed by the tumultuous entry of the Arab Desert Mounted Corps. A day of anarchy and looting followed. The prison doors were broken down -- not to free the prisoners, but to rob them. Most of the prisoners fled into the city, but ^{The Reverend Fathers} ~~Pere~~ Hyacinth and ~~the Abbot~~ Pascal -- unacquainted with the city -- remained in their cell. Suddenly armed Bedouine appeared, taking everything of value. They dragged the two priests by their heels across the courtyard, tearing their backs on the rough pavement, and stripped them completely naked. Concealed in ^{Father Pascal's} ~~the Abbot's~~ clothing was his precious diary and a sack containing twenty seven Turkish gold pounds, which represented his earnings from the teaching of French, and these were lost. A small boy who had watched the attack on the priests reported to an arabaji that there were two priests in the prison court "dressed just like Adam". The coachman, nephew of a Syrian bishop, came to investigate and took the naked men to the bishop's home, where at last they were in safety and comfort. * 53

*(Memoirs de Mgr. Jean Naslian. Vol. 1, p. 387; and Personal interview.)