

**PILGRIMAGE TO WESTERN ARMENIA,
CILICIA AND CAPPADOCIA**

Embracing the Land
of our Ancestors:
The Presence
of the Past

Dr. Garbis Der-Yeghiayan

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PREFACE

Some things that happen to us when we are young shape the rest of our lives. At the time they occur, they may not seem important. In some cases that may even seem routine. Only when we have accumulated more experience do we begin to appreciate their importance.

The summers I spent with my paternal grandfather Garabed in Chtora, Lebanon, and my maternal grandfather **Stepan** in Beirut, Lebanon, had a lasting, unforgettable influence on my life. My grandfathers' stories about Armenian life in our rightful historic homeland shaped my dedication as an ardent servant to my own Armenian people. They showed me how faith in God, persistent hard work, and courageous effort strengthened our people and preserved our precious culture for future generations. They instilled in me an undying love of the legacy for which my family members had shed their precious blood so that I might enjoy the bounty of their sacrifices.

Being Armenian is a personal choice as well as a genetic assignment. I could have changed my name and in other ways merged myself into the general population. My parents and other relatives have instilled in me a deep respect for the accomplishments of our people. Consequently, I treasure my Armenian heritage and always strive to show my sons and other Armenian youth that for more than 4,000 years, our Armenian ancestors have accomplished what few others have been able to contribute to world civilization during a similar period. Similar opportunities exist today and will exist in the future for Armenians.

Throughout my life, I have heard exciting stories about my ancestors and the beautiful land they inhabited in Cilicia, Cappadocia and Western Armenia. Each story described the devoted courage Armenians had in the face of many challenges, their dedicated efforts to triumph over bigotry, their devotion to our Christian faith, and their sacrificial hard work to preserve our precious heritage for me and other Armenians of my generation.

learned through these stories how my great-grandfather, his family and extended family members were in shivering cold from their homes into a wheat field during the winter I of 1915. Forty-four relatives did not survive this brutal treatment, including my paternal great-grandfather. However, his daughter-in-law, my great-aunt, did live to tell us about our homeland and the atrocities committed to take it from us, and about the death of her own infant daughter.

These stories kindled in me a deep-seated passion to visit our historic lands. I wanted to see where my great-grandparents and their ancestors had lived for many centuries. I wanted to visit the villages where my grandparents were born, and to walk in the streets where they had walked. I wanted to find the legendary roots of my heritage - - Mount Ararat - - and to see firsthand the soil from which my ancestors created a rich culture that influenced the course of human history.

In seeing and touching the remnants of our Armenian nation, I discovered my spiritual home. I was not prepared for the effect on me of the devastation of our

historic homeland. I was most surprised by my "tears." I did not expect to shed so many tears of joy, exhilaration, and sadness. My body cried. My soul cried. My heart cried.

This chronicle represents the elegy of a son, who has come to the tombstone of his forefathers to shed tears that have welled up in his heart for so long. It is the bitter-sweet reminiscences of a devoted son who has come to pay tribute to his people, who preferred torture and death to slavery and injustice, cognizant that the flower of their sacred faith shall bud and blossom and that over death Armenia shall rise in glorious victory.

GOING HOME!

My annual pilgrimages to Cilicia, Cappadocia and Western Armenia, offer me and my fellow pilgrims a panorama of unforgettable moments. Suddenly, the past and the present fuse seamlessly. These are no ordinary sightseeing trips but a fateful encounter with our historical roots. As we walk through the ancient streets of our ancestral lands, from village to village, from city to city, we behold in awe the priceless Armenian treasures "hidden" in plain sight. This sky, this very same earth, this very land was where our parents and grandparents were born, grew up, lived and died, and worshipped in churches that now lie in various stages of neglect, ruin and outright desecration.

Yet, we experience heart-warming and triumphant moments as well. As we crisscross this historically rich land, time and again we are transfixed by the historical sites, structures and objects that trumpeted the golden age of our courageous people's history . . .

Every year, as the month of July approaches, my heartbeat begins to accelerate in anticipation of yet another trip down memory lane, down the lanes of Cilicia, Cappadocia and Western Armenia. As departure day nears, it seems that I can actually hear in my mind's ear, the voice of my grandfather telling me: "Never forget that that beautiful and blessed land has always been the indisputable homeland of the Armenian People. That is where your fathers were born; therefore that is your Fatherland."

During our flight from Los Angeles to Istanbul, I could sense that unusual feelings were parading upon the emotional landscapes of my fellow pilgrims. The magical places that they had heard about from their parents and grandparents were soon to become real and concrete. Personal history, once shrouded in mists, was to take sharp edges and concrete reality right in front of them. They would soon see and commune with the places where their ancestors had lived and thrived, the fields and orchards that they had cultivated, the culture and civilization that they had built . . .

We arrived at the Yeshilkoy International Airport located near Istanbul without any incident, yet our inner world was bristling with feelings. "Yeshilkoy", meaning "Green Village", is located 10 miles west of Istanbul downtown, and is the exact

place where the Armenian Question officially “introduced” in international politics. Yeshilkoy’s old name was San Stephano, the place where the famous treaty was signed between Ottoman Empire and the invading Russian Army, whose soldiers had arrived just 2 miles west of the San Stephano monastery in March, 1878. Those were the days of the “Armenians Reforms” (Haygagan Parenorokoomner), the ill-fated Article 16 and Khrimyan Hayrig.

The customs officer at the airport was obviously unaware of Khrimyan Hayrig, or our group’s relationship with him. He quickly stamped our passports welcoming us to Istanbul. All was routine, yet, suddenly, almost involuntarily, materialized in front of my mind’s eye, the silhouettes of the long caravans of Armenians who ninety years ago were yanked from their hearths, and were herded into the barren desert to die “all the deaths” in the world. A gut-wrenching contrast indeed – awesome is the power of memory.

Moments later, we transferred into a flight bound for Adana. An hour later, as I looked down at the stunning beauty of the mountains and lakes of Cilicia, wave after wave of tears flooded my inner being. But I had to hold my emotions in check, since our itinerary consisted of a 4,000-kilometer journey through the history-rich villages and cities of Darson, Mersin, Antioch, Musa Dagh, Iskenderun, Kerek-khan, Beylan, Sis, Anazarpa, Marash, Zeytoun, Aintab, Birejik, Urfa, Severeg, Diyarbekir-Dikranagerd, Evereg, Guesaria, Guermir, Talas, Tomarza, Sepastia, Zara, Urgup, Bogazliyan, Gurun, Malatya, Kharpert, Peri, Palu, Bingeul, Mush, Arapgir, Agn, Gamakh, Erzinga, Shabin Karahisar, Tamzara, Ordu, Drabizon, Hamshen, Rize, Hopa, Erzurum, Artvin, Ardahan, Kars, Ani, Pergri, Van-Akhtamar, Igdir, Beyazid, Mount Ararat and Bolis.

ARMENIAN CILICIA

During the early 10th century the Seljuk Turks from Central Asia came hurtling through the continent.

Meeting with little resistance from a weak Byzantium, they invaded Asia Minor as well as the Armenian highlands. Thousands of Armenians fled south, taking refuge in the rugged Taurus Mountains and along the Mediterranean coast, where in 1080 they founded the Kingdom of Cilicia (or, Lesser Armenia) under the young prince Roupen. The town of Sis (now Kozan) became their capital.

While Greater Armenia struggled against foreign invaders and the subsequent loss of their statehood, the Cilician Armenians lived in wealth and prosperity. Geographically, they were in the ideal place for trade and they quickly embraced western European ideas including its feudal class structure. Cilicia became a country of barons, knights and surfs, the court of Sis even advocated European clothes. Latin and French became the national languages. During the Crusades, the Christian armies used the kingdom as a safe haven on their way to Jerusalem. This period of Armenian history is regarded as the most exciting for science and culture, as schools and monasteries flourished, teaching theology, philosophy, medicine and mathematics. It was also the golden age of Armenian Ecclesiastic manuscript painting noted for its lavish decorations and western influences. The Cilician Kingdom thrived for nearly 300 years before it fell to the Memluks of Egypt.

The Armenian ruler, Levon IV, spent his final years wandering Europe trying to raise support to recapture his kingdom, before dying in Paris in 1393.

ADANA

My First Encounter with My Ancestors

Upon landing at Adana Airport, we were welcomed by Selim, the affable young man who was to serve as our driver. After warm words of welcome, feeling very much at home, we began our land journey.

Situated in the middle of the Chukurova Plain (Cilician Plain), Adana is the fourth largest city of Turkey, nestled in the most fertile agricultural area of the whole country which is fed by the life-giving waters of Seyhan (Seehoon) river. The city's name originates in mythology, where it was said to have been founded by Adanos, the son of Kronus (the Greek god of weather).

Adana was a flourishing city when most of Europe was still in the dark ages. Since history's dawn, time and time again it has been conquered by various armies. Tigran the Great, the Armenian King, conquered it and ruled over it between 95-54 B.C. He transformed it into an important trade and military center. During the time of the Crusaders, Adana was such a flourishing city that European princes engaged in pitched battles to conquer it. When the Memeluks conquered Sis, the capital of Cilician Armenia, King Levon IV retreated, and between 1320 -1342 made Adana his capital. At the end of the 15th century, the Egyptians conquered it and kept it till 1841. But after signing a treaty with Ibrahim Pasha, they ceded the city to the Turks, and it has remained under Turkish rule ever since.

In 1909, from April 1-14, when the Young Turks' government was in power, Turks torched over 5,000 Armenian houses, 12 churches, 17 schools, and thousands of shops and commercial centers were devastated. The Adana Massacres were a preview of a more sinister plan to once and for all ethnically cleanse the Armenian population from its 3,000-year long homeland, and to eradicate every Armenian from the face of the earth. This plan was implemented in 1915, when Turks piled up the Armenians into trains, transported them to the concentration camp in Katma, and from there sent them on foot, without food or water, to the gruesome death-trap of Der Zor.

But that was all in the past, wasn't it? Pain fades away, doesn't it? Or does it?

It was extremely painful to stroll down the narrow, semi-ruined streets of Adana, and suddenly come across Armenian churches that had been converted into mosques and public baths!

Similarly, it was heart-wrenching to pause by the banks of the river Seehoon (Seyhan), where, according to eyewitnesses, countless Armenians went to their unmarked watery graves. So this is how civilization functions . . .

We continued our explorations of Adana's landmarks by walking across the ancient Tashkopru (Stone Bridge), which was built by Emperor Hadrian and then restored by Emperor Justinian. The 2nd century Roman stone bridge across the Seehoon River is a marvel of construction. 319 meters long and with 14 (formerly 21) arches, the bridge is still in heavy use today. From the high vantage point of the bridge we scanned the horizon and could see the ancient quarters of the city next to the modern

developments separated by the E5 north-south Highway. Further away on the horizon, we could see the Davros (Taurus) mountains in the north, and the Amanos Mountains in the east. And by the bank of the river, next to the Hilton Hotel, the Sabandji Central Mosque (Sabanci Merkez Camii) with a 28,500 capacity, six hallowed minarets and the highest dome in Turkey, dominates everything else. It is the third largest mosque in the world and a testament to the continued strength of Islam in the southeast. The American military base, Injirlik, is a few miles to the east of the city.

We descended from the bridge and like proprietors and rightful owners, walked the streets and alleys of the once Armenian quarter of the town. We could easily differentiate the Armenian houses from the rest. Their windows were rectangular which allowed more light and air. In contrast, the Turkish houses looked small, lonesome with small square windows. This, of course, proves that Armenians were more open to letting the outside world penetrate their inner abodes. They preferred to have more air, more light, and more interaction with the outside world.

One can get the feel of a city only by walking through its byways and sideways. And it seemed that fellow pilgrims were intent on surveying every inch of their ancestors' city and occasionally a few would often leave the group to explore and photograph the hidden corners and alleys of his beloved fatherland.

The Ethnography Museum of the city, however, which once was a large church from the Era of the Crusaders, offered not a word about the cultural contributions of Armenians to the city. It includes a reconstruction of an old Adana house, a collection of ceremonial weaponry and firearms and displays of copper kitchenware, tents, carpets, textiles. Case in point is the towering clock-tower (Buyuk Saat Kulesi) on El-Munif Street, where the sound of metalworking echoes through the air. Here was an architectural wonder which was built in 1882 by famed Armenian architects Krikor Bezdikian and Kaspar Avakian, but none of the thousands of people who saw it everyday have any clue who actually designed and built it.

After paying a visit to the covered bazaar, we walked on in search of the Armenian church of Saint Hagop. We found the building intact, but alas the spirit had long departed. The church has been converted into "Yagh" mosque. Standing reverently by the alter we sang the Lord's Prayer and Lord. Have Mercy on us. We moved on to the Nourihass passage, where the building of the former Apkarian School stands. We also visited the Armenian Evangelical Church and School, the former Armenian hospital, and the Franciscan Saint Paul Church, which today is the only functioning Catholic Church in Adana. A Greek family nowadays occupies the two-storey Armenian-owned building next to the hospital building. As in previous years, we once again enjoyed their warm hospitality. We left Adana with mixed emotions and proceeded onto Darson (Tarsus), only 20 miles to the west, and then to Mersin, another 20 miles.

DARSON (TARSUS) AND MERSIN

Armenian Inscriptions Embracing Us

We are in the middle of the fertile Cilicia Plain (*Tashdayin Giligia*) now renamed as Chukurova plain. Driving westwards, we arrive at Darson (Tarsus), the birthplace of

Apostle Paul. He was born as Saul of Tarsus and returned after his conversion on the road to Damascus fleeing persecution in Palestine. He seems to have been proud of his roots and is described in the Bible as having told the Roman commandant of Jerusalem: "I am a Jew, a Tarsian from Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city."

Tarsus was the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia from 72 A.D. Before then it was a major linen and lumbering center during the time of the Greeks, and prior to that it was the seat of the provincial governor during the time of the Persians. Tarsus was known for its wealth and for its great schools which are said to have rivaled Athens and Alexandria. Located in what is today southern Turkey, Tarsus was situated adjacent to the Cydus River, about 18 kilometers north of the Mediterranean Sea.

Some historians believe that this was the place where Cleopatra met Mark Anthony for the first time in 41 B.C, and turned him into a "strumpet's fool". Across from the massive Ataturk statue in the center of the town is Cleopatra's Gate, a beautiful arch that once marked the ancient city's entrance. Today, the arch is trapped in traffic circle. The old houses, narrow streets, and shady fir trees promptly attracted our keen attention. We quickly moved to the Saint Paul Well (Sen Pol Kuyusu), which unfortunately was nothing more than a borehole in the ground covered by a removable lid. However, as it's said to be on the site of Saint. Paul's house, the steady stream of visitors gladly pay a fee for a sip of water from a bucket hauled up from the depths. Of the well-adorned well, only the round stone slab remains from about 20 A.D.

We also visited the nearby Saint. Paul Church, now converted to a museum. I thought it was outrageous that we had to buy tickets to enter the former Armenian Church of Soorp Boghos, which was now functioning as a "museum."

At the request of several fellow pilgrims, we paid a visit to the Saint Paul College where their loved ones had studied. Saint Paul College, now renamed Tarsus American College (high school), this prestigious institution of higher learning was established by Rev. Haroutune Jenanian in 1888 and until recently it still was administered by American missionaries. It was genuinely touching to watch the pilgrims gingerly enter the venerable campus of the old college, with a group-photograph of their family members' graduating class in hand. The administrators of the college gave us a very warm welcome, and were fascinated to see a picture of their college taken ten decades ago. They immediately requested to make a photocopy of the photograph for their own archives. With great regrets we left the impressive campus of this historical college where a great number of Armenians had once taught and studied. This world-renowned institution played a prominent role in the educational and cultural life of the region in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Once again, we came across to a church that has been converted to the "Eski Jami" (old mosque). This ancient town's exit is marked by an arch near the Eski Jami called Kanjik Kapisi ("Beach Gate").

As we drove through Darson, I happily observed that the inhabitants were still continuing the ancient Armenian tradition of covering their roofs with a canopy of grapevines.

We moved westwards toward the Mediterranean Sea. At the gates of Mersin, the Turkish District Governor of Rotary International welcomed our group warmly and offered us his assistance. Recently, due to his efforts, 25 Armenian young boys and girls from Yerevan had come and lived with families in Mersin for 15 days. This group of youngsters had given a song and dance performance, charming the locals, among them, 200 Armenians, who still live in Mersin.

The largest Mediterranean port in Turkey, Mersin is the first of three large cities that grid the Ceyhan delta. Currently, Mersin is considered one of the key commercial centers in Turkey coupled with its role as an international free-trade zone. Mersin has blossomed into a mid-sized cosmopolitan city in response to Adana's need for a Mediterranean port. Travelers mostly find the city useful as a dock from which to catch a ferry to Magosa (Famagusta) in Northern Cyprus.

The District Governor of Rotary International accompanied us as we passed through the sea-town of Erdemit to get to the castle of “Gorigos” (Korykos/Corycos, Kizkalesi or Maiden's Castle), located north-east of Selevgia (Sikifke) on the Mediterranean shore. Its chief landmarks are two castles, one on the shore (land castle), and its sister, lying 200 meters offshore. Local fishermen ferried us over to explore the ruins of the fortress which was conquered by Toros II, during the Era of the Cilician Kingdom, and which was subsequently renovated by King Levon II. The Governor pointed out Armenian inscriptions on the Eastern Tower of the castle, which depicted the achievements of King Hetoum I and King Levon II, who undertook large scale renovation projects during their reigns. The Turks tell the story that King Levon II who ruled the region in medieval times had a beautiful daughter, Zabelle, whom he doted on. One day, a fortune teller tells the king that his lovely daughter will die prematurely as a result of a poisonous snakebite. The king builds the “Gorigos” castle in order to keep her daughter safe from the predestined calamity. One day, one of the king's advisers sends a basket of fruit out to the island for her, out of which slid a snake. And of course the snake slithers out and snares the girl. According to local stories, the snake still lives on the island and the only people to venture to it are tourists for whose benefit boat services operate from the western end of the beachfront.

In order to ascend to the summit of the Gorigos fortress, it was necessary to climb very steep and narrow steps. I couldn't resist the adventure. And along with four fellow pilgrims, we undertook to climb the arduous steps. It was well worth it. With a cool breeze caressing our faces in the deep silence, we felt thoroughly elated and detached from the world. There we were, over eight centuries later, contemplating our history on the summit of a fortress where King Hetoum I lived in 1251 . . . The joy we felt on that summit was truly sublime.

Returning to the shore, some of us we could not resist the temptation to take a dip in the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea, we swam at the very western border of Armenian Cilicia, and the most south-western point of our pilgrimage that was appropriately called as our wildest national dream: “Armenia from Sea to Sea” (*Dzovits Dzov Hayasdan*). At this point, on the first day of our pilgrimage, this was a like first baptism.

Upon our return to Mersin, we stayed at the beautiful, multi-storey Hotel Taxim International, to continue our pilgrimage early next morning. That night there was a wedding reception going on in the hotel's banquet hall. The Governor invited me join him since the wedded couple were close relatives of his. Out of respect, I briefly visited the banquet hall, and then went to bed early since I had a five o'clock appointment with the Governor next morning, to visit Armenian historical sites. The Armenian lineage of these locations had only recently been verified, thanks to the efforts and explorations of the Governor. I greatly appreciated his tireless efforts and courage to reveal the truth.

