

Araham Hoja of Aintab

By the Rev. Vartan S. Bilezikian
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DEDICATION

To the memory of the innumerable martyrs of our Armenian people whose blood covers the whole of Anatolia. To the great company of saints who were victorious in death, keeping the faith. To all the millions who triumphed over this world. To those who now bear the trophies of victory around the Lamb slain for them and vanquishing the foe, rose again.

Forward

I am greatly honored that my good friend, the Rev. Vartan Bilezikian, permitted me to read the manuscript of the book, "Araham Hoja of Aintab".

Too little has been recorded of the sufferings and victories of that faithful company of Armenian Christians who bore the unspeakable persecutions of wicked men during the early part of this century. It is well that one who shared these experiences has been led by the Holy Spirit to write of these acts of modern apostles who followed in the train of the early martyrs.

This volume is more than a narrative of those who dared to follow their Lord in full dedication of life and service. It is a daring, shocking, convicting indictment of the spiritual shallowness and lack of passion for God's very best which characterizes the ease-loving generation of which we are a part.

Do not read this book hastily or in the midst of the confusion and distraction of a busy day. Read it in the quiet of your chamber, read it slowly, read it prayerfully, that your own heart may catch fire and cause you to become a flaming witness.

DR. J. ELWIN WRIGHT,
Executive Secretary
Commission on International Relations
Founder, National Association of Evangelicals
Boston, Massachusetts

Forward

The story of the Armenian revival, preserved for us by the Rev. Bilezikian, is an inspiration to all who are interested in the sovereign movements of God's Spirit in the history of the Church. It illustrates that the Spirit bloweth where it listeth. This revival would be unknown to us except for the record made by the Rev. Bilezikian. Revival often comes from sufferings or else is the prelude to suffering. Many of God's people are praying these days for the last great revival of the age preliminary to the tribulation and the coming of Christ. The fact that thousands in mass meetings are hearing the Gospel would lead us to believe that the Church may be moving toward a period of suffering for which this is a preparation.

This brief historical study will encourage your heart, inspire your labors and awaken a new interest in revival.

Dr. H. J. OCKENGA
Pastor, Park Street Church
Boston, Massachusetts

Forward

This book which records the lives and works of some of God's servants and saints is written with the sole purpose that it might strengthen the faith and be a blessing to those into whose hands it may fall. It is the aim of this book also to preserve the testimony and experience of these servants of God for the generations yet to follow. As in all ages of the Church, in which the Holy Spirit did mighty and wonderful works through consecrated souls, so during the first half of the twentieth century among our Armenian people the blessed Holy Spirit brought about mighty accomplishments through some obscure and weak instruments. It is the sober conviction of the author that it would not be rightly honoring those of yesteryears if we should permit their precious testimony to be lost. At the outset it may be said that to understand this book and appreciate its worth, it ought to be read through carefully and prayerfully.

The spiritual hero of this book is Apraham Hoja Levonian of Aintab, Turkey. He was a man absolutely dead to self and separated from the world. He was unique, incredibly unique in a thousand and one ways. Of all the men the author has known, Apraham Hoja could make without reservation the apostolic claim: *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20). Though like his Lord and Master, he was rejected by men and misunderstood by them, none could withstand his power, nor resist his prophetic personality. They could not deny the mighty operation of the Holy Spirit in his life which resulted in the salvation of thousands, and in the spiritual vision and purification of the Church throughout the length and breadth of Central Anatolia. While Apraham Hoja was the leading figure and moving spirit there were many other worthy co-workers who suffered with him, some of whom are mentioned in this book. But many men and women, all of whom have reached their rest above, are too numerous to mention here.

In addition to the astounding life and service of Apraham Hoja we are able to include in this book only a few of his many amazing letters. In producing this book, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness and thanks to a few persons who assisted me by their cooperation and helpful suggestions in gathering the material and shaping the manuscript:

To Rev. M. Bozuklian, formerly of Aleppo, Syria, for writing part of the manuscript;

To Brother John Shnorhokian of Beirut, Lebanon, for additional information about Apraham Hoja, and for making available some of Hoja's letters;

To Rev. M. Apkarian for securing the exact copy and form of Hoja's last will and testament.

All these brothers are now deceased.

The author is under particular obligation to Rev. M. P. Krikorian, and would like to express his deep gratitude for the outstanding assistance he rendered in making a faithful translation. The text I wrote was in Turkish with Armenian characters. The translator skillfully rendered it into English, offering valuable suggestions, accomplishing a work I could not have done. The readers of this translation who