A few hours later, we rejoined the group and paid a visit to the Armenian Church, as well as an impressive cultural center, which, according to the Governor, was built with the stones of the Armenian Church.

It was difficult to say goodbye to Mersin and to the Governor, whom I had met a year earlier in Yerevan, Armenia. There, the two of us ascended to "Dzidzernagapert" and prayed and lit candles at the Genocide Monument. From that day on, a unique bond developed between us.

ISKENDERUN AND BEYLAN

Worshipping in Our Mother Church

In the afternoon, we drove alongside the Amanos Mountains and entered the beautiful, multi-cultural and multi-lingual seaside city of Iskenderun (formerly Alexandretta), where about forty Armenian families reside. The city was originally founded to commemorate the victory of Alexander the Great over the Persian Emperor Darius at the Battle of Issos in 332 B.C. It was a major trading center in Roman times, and is still an important port. The people of Iskenderun are proud of their multicultural city and of its remaining Christian and Jewish communities. The surviving Armenian Apostolic, as well as Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches are hidden in the backstreets.

We left our hotel on foot and taking the Shehit Pamir Boulevard and proceeded toward the "Karasoon Manoog" Armenian Church (Forty Martyrs) built in 1872. The chairman of the Board of the church warmly welcomed us. He has an accounting office next to the church, and thus is always available to accommodate visitors. With great reverence we entered the church, lit candles, and sang canticles. We were delighted to see a functioning Armenian church which still serves the needs of the Armenian faithful. The Chairman recounted a great many details to us about the lifestyle of the community there. As we left that holy Armenian Church, a happy and serene mood overtook me, and grew more palpable as we continued our tour by visiting the "St. Nicholas" Greek Church, built in 1876, and located on the other side of Shehit Pamir Boulevard, and the "Saint George" Greek Church on Denizdjeeler Boulevard. We also paid a visit to the very large 19th century Saint Mary's Catholic Church.

We left Iskenderun crossing the Amanos Mountains at Beylan, a stunningly beautiful town nested in the lap of nature. We continued our journey of discovery and went to

the Armenian Church and took many photographs. Beylan has always occupied a strategic military position, and is also known as “The Gates of Syria”, since through this mountain pass traveled all the armies of the west to conquer the East: from **Alexander** the Great, to the Romans, to the Crusaders, as well as Memluks and finally Ottomans.

In Beylan, at one time, the Armenians had a strong religious-cultural-educational presence. There even exists a “Beylan Dialect” (*Beylani Parpar*), and **several Beylantzis proudly speaks this dialect in ... Los Angeles, California!**

We then entered the fertile plain of Antioch. Traveling across large swaths of cotton fields dotted with villages, we arrived at The Orontes (Asi) River, which loops through these fields and empties into the Mediterranean.

ANTIOCH

Witnessing the Birth of Christianity

We entered the ancient city of Antioch (Antakya), in the province of Hatay. Antioch was founded by the Seleucids in 300 B.C., and served as their capital. King Tigran the Great conquered Antioch and made it the second capital of his empire for 17 years, until 68 B.C. Romans captured it from Tigran and Antioch became the third largest city in the Roman Empire, and during the birth of Christianity, a most important Christian center. Apostle Peter had once founded a cave-church there, which is considered by many as the world’s “earliest” Christian church! Now, the church is transformed into a museum. About 3 kilometers from the center in the northeastern outskirts of the town, we visited the cave-church of Saint Peter cut into the slopes of Mt. Stauria (Mountain of the Cross). To the right of the altar faint traces of fresco can still be seen, and some of the simple mosaic floor survives. The water dripping in the corner is said to cure sickness. This site is recognized as the earliest place where Christians met and prayed secretly. According to tradition, this cave was the property of Saint Luke the Evangelist, who was from Antioch, and that he donated it to the burgeoning Christian congregation as a place of worship. Apostles Peter and Paul lived in Antioch for a few years and preached in the city. Currently there are more than five thousand Christians still living in the city, mainly Greek Orthodox and some Latins. We also read in the New Testament that between 47 and 54 A.D, Apostle Paul and Barnabas continuously preached in Antioch because the population there at the time had degenerated into sin.

During the Second Century AD, Antioch boasted a population of half a million, and served as a key hub between East and West on the Silk Road. Antioch was devastated by earthquakes in the 6th century and fell into Arab hands in 628. Although recaptured by the Byzantines, its role was gradually displaced by the rise of Constantinople. In 1098, Antioch was captured by the Crusaders after a seven-month siege, and became the capital of the Principality of Antioch. At that time, when the Roupinian Dynasty was ruling neighboring Cilicia, the city had a very large Armenian population. The Egyptian Memluks conquered it in 1268, and kept it till Sultan Selim I conquered it in 1516, and made it part of the Ottoman Empire.

The city is still the titular seat of five Christian Patriarchs - three Catholic (Syrian Catholic, Maronite and Greco-Melchite), one Greek Orthodox, and one Syrian Jacobite - although none are based in the city any longer. Currently, there are two functioning churches in the city: The Capuchin Chapel on Kourtouloush Street, and the icon-rich Russian Church on Heukumet Street, near the Rana Bridge. Recently the North Koreans built a Protestant church on the premises of the former French Consulate building. At the cross-section of Kemal Pasha and Koortooloush Boulevards, there is the Habibi Nakkar mosque, which previously was a church during the Byzantine Era. There's a strong Arab presence in this city of olive trees. We had a great time chatting with them in their own mother tongue.

Currently, Hatay is under Arabic influence, and enjoys close ties with the Arab world. This portion of land was given to the Turks as a gift-bribe by the French in 1939, to secure their allegiance against Hitler's Germany. Riots and rebellion rose up in Antioch in 1983, and to this day there is a dispute whether it belongs to Turkey or Syria. As for the Armenian ancestry, the city that once was the "Southern Capital" of the Armenian Empire for 17 years, now has less than 17 Armenian families, almost all from neighboring Mousa Ler. Yet, Antioch is relatively more "**densely**" Armenian-populated than the other ex-capitals of Armenia: Van, Gars, Ani or Sis (all of which once capitals of Armenian Kingdoms) now have 0 (zero) Armenian presence. While in Dikranagerd, the great capital of the mighty emperor Tigran the Great, only 2 Armenian families still remain, surrounded by 2 million Kurds.

MUSA DAGH / MOUSA LER and BITIAS

Precious Moments With Our Compatriots

The majority of the people in our group left Antioch for Musa Dagh/Mousa Ler, or Jebel Mousa, while four of us rented a car to visit Bitias, and then to join them at the Armenian village of Vakef. Musa Dagh (Mountain of Moses) is situated in what is today the Turkish Province of Hatay, the smallest finger of coastline territory that points southwards into Syria. In the foothills of Musa Dagh lie the following six villages: Kabusia, Vakef, Haji Hababli, Khdr Bek, Bitias and Yoghun Oluk. "Vakef is the last Armenian village in Turkey today" wrote the Turkish Jumhuriyet newspaper in 1995. In 1938 all six villages of Musa Dagh were populated by Armenians, about 6,000 of them. In 1939, when the Kemalists seized Musa Dagh (under French Mandate), the Musa Daghians were given a new "home" in Anjar, Lebanon. These people were the heroes of "The Forty Days of Musa Dagh" (a novel written in 1933 by Austrian writer Franz Werfel), who had fought against the Turks in 1915. Faced with certain death, the Armenian villagers revolted. For months, the ruthless Turks had waged a campaign of terror against the Armenians – hanging, looting and raping. It fell to Rev. Dikran Antreasian to lead some 6,000 of them into the impenetrable mountain areas of Musa Dagh. The tough, courageous villagers – poorly armed and with meager provisions – looked out across the rocky slopes to see the first Turkish patrols inching slowly up the mountain. The bloody battle of Musa Dagh was about to begin.

Historic dates from the Musa Dagh Battle:

July 31, 1915 – The first day of mass migration from the villages to the high mountains in rebellion against the Turkish government.

August 3, 1915 – The first self-defense groups are organized.

August 7, 1915 – The first skirmish with the Turks.

August 19/20, 1915 – Heavy fighting against the Turkish army at the end of which the Turks retreat.

September 5, 1915 – The French battleship Guichen is observed and contacted.

September 15, 1915 – Guichen and four other battleships evacuate the Armenians of Musa Dagh to Port Saeed, Egypt, where they stay until the end of World War I (1918), after which they all return to their villages under the French Mandate.

This is a very brief description of heroic events of a bunch of people. Today, there are three monuments dedicated to these heroic men and the Battle of Musa Dagh: in Armenia; in Cambridge, Canada; and in Anjar, Lebanon.

The tombs of the 18 Armenian martyrs of Musa Dagh were on the Mountain, near the monument dedicated to them. Lately, during the war in Gharapagh (1993), that monument and the small cemetery on the Mountain were vandalized using TNT explosives. The vandal was a grieving father of a volunteer in the Azerbaijani army, whose son was killed in the war of Gharapagh. He was “officially” given a suspended sentence of imprisonment. Consequently, he never “did time”. Rather, he was considered by many compatriots as a hero...

Mousa Ler: it truly is impossible to paint in words the exceptional beauty of this landscape. It is even more difficult to convey the overpowering feelings that engulfed one of our Bitias-born fellow pilgrims, who for the first time was returning back to the village and house where she was born. Her cousin and I watched in tears as she ventured into the garden of the house which at one time belonged to her family. Each tree, each branch and leaf carried special significance for her. The large circular pool in the garden awakened such a barrage of memories in her that she began to weep in joy and agony. We tried to calm her down in vain. You cannot hold down a pent up volcano of emotional memories. Finally, she picked up a palm-full of earth from her garden and renewed her vow to pursue the cause that was so dear to her and to her parents. We videotaped the whole moving episode for posterity.

We ascended the flight of stairs next to the house to visit the Armenian Church perched on the hill. It looked relatively well kept on the outside, but the interior was in a pitiful state. More memories surfaced for us all, when we lit candles and sang the Lord’s Prayer in Armenian. From our high vantage point, we beheld the uncommonly enchanting panorama of Bitias. We then proceeded to the Armenian Evangelical Church, which has been converted into a mosque, and found refuge under the tree dedicated to the memory of Sossi. We bade farewell to Bitias and proceeded to the village of Yoghoun Oluk, where we quenched our thirst by drinking from the fountain built there by a certain Boyadjian in 1892, as the inscription shows. We then took shelter under the famed 2000-year “sossi” tree in Khdr Bek.

When we finally rejoined our group in Vakef, they had gathered at the courtyard of the Soorp Asdvadzadzin (Saint Mary's) Church, and were warmly conversing with the local Armenians. One of the pilgrims in our group, a fervent Kesabtzi, was having the time of her life by taking profuse notes about the land of her ancestors. This particular

church, built in 1910, and completely renovated in 1987, was impressive both on the outside and the inside. Our compatriots there welcomed us with baskets of fruit and evocative melodies played on the duduk. Next to the church, we noticed a small Armenian cemetery graced with headstones and small mausoleums. Surrounded by nature, we scanned the nearby hills and mountains where proud Mousa Lertzi Armenians had retreated to avert the yoke of tyranny and genocide. With warm hearts and proud chests we departed from that hallowed village that reeked of "Armenianness".

KERK-KHAN

The Historic Baptistery

Leaving Moussa Ler behind, we went to Kerk-khan and visited the Soorp Krikor Lousavorich (Saint Gregory the Illuminator) Church, which is almost in ruins. The caretaker kindly allowed us to enter the church and to sing and pray to God for the souls of all Kerkh-khantzi Armenians. Visiting Kerk-khan held a special significance for me, because of the baptistery located in the courtyard of the church. **My Kerk-Khan-born friends had always spoken to me with great emotion about the baptistery where they were baptized more than 85 years ago.** I quenched my desire by getting photographed next to the baptistery. I then picked up a few stones from the church to give them to my Kerk-Khantzi friends in Los Angeles. A few meters away from this ruined Apostolic church, we observed with indignation the ruins of the Armenian Evangelical church.

SIS

Renewing Our Faith amidst the Ruined Walls of the Cilician Catholicosate

After traveling for three hours, we finally arrived in Sis, and the famous Fortress of our historic capital city perched high up on the three-summit Sis Mountains proudly saluted us. The city of Sis (now, Kozan) had at one time served as the capital of Armenian Cilicia during the reign of the Roupinian Dynasty. We took a ride in small vans to the top of the mountain and climbed the stone walls of the citadel. Naturally, not all members of the group ventured to undertake this climbing ordeal. I wish they had, because it is in those remote and abandoned historical edifices that history seems to come alive with an almost palpable force. Unfortunately, this once teeming terrain brimming with Armenians is almost totally devoid of Armenians. Group member Mrs. Mariam Boghosian tearfully yet with keen attention gazed at the panorama of the heartland where her parents hailed from. There used to be so much culture and civilization here at one time! There's so much beauty and majesty here. There is so much to stir the blood . . . We descended from the summit, and in front of the ruined walls of the Cilician Catholicosate, and as grateful heirs of St. Nerses Shnorhali's unswerving faith, creative spirit, and unbending struggle, lit candles, sang canticles, and renewed our vows. Once again, full of fathomless emotions, we bade goodbye to this sacred spot that had revolutionized our religious and national life, and headed to Anazarpa and Marash (now Kahramanmarash).

Even pilgrims must eat, and eat well during travel. Partaking of food in Anazarpa is one of the most beautiful experiences anyone can wish. Anazarpa has been the “garrison city” of Cilician Armenia, where the bulk of the 60,000 strong army and its commanders were stationed. On top of a 1000-foot stone, in the upper fortress, there are the remains of a church, once called the “Commanders’ Church” (*Zoravarats Yegeghetsi*). Almost 100 years later, here we were, having lunch in a house that could rival a museum in its grandeur, surrounded by towering citadels, and perched majestically where the mountain meets the sky. At this magnificent site, stood the centuries-old Armenian “commanders” in constant communion with God.

MARASH

Embracing My Maternal Ancestors

We approached Marash via the highway by ascending the Taurus Mountains. Marash has always held a special place in my heart because that is where the parents and grandparents of my mother Lydia were born. In addition, Marash, situated at the foot of the Taurus Mountains, also occupies a special place in the history of the Armenian People. In 1070, the Armenian General Pilardos rebelled against the Byzantine Empire and transformed Marash (Kermanig) into the capital of his kingdom. Marash was also part of the Cilician Kingdom of Levon II from 1187 to 1219. Right before the Genocide of 1915, there were eleven functioning Armenian churches in Marash – six Apostolic: Soorp (Saint) Asdvadzadzin (Virgin Mary), Soorp Garabed, Soorp Kevork, Soorp Sarkis, Soorp Stepannos, Soorp Karasnitz Mangantz – and four Evangelical and one Catholic. As in all other communities, the Armenians also had dozens of schools and cultural centers. My grandfather, Stepan Trashian, was born in the rich village of Gaban near Zeytun, while my grandmother, Trfanda Der-Simonian-Trashian, was born in the Armenian village of Shivilgi. Both were orphaned and met each other while students at the Beytshalom German orphanage-school in Marash. My grandfather possessed inbred musical talents which he cultivated at the school. He had a special fondness for spiritual hymns. Perhaps he had no choice but to invoke the highest through his music because from 1895 to 1920, Marash was well known as “The City of Orphans”. Three waves of massacres, the Hamidian Massacres of 1895, the Adana Massacres of 1909, and the Armenian Genocide in 1915, left behind a legacy of shame – a large population of orphans.

As we approached Marash, a maelstrom of images flooded my memory, as I recalled the fierce resistance my parents’ fellow-villagers demonstrated against the Young Turks. Out of the silence, it’s as if I actually heard my mother’s anguished shriek as she witnessed the beheading of her own father! Out of the silence, I could hear the resigned voice of my grandfather, as he helplessly and in despair witnessed with his own eyes the prolonged-anguish and final martyrdom of his own parents!

Throughout the trip, I had been getting flashes of memories personal and historical as we proceeded further into our Ancient Lands. But my experience of approaching Marash was totally amazing. It’s as if for one long moment, I was literally and physically transported to the past. As we entered the city, however, a road sign that read “Kahramanmarash” (Heroic Marash – indeed!), and the giant statue of Ataturk

smack at the middle of Azerbaijan Avenue jolted me out of my anguished reverie, and a sense of panic suddenly gripped me. But of course the shiver died away since this was my third trip and therefore I knew well that I and my fellow pilgrims were totally safe. Tourism after all is one of the most important businesses in Turkey. Can I forgive and forget? Or is that even impossible? Time will tell. In any case, no matter how painful it gets, the pilgrim must continuously progress.

We checked into our hotel and some of us immediately went to the nearby restaurant famous for its delicious Marash ice cream (Marash dondurmasi), containing Arabic gum that is pounded or whipped into glutinous form. The proprietor of the restaurant, whom I had had the pleasure of meeting two years earlier, bade us welcome and recounted at length about the contributions the Armenians of Marash had brought to the development of the city. A small crowd, friends of the proprietor, gathered around us. Among them two medical doctors, a teacher, and a historian who volunteered to take us to the old Armenian quarters early next morning. We accepted his offer with delight. That same night, unable to sleep, I strolled around the ancient streets of the Armenian quarter and walked all the way to the foot of the ancient citadel.

Early next morning, we went up the hill to visit the ancient Armenian neighborhood. A feeling of hot rage and anguish rose up in my heart as we stood on the grounds of the Soorp Asdvadzadzin (St. Mary's) Church where in 1920 thousands of Armenians were torched to death. Instead of a monument dedicated to Armenian martyrs, there is now a mosque on that sacred ground. I also paid a visit to the orphanage-school of my maternal grandparents that is still standing strong. Gazing at the ancient walls of the school, I remembered the benevolent hands of a brave missionary, Dr. Stanley Kerr, who came to the aid of the Armenians in their darkest hour of need.

We visited other church sites that have been converted to mosques, and proceeded to visit a school which once was an American college where a score of Armenians had studied. We had conversation with the teachers and the students who were eager to hear about the history of their school and the contribution of the Armenians to the city.

Our next stop was the citadel of Marash, an imposing structure on top of a hill built by the Hittites for defensive purposes. At the main courtyard, we enjoyed the famous stone statue of a lion with Hittite inscriptions which soared with power and beauty, guarding the fortress like an imperishable Sentinel. We were however shocked to come across new inscriptions which aimed to distort history. The inscription proclaimed that the Armenians themselves were responsible for the massacres in the city. We raised our voices in protest, but even the guards on duty weren't aware of the contents of the inscriptions.

As I gazed from the high vantage point of the citadel at the panorama of the old and new quarters of Marash, my mind harked back to February 12, 1920, when the French abandoned the city and left the Armenians at the mercy of the marauding Turkish forces hell-bent on ethnic cleansing.

ZEYTOUN

Invincible Heroism

The following morning, we went into the Tauros Mountains on our way to heroic Zeytoun (Suleymanli). On the way, we marveled at the artificial lake created with the waters of the Djihun River. After a steep climb we finally reached Zeytoun, a village which successfully repelled Turkish attacks forty-one times. As our tour bus negotiated the steep curves of the narrow roads that would lead us to storied Zeytoun, the home of Strong Armenian faith, I wondered what it would have been like to have been present when the clergy would parade Toros Roslin's illustrated "Zeytoun Gospel" on the streets to seek protection from the Almighty.

With great pride, fellow Zeitountzi pilgrims began to regale us with stories about the exploits of the heroic Armenians of Zeytoun. A fellow pilgrim, a medical doctor and his wife had insisted on bringing along their two sons on the trip, and through his stories about the exploits and sacrifices of their grandfather was instilling in them a sense of historical perspective. To him, it wasn't enough to just remember the past himself, he had to have his sons establish an unbreakable bond with their fatherland.

Close to 30,000 Armenians used to live in the Zeytoun area during the time of Sultan Abdul Hamid. Six thousand of the bravest Zeytountzis had rebelled against the odious reign of the Sultan multiple times. The area is famous for its iron mines, and gun-making industries. It was subdivided into four sections: Upper Quarter, Lower Quarter, Vosnayer Quarter, and Cholakian Quarter. There's a famous stone bridge in the middle of the town, from where the Armenians had thrown the commander of the invading Turkish forces, and 35 of his fighters. Zeyotun is now called Suleymanieh, "in honor" of that commander.

As we walked the streets to look at houses that used to belong to Armenians, we chatted with a few of the locals, who were surprised to see tourist in such an out-of-the-way village lost in the mountains. They soon began to suspect that we weren't mere tourists, but the rightful owners of these lands that once were baptized with the blood of Armenian heroes. As we explored the neighborhoods, I noticed an older man who was observing us intently. We approached him and asked how s\he was doing. "What can I say," he sighed with a wave of his hand, "When the Armenians were here the place was blessed. They were very hard working people, but now . . . you yourself can see in what a sorry state we are in." There's no doubt in my mind that she knew that he was having a conversation with the grandchildren of those hard-working Armenians. He offered us some delicious, freshly picked apricots, as we reluctantly left heroic Zeytoun and headed for Aintab.

AINTAB: Crucifixion without a Cross

We left Zeytoun with mixed feelings of loss and yet invigoration, and headed on to Aintab (now Gaziantep, the prefix "Gazi", which means "warrior for Islam" was only added in 1920), a lively, crowded modern city located at the smack center of a triangle formed by Marash, Urfa, and Aleppo. Gaziantep boasts some fine domestic architecture, especially in the Christian/Jewish quarter. Before being depopulated of

Armenians in 1922, it had been yet another Armenian center of power and culture. Aintab is famous for its grapes, olives, pistachio nuts, and arabic style Lahmajun. The previous year, I was invited to serve as keynote speaker in Pasadena, California by the Armenian Aintabtzi Cultural Association on the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the heroic struggle of the Armenians of Aintab. I also had the good fortune of visiting Mrs. Vahide Dekmejian, my good friend University of Southern California distinguished political science professor, Dr. Hrair Dekmejian's precious mother, a survivor of the Armenian Genocide and one of my heroes. While enjoying her delicious Lahmajouns, I always intently listened to the stories she shared with us about her family life in Aintab and the struggles they endured. And now, with every step, as I walked the memory-filled streets of Aintab, those past episodes of heroism and martyrdom took on deeper significance. It was here that the spirit of unity and clever tactics of the Armenians time and time again repelled the superior forces of the Turks. From 1895 to 1821, Aintabtzis had to invoke superhuman inner powers in order to survive in an atmosphere of pervasive fear and relentless terror. I had first visited Aintab in 1987, and the shock of what I saw then still reverberates inside of me. I had climbed the Hayik Hill to pray and sing in the splendid Sourp Asdvadzadzin (St. Mary's) Church designed by architect Sarkis Balian and built in 1892. Alas, the structure which was amongst the most famous and impressive monuments in Cilicia had been converted into a mosque, ironically called "Kurtulush (meaning "Liberated") Mosque". The façade with black and white stone trim and restrained carvings around the windows, would do credit to a French city square. Inside, Corinthian columns support the porch, while the main space is covered by a huge cleverly constructed dome. Persistent visitors are allowed to climb to the top of the minaret, which is paired with a square bell-tower, from where there are extensive views of the dome and the city behind it. There is no other country in the world where so many Armenian houses of worship have been converted into mosques. This is cultural genocide, pure and simple. We entered our church which for 60 years was used as a prison until 1982, and after as a mosque under the name of Kurtulush Jami. In the presence of Turkish Moslems praying there, we raised our passionate voices and sang the Lord's Prayer and "Der Voghormia"("O Lord, Have Mercy").

We then visited the American Hospital which was established in 1847 by Dr. Azarieh Smith. Dr. Fred Douglas Shepard served as chief physician for many years assisted by several Armenian medical doctors and nurses. We toured the impressive facilities, including the burial sites of its founders, guided by a staff member.

We also touched the remnants of Vartanian Armenian School, which was built in 1867. We had an opportunity to converse with the folks living in the vicinity of the famed church, hospital, and school. I wondered if these people knew that they were living in houses that once belonged to Armenians. I was surprised to discover that they all knew about the massacres of the Armenians. I noticed that one of the houses across the church was up for sale. The owners of the house had been watching us from their courtyard. I accepted their invitation to have a cup of tea. When they found out who I was, they offered to sell the house to me with a 25% discount. I told them that the prices of that house and all the houses in that neighborhood had already been paid in full. They smiled strangely without comment.

As I continued my survey of the neighborhood, I saw that Turkish workers were systematically destroying the old Armenian houses under the pretext of widening the

road. We continued our tour by visiting the building of the former American College which has now been converted into a hospital named Azarieh Smith. The hospital administrators welcomed us in and answered our questions regarding the current state of this busy hospital. A great number of Armenian doctors and nurses have served in this hospital prior to the Armenian Genocide. We then moved on to the site of the Aintab College, which was built in 1876. It is now called Central Turkish College. Many Armenians have graduated from this prestigious institution of higher education.

Continuing our tour, we moved south-west from the Gul Hotel to the neighborhood where wealthy Armenians once thrived. Dotted with mansions with black and white arches, these homes were built like mini-fortresses to keep the ever-intruding Turks out. Each house used to have within its quarters, artesian wells, large food-storage facilities, and stables. As we strolled on down the winding memory-lanes, suddenly the immensity of the calamitous loss that we suffered hit me once again with great severity. Everywhere I looked, other people were living in our houses, other faiths were using our houses of worship, and other people were accusing us as massacre-ers. Is there any other nation other than us and the Greeks who have had their churches converted into mosques, cinemas, bath-houses, or were left in various stages of ruin? There and then I made a vow to sing canticles and prayers, and to burn incense in every Armenian Church throughout Cilicia and Western Armenia. After nine decades of silence, it is time to have the Armenian religious spirit reverberate with more thunder within these sacred walls.

Before departing this historically significant city, we savored the famed Lahmajun, and then paid a visit to the **Kale**, the most prominent survivor of Aintab's past and which dominates the town from the eastern hill - an artificial mound formed by layers of accumulated debris from thousands of years of human occupation. The castle dates back to late Roman times, but the present structure, with its 36 towers, owes more to the Seljuks. Our final visit was to the Arasa Market District, which at one time was a business center run by Armenians. This was also the hallowed spot where many of the businessmen, citizens of the nation, were massacred by the state. May they rest in deep peace.

BIREJIK

The Euphrates Ran Red Again

On our way from Aintab to Urfa (Shanliurfa, Yetesia-Edessa), we stopped at Birejik, an ancient border city which straddles the Euphrates (Yeprad) river. A huge Roman-built fortress dominates its skyline. The ruined castle was renovated during the eleventh century as a frontier outpost for the Crusader state of Edessa. The town is of interest mainly to ornithologists, as one of the few places where you're likely to see the **bald ibis**, a relative of the stork that once nested wild on the castle walls but now are confined to a **breeding station**.

The Euphrates River was flowing freely under the bridge as we crossed into the town. From this site, the fortress loomed high and wide. The boulders that made up its walls were so huge that I wondered how they had been moved and placed so precisely to form such impregnability. The town was built into the side of the steep hill below the fortress. The roads we traveled were so narrow that there was barely enough room for

one car. Our driver took us into the city across the river on the bridge constructed during the 1950s that spanned the river at a point about half a kilometer wide. He told me that local citizens, who were making their living ferrying passengers across the river, were upset that the bridge was being built. They knew they would lose their riverboat jobs and businesses if the bridge was opened. When their grievances had not been persuasive enough for the local authorities to stop construction, an unknown number of citizens had killed the Turkish architect by throwing him from the bridge into the river.

I wanted to climb the fortress in order to step back nine decades to that moment in history when Armenians were so brutally massacred and thrown into the river. As the car wove through the narrow streets past shops on both sides, then up several terraces of houses to where I could climb, people watched me carefully. They were simply sitting on the pavement, standing along the road, or playing backgammon – just passing time. As I climbed over the loose, shale-like rock to the base of the fortress at the top of the hill, village children climbed along with me and kept begging for their pictures to be taken. During my climb, I thought of the long lines of Armenian men, women and children, young and old, being forced over these same loose rocks. Chills ran down my spine when I pictured the devastating scene of parents holding the hands of their children, of grandparents thoughtfully and carefully helping each other, while they were all valiantly moving closer to their death through this tortuous route. My climb over this uneven dirt and stone was becoming a pilgrimage in effort, not just in spirit.

When I finally reached the top and looked over the bridge of a parapet, it occurred to me that this summit symbolizes the heights achieved by our ancestors. Although they struggled successfully to overcome other obstacles, the conquering of this hill literally led to their death.

While standing silently on top of this part of the world, the exact spot from where Armenians were pushed into the river, I understood how their sacrificial martyrdom symbolically reinforced the importance of preserving the memory of their heroism. It seemed ironic that nine decades after these killings, an Armenian stood on this secular altar in relative peace surveying the site with a camera and Turkish children who could have been the great-grandchildren of Turkish officials who brutally massacred my ancestors. All that was present in this abandoned structure was a single flag of Turkey, but more than that were the ever-present memories of killings. This realization made me literally sick to the point of choking and gagging. I could see the Euphrates River running red again. The river had run red with the blood of Armenian martyrs for three days in 1915.

We lingered by the Euphrates River bridge relishing the fact that geographically we were about to leave behind beloved Cilicia and to enter historical Western Armenia. Before crossing the bridge for the last time, I immersed my hands in the water at the shore. This was a ceremonial baptism symbolizing our holding hands in a sacred link.

As our bus left the city, I continued watching the river and the fortress through the side and rear windows. Despite the ever-increasing distance, the view became clearer and larger, because the experience that it had left was more than the physical presence of the structure and water. In my mind and heart, a warm loving spiritual presence had

descended from the bank of the Euphrates, as it enveloped the site of the Armenian martyrdom, a warm glow surrounded the river and the fortress with a holy aura. I watched until the aura faded away into the distance.

URFA

Saluting the Birthplace of My Father

Shanliurfa, or "Glorious Urfa", commemorates resistance to the French invasion and occupation of 1918-1920. It's a place of pilgrimage for many religions. Urfa's Middle Eastern atmosphere is very compelling. A significant portion of the population is Kurdish: women are veiled and often tattooed with henna, and men wear baggy trousers and traditional headdresses. Amongst the Arab population, women tend towards brightly colored clothes and rich fabrics, while visiting pilgrims are often fully veiled and clad in black from top to toe. Even by Turkish standards, Urfa is an old city.

I had been looking forward to visit Urfa because that is where my grandfather, Garabed, met an orphaned Armenian girl from Kharpert named Nvart, married her, and a year later gave birth to a son, Hagop, my father. My paternal grandfather left for the United States in 1912. He was then employed for three years in Waukegan, Illinois and Racine, Wisconsin to support his family in Kharpert. When the atrocities were over, he returned to Kharpert in search of his wife, his parents, his brothers, sisters and their families, only to learn that my great-aunt was the sole survivor of their once-large family.

As the bus moved closer to Urfa, rhythmically the Euphrates River came into view only to disappear once more behind hills and trees. As we entered Urfa, a fellow Urfatzi pilgrim, with great excitement regaled us with facts about the proud history and prominent role that his father's birthplace had played. Finally, we entered the city of colorful tall buildings where the old and new mix often jarringly and often harmoniously. Throughout history, Urfa has been a significant cultural and trade center. Assyrians, Greeks, and Armenians have left their imprints throughout the land. According to a number of historians, it is in Urfa that Saint Mesrob Mashdots created the Armenian alphabet. According to both Jewish and Muslim sources, Abraham received his summons from God to take himself and his family to Canaan while living in Urfa. Other stories record that prophet Job was a resident for a while.

The first settlers were the Hurri, members of one of Anatolia's earliest civilizations who built a fortress on the site of the present citadel around 3500 B.C. and controlled much of the surrounding area. The Hurri were followed by the Hittites and Assyrians, the latter remaining in control until Alexander the Great swept through after his victory at Issos. Upon Alexander's death, the whole region became part of a Seleucid province in 306 B.C. when Urfa became Orhai, an independent kingdom of local Aramaeans. Four centuries later, after Orhai had become one of the first Christian kingdoms, it was conquered by the Romans.

The Romans were stretched here, with the Persians frequently wresting control of the city before it fell to the Arabs in 637 A.D. Relative peace held until the end of the 10th century, when power changed hands again in battle between Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Byzantines. In 1098, during the first Crusade, Baldwin I set up a short-lived feudal state in Edessa. A vengeful Seljuk emir, Nur-ed Din of Aleppo, burned the city to the ground, sold its citizens into slavery, and destroyed all its churches and monasteries. Selim the Grim captured the city in 1516, but it was not incorporated into the Ottoman Empire until as late as 1637.

We paid a visit to the Golbashe lakeside located next to the Khalil Rahman mosque, and along with hundreds of tourists, took in the sights of the artificial pool and fisheries. According to tradition, this is the site that Abraham and Sarah often visited. The pleasantly landscaped garden at the foot of the citadel is said to be the site where Abraham was saved from the vengeful hand of the Assyrian King Nimrod (Nemrut).

The Saint Mary's Armenian Church (Soorp Asdvadzadzin) in the middle of the town has been converted into the Salaheddin Ayoub mosque and the Armenian Evangelical church has been converted into the Firfirli mosque. A great number of Armenians used to live in Urfa and its environs before 1920. The annals of Armenian history are full of their heroic acts that reveal their unswerving and unflinching freewill.

We left Urfa for the purely Armenian village of Garmudj, ten kilometers away. A pitiful, horrifying site stunned us into silence. There lay two Armenian churches in total ruin. The stones of the Evangelical church were strewn helter-skelter, while further up the hill the Apostolic church was barely standing. We once again prayed and sang the Lord's Prayer, and with rage in our hearts left this once active Armenian village now lost forever.

MARDIN

Christian Churches Hidden Away in the Backstreets

Mardin's history is one of disputes between rival armies over millennia. Assyrian Christians settled in their city during the 5th century, and the Arabs occupied Mardin between 640 and 1104 A.D. After that it had a succession of Seljuk, Turkish, Kurdish, Mongol and Persian overloads until the Ottomans under Sultan Selim the Grim occupied it in 1517 and an era of torpor began that was not significantly disrupted until the Kurdish Rebellion of 1832, when a number of public buildings were blown up. There was a brief Egyptian occupation in 1839-1840, after which the town sank back into somnolence until World War I.

Mardin's Roman origins are lost in the welter of war and conquest that forms the region's historical backdrop, while the town's later history is connected with the development of early Christianity. The first Christians to settle in Mardin were Syrian Orthodox, who arrived during the third century A.D. The Christians survived the period of Arab occupation from 640 to 1104, and were left alone by the Seljuk and Turcoman ruler.

Before and during Turkey's War of Independence, Mardin's Christian population was drastically reduced by massacres and emigration. In the early 20th century many of the Assyrians were massacred. There were renewed emigration in the early 1990s and today, an estimated 600 practicing Syrian Orthodox, Catholic and Armenian Christians remain with 11 churches hidden away in the backstreets of which eight still serve the dwindling community on a rotational basis. Local emigres made good in Europe and the United States and are pouring money into the local Syrian Orthodox communities in Mardin and Tur Abdin.

Mardin has a vibrant Christian heritage, and many of its churches have survived the vicissitudes of history. The Syrian Orthodox Kirkklar Kilisesi or Church of the Forty Martyrs, is the most welcoming to visitors and dates back to the sixth century. Next door to the Kirkklar Kilisesi is Mar Yusuf (St. Joseph's), which now serves the town's tiny Armenian Catholic population. To the east, is the town's largest church, the Suryani Katolic kilisesi (Church of the Virgin Mary). On Birinji Jeddese, is the tiny Mar Homizd Keldani Kilisesi, a Chaldean Church. At the bottom of the hill in the southeastern part of the old town is the Marishmini Kilisesi.

Mardin's most obvious attraction is the rambling bazaar that parallels Jumhuriyet Jaddesi. Here donkeys are still the main form of transport. Seen from the south at a distance, Mardin's tiered layers of houses cling to a huge citadel-topped rock which rises out of the endless level plain. The city's position has always made it a strategic military outpost.

BITLIS

William Saroyan's "Hometown"

The town of Bitlis (classical Armenian Baghaghesh, Modern Eastern Armenian Baghesh, Modern Western Armenian Paghesh) was a well-known town for Armenians, located in Western Armenia, southeast of Lake Van, at 1,585m elevation. During the Armenian Genocide all of the Armenians were murdered or exiled. Prominent Armenian American author William Saroyan's family hails from Bitlis, a fact he talked and wrote about extensively as "the hometown". In 1964, Saroyan journeyed to his ancestral home with the editor of **Marmara**, an Armenian daily published in Istanbul. As a freshman at the American University of Beirut, I had the distinct honor of interviewing Saroyan for an Armenian daily during his only visit to Lebanon and now I was in his ancestral hometown with vivid memories of my fascinating meeting with him in the lobby of Beirut's fashionable St. George Hotel. I was captivated by his wit and candor and was grateful for the honor bestowed upon me.

The population of the town before the Genocide was 38,886, broken into the following groups: 20,800 Muslims. 16,086 Armenian Apostolic, 200 Protestants and 1,800 Syrian Jacobites. Bitlis was on the route of one of the best passes leading onto the Armenian Plateau, used by camels carrying goods from Aleppo to Tabriz. Prior to 1915, there were four Armenian churches, three monasteries eight schools, five for boys and three for girls. During the Armenian Geocide of 1915-1917, Turks and Kurds led by Jevdet Bay Pasha massacred more than 15,000 Armenians.

A folk etymology of the name Bitlis is that it is derived from "Bedlis", the name of the commander who built a castle in the province, by the order of Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia. The history of Bitlis extends back to 2,000 B.C. The city is located in a narrow valley with high rocky mountains. The Bitlis River runs through the town. From the main street we could see the city's imposing fortress standing on the mountains to the right. We visited the Armenian church which was built in 1884. There was no dome, no roof. It was sad to think of its short life and the abrupt end put to its existence, as with all other Armenian structures in Bitlis.

Across the street from the City Hall, we visited the local park to enjoy our box-lunches. The manager of the park's cafeteria kindly allowed us to play our Armenian music tapes through the park's sound system. Our group members began dancing to the tune of Armenian folk songs. It was an incredible experience most fitting to the memory of our martyrs who were deprived of similar opportunities because their voices were silenced and they were never heard again.

DIYARBAKIR-DIKRANAGERD (THROUGH SEVEREG): Our Renovated Church

Diyarbakir is not only the capital of the upper Tigris valley, but has some claim to being one of the oldest settlements on earth. Certainly the city existed at the time of Hurrian Empire some 5,000 years ago and it subsequently saw successive periods of Urartian, Assyrian and Persian rule, before falling to Alexander the Great and his successors, the Seleucids. The modern name of the city comes from the Arabs: in 638 the Bakr tribe of Arabs arrived and renamed the city Diyar Bakr, or "Home of Bakr". With the decline of Arab influence in the region, Diyarbakir became a Seljuk, then Turcoman, and finally an Ottoman stronghold.

We approached Diyarbekir from the east, driving through the 2-millennium-old Royal Route (Arkayagan Janabarh) of the pre-Alexandre the Great Persian Empire. On the main road is the town of Sivereg. The name "Sivereg" is derived from the Armenian "Sev Averag", meaning "Black Ruins". In fact, there are remnants of black stones in the region all the way to Diyarbekir, whose majestic walls are from these same black stones. I thought about the dire destiny of my people, who called their towns with names reminding destruction, persecution and the ensuing ruins. There is another "Ruin" (Evereg) in Cappadocia, near Gessaria, that we plan to visit next.

Diyarbekir (Amida) is a historically significant fort-city with an Assyrian flavor. On the ancient city walls we observed bas-reliefs of 12 different historical periods. According to one historian, "the city walls can be considered as the museum of bas-reliefs". The wall with its 72 defensive towers is 6 kilometers long, making it the longest wall after the Great Wall of China. We ascended the Seven Brothers Tower situated between the Mardin and Urfa gateways, and gazed down at the Tigris river flowing through the old and new sectors of the city. Although the foundations of this most famous attraction are Roman and Byzantine, most of what can be seen today dates from the eleventh-century Artukid kingdom of Malik Salih Shah.

We next visited the saint Giragos Armenian Church, a once-thriving church in the days when the population of Diyarbakir was one-third Armenian. For more than 90 years the church remained roofless because of vandalism and neglect, but recently it was renovated and it still impresses with its gold-painted woodwork of the seven altars and overarching cloisters. We entered the church proudly, and as the rightful proprietors of this sacred spot, we raised our voices in hymn and prayer, and like our faith-infused ancestors, built a bridge to the Creator. We were then invited to a beautifully decorated house, Esmâ Ojakh Diyarbakir Evi, opposite to the church, a typical black-and-white stone construction around a courtyard where we heard more details about the traditions and family life the Armenians of Diyarbakir had practiced. The rooms have been refurbished as they would have appeared in 1899. We also visited the large Ulu mosque, which is built partly on the site of the former Surp Asdvadzadzin Armenian Church! It is amazing how many Soorp Asdvadzadzin (Saint Mary's) churches have been converted into mosques. This particular church, with its 60 altars had once been sacked and torched by Arab invaders. King Ashod Pakraduni had it renovated and rebuilt during the tenth century. But now it stood as a mosque.

We continued our tour by visiting the markets next to the church. We were surprised to discover that the stores near the church still belonged to the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul and that the tenants still pay their rent to the Patriarchate every month. We also visited the Armenian Evangelical and Armenian Catholic Churches, both converted to trade schools, as well as the Assyrian Orthodox church named Meryamana Kilisesi (Church of the Virgin Mary). A small door leads on to a paved courtyard surrounded by buildings that were once part of a seventh-century monastery.

CAPPADOCIA

Enchanting Landscape

Advancing toward Cappadocia, we arrived in Urgup - Cappadocia's enchanting landscape which remains unparalleled in history and mystery. We were both captivated by the genius of ancient civilizations and inspired by pristine hikes through Cappadocia's bizarre geology, which is sometimes compared to the Grand Canyon on acid. Urgup emerges from rock formations, early Christian dwellings, and old Greek mansions. The town enjoyed prosperity in the 10th and 11th centuries but no ancient church remains can be seen in the town. There are, however, many attractive houses on the slopes at the edge of the town, but there residents have moved to the less attractive modern accommodations. Urgup strikes a balance between preserving its Anatolian traditions and cultivating an unobtrusive yet irresistible tourist infrastructure. We sampled the amazing, awe-inspiring balloon rides above the beautiful Cappadocia, experiencing the incredible feeling of time suspended floating majestically through the air as the world passes quietly below.

Then we visited the Goreme region which is one of the most beautiful spots in the world. Nowhere else can one find variety of enchanting formations. Besides its unequalled and striking scenery, Goreme is full of artistic products representing different civilizations. Most of the monasteries and churches are decorated with frescoes. Nature, history, and art are harmoniously combined in great unity. The

Goreme valley holds the greatest concentration of rock-cut chapels and monasteries in Cappadocia. Dating largely from the 9th century onwards, the valley's 30 or more churches were built by cutting rooms out of the soft volcanic tuff. Many of the churches feature superb Byzantine frescoes depicting scenes from the Old and New testaments, and particularly the life of Jesus Christ and the deeds of the saints. We also visited Nevsehir, the capital of Cappadocia. Known as Nyssa in antiquity, it is a popular attraction for its troglodyte (underground) cities. A striking feature of the Nevsehir area is the strong Christian leaning. As early as the 4th century, monks and hermits inhabited Cappadocia.

As we were entering the town of Ortahisar, we were captivated by its old and new storehouses carved out of the rocks. A small town, Ortahisar has developed around a fortress-like, big block formation. The fortress is an "all times" settlement with its holes and openings on the façade, due to its successive collapses. At the tip of the high plateau, we enjoyed the extraordinary panoramic view of another small town, Uchisar, which looks like a majestic fortress with myriad holes and openings on its façade.

EVEREG-FENESSE

Armenian Inscriptions Still Adorn the Façade of the Church

Evereg (Develi) which is 45 km. South of Gueseria (Kayseri) at the foot of Archeos (Erciyes) mountain. The city was formed from an amalgamation of three communities in the 19th century: Evereg and Fenesse (Armenian Christian population) and Agostan. The old town, Yokari Develi, lies to the south on the hillside. The medieval castle ruins of Develi Kalesi overlooks the Armenian quarter of the town from a rocky outcrop.

I had heard from my close friend, Dr. Simon K. Simonian, about the proud history of Evereg-Fenesse, and especially about the local Armenian Church and the important role it played in the spiritual and national uplifting of the Armenian community there. His grandparents were born in this town, and as I was videotaping our visit for posterity, the stories he had shared with me suddenly became vivid realities.

We visited the Armenian Soorp Toros church with multiple hexagonal structures and layered arches and pillars. Armenian inscriptions still adorn the façade of this impressive church and the 7th letter of the Armenian alphabet "E" is chiseled out and quite visible. The church is converted to Evereg Faith Mosque today.

We toured the old Armenian quarter surrounding the church and were greeted with a warm welcome by its "new inhabitants", especially several elderly men and women who were well aware of the history of the region and its original owners. They guided us to witness the still-intact elegant multi-story houses of prominent Armenian families who once were the pride of the region. Several houses in the vicinity of the church bore ornamental Armenian characters (family name initials) on their rusty metallic gates. The street facing the Armenian church is now named in honor of Talat Pasha, how ironic, how sad, and how insulting to the memory of the Armenian martyrs of Evereg-Fenesse!

GUESARIA

What an Emotional Moment!

We proceeded to our next appointment with our roots and were greeted by the green fields and wooded hills of Guesaria (Kayseri). Dominated by Mount Archeos (Erciyes), Guesaria has been fought over by Persians, Arabs, Mongols and Ottomans. Its most prosperous era was undoubtedly under the Romans – when it was known as Eusebia/Mazaka and then Caeserea in honor of Emperor (Cesar) Tiberius. By the 4th century, Gueseria was a focal point of Christian life and faith. Its most famous cleric was St. Basil the Great who defended church doctrine against heretical movements.

Green fields, wooded hills, and snow-capped volcano surround the modern-looking concrete that is today's Kayseri. The city has a reputation for religious conservatism and ultra-nationalism. It's also a thriving business center, where traditional commerce, particularly raw textiles and carpets, still flourishes in the medieval **khans**.

Our emotions were gradually heightened when we walked through the old Armenian quarter witnessing a devastating scene of our ruined houses being bulldozed for new apartment buildings. From a distance, the large dome and cross of the Soorp Krikor Lousavorich Armenian church (Saint Gregory the Illuminator) was smiling at us with immense joy and pride. This impressive church, located on Hacilar/Erciyes road, is the last architectural reminder of just how important Guesaria was in the Byzantine Christian world. Dating from around 700 A.D., it is said to be Turkey's largest consecrated church, and can hold a congregation of a thousand, though at present services are held just twice a year, on March 16 and June 16. The worshippers are largely Diaspora Armenians from Istanbul and elsewhere. Only around forty Armenian families still live in the Guesaria region and they hold their church in high esteem as soorp Krikor, the first Catholicos and founder of the Armenian church (301 A.D.), spent much of his early life in Guesaria.

To gain entry, we rang the bell and the caretakers, a friendly Armenian family from Bolis, happily greeted us with hugs and kisses. What an emotional moment! The church, with its impressive architecture, reminded us of the unfaltering faith, devotion and sacrifices of our compatriots in this historic city famous for its opulent educational and cultural life. We gathered with reverence facing the beautiful gilded altar and in unison sang the "Hayr Mer" ("The Lord's Prayer") and Der Voghormia ("Lord Have Mercy"). My good friend and Armenian community leader in Montebello, California, Dr. Hagop Dikranian, offered an emotional prayer in memory of our martyrs.

The church was bought from the Greeks in 1860 and was renovated in 1996 thanks to the generosity of two brothers from Bolis whose ancestors hailed from Guesaria. We also visited the nearby Gumushian school building and were stunned to see that only the walls of the classrooms of this once-thriving Armenian educational institution were still standing.

After honoring the memory of our ancestors, we all gathered in the courtyard to enjoy a most delicious villager's Armenian lunch consisting of basturma (cured beef),

broiled sujuk (sausage), feta cheese, freshly-picked tomatoes, cucumbers, and honey. The Armenian beverage "tan" (yogurt shake) and watermelon complemented our most memorable Armenian feast.

We bid farewell to Guesaria with tears in our eyes and continued our journey by visiting Germir where three half-ruined churches are the only reminders of the existence of our people in that village. We then visited Talas, once a famous summer resort for wealthy Armenians as well as the birthplace of prominent Armenian benefactor Calouste Gulbenkian. Only three miles from Guesaria, Talas is mainly an agricultural village, but also a dormitory suburb of the city and partly the center of the motor transport business. Its former large Christian population drew a flourishing American Protestant mission center in the village in the 19th century. Forbidden by law to proselyte, and much reduced to scale, the mission now runs a boarding school for Turkish boys and a medical clinic for the local people, especially the villagers.

TOMARZA

Pigeons Freely Crisscrossing our Church Dome!

Our next stop was Tomarza, a small town southeast of Guesaria and to the east of Mount Archeos. It was a Sunday, and the entire town looked deserted. The place had a special interest for Wisconsin natives whose parents and grandparents were born there. The mayor of the village was informed of our arrival and greeted us at the entrance of the Armenian Soorp Boghos-Sourp Bedros Church (Saint. Paul-Saint Peter Church) by unlocking its doors. It was quite apparent that the altar and the marble floor of the church had been vandalized. Surrounded by the church's blue and gray frescos, we sang "Hayr Mer" and "Der Voghormia" as pigeons were freely crisscrossing the dome and the spirit of Armenian faith came alive under the watchful and curious eyes of the mayor and local youth and children. It was astonishingly touching to watch these Tomarzatizis singing in the same church where a century earlier their ancestors had sung, prayed, and worshipped. After our singing and prayers, without mincing his words, we courageously informed the Mayor that it was a genocide that had destroyed his ancestors. The surprised mayor could only nod in silence.

DJUDJUN

Fellow pilgrim, Serpuhi Ohanian-Sarkissian, suddenly decided to take a side-trip to Djudjuin, a small village where her parents were born. Dr. Kademian said that he had heard from a few Tomarzatizis that Djudjun was a mere 25 kilometers away from where we were at that moment. So with the assistance of a local guide, a small group consisting of Serpuhi, her husband Jirayr Sarkissian, Dr. Kademian, and Ani Aghbashian, a well-known pedagogue from Lebanon, took off the visit the remote "lost and found" village.

Upon their return, we could tell from their pensive and tearful eyes that something had shocked them. They reported that the village had been left to die. The Armenian

church had been converted into a barn, and the locals lived together with their livestock in mud houses in a most primitive manner.

Yet the side-trip was well worth for Serpuhi and Ani, who had picked up a palmful of earth, which they now carried close to their chests like a sacred relics.

We returned to our hotel for an open-air banquet dinner under the bright stars of Cappadocia. The air was cool, even somewhat chilly during the month of July, since we were on an altitude of 1400 meter and separated by the Mediterranean and Black Seas high ranges of mountains and some 500 kilometers on all sides.

During the dinner, Dr. and Mrs. Gregory and Alice Ketabgian and Alice's sister, **Mrs.** Armine Garboushian, asked our guide Avo to make arrangements for their side-visit to locate their ancestral home in Aksaray, some 80 kms. away. After a few cell-phone contacts, a special taxi was quickly arranged and detailed instructions were given to the driver.

We all went into a deep sleep after a most memorable day with unforgettable experiences which certainly enriched our lives.

AKSARAY

Locating an Ancestral Home!

While the other members of the group were still dreaming, at 6:00 am. four of us, Gregory, Alice, Armine and me, were pursuing our individual dreams going to Aksaray. This verdant town is located at the end of the road that turns off to Cappadocia from the main route of Ankara-Adana. From the south, Aksaray is overlooked by the twin peaks of Mount Hasan, an extinct volcano known as "little sister" to Mount Archeos. Aksaray has seen Armenians, Assyrians, Hitites, Persians, Seljuks, Mongols and Alexander the Great. In Roman times Aksaray was known as Archelais, after Archelaus II, the last king of Cappadocia. By 20 BC, the kingdom had been reduced to a virtual protectorate of Rome and the king enjoyed only a token status.

Huddled in an oasis on the Melendiz River, on the far side of the Melendiz mountain range from Nigde, Aksaray is a market town with no real interest except as a base for reaching Ihlara valley. Although no trace of the ancient city survives, Aksaray probably occupies the site of the Byzantine town Archelais. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, part of the population of Aksaray was transferred to the capital, a repopulation program that was a measure of how weak the Byzantine city had become before the final collapse of its empire. The displaced people named the district in Istanbul in which they settled after their hometown, a name which that lively suburb still retains.

To our amazement, we could locate the two-story stone building which still stands near the historic Pasha Public Bath and a river, constructed (and described in the memoirs) by the great uncles and grandfather of Mrs. Ketabgian and Mrs. Garboushian. The half-ruined house, marked for historic preservation, has a caretaker,

an elderly woman from Azerbaijan. Alice and Armine politely approached her as she was tending the front garden. As an eyewitness, I was listening intently as the emotional encounter was unfolding by reaching its peak. Bewildered, she kindly welcomed us in to see firsthand the interior of the house. There was a smile on my face and unspeakable joy in my heart, when I realized that an important mission was accomplished. What a rewarding and inspiring experience!

BOGAZLIYAN

An Armenian Name Greeting Us

History records that scores of Armenians were brutally massacred in Cappadocia, and as we were crossing the Alis River (Kizilirmak), the events of 1915 flashed through my mind when a large number of Armenians were shot to death on the banks of this river. Driving through Topakli, Duver, Elmali and Eozler villages, the city of Bogazliyan, with its interesting Armenian name and a population of 30,000, greeted us. The city is depleted of its Armenian population and only one Armenian, Mr. Bey Toufik, resides in Bogazliyan today. We invited our compatriot to join us as we were dining in a local restaurant. He furnished us with invaluable information about the history of the city and its former Armenian inhabitants, most of whom have moved to Bolis to make a better living. Our emotional encounter with Mr. Toufik was extremely significant especially for Dr. Hagop Dikranian, whose grandfather Dikran and uncle Hagop were martyred in Bogazliyan and Ghonorloo, a nearby village.

GURUN

Epitaph of a Tombstone

The following morning, we continued our pilgrimage and arrived in Gurun (Gurin), a truck stop between Cappadocia and Malatia. The settlement of the Armenian community in this region dates back to the 6th century. Records show that from the early 7th century, there has been a deeply-rooted family system whose economy depended mainly on agriculture and cattle-breeding. This period coincides with the Arab expansion, and their penetration into Armenia through the south-east. The situation was later aggravated by the Seljuk and Tartar invasions from the far east.

Gurun is situated in a long valley, with high peaks and caves all around. Before 1914, two-thirds of its population (est. 14,000) were Armenians. In residential quarters, the houses were surrounded by orchards which supplied the household with all the fruits needed. The surplus was dried and exported to other towns. Some of the populous Armenian quarters were Shoughoul, Eoren, Tsakh-Tsor, Khasbagh Ferman, Terjan and others., each of which had a parish church with an organized Diocese. Besides the Armenian Apostolic churches, there were also Armenian Catholic and Protestant churches. Each of these communities had its own schools adjacent to its churches.

Before Gurun was deprived of its Armenian population, it was the center of shawl weaving industry. The Armenian artisans working on the looms were so ingenious that no competitor outside Gurun would dare challenge their handicraft. Moreover, all

innovations were featured by Gurunians, so much so, that the first mechanized loom in the area was introduced by a dauntless and imaginative Armenian entrepreneur named Sarkis Minassian.

In 1915, out of 10,000 Armenians of Gurun, only 2,000 survived the Genocide. The once flourishing and prosperous Gurun has become a lost village. All the Armenian houses, churches and schools have been destroyed. The Mother Church is now being used as a cinema. We could only visit the ruined site of an Armenian church and under its fallen walls to read the epitaph of Simon Terjanian's tombstone - - "Deceased September 7, 1894, at the age of 67".

MALATYA

Civilization on Trial

Our next stop was Malatya, one of the oldest cities in Asia Minor with origins dating at least to the 12th century B.C. Its location on a plateau more than 900 meters above sea level on the western bank of the Euphrates River, surrounded by snow-capped mountain ranges on three sides and by rivers and waterfalls on the fourth, made it a strategically favorable natural fortress for centuries. The exceptionally fertile soil was renowned throughout Asia Minor for its production of fruits, especially apples, grapes, apricots, peaches, and berries, as well as for its deposits of copper, salt, coal, and stone. As a result of its mixed population of ethnic groups and of its rulers over the ages, Malatya is reputed to be so rich in undiscovered pre-Christian and Christian artifacts that there exists hardly an inch of land in which excavations would not reveal historic treasures.

We entered into the city on the tree-lined Belhassa Boulevard, its two-way traffic divided by beautiful plants and flowers. Some historians believe that the name Malatya was derived from the Greek word "melitineh", meaning "mellow or sweet," referring to the exceptional beauty and the abundance of sweet-smelling flowers and fruits in the area. In the middle of the city's square stood the statue of Ismet Inonu, a former Turkish leader, commemorating his birthplace and his work for the betterment of the city. The square was surrounded by modern stores, airline agency offices, and hotels.

Armenians made valiant and vibrant contribution to civilization here. During the life of Christ, King Apkar was sovereign, followed – among others - - by Senekerim Ardzruni and Levon V. In the first century A.D., two apostles of Christ, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, visited Armenia to evangelize. According to legend, King Apkar built the monastery called The Free Physician to commemorate the miraculous healing of his son by one of the apostles on that site. The monastery was an architectural marvel, with forty alters and a foundation that has been authenticated as dating to the time of Christ. Additional Christian influence by Armenians in the area was brought in the fifth century when the Armenian Diocese was established in Malatya, and also in the tenth century when the Armenian catholicos resided there.

In the sixth century A.D., the city has become the capital for Armenian kings. By the seventh century, it had become the battleground between the Byzantine Empire and

the Arab khalifates. In the eleventh century, the region became to be known as Lesser Armenia with many settlers from various regions of Greater Armenia that were withdrawn by the Byzantines in vain efforts to improve their eastern defenses against the Turks. Armenian rulers held Meliteneh for a while before 1101 when it went to Danishmend Turks. Sieges and fighting continued with the Crusaders becoming involved in the local quarrels. The town was defended by its Muslim and Christian population for fourteen years against the Mongols before surrendering to them in 1257. Memelukes held Malatya until they were defeated by the Ottomans in 1516.

Eski Malatya or Old Malatya, 15 kilometers away - - which was once the ancient city of Meletene - - was my planned destination. On my way, I saw the location - - which is now an open, flat land - - of the Furunjular refugee center where Armenians from nearby cities were herded in 1915 on their way to the deserts of Der el-Zor in Syria. Those trying to escape had made their own trails over the rocks, around the bushes and trees, and across the steep inclines. The visions parading on my mental screen were the reenactments of countless stories I had heard from survivors. More than 100,000 refugees had been reported to have scrambled over the surrounding mountains to safety. The very thought of their ordeal was devastating.

Upon my arrival at the Byzantine fortress ruins, I could see the temple on one side of the arches and the walls of the palace where King Apkar had lived for a short time. The ruins of the mosque built by the Seljuks were visible above the ground, but I could only guess of the precious treasures that existed below the ground. As I looked over the ruins, I tried to visualize the 2,000 people who had lived in their cottages surrounding the fortress in this historic city which was destroyed during the purge of Armenians nine decades ago. Most of the cottages were in ruins, as were the thirty-two major boulevards, the more than ten churches, and the hundreds of public establishments.

Although Eski Malatya could be considered an open museum with untold answers to questions of interest to historians, no one seemed to be taking care of it. The only inhabitants I saw in this once proud suburb of Malatya were lizards and other reptiles.

Prior to the Genocide, Malatya had been an important religious center for Armenians of the area. The monastery of St. Gregory the Illuminator was built in the eleventh century. The famous St. Sarkis Church, built in the sixteenth century, was reconstructed later and renamed Holy Virgin. The Holy Resurrection or St. Haroutiune Church built in the seventeenth century housed a school for boys and another for girls. The Armenian Catholic community had an impressive church - - St. Mary - - and schools for boys and girls, a convent for monks, and another for nuns. The Armenian Evangelical community operated several schools and orphanages. In the nineteenth century, the Armenian Apostolic Church established several schools: St. Mesrob, St. Nareg, Arshagounian, Gayanian, Sahagian, Nercessian, Santoukhtian,, and Hripsimiantz.

When I returned to New Malatya, I visited the isolated Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church. It seemed naturally peaceful, as if defying the heroic defensive battle of Armenians in 1896 in this structure. As I approached the church, I noticed that the cross was gone and wooden boards were nailed across the entrances. Pigeons and other birds flew in and out of the church through window openings and around

covering boards. The peacefulness of the birds, symbolizing the ecstatic adoration of a church full of worshippers, contrasted dramatically with the savage mob of 20,000 Turkish and Kurdish soldiers who advanced toward the Armenian quarters in 1896 forcing 12,000 Armenians to take refuge in this church compound and to bravely fight the attackers who bombarded the church with artillery. Later, the Turkish soldiers brutally massacred 4,000 Armenians who sought sanctuary here, beseeching God for divine assistance.

From there, I visited the St. Gregory monastery on top of a hill in the village of Venk ("Venk" is the Kurdish pronunciation of the Armenian word "vank", meaning monastery.). Built in 1349, the monastery had served as the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

I looked forward to my next destination, Kharpert. I vowed that the torch of justice will continue to burn increasingly brighter until Armenian grievances about loss of lives and property in Malatya are redressed.

KHARPERT

A Historic Rendez-Vous with My Roots

As I continued from Malatya to Kharpert (Elazig), my heart began to throb with anticipation. In a matter of minutes, hardly the blinking of an eye in eternity, I was "returning home" to my paternal grandparents and great-grandparents' ancestral villages. Finally, with indescribable patriotic pride, we set foot upon the most multi-dimensionally prolific corner of Western Armenia. Kharpert once enjoyed a reputation as lofty as that of classical Athens. It had more educational institutions than any other city throughout the land. The education level of the Armenians was so superior here that the empire had entrusted them with many of the technical and bureaucratic positions. Besides secondary schools, colleges, and divinity schools, Kharpert boasted numerous monasteries and at least one church in each of its 350 villages. In 1900, the prestigious Euphrates (Yeprad) College offered seminars in educational psychology to train women to serve as teachers. Upon graduation, they went to neighboring villages to carry the torch of learning to other Armenians.

Kharpert has always been very dear to my heart--the birthplace of my ancestors. Senior priest (avak kahana) Der Yeghia Der Yeghiayan, the father of my paternal grandfather, lived, preached and was martyred in Kharpert in 1915.

Kharpert has served as the archetypical patriarchal community throughout Western Armenia. The whole community used to function as one family by baking bread together, tilling together, and harvesting together. Kharpertis have always been known as friendly, fun-loving people. Every birthday, name day, engagement or wedding provided them the chance to invite everyone to a feast and celebration. This tradition still continues amongst Kharpertis all around the world.

This province has given birth to many of the novelists and writers such as Tlgadintzi, Hamasdegh, Yeroukhan, Peniamin Nourigian, Roupén Zartarian, Vahan Totovents, Rev, Hovhannes Boujikianian, Vahe Haig, and others, who used the versatile Western

Armenian dialect to weave numerous novels and stories which kept the spirit of national identity of the Armenians alive and strong.

Before reaching Kharpert, we stayed the night at the “Turpol” hotel on the shores of the beautiful Hazar Lake, the historical Dzovk. The large photographs of the ancient Armenian buildings of Kharpert gracing the walls of the hotel immediately aroused our interest. A Turkish young lady approached us and wanted to know why we were showing such interest by photographing the pictures. I answered her without hesitation: “These houses belonged to Armenians, therefore they represent a great historical value to us.” She immediately retorted with the pat answer which is drilled into every Turkish schoolboy and girl: “The Armenians were deported because they were massacring the Turks.” Not wanting to engage in a fruitless argument, we went to our designated rooms, left our suitcases there and returned to the reception area. The young lady again approached us and asked: “I look neither like my father or mother; do you think I might have Armenian origin?” She then expressed the wish to accompany us on our tour of the local churches.

We visited the Armenian Sourp Asdvadzadzin (St. Mary's) Church in Khulakugh (now, Shahin Kaya), where my great-grandfather had served as the last priest. This was the spot where the blood of my great-grandfather and 41 Der Yeghiayans was spilled. This was holy ground for me. A spot from where I could commune with the unflinchingly courageous spirit of my martyred ancestors. It was as though I were in a different world with all my ancestors who had lived there. I knew I was walking on the same streets where my grandfather had walked to church, viewing the land, now stone strewn, which they knew so well. My pride swelled as I said silently, "I am here, I have come to visit the hearth of your ideals, which are mine today." I had an indescribable feeling of joy and pride mixed with pain.

I sat by the entrance of the church thinking about how fortunate I was to be in the same place that both my great-grandfather and grandfather had lived nine decades ago. Their spiritual presence engulfed me. As I watched the surrounding mountains, I even felt that they, which had witnessed many historic events over eons, were welcoming me with open arms and tears on their cheeks. I wanted them to see me walking triumphantly through these streets. For my family, this was a historic moment.

Accompanied by my sister Knar Toutounjian, my cousins Regina Garabedian, Amy and Mary Hoogasian and their mother Claudia, as well as Adrienne Fosberg and fellow Kharpertzi John Hovhannes Yacoub and his son Greg, I entered the church, lit candles, sang canticles and burnt incense. The Turkish lady watched all this with great interest. She wanted to know what the purpose of our ritual was. When I explained it to her, she said: “These songs impacted me greatly. They sounded so familiar to me.” We also paid an emotional visit to the village of Tadem where Adrienne Fosberg's father had served the Armenian Church. We located only a remnant of its physical structure upon which Adrienne lit a candle in memory of her beloved father.

We said good-bye to that sacred and unforgettable ancestral villages of Khoulakugh and Tadem dotted with vineyards, and walnut and mulberry trees, and passing through the golden fields, ascended 1700 meters to the old Armenian city of Harput, in order to enjoy the majestic sight of the 8th century Urartian fortress. Harput, a five-

kilometer ride to the north of Elazig, is situated at the end of a road heavy with military installations guarding the Keban Dam. Harput was a thriving commercial center until the late nineteenth century. From the high vantage point of the fortress, we looked down in sorrow at the ruins of Sourp Asdvadzadzin (St. Mary) and Sourp Garabed churches. Upon our descent, we walked through almost total desert-like desolation toward these two once-thriving Armenian churches. Not a single house, wall, or even stone-upon-stone was visible at these sacred sites. Further away, a tall modern building erected over land that once housed Armenian homes similarly attracted our attention. Ironically, that night, foreign and local political and public personalities were to get together there for a meeting. Will any of them show the intellectual vigor to inquire upon what land that building was erected? Probably not. To most people the past is dead; but not for me, and not for my fellow pilgrims. As I began to take panoramic photographs of Harput, once again, whether I wished it or not, images from the past intruded forcefully. There was once bustle and vigor there. There was once a vibrant community there that built churches, homes, schools, hospitals . . .

Kharpert (Mezireh) is also the birthplaces of my paternal grandmother Nvart Der Boghossian whose father served as the priest of the Armenian Church. We visited the First Evangelical church which stood there forlorn and roofless. A bas relief cross sculpted on one of the walls was covered with cement. After the deportation of the Armenians, the building was used as a factory. But now, abandoned and neglected, it was home to birds and pigeons. I was surprised to see that the seventh letter of the Armenian alphabet, "e", which has Biblical connotation, was still visibly carved into the wall above the stone alter, but now covered with concrete. I ran my hands over the walls and the alter, and walked over various remnants of ruined masonry that cluttered the church floor. I wanted to feel the reassuring presence of relics in my ancestral land which spawned many great pastors who served the Armenian Evangelical community with vision and dedication. I wanted to use all my senses to inflame into my memory the image of those days when hundreds of members of the congregation gathered to worship in this important Armenian Christian edifice. We next paid a visit to the Assyrian church that still serves the needs of 14 Armenian and 30 Assyrian families who gather each Sunday and partake in the liturgy. We had a chance to talk with the Assyrian vartabed (celibate priest) and the Armenian caretaker, two people I had met earlier in 1987, who gave us new and detailed information about the condition and needs of the Christians still living there. Next to the church there was a small cemetery where the headstones had Armenian inscriptions. In the evening we returned to the hotel and savored the delicious fish from Dzovk Lake. Curiously, the Turkish singer who had accompanied us to the churches had decided not to perform at the hotel that night. Something had moved her so deeply that she had preferred to stay in her room in solitude and meditation.

PERRI

"Armenians Used to Own all these Houses and Vineyards . . . "

Early next morning at 4:00 am, Roxanne Makasjian and I hired a van to visit Perri (Charsanjak), a place that Roxanne had dreamt about all her life, since that's where

her family hailed from. Before the Genocide, 1,763 Armenians (310 families), 350 Turks and 80 Kurds lived in Perri. Obviously the Armenians were the majority there.

After a two-hour ride, we arrived at dreamlike Perri, now called Akbazar. Nestled in the lap of beautiful nature, and irrigated by the Perri River, the sleepy village welcomed us with a soft breeze and the morning calls of the roosters.

As if mesmerized, Roxanne walked to the River Perri to symbolically get baptized and rejuvenated, in memory and in gratitude to her ancestors. While we were inspecting the exteriors of the houses in the village, we came across a hospitable old man of 87 with the name Ahmed Yildiz. When we told him we were Armenians, he spread out his arms and hugged us warmly. He had nothing but great things to say about the former Armenian inhabitants of Perri. With great admiration he said: "The Armenians used to own all these houses, and these vineyards and orchards are the fruits of their labors." During our conversation, a middle-aged man by the name of Abdullah Karadagh joined us, and quickly concurred with the glowing sentiments that the old man had expressed about the Armenians. Further down the road, at an outdoor restaurant, the elderly of the village calmly sipped their morning tea. As we continued our walk and took in the sight and sounds of the various neighborhoods, the fountain, the public baths, and the Armenian church now converted to a mosque, I couldn't help but think of Hampartzoum Chitjian from Perri, who escaped and survived the Genocide, and before passing on at the age of 101, managed to share his compelling story with us in his autobiography published by her daughter Sara in 2005 in Los Angeles.

Before rejoining our group, Roxanne and I then proceeded to visit the neighborhood ancestral villages of Keserig, now called Kizilay, and Sorcere, now called Sursuru.

MUSH

The City of "National Character-Builders"

Continuing our journey toward the heart of Western Armenia, we crossed the Aradzani river passing through the Daron plain and entered Mush. The deeper we moved into Western Armenia, the more our enthusiasm level rose. The invigorating air, the delicious water, and its eternal spirit seemed to stir our patriotic sinews. Mush is situated in the West of Western Armenia, in the southern part of the Province of Daron. The Meghraked River flows right through the center of Mush and flows into the Aradzani a mere 20 kms north.

As early as in the fourth century, Daron boasted a string of monasteries such as "Msho Sooltan" Sourp Garabed, Sourp Arakelotz, and Ashdishad, where monks and scribes copied the Bible and other religious books. Today these bastions of culture and religion are in absolute ruin. During the 1890s, the Arakelotz Monastery played a special role in the revolutionary movement of the Armenians. General Antranig with a group of 31 *fedayis*, including Kevork Chavoush, found shelter here. The monastery was surrounded by 5000 soldiers and the fighting began. In one month of fierce fighting, the Turkish army lost around 500 soldiers while Antranig lost 2. Then under

the cover of a snowy night, General Antranig managed to cut through the Turkish forces that had ringed the monastery and escaped to continue his mission.

Saint Mesrob Mashdots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet (406 A.D.), was born in the village of Hatzegatz, located 15 kilometers north-east of Mush. Another titan who hails from Mush was Movses Khorenatzi, the father of Armenian historiography. He has lived, worked and is buried at the Arakelotz monastery.

Crossing the Aradzani Bridge, our bus climbed the tortuous road to bring us to the poor and backward village of Yokharda Yongaleh. Oh, how, how can I describe the utterly pitiful condition of the Armenian school and Msho Sooltan Sourp Garabed monastery! There was nothing there but piles of stones. The penniless Kurdish villagers came out of their huts and wanted to know why we were so interested in the ruins. When we told them that we were the descendants of the heroes of Mush who had returned back to our Fatherland, they immediately invited us in for some tea. But my heart was fixated on the high mountains all around us. My heart was rejoicing as I gazed at these same mountains that are the silent witnesses to the heroic struggles of the Armenians against the Turks and Kurds. The awesome presence of the mountains stirs the soul with unimaginably positive, healthy energy. In an elevated mood – yet tinged with regret, we again raised our voices, hands and heads to the Lord, and sang canticles and burned incense in honor and memory of those now forgotten heroes and martyrs of Mush.

Mush was famous for its monasteries. Songs and poems have been dedicated in praise to Sourp Garabed and other monasteries, namely, Sourp Hovhannoo (St John), Holy Apostles and Ashdishad. It was also blessed with many churches. Before 1915, There were seven Armenian Apostolic churches: Sourp Giragos, Sourp Sarkis, Sourp Khatch (Holy Cross), Sourp Stepanos, Sourp Asdvadzadzin (Mother Church, the most prestigious and the best constructed), Sourp Haroutiune, and Sourp Arakelotz (Holy Apostles). In 1917, when the Armenian population left Mush to go to Eastern Armenia, the faithful Mshetsis carried the huge decorated front door of the latter church to safety in Armenia.

Walking and talking with my fellow pilgrims, we took a closer look at the huts that had sprung up around the church. Another iconic world gone haywire flashed in front of my eyes. Some of the Kurdish houses had been built with the stones of the ruined Armenian church. The bas relief crosses and inscriptions in Armenian stood frozen, in a helter-skelter pattern. A large cross sculpted on six stones was reconfigured on a house wall in a totally distorted pattern. The cross had become a bunch of meaningless lines. Similarly, multi-cell stone inscriptions had been juxtaposed in a totally meaningless and bizarre pattern. A wave of sharp pain flashed right through me. The tragedy was that these miserable, left-behind, neglected Kurds meant no disrespect. They scavenged just to survive. Maybe we should build them modern new houses and bringing down their old houses liberate and release the “stones” from their profane place back to their rightful, sacred space – on the walls of the resurrected Armenian church.

We returned at our hotel at the center of the City of Mush, and Dr. Alber Karamanoukian and I walked to the commercial hub of the city. We were surprised at the availability of such a variety of goods in abundance. We couldn't help but

purchase some items. The shopkeepers were very curious about us. We answered all their questions. They learned that we were not merely tourists who love to shop but also Armenian Pilgrims on a spiritual journey.

Early next morning, passing through the old Armenian Quarter, and after a brief stop to pay our respects to the semi-ruined Sourp Asdvadzadzin Church, we climbed the hill over which stands the Citadel of Mush in order to have a better look of the panorama of the city and its surrounding Gortuk Mountains. It was painful to part from this habitat which once was the home base of the Mamigonian clan. Yet I felt joy also. It was joyous to have breathed the air and walked the earth of this legend-full, blessed place. In the history of mankind, this was the spot where Armenian heroism in the name of religion began to gain strength. This was the original point, the eternal spring.

ERZURUM

The Price of Martyrdom

Traveling through the towns of Varto and Khnous, we headed toward Erzurum. Perched like a nest between tall mountains, Erzurum or the formerly important Armenian city Garin, was once the Ninth Province within Medz Hayk. In the fourth century, the city was christened with the name Theodosiopolis. It subsequently remained often under Armenian and at other times Arab occupation for five centuries, till in 1515 Sultan Selim annexed it to the Ottoman Empire. It remained under Ottoman rule until 1828. Three Russian excursions, the last one 1916-1917, brought the city under Russian rule. In July of 1919 Turkish General Karabekir and his followers drew up a new map which defines the current borders.

Garin was the feudal capital of Upper Armenia, a province about 76,000 square kilometers of large meadows and well-watered soil. The region of the Armenian homeland, called Greater Armenia, consisted of ten provinces among which the foremost position was occupied by the province of Garin. The etymology of the city's present name Erzurum is a corruption of Arz-er-Rum, or "Domain of the Romans" in Arabic.

When I visited Erzurum for the first time in 1987, I came across a sculpture-monument at the entrance of the city which distorted truth beyond belief. Thus I was filled with a sense of quiet rage as we approached this neglected city full of roaming beggars. Walking the streets of Erzurum is like walking in a city frozen in time. Most of the women still wore heavy veils. In the reception area of the hotel we were staying in, two teenagers approached Mrs. Irma Arabatlian and wanted to find out what language we were speaking. When she proudly announced in perfect Turkish that we were Armenians, the boys stood there in stunned silence. After a moment they recovered then confessed that to them the word Armenian was equivalent to a curse word. They were eager to find out more about us since we were the first Armenians that they had ever met. Based on what they had heard about from their parents and at school, they had thought that Armenians were some kind of monsters . . .

Mrs. Mariam Boghosian, whose roots stem from Garin, strolled up and down the streets of Erzurum full of conflicting emotions of joy and regret. We walked the streets of the Armenian quarters, and then climbed up the hill to the frontier fortress erected in the 5th Century by Byzantine Emperor Theodosios II, to get a panoramic view of the city and its mountainous environs.

We next visited the impressive Sourp Asdvadzadzin Mother Church built in 1838. This sacred structure too is currently used as a mosque. We visited the Armenian houses that remain empty and in semi-ruin. At one time in Garin, the Mother Church had the following eight companion sacred sites: Sourp Toros, Sourp Sahag, Sourp Hovsep, Sourp Minas, Sourp Varvara, Sourp Nshan, Sourp Barkevadu, and the Ark of Martyrs. Three Patriarchs from Constantinople have served as Prelates of Garin: Haroutioun Vehabedian (1874-1884), Maghakia Ormanian (1896-1908), and Zaven Der Yeghiayan (1913-1922). The Catholic community had one church, Surp Asdvadzadzin, built in 1840, and the Evangelicals another built in 1847.

Erzurum was also once famous for its educational institutions such as: The Sanasarian School built in 1881, the Kavafian School built in 1915, as well as six boys' schools and one girls' school under auspices of the Armenian Apostolic Church, three under the Catholics, and one under Evangelic control.

We visited the impressive campus of the Sanasarian School (now the local Congress headquarters) as well as the abandoned St. Minas Armenian Church. We also toured the main streets of the city, and paid a visit to the Chifte Minareli Medrese, formerly a theological school built in the Seljuk style in 1253, which was now being used as a covered market. Elsewhere in the city, we paused in front of a two-storey building where in 1914 the Tashnagtzoutioon (Armenian Revolutionary Federation) had convened its 8th Party Conference. A fellow pilgrim, Mrs. Sara Churukian, informed us that her father, Dr. Avedis Injejkian, had taken part in that meeting as a delegate from Kessab.

Before leaving Erzurum, we paid a visit to an antiquity museum full of Urartian, Caucasian, Roman, and Hellenic artifacts. This infamous place however also had a special place, "The Massacre Room", where the bones of Turks allegedly massacred by Armenians had been exhumed in 1980 from mass graves. According to the Deep State, which still wields the real power in Turkey, the Armenian Genocide is an "alleged Genocide", while the alleged massacre of Turks is the real thing. Does anyone need any more proof that the Official History is rammed through the throats of Turkish citizens at every opportunity? They lie with impunity in broad daylight. The following thought suddenly occurred to me: If you have one room full of victims of Armenian violence, how many rooms would you need to include the bones of a million and a half perished Armenians? Would a hundred museums be enough? A thousand? More?

We next took a side trip to the village of Khoumlar, located a few kilometers away from Garin. This was the village where fellow pilgrim Shoushanig Vartanian-Moloyan's father was born. It is always amazing to watch a son or daughter honor and pay tribute to the unfading memory of a parent. A sound was once heard from the Armenian mountains of Erzurum . . .

We left Erzurum for Kars driving through the astonishingly beautiful Plain of Pasen. The ever-energizing River Arax was our constant companion. The natural sculptures on both sides of the Arax Gorge continuously stunned us with their majestic beauty

ARAPGIR

An Emotional Encounter!

We crossed the Euphrates River and entered Arapgir. Located at the foot of the Anti-Taurus Mountains, the area has abundant water supply, with ever-flowing fountains. This high-plateau village, surrounded with willow and aspen trees, once had a large number of Armenian churches and schools, due to the large distances of the cluster of hamlets. Before the Genocide, the Armenians formed 53% of the total population here. Unfortunately however, as in most towns and villages in our itinerary, here too all traces of the Armenian presence had been deliberately erased. From 53% to zero percent can only mean one and only one thing.

But we were pleasantly surprised to hear that there was an Armenian by the name of Sarkis Mihranshahian still residing in Arapgir. Fellow pilgrim Dr. Hagop Dikranian mentioned that he had visited this "Armenian Patriarch" during a previous visit.

We quickly decided to find the house of this 94 year old resilient Armenian. It wasn't that difficult to locate him; he was known to everyone. A local Turk led us down a hill and we found ourselves in front of a warm house surrounded with fruit trees. We knocked on the door and were surprised to see a woman open the door and say, "Bazhalsta." We asked her if she was Russian. "No, I am an Armenian from Gumri," she answered.

We soon found out that her name was Manoushag Kevorkian, and that she was Sarkis Mihranshahian's caretaker. We went into the house, eager to meet the brave and courageous Armenian. Manoushag told us that a few months ago he had lost his wife. Two of his children who live in Bolis and another in America had come to the village for their mother's funeral, and had tried without success to persuade him to leave Arapgir and move to Bolis. Unable to persuade their unbending father, the sons had arranged for Manoushag to come from Bolis to Arapgir to take care of him.

We walked up the stairs of his two-storey wooden house waiting for his return from the garden where he was apparently working on the soil. And in walked a strong, stern, and energetic man who looked much younger than his actual age of 94. He was a true mountain man. This Arapgirtzi man of faith and courage, who had once served in the armed forces of Turkey, boldly kept telling us repeatedly: "I am afraid of no one; I'd sacrifice my soul for my Armenian Nation." There was chaotic excitement in the room as we tried to pry more information from this indigenous Armenian. How had he survived here? Why hadn't he left the village? What was the secret of his strong health and strong convictions? He patiently answered all our questions. Suddenly, a young girl appeared next to Manoushag. Little Anoush was his grandchild who had come to spend her summer vacation with grandpa.

It was time to leave. But before we could leave, Sarkis Mihranshahian asked us to turn our faces eastward and pray, “We profess to one God” with him. After the prayer, all of us together sang the “Lord’s Prayer.” Touched by this sudden infusion of so many Armenians who were soon to leave him behind, this strong and resilient man began to shed tears. He insisted on feeding us and told Manoushag to lay a table for his precious visitors. Once again it was painful to say goodbye to such an authentic man who was the sole remnant from a once flourishing town. It’s impossible to put into words the feelings that this man aroused within us. After all, this brave Armenian, overcoming all fear, had tenaciously clung to the land of his birthplace, and though he had no other Armenians to congregate with, he had pledged to himself to stay there till his last breath and to be buried under the earth of his Fatherland.

We weren’t able to pry from him all the secrets about the difficulties of living surrounded on all sides by Turks. But this much was obvious: The flame of the Armenian Spirit burned high and bright in the soul of this archetypical Armenian. Love of land was in his every cell, love of nation always vivid in his soul.

On our way back to the center of the city, curious shop-keepers wanted to know who we were and where we hailed from. We boldly told them that we were Armenians who were on a pilgrimage to visit the birthplace of our fathers and grandfathers. These poor, uninformed peasants didn’t know how to respond to us, yet they invited us in to share some tea with them.

As we were boarding the tour bus, suddenly a man appeared and confessed that he was Armenian by birth and asked for money.

We decided to leave Arapgir earlier than we had planned. There was no need to take in sites any further. We were highly charged up by our meeting with Sarkis. We wanted to carry that enthusiasm with us for the rest of the trip. We left Arapgir physically, but left behind a piece of our hearts and souls.

AGN, KEMAKH, ERZINCAN

Not a Single Trace of Armenian Civilization

As we proceeded onto Agn, the touching experiences we had gone through were so powerful that they kept on coming up in my mind's eye. I had no doubt that the events were firmly etched upon the canvas of our minds and souls forever. Our journey continued through the narrow and winding roads that hugged the soaring mountain peaks. From our vantage point we could see the Euphrates flowing in its eternal beauty.

We reached Agn in the afternoon. And what a stunning vista spread in front of our amazed eyes! Hidden in a valley between Mount Munzur and the Sariçicek High Plateau, spread out on the banks of the Karasu River, a tributary of the Euphrates, this town of 2250 inhabitants in the Erzincan province, now called Kemaliye shimmered in its timeless, rugged beauty. Surrounded by a riot of trees, this magical town was yet

another reminder that our ancestors had not only suffered massacres and deprivations, but had also lost a piece of paradise on earth.

We entered the main road of the town and at once loomed in front of us the Armenian school, which now had a large sign proclaiming: “Kaymakam of Kemaliye”. We walked the streets surrounded by aspen trees, and quickly encountered Armenian houses, and an Armenian church, which alas, like many others, had been converted into a Turkish Cultural Museum.

We visited the so-called museum and found not a single trace of sacred Christian civilization. There were only old artifacts, lace clothes, old pictures and farming equipment. Once again, the culture of the majority had been erased, and the culture of the minority had been instituted everywhere. As always, each encounter with our past was emotionally overwhelming but never exhausting.

We continued our journey northward toward Erzincan via Gamakh (Kemah). The roads were narrow, dangerous, and primitive. After driving through many tunnels and surviving hairpin turns of the road, we finally reached the plateau of the Gamakh Mountains.

After taking in the splendid beauty of the mineral-rich cliffs some black some red, we reached the town of Gamakh, population 2,900. It is an old and decrepit town full of rough backwards villagers. From afar we could see the remnants of an Armenian Fortress built during the Ani Kingdom.

After a brief rest, we continued for another 50 kilometers and at long last reached mythical Erzincan (Yeriza), one of the three centers of pagan Armenia. At one time, the town boasted the presence of an Armenian pagan temple dedicated to the golden “Goddess” Anahid. Perched at an elevation of 1,160 meters, the town is home to 108 thousand people. Exhausted from the winding roads and the emotional toil of driving across our ancestral lands, we rested at the modern Buyuk Erzincan Hotel.

SHABIN KARAHISAR

Fortified by General Antranig's Heroic Deeds

After a good night's sleep, early next morning we continued our journey toward Shabin Karahisar, Tamzara, Baghleli, Sevapert, and the Black Sea- shore towns of Trabzon, Rize, Ordu, Hopa, and Hamshen. This, of course, took 3 whole days.

Our living dream journey continued, as each new town rekindled memories of our glorious past, as well as startling us with spectacular mountain vistas and wide beaches. We passed through the town of Kelkit (Turkish pronunciation of Kayl Ked, meaning Wolf river), and reached Karahisar, the birthplace of Armenian hero General Antranig. The town is located on the right bank of the Gernagous River, a tributary of the Kayl River in Lesser Armenia (Pokr Hayk), and is surrounded by cultivated fields and thick mountain forests. After the Turkish conquest of 1473, the name of Sevapert was changed to Shabin Karahisar. At one time 1600 Armenians called this place their home. Although Shabin Karahisar was not on our itinerary, we nonetheless gave in to

Dr. Noubar Mkhsi-Kevorkian's request and our hearts brimming with Armenian pride, entered the historical city. Suddenly an impregnable fortress loomed in front of us. It had been built on a summit surrounded on four sides by deep, impenetrable valleys. In 1915, the Armenian had sought refuge in the fort, after Turkish cannons had turned their wooden houses into ashes and amber. The Armenians had raised their flag of freedom and independence on the fort, and had fought till their last bullet, till their last breath. As the blood of the innocents flowed unabated, honorable Armenian women, some hugging their children to their chests, had preferred to throw themselves into the deep gorges rather than submit to the barbaric ethnic cleansing of the Turks.

Our tour bus came to a halt in the middle of the town. The locals were surprised at this sight of tourists visiting their forgotten town. This was the first time that 40 Armenians were visiting Shabin Karahisar since the time of the Genocide. As was our custom wherever we went, we took a stroll through town looking for Armenian houses and churches. Alas, there's not a shred of the once prominent Armenian presence left. We went into a store to buy food for our lunch. The shopkeeper and others wanted to know who we were and where we had come from and why. As always, without mincing words, we told them who we were and what the history of their town was. Fortified by the memory of General Antranig's heroic deeds, we said goodbye to Shabin Karahisar.

TAMZARA

An Armenian Dance?

On the drive back, we spontaneously decided to also visit the village of Tamzara. Right at the edge of the town, we encountered an Armenian church that had been converted into a mosque. After a short search, we found a humble restaurant surrounded by water on all sides. We sat there and had a hearty meal of cheese, olives, tomatoes, watermelon and bread that we had purchased in Shabin Karahisar. From the restaurant, we could see the ruins of yet another Armenian church . . . We asked the locals about the origin of the village name, and they answered, "It's an Armenian dance."

While Dr. Michael Kademian and Adam Barsamian went on expedition to the depths and heights of Tamzara to search for traces of Armenian life, the rest of us found a little gorge filled with the sounds of fast-moving brooks. Here and there, a riotous canopy of wild flowers complemented the evergreen forests of the Pontus Mountains, creating a scene right out of Greek mythology. We forged ahead on our journey of remembrance and discovery. Michael and Adam returned in an excited state. They recounted that they had seen Armenian houses, and had gathered valuable information about life in Tamzara from the locals.

Dr. Kademian was convinced that like in all the other places we had visited, many of the people in Tomarza looked Armenian. He kept showing us on his digital camera the faces of the youth he had captured. Indeed the eyes of some of them couldn't be anything else but Armenian.

Leaving Tamzara village, we ascended 8,000 feet up the Pontus mountain chain. The mountains were shrouded with mist, as our driver negotiated the narrow and winding roads.

GIRESUN AND ORDU

"Honorary Mayor for a Day"

Crossing the Derili village and the town of Allucra, we reached Giresun, an ancient Greek city on the shores of the Black Sea. This town entered history as Pharnacia, a second-century BC foundation of the Pontic King Pharnacia, but the name was soon changed to Kerasos, the root of the word for cherry in virtually all western languages. It was from here in 69 BC that the Roman gourmet-general Lucullus, first introduced the fruit to Europe, and cherry orchards still flourish all around.

Climbing steep stairs we ascended to a former 18th century Greek church which has been pressed today into service as the Giresun Museum at the foot of the ramparts on Sokakbashu Jaddesi. The grounds of the castle on the bluff, nucleus of the earliest settlements, are today the main city park.

On our way to Trabzon, we again deviated from our itinerary and stopped at Ordu, a quaint town where the parents of fellow pilgrim Armen Baghdasarian were born. Spontaneously we decided to elect Armen Baghdasarian “Honorary Mayor” of Ordu for a day at least.

Despite an 1883 fire that destroyed much of its historic architecture and the hasty departure of its Armenian and Greek communities after the War of Independence, the city today is a flourishing urban center, and it makes a good base from which to visit the **aylas** (highland plateaus) that rise up farther inland. Ordu is the center of the local hazelnut industry, producing vast quantities of chocolate and hazelnut candy.

Called Kotorya by the ancients, Ordu is a city with just a few older houses scaling the green slopes of Boztepe on the west, above the recently restored 19th century Greek Orthodox cathedral. The only other historic remnants are in the museum in the Pashaoghlu Konaghi.

Early next morning we climbed the Boztepe hill and took in the magnificent vista and the fantastic coastal views of the city and the Black Sea.

TRABZON

Emotionally-Driven at the Sight of our Churches

The earliest evidence of civilization in Trabzon dates from 7000 BC. Established as a Greek colony (with Amasra and Sinop), the town benefited from its position on the busy trade route between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It grew quickly and was the focal point for the Pontic kings. At the beginning of the 15th century, the Comnene dynasty established a Byzantine state with its capital in Trabzone. During the Comnene era, the city gained a reputation as a beautiful, sophisticated cultural center. The Genoese and Venetians came here to trade, as Trabzone was the terminus of a modern branch of the Silk Route. In 1461, Trabzone fell under Ottoman rule.

We reached this busy port city on Friday evening. While the men had jammed the mosques, the women and youth were out shopping and promenading at the colorful shopping malls filled with trendy stores and chic cafes. We went into a clothing store and asked the saleslady if she knew where we could find Armenian churches. She volunteered to show them herself.

We paid a visit to the icon-filled ancient Greek church of St. Sofia, and down on our knees prayed in front of that ancient altar. This restored 13th century Byzantine church is by far the most impressive sight in Trabzon. It was originally built by the Comnene emperor, Manuel VII Palaeologus. In 1557, it reverted to a mosque and, after serving as an ammunition depot and also as a hospital, became a museum in 1957. The interior frescoes depicting scenes from the Bible are among the finest in Turkey. The patterned mosaics date from the Byzantine times.

Our visit to the Armenian St. Anne's Church was an extremely sad experience. Located on Marash Jeddesei, the church (Kuchuk Ayvasil Kilisesi) built in the 9th century is now permanently closed. The exterior is adorned with carved crucifixes and angels. We also visited another Armenian church, St. Basil's (Buyuk Ayvasil) in the same area, and were emotionally-driven at the sight of this former architecturally impressive church.

Sumela Monastery sits high up on the cliffs of Mt. Mela, southeast of Trabzon. It was founded in the 4th century by two Greek monks, Barnabas and Sophronius, who were guided to the city by an icon of a "black" image of Virgin Mary. After their deaths, Sumela became a place of pilgrimage. The monastery was rebuilt several times and the ruins we saw during our visit date largely from the 19th century.

When we returned back to the city center, the whole zone was humming vibrantly, as if the whole population of 215,00 had decided to gather in one place . . . But alas again, no trace of anything Armenian. All things Armenian had been erased from a city that once boasted one of the largest Armenian communities.

RIZE, HAMSHIN AND HOPA

The Highlight of our Pilgrimage!

In ancient times, Rize was ruled by the Pontic kings and was known as Rhizus. The name means rice, although the town is now better known for its tea. Rize was strongly fortified by the Byzantines in the 6th century and later became part of the Comnene

Empire. Like Trabzon, it came under Ottoman rule in 1461. In Ottoman times, many people left Rize to seek work in Russia. There they learned the art of bread and pastry-making, which they brought back with them when they returned.

We arrived at Rize at 5:00 PM and decided to stay at the Khatchkar Hotel. We were pleasantly surprised to see a hotel with such an Armenian name on the main street of Rize. While we were having our pictures taken in front of the hotel, a young man by the name of Maher, a Hamshentzi, approached us with curiosity. He immediately became our unofficial guide, sharing with us startling facts about the Muslim Armenians of Hamshin. In the evening, we came across a group of Hamshentzi youth who had come to Rize to dance traditional circle dances at a festival. We noticed many locals clad in versatile **Rize bezi**, a light cloth made of silk, cotton or wool, in black and purple.

Next day early in the morning, I visited a few of the bookstores to see if they carried any books about the Armenian Genocide. Indeed they did. But they were merely propagandistic distortions of the truth to muddy up the thinking of the readers.

East of Rize, the road turns off to the Hemshin Valley. A few kilometers further east is a second turning to Chamlihamshin. The road rises steeply and the air is filled with the smell of boxwood trees. This area lies deep within the Khachkar Mountains at an altitude of 3,932 meters. This is one of Turkey's best areas for trekking and hiking. To the east is Ayder, a village known for its hot springs.

Having read a great deal about the Hamshin, I was very eager to see if the reality now unfolding in front of me matched what I had read. **Armenians are largely unaware of these people to whom they are related ethnically and who in all number several thousand worldwide.** According to Leontius the Priest, in the 8th century **A.D.**, the Armenian princes Hamam and Shapuh Amatuni, after losing their domains in Artaz to the invading Arabs, had taken 12,000 of their followers **from the Ayrarat district** and settled in the town of Tambut, which they had immediately renamed Hamamashen, or Hamshin. To secure their survival, these Armenians converted to Islam in the **16th** century. Yet despite this conversion, to this day they have retained their Armenian dialect and traditions. They even celebrate Armenian holidays, and yet worship in mosques. **The Hamshen still observe the Armenian Christian New Year (celebrated on the day of Epiphany), the Armenian Christian feast of Vartivar, and the language retains the Armenian Christian word for God, Asdvadz. In addition, down to this century, it was reported that some Hamshen still performed baptisms.** They delight in their seasonal and farming festivals, folklore traditions and colorful costumes, and still migrate to and from the high summer pastures. Over half the population of the region is Armenian while the other half is made of Lazes. Most of the people cultivate tea and grapes, and produce large quantities of honey.

Our visit to Hamshin was the highlight of our trip. For a few days Maher took us on a magical mystery tour. Even though there were no Armenian churches, schools, social clubs, or cultural centers in Hamshin, the Hamshentzis could speak fluent Armenian, that is, the "Hamshin Dialect" of the Armenian language **which is closely related to standard Western Armenian.** It was so startling to listen to their stories, their memory of who they were and where they had come from. I couldn't get over the fact

that here we were in this beautiful park, and we the 40 Armenian Christians from the United States **and the Middle East**, were mingling and interacting with **Muslim** Armenians, in a city long cut-off from mainstream “civilization.” **It was apparent that their names do not generally have Armenian roots but rather are related to Turkish or Georgian names.**

The Bash-Hemshinli approximately numbers between 15,000-23,000 individuals in the Rize province, while the Hopa-Hemshinli is estimated at around 25,000. Large communities of Hemshinli can also be found in regional centers such as Trabzon and all the way to Samson on the Black sea coast, as well as in northeastern provinces of Artvin and Ardanoush. A total figure of approximately 250,000 individuals for all Turkey appears to be a realistic figure.

Since our guide Maher was studying for his master's degree in philosophy, I wanted to videotape him as he spoke about the history, family-structure, traditions, and religious practices of the Hamshentzis. When I showed this interview on my television program, our viewers could not believe that such a thing could exist. They thought we were **simply** faking it . . .

Later that day we went to the center of town to explore the shops that had been built around the mosque. It was difficult to come to terms with the fact that our compatriots routinely worshipped in that mosque . . . However, Maher informed us that as a rule Hamshentzis were left-leaning secularists, not religious fanatics. Once again, it was heartbreaking to say goodbye to this most unique Armenian village.

We continued our journey up the coast of the Black sea, to visit Hopa and Sarp. From Hopa, the frontier to the Turkish-Georgian frontier is 20 km. This border was set by the Turkish and Soviet revolutionary governments in 1921. The crossing was virtually inactive between 1935 and 1988, a casualty of **Stalinist**, then Cold War, paranoia, but since the gates have opened, Turkish Sarp has become a busy 24-hour way-station. Convoys of Georgians and Russians head through here for the markets of Turkey's Black Sea cities and towns. The Georgian port city of Batumi was 15 miles away. Hopa was a major port in ancient times, and is still the main seaport (after Trabzon) on the eastern Black Sea coast. Today, the town is dominated by the boat-building industry and a large thermal power station.

We drove eastwards towards Georgia, arriving at the last border point. There, at the most north-eastern point of our entire trip, we went to the beach. In fact, the water is not black; it only looks black because the sea bed is covered with black rocks and pebbles. Some members of the group, this time encouraged by Jirayr and Khajag Sarkissians, took a dip into the dark waters of the Black Sea. There they were all, **Dr. Albert Karamanougian, Armen Bahdassarian, Dr. Michael Kademian, and Michael and Adam Barsamian**, swimming and laughing and shouting like young boys; yet in their respective communities in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Wisconsin, they all were quite serious, prominent men. At this point, we were at the diagonally last point of “*Dzovits Dzov*”, at the very border of Turkey and Georgia, a mere 10 miles away from the port of Batum.

We stayed at the Oustabash Hotel in Hopa. The streets nearby were full of stores. I entered each one of them with my video camera and had conversations in Armenian with the storekeepers. I felt like I was living in a new kind of Armenia . . .

For dinner we went to the Armenian-owned restaurant inside the hotel. All the waiters and servers were **Hamshinli** Armenian. One of them, a young man by the name of Aykoot Oustabash, expressed his wish to immigrate to the United States. The energetic **Hamshinli** Armenian mayor of the town joined us for dinner while the youth entertained us with traditional Armenian dances till the wee hours of the morning.

ARTVIN AND ARDAHAN

Where is the Once-Pervasive Armenian Culture?

Next morning at 7:00 am we boarded our bus and headed for Artvin. Crossing the Khachkar Mountains, which are part of the Pontic Mountain range, we saw a great deal of heavy construction going on around the road. We enjoyed the unique beauty of the Djorokh River, as our expert driver navigated the treacherous roads. Artvin receives more rain than any other place in Turkey, so everything grows wonderfully here. The people of Artvin are known for their many festivals, which feature traditional dancing, games, music, food and costumes. Around Artvin are a number of beautiful villages. Shavshat, about 55 km to the east on the road to Ardahan, is a lovely alpine helmet. Twenty three thousand people reside in Artvin, mostly Armenians and Lazes.

In 1850, Pope Pius IX established the Armenian Catholic Diocese of Artvin. The Catholic Encyclopedia reveals that the city had 5,900 inhabitants in 1894, the majority being Armenians. Prior to the tragic events of the Armenian Genocide, there were nine Armenian Catholic churches, and four schools for boys and three schools for girls. The Diocese of Artvin counted 12,000 Armenian Catholics in 1915.

Continuing our journey, we ascended 6800 feet, and the higher we went the more beautiful and verdant became our surroundings. Ascending further to 7920 feet, we finally reached the famed city of Ardahan. 17,300 people live there now. Here was the Ardahan Fortress and the Hamanos River, but where was the once pervasive Armenian culture?

Ardahan today is the capital of the province of the same name in northeastern Turkey (historic Western Armenia). Internationally, Ardahan is bounded by Armenia and Georgia to the east. Carved out of the Kars province in 1994, it occupies an area of 5,576 km. It is perhaps Turkey's most sparsely populated province with a population of 122,000 consisting of a mix of Georgians, Kurds, Circassians, Turks, and Muslim Hamsheni Armenians. The Christian Armenian population was eliminated by Turkey in 1915. At the beginning of the 19th century, 8,000 of the city's 10,000 inhabitants were Armenians, and by mid-19th century 6,000 of Ardahan's 8,000-population were Armenians. In 1914, 2,063 of the city's 4,113 inhabitants were Armenians. Their occupations included field-working, gardening, raising sheep, woodworking, and

other crafts and trade. The Armenians had two churches, Sourp Asdvadzadzin and Sourp Kevork, two schools and even a theater.

KARS & ANI

Stunning Moments with History

As our hypnotic sojourn forged ahead toward Kars, I could see the excitement level of fellow pilgrim Edig Peshmaljian rise in anticipation. He was about to set foot and take in the sights and sounds and smells of his father's birthplace. The city of the imagination was to become the city of real streets, churches, citadels, people, emotions, weather, food, water, and air – life itself.

Kars was proclaimed an Armenian city for the first time in the 8th century, when in 938 A.D., the Armenian king Abbas I turned it into one of his royal cities, fortified it with a string of citadels, and built the “Church of the Apostles”. Also known as “The Cathedral”, the structure excels in beauty, symmetry and unity. Constructed on a cruciform (cross-shaped) floor plan, the church contains sculptures and inscriptions depicting the Twelve Apostles, and is “surmounted by a circular dome whose ornamentation resembled the vault of heaven”. Ascent was always on the minds of our ancestors.

As we approached the city of “Hayreni Hars”, the soaring dome of the Surp Arakelotz church (Church of the Holy Apostles) instantly magnetized our attention. With great reverence we approached the church, which was converted into a mosque in 1998 by the name of “Havalilar Jamisi”, that literally means “Apostles’ Mosque”. It is quite surprising to find out that devout Moslems in Kars give to Christ's apostles a greater significance than many Christians. It is equally surprising that the 12 Apostles are still covering the outer wall of the great circular dome. Despite the fact that in Islam, sculptures and paintings depicting the human body or face are totally forbidden. Thus, the Apostles’ Mosque in Kars is perhaps the only “mosque” in the Islamic world that contains human sculptures.

In the churchyard, we were faced with the power of the sacred stones standing tall and firm, beautiful and dutiful. My heart felt like it was about to leap out of my chest. Words fail to convey the magnitude of the surge of energy that such a monument inspires in a pilgrim! Although, instead of a cross, the structure is crowned with a crescent, we sure-footedly entered our sacred church, and in front of the resident mullah, prayed and sang canticles, and renewed our vows to keep the cause of our martyred ancestors alive and fresh.

As we walked the streets of Kars, Mr. Puzant Meymarian pointed to a plaque on a building which proclaimed that it was dedicated to the memory of “Turkish martyrs killed by Armenian brigands.”

We moved on and paid a visit to the old Armenian and Russian neighborhoods. Address in hand, fellow pilgrim Edig feverishly searched for his parents’ house.

We stood on the Kars Stone Bridge (Tash Kopru), made of the same volcanic rock as the nearby church and restored during the 1580s by the order of Murat III, and took in the sights of the Citadel of Kars and the Armenian neighborhoods around it. After decades as an off-limits military reserve, Kars Kalesi, as it's officially known, is now open as a park. The only other compelling attraction in Kars is the Kars Museum (Kars Muzesi), a fifteen-minute walk to the east end of town, whose ethnographic section includes such curiosities as a ceramic yayik (butter churn), and a cradle, as well as jewelry, leatherwork and extensive exhibits of local carpets and kilims. The basement is given over to ancient pottery, and ecclesiastical Armenian and Russian artifacts, particularly a huge church bell inscribed "This tolls for the Love of God", and a pair of the ornament-rich doors of the Sourp Arakelotz church on permanent exhibit there. This ancient multicultural city, the birthplace of poet Yeghishe Charentz (we visited his now abandoned childhood house), is currently in a state of absolute neglect.

On our way to Ani we saw yet another monument dedicated to the perpetuation of a historical falsehood. But our mood rose considerably, and our chests were filled with patriotic pride, when we entered the walled city of 1001 Armenian churches. As soon as I set foot on this hollowed ground, my mind soared back into the glorious era when Armenians were in power and worshiped God with such uncommon fervor. This was the magical place I had read about in school. This was the legendary spot where Armenian power, sovereignty, and faith were once ascendant. This was the place where during the reign of King Gagik, the Armenian people enjoyed a renaissance of culture and civilization.

Once the capital of Bagratid Armenia, today Ani is a melancholy, almost vacant triangular plateau divided from Armenia by the stunning Akhourian River (Arpa Chayi) gorge and very nearly separated from the rest of Turkey by two deep tributaries. The Armenians were master stoneworkers, and the fortifications that defend the northern, exposed side of the plateau, and the handful of churches behind, are exquisite compositions in a blend of ruddy sandstone and darker volcanic rock. These, and the cliffs fringing the river, are the only vertical features here, dwarfed by an evocative but relentlessly horizontal landscape.

Ani first came into prominence after the local installment of the Armenian Gamsarakan clan during the fifth century. Situated astride a major east-west caravan route, Ani prospered receiving fresh impetus when King Ashot III, fifth in the line of the Bagratid kings of Armenia, transferred his capital here from Kars in 961. For three generations the kingdom and its capital, under the successive rule of Ashot, Smbat II, and Gagik I, enjoyed a golden age. Beautified and strengthened militarily, with a population exceeding a hundred thousand, Ani rivaled Baghdad and Constantinople themselves.

Ani lies 41 kilometers southeast of Kars, just beside the village of Ojakli. The vast boundary walls of Ani, dating from the late tenth century and studded with countless towers, were visible from several kilometers as we approached past villages teeming with sheep, buffalo, horses, donkeys and geese. Once beyond the inner walls, we were confronted with the sight of the vast forlorn, weed-tufted plateau, dotted with only the sturdiest bits of masonry that have outlasted the ages. A system of signposted paths,

many of them remnants of the former main streets of Ani, lead to all the major remains.

Alas, there stood forlorn the halved cupola of the Sourp Pergitch church (Church of the Redeemer) built in the 11th century. The remainder of the church, seen from the side, looks uncannily like a stage act, albeit one with the carved filigree crosses and Armenian inscriptions. **The architecture is typical of the circular-planned, multi-apsed Armenian churches built in this era. The round porthole window above the ornamental portal is one of the few windows the church could withstand.** Three meters high on the exterior wall we saw a freeze of a cross on an ornate rectangular background; this is a fine example of the typically-Armenian khatchkars (literally "cross-stone"), carvings that gave their name to the Khatchkar Mountains. Adjacent are the labeled remains of an "oil press", more likely a wine press, as even a millennium ago the climate in Ani would not have been mild enough to support olive cultivation.

Some 200 meters east, tucked down a stair-path by a course of a wall overlooking the Akhourian River stood the charming monastic Tigran Honents' Sourp Krikor church (Church of Saint Gregory the Illuminator), inside of which, a series of bas relief once recounted the life of Sourp Krikor Lousavoritch. Though not all of the stones are there to tell the whole story, there are enough of them to inspire the soul with a message of unbounded dedication and unbending willpower. This church, built by a pious Armenian nobleman, named Tigran Honentz in 1215, is the best preserved of Ani's monuments and dedicated to the saint who established Christianity as a State religion in Armenia in 301 A.D. The church is most rewarding for its frescoes, the only ones surviving at Ani, which cover most of the interior and spill out around the current entrance onto what was once the narthex wall. Long Armenian inscriptions carved on the exterior walls as well as the colorful and lively frescoes depicting scenes from the Bible and Armenian Church history caught our immediate attention. The church also features well-preserved relief work, with floral, avian, and sinuous geometric designs.

We continued our walk toward the south where stood an 11th century mosque next to the still standing fortress wall. Behind the wall, perched on a ledge of a flowing brook, stood the Sourp Gusanats Vank (Convent of the Virgins). A minuscule, rocket-like rotunda church, is flanked by a smaller chapel or baptistery. Just downstream are the evocative stubs of the ruined medieval bridge over the Akhourian River.

Rejoining the main plateau trail heading west from Tigran Honents, we reached the elegantly proportioned cathedral, the most stunning structure in Ani: the Amenapergitch Mother Cathedral completed between 989-1010 (begun by King Smbat II and finished under King Gagik I). The dome of the cathedral, once supported by four massive pillars, has long since vanished. **The three doorways served as separate entrances for the clergy, the king, and the people.** The main entrance was – unusually – not to the west, opposite the apse, but on the side of the nave, through the south wall. **This most impressive religious edifice reveals eye-catching decorative elements, including several porthole windows, slender windows surrounded by fretworks, several triangular niches, an inscription in Armenian near the main entrance, and a blind arcade with slim columns running around the structure.** We entered this sacred adobe and once again raised our voices in prayer and song to the Lord to grant justice to His ardent followers.

West of the cathedral “stood” Aboghamrents Sourp Krikor Church (Church of St. Gregory) built in the 11th century. This rotunda is like no other at Ani – instead of just merely blind arcades in a flat surface, the twelve-sided exterior is pierced by functional recessed vaults, which alternate with the six rounded interior niches to lend extra structural stability. The nearby Sourp Arakelotz church (Church of the Holy Apostles **built in 1031**) though in ruins now, with astonishingly beautiful bas reliefs on the walls still has the power to amaze and delight. We visited every church one by one, including the ruins of the Church of St. Gregory of Gagik **built in 998**. Intact, it would have been one of the largest rotunda in medieval Armenia proper, but the design based in the three-storey, seventh century rotunda of Zvartnots in Armenia, has collapsed.

It seemed that the lonely and abandoned churches were coming to life in response to the fervor and faith of the visiting pilgrims who sang, prayed, and burned incense in order to renew their commitment to nation, faith, and God. Indeed, stones do tell stories; churches do stir the soul. History may fade but it can never die – so long as there are people who still believe.

We stood by the shores of the Akhourian River and shouted greetings to our compatriots working in the stone mines across the river in Armenia.

It was painful to say good-bye to Ani, a sacred place that has been the fount of inspiration to Armenians for centuries.

MAJESTIC MOUNT ARARAT

Our National Legacy

Driving through Goghph and Igdir, we arrived at our hotel in Beyazit (Doghubeyazit) around midnight. I knew that our hotel faced Mount Ararat, but in the utter darkness I couldn't see the Sacred Mountain, the Paramount Symbol of the Armenian People. Impatiently I waited for dawn to arrive. I tossed and turned in bed unable to sleep. I had planned to take pictures of the Holy Mountain every half hour to capture its ever-changing moods. An amazing sight confronted me when at 4 AM I opened my window and saw the great soaring mountain so close-by that it seemed that I could almost touch it. Mount Ararat indisputably dominates the entire landscape. That morning, it looked like a stern champion gladiator challenging one and all. Eyes wide open and with big grin on my face, I stared at Medz Massis and Pokr Massis and realized why generations of people have been mesmerized by its majesty, power, and beauty. I couldn't wait to set foot on its sacred soil.

We found a cab and asked the driver to take us to the foot of the mountain. We wanted to climb at least a few hundred meters, knowing full well that that moment was going to be the highlight of our pilgrimage. As we reached the foot of the mountain, the cloud cover evaporated and the blazing white summit beckoned us to proceed. I had to literally pinch myself to remind myself that this was no dream but actual reality. Staring at the pure white summit, we once again renewed our national vows.

Driving back to the hotel, we couldn't help but turn our heads back to catch more glimpses of the Sacred Mountain. Oh, what a precious gift our ancestors bequeathed us!

While dining at the hotel's spacious veranda-restaurant, we got to know the owner of the hotel and his daughter who had come from Istanbul. They greeted us respectfully and joined our table. They conveyed to us that they had many Armenian neighbors in Istanbul who had impressed them greatly. Then lifting his glass, our new friend proposed a toast by stating that the mountain and the surrounding lands historically belonged to the Armenians, and expressed hope that one day the dreams of the Armenians will become reality.

As we drove along the base of Mount Ararat, while watching the mountain intently, I basked in my growing admiration and gratification for the legacy of confidence, which my dedicated forebears have given me through their sacrifices in the symbolic protective shadow of the Mother Mountain.

ON EARTH, VAN!

Akhtamar: The Birthplace of My Soul

We impatiently headed for Van, yet magnetically our eyes kept turning back to gaze at Ararat with great longing and joy. On the way we stopped for lunch near the Pergri Falls (Mouradieh), a beautiful spot in the lap of nature. A group of local politicians were having a lunch-meeting next to our table. To rattle them a little, we raised our glasses and praised the centuries-long history of the Armenian people.

In Van we stayed at the lovely Hotel Merit, located on the shores of Lake Van, and decorated with pictures and artifacts representing the history of Van. A few of my fellow pilgrims immediately rushed to the lake for an invigorating swim. We next paid a visit to the Armenian Church of Ardamed, now serving as a stable, and forged ahead toward the "Mher Gate". A few of us dared to climb the steep incline and reached the top.

Finally it was time to take a boat to the Island of Akhtamar, to the Cathedral Church of the Holy Cross (Akdamar Kilisesi), built by the architect and Bishop Manuel between 915 and 921 AD during the reign of King Gagik I of Vasburagan (908-943 A.D). He also constructed a palace and monastery here, which have not survived.

Fellow pilgrims Harry Vartanian and his wife, Shoushan, took a side trip to Vanig where his parents were born, and then joined us on the island. Having celebrated the birthday of fellow traveler and staunch Vanetzi, Mrs. Vartouhie Tovmassian, on the deck of the restaurant overlooking the famed island, we were in an especially festive mood when we boarded the motorboat.

The closer we got to the island, the larger loomed the famed red sandstone structure of the church, filling our hearts with pride and reverence. Once on the island, we were

able to enjoy the splendor of the church which was extensively renovated in 2009. We had the great pleasure to enjoy the elevating, sacred atmosphere within. What an amazing degree of faith and willpower our ancestors must have had a millennium ago to have built such a splendid monument to faith! Every inch of the façade of the church was sculpted with figures from the Bible and Armenian history. And all the inscriptions were in Armenian! I wish I had been there during the time when political leaders, architects, priests, craftsmen and workers came together to build this wondrous monument to Armenia and God. The four-apse church is only 15m by 12m, but with a central cupola over 20m high. The exterior is covered with profuse relief depicting biblical scenes, idiosyncratically interpreted by Armenian masons who obviously observed nature with affection. The reliefs on the south side describe the story of Jonah and the Whale, one of them showing Jonah being swallowed by a chimerical creature with ears and teeth. Also, well represented are episodes demonstrating the rewards of faith: along the southern wall Abraham and Isaac, and David and Goliath are depicted. The most famous panel is on the north wall showing Adam and Eve, and next to it Delilah is cutting off Samson's hair. The west wall is adorned by Gagik the builder-king presenting a model of the church to the clergy.

Before leaving the island, we stared in awe at the Sipan Mountains rising gloriously to the sky, and on the eastern horizon, right behind the city of Van, we enjoyed the majesty of the cloud-hidden Varak Mountains. Surrounded by beauty coming at us from all directions, it was easy to see why this “birthplace of the Armenian soul” was during its glory days the closest thing to paradise on earth.

We returned to Van and then drove for two miles to visit the Urartian fortress of Van built in 825 B.C.! A few of us couldn't resist scaling the summit of the fort. New Jersey psychologist Dr. Meline Karakashian not only braved the heights with us, but made sure to video tape the entire scene from many angles. While we were climbing, local Kurdish youth repeatedly offered their assistance. The fortress is built on a limestone block 300m wide, 1.5 km long and 100m high.

From the top of the fort we looked toward the once vibrant Armenian quarters of Van, specially the famed Aykesdan: all now lay in a state of utter ruin. I was stunned to see that the walled-city was gone - leveled and completely in ruins. Nothing was near the rock where the old Armenian city once had thrived. As I climbed higher along the narrow walk, I beheld nothing but flat spaces punctuated by grass-covered foundations of many buildings and the city wall. I couldn't help but invoke in my mind, the heroic struggles of my brave Vanetzi compatriots. While I was waiting for sunset in order to take evocative pictures of the landscape, a few Kurdish men approached and wanted to know who we were. When they found out that we were Armenian, they asked whether the Kurds were also guilty like the Turks for the massacres. I had to tell them the truth, which was in the affirmative. Upon hearing this, they bowed in regret and suggested that 500 thousand Armenians should return and govern the place in partnership with the 500 thousand Kurdish residents already there.

Typical black-on-brown signs point the way to the Van Museum on Jengiz Jaddesi. This is the main attraction of modern Van. On the ground floor there are displays of Urartian gold jewelry, bronze work and terracotta figures unearthed at Chavushtepéh, plus some ornate bronze belts and jeweled breastplates. Adjacent to this gallery is a

small conservatory, containing various rock carvings from Mesolithic times (9000 – 8000 B.C.) through the Bronze Age. Upstairs, there's an ethnographic section displaying kilims from Van and Hakkari provinces, as well as a prominently signposted "Genocide" Section, similar to the one in the Erzurum Museum. It features a gory display of cracked skulls, supposedly those of Turks or Kurds killed by Armenians or Russians, though locals will courageously tell any visitor that the reverse is true. Even Turks and Kurds living in Van call their government officials "big liars who unsuccessfully try to rewrite history".

The city of Van has been known down through the ages by different names: Dushpa, Vantosp, Yervantavan, Shamiramagert, and finally Van. The city is surrounded with mountains and lakes of incomparable beauty, and rich agricultural fields. It is located on the eastern shore of Lake Van, in Vaspuragan, which once was one of the 15 provinces of the Armenian Kingdom of Medz Hayk. For centuries, up till WW I, Vaspuragan had functioned as the central hub for Armenian religious and political thinking. Starting as early as the fourth century A.D. when Christianity was adopted in Armenia as a State religion, churches and monasteries were set up in Vaspurakan in general and in Van in particular, to train clergymen for the newly-founded Armenian Church. In fact, Van was considered one of the most academically advanced centers of Armenia. Thus, besides the Diocese, its seven churches and several monasteries, Van had a dozen elementary schools for both girls and boys, several kindergartens, a high school, and an academy for teacher training. Some historians assert that this is the spot where the genesis of the Armenian People sprang forth in full force. Up till 1895, the Armenians formed the majority here. Van was the crucible out of which came such revolutionaries as Megerdich Portugalian, Megerdich Avedisian, Mardiros Saroukhanian, Armenag Yegarian, Aram Manougian, and many others.

Van is also the birthplace of Khrimian Hayrig who, amongst other seminal works, wrote "Grandfather and Grandson". With his writings and sermons, Khrimian Hayrig succeeded in bridging the class barriers that had existed between the educated Armenians in Bolis and the simple peasants of the villages. He established a great number of cultural and literary societies, and systematically collected and catalogued priceless ancient Armenian manuscripts that were otherwise doomed to perish. During his tenure, Varakavank became the spiritual center for all the Armenians in the area. He established the "Jarankavoratz", inside the Old Varakavank Monastery; he published the "Ardziv Vasbouragani" (Eagle of Vasburagan) monthly, which propagated new and revolutionary ideas such as Human Rights and Freedom, the Right of Self-determination, Equality and Fraternity. Suddenly I realized how true and apt the poet's cry was: "Van on Earth, Faith in Heaven."

Hiring two vans we took off from the center of Van and headed for the Varaka Mountains. On the way we briefly paused at the Armenian village of Shoushantz, where lay the red-colored ruins of the "Garmeravor" church. Our drivers didn't even know the location of the Varaka Monastery (Yedi Kiliseh), but somehow managed to maneuver the windy, rock-filled, unpaved road and delivered us to the gate of the monastery. With reverence we entered the semi-ruined Sourp Kevork Church. In the courtyard Kurdish women were hawking their woven goods.

I went in, stood in the middle of the church, and could almost hear the voice of Khrimian Hayrig recounting the seminal heroic legends which sculpted the national

character of the Armenians. Full of fervor, we sang canticles, we prayed, and burned candles in this sacred church where the remains of Catholicos Bedros “Kedatartz” (River Diverter) are buried.

From the heights of the Varak Mountains, through moist eyes and heavy heart, we surrendered our eyes to the overwhelming panorama laid out all around us: Lake Van glistened over there, history soared through the Fort of Van, and then there was the beauty of Sipan and Toprakkaleh. Surrounded by abundant beauty, it was no wonder that a local lad named Vosdanig Adoyan, better known as Arshille Gorky, dedicated his life to painting.

Sadness enveloped us when the thought sank in that early next morning we were to leave our Ancestral Lands behind – for now. It is not easy to part from the land that brought Armenian history alive with a vividness that none of us will soon forget. It seemed to me that our Ancestral Lands had welcomed us with open arms and heart. It seems the Land knew that we were her sons and daughters who had returned back from a long journey. If our church walls could only talk . . .

It was also going to be very hard to say goodbye to one another. The pilgrimage had forged a special bond among us. After all, we saw the amazing treasures together, we felt vivid emotions together, we prayed together, we sang canticles together, we burned incense together and watched the smoke rise up, up into the deep sky . . . We constantly sang traditional and revolutionary Armenian songs together. We listened to Armenian poetry recited by fellow pilgrims together. And, I am certain in my heart, that we experienced the Spirit of "Armenianness" together.

So we said our good-byes to the sacred land that gave birth to us and nourishes us still, and making a solemn promise to revisit again, we vowed to never abandon the Armenian Cause.

BOLIS

Precious Final Moments

A direct 2-hour flight from Van airport took us to our final destination: Constantinople, or Bolis, or Istanbul. As we passed the Bakerkuigh (Bakerkoy) neighborhood on our way from the airport to our hotel, fellow pilgrim, Mrs. Irma Arabatlian, who was born in Istanbul, was feverishly trying to find her childhood house and her father’s store, with her eyes glued to the window.

In its current incarnation, Istanbul is the most crowded and cosmopolitan city in the Turkish Republic. The city unfolds against a densely historic landscape of Ottoman mosques, Byzantine mosaics, and Roman masonry. Waterways divide Istanbul into three sections: The **Bosphorus Strait** (Boghaz) separates Asia from Europe. Turks call the western European side of Istanbul **Avrupa** and the eastern, Asian side, **Asya**. The **Golden Horn**, a river originating outside the city, splits Avrupa into northern and southern parts. Most of the famous mosques, historical sites, and tourism facilities are south of the Golden Horn and towards the eastern end of the peninsula, which is

framed by the Horn and the Sea of Marmara. The other half of "Europe" is focused on Taksim Square, the commercial and social center of the northern European bank. Two main arteries radiate from the square: Istiklal Jaddesi, the main downtown shopping street, and Cumhuriyet Jaddesi, which is lined with airline offices and hotels. The Asian side of Istanbul is mainly residential, but in a more relaxed pace.

The two faces of Istanbul can come of something of a shock. In many ways, it is much a European city, but step away from the main drag and you enter another age and another culture. Scrap-metal merchants with handcarts, **hamals** (stevedores) carrying burdens of merchandise twice their own size and weight, hapless beggars and shoeshine boys, all frequent the backstreets around the city center, loudly proclaiming their business until late at night. Yet, Istanbul is the only city in the world to have played capital to consecutive Christian and Islamic empires. Their legacy is much in evidence nowhere more prominently than in Sultanahmet, the cultural center of the city, where the great edifices of **Aya Sofya**, the former Byzantine church, and **Sultan Ahmet Jami** (or Blue Mosque), glower at each other across a small park.

There is also a wealth of other fascinating sights in and around Istanbul. Exploration reveals ancient bazaars that still function as they have done for centuries, including the largest covered bazaar in the world, the **Kapali Charshi**. Several major palaces and museums are scattered across the city, including Sultanahmet's famous **Topkapi Palace** and the opulent **Dolmabahche and Yildiz palaces**, with their formidable Bosphorus views. The Dolmabahche is built by the first of the Balian family architects, Garabed, for the Ottoman Sultan Abdulmejid II, and was the most monumental work of the time. Its construction lasted for 11 years. The palace was the official residence of several Ottoman Sultans in the 19th and early 20th centuries. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Dolmabahche remained empty till Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the first president of Turkey, took up residence there and stayed in the palace between July 1, 1927 and November 10, 1938.

On April 24, 1915, commemorated worldwide by Armenians as Genocide Memorial Day, more than 200 Armenian community leaders and intellectuals in Constantinople (Istanbul) were arrested and then murdered. However, the Turkish plan of uprooting Armenians from their ancestral homeland was masterminded far beforehand. The outbreak of WWI in 1914 gave the Young Turks the perfect opportunity to solve the Armenian Question. A coup by "progressive" Young Turks in 1908 replacing the Sultan's government was supported by Armenians. Unfortunately, promised reforms never came, and in fact a triumvirate of extreme Turkish nationalists took complete dictatorial control, Enver, Jemal and Talaat. It was they who masterminded the plan to completely eradicate the Armenian race in a step towards fulfilling their pan-Turkic dreams. Armenians in the Ottoman armies, serving separately in unarmed labor battalions, were removed and murdered. Of the remaining population, the adult and teenage males were separated from the deportation caravans and killed under the direction of Young Turk functionaries. Women and children were driven for months over mountains and desert, often raped, tortured, and mutilated. Deprived of food and water, they fell by the hundreds of thousands along the routes of the desert. Ultimately, more than 1,500,000 Armenians were annihilated. In this manner, the Armenian people were eliminated from their homeland of several millennia.

Henry Morgenthau, the U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire wrote: **"... the whole history of the human race contains no such horrible episode as this. The great massacres and persecutions of the past seem almost insignificant when compared to sufferings of the Armenian race in 1915."**

Nobody knows the exact number of Armenians in Istanbul today, because all the Armenians are not registered to the Patriarchate. The estimated number is 60,000. Most of the community lives in Kurtulush, Shishli, Samatya, Kumkapu, Kadikoy, and Uskudar. Also, most Armenians have a summer residence in Kinali Island. This Island is 90% populated by Armenians. Apart from Istanbul Armenians, more than 50,000 Armenians come to Istanbul from Armenia to work.

Since the establishment of the Istanbul Armenian Patriarchate in 1461, 55 Armenian churches have been built. About 30 of them are still active. There are 16 Armenian schools in Istanbul today with a student population of 3,250 and a teaching staff of 415. Many more Armenian students attend the 'normal' schools. Apart from the Armenian churches and schools, there are Armenian health institutions, sport clubs, and cultural-social organizations. Moreover, three Armenian newspapers are published in Istanbul: Two dailies, "Jamanak" (founded in 1908) and "Marmara" (established in 1940), and one weekly, "Agos" (established in 1996). In addition, there's a theatrical journal printed in Armenian, "Kulis", and a community-based health journal published by Sourp Pergitch Armenian hospital.

We paid a visit to the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul and shared our experiences with His Eminence Arch. Aram Ateshian, the Acting Patriarch, who graciously gave us a tour and informed us about the function and current role of the Patriarchate. We continued our tour of churches by visiting the 18th century Sourp Yerrortoutioun Church (Holy Trinity) in Pera, and the 17th century Sourp Asdvadzadzin Church (St. Mary's) in Beshigtash, where my maternal grandparents had gotten married. We also visited the Sourp Khatch Church (Holy Cross) of Beyoghlu built in 1680, the Sourp Garabed Church of Uskudar built in 1590, the Sourp Asdvadzadzin Mother Church of Kumkapu built in 1608, Sourp Krikor Lousavoritch Armenian Church in Karakoy (St. Gregory the Illuminator) which is the oldest Armenian church in Istanbul, and the Armenian Evangelical Church in Gedikpasha, near the Beyazid Square, as well as the Bezjian School (170 students) in Kumkapu, Esayan School (325 students) in Taxim, Dadian School (415 students) in Bakerkoy, and the Armenian Catholic Mekhitarian School (365 students) in Pangalti. The other schools are: Aramian, Kalfayan, Getronagan, Karagozian, Levon Vartuhian, Ferikoy, Sahakian, Samatya Anarat Highutyun, Ortakoy Tarkmantchats, Tibrevank, and Yeshilkoy.

We also paid a visit to the Uskudar Cemetery, and paid our respect by bowing in front of the tomb of famed poet Bedros Tourian and other intellectuals buried there.

Visiting the Sourp Prgitch (Holy Redeemer) Hospital in Yedikule was next in our itinerary. Dr. Alber Karamanoukian and I had a most productive meeting with the Chief Surgeon and the Director who graciously provided detailed information about the activities and the challenges facing this most impressive hospital. We toured the modern facilities of the hospital, including the imposing Armenian Chapel, and met with several staff members as well as Armenian and Turkish patients. I made sure to

walk on every floor of the main building because at one time, my maternal grandmother Trafanda and my great grandmother Yeghsapet had worked there.

On our last day, we were delighted to meet on the deck of the boat to Beyuk Ada (Medz Gghzi), three Armenian Women from Yerevan who were now living in Istanbul. But after a brief chat my delight turned into deep disappointment. Their attitude toward all things Armenian was remarkably cavalier. This phenomenon needs long and deep examination . . .

During lunch on the island, we celebrated the birthday of fellow pilgrim Anahid Yeretzi. There's one bookstore on the island which has always fascinated me. I once again found important books about Armenian history and the Armenian Genocide there. I was especially excited to discover a book that painted a vivid picture of the last century of life of Armenians in Cilicia and Western Armenia before the Genocide.

We next took the boat to visit the famous Armenian Island of Kinali, and took part in a touching baptism ceremony at the Armenian Church there. His Beatitude, Patriarch Archbishop Mesrob Mutafian, baptized 16 youth aged 2-16, from the provinces, who might have otherwise faded away from the bonds of "Armenianness". Dedicated Armenians served as Godfathers to these youths. This moving baptism ceremony inspired us to once again rededicate ourselves to the aspirations and dreams of our people. After the ceremonies, we had an interesting meeting with the Patriarch. He emphasized the importance of the Armenian language and culture courses in Armenian schools as crucial safeguards in maintaining the existence of the Armenian minority in Turkey. According to the Patriarch, the main problem of the Armenian population in Turkey is voluntary "assimilation". A large number of Armenians do not attend the Armenian Church and Armenian schools. Another problem is the mixed marriages.

On our way back from the island, three youths who had overheard us chatting in Armenian, greeted us in Armenian. These strapping young men hailed from heroic Sassoun. They inspired us with their encouraging news about Armenian life in Sassoun today. Their words warmed our hearts and stirred our souls.

As our plane glided through the clouds transporting us back to Los Angeles, the incredible sights and sounds of the trip kept parading on the screen of my mind insistently. The places I saw, the people I met, the wisdom I learned will remain in my heart, mind and soul forever. I know that one day our Cause will be justly solved, and bridging the chasm of the Akhourian River which parts the two Armenians asunder, we, the torchbearers of our martyred ancestors, shall ascend Mount Ararat, and with the Holy Cross of the Illuminator in one hand and the Armenian flag in the other, shall thunder together:

“We have survived; we shall thrive, and we shall multiply.”

About the Author

Garbis Der-Yeghiayan traces his devotion to his Armenian legacy through countless generations of ancestors who lived in his beloved homeland, the frontier of historic Western Armenia. He organizes annual pilgrimages to Cilicia, Cappadocia and historic Western Armenia. He has provided 38 years of visionary leadership to Armenian higher education in the United States and currently serves as president of Mashdots College in Glendale, California and professor of Armenian Studies and Educational Management. He holds doctoral degrees in Educational Management and Organizational Leadership from the University of La Verne, La Verne, California, and in Human Development and Social Policy from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He serves on numerous non-profit Boards in Southern California. He serves as Commissioner of Inmate Welfare Services of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. He is actively involved in Rotary International, has served with distinction as District Governor and in 2007 received Rotary's highest honor -- the "Service Above Self" award in recognition of his global peace efforts. In 2013, the Rotary International District 5300 Peace Institute was named in his honor. He is regularly invited by community organizations, churches, schools, youth groups and Rotary Clubs to serve as guest speaker, panelist and master of ceremonies. He is the author of 14 books and more than fifty scholarly publications. He generously volunteers his time, talents and resources for the welfare of his community and humanity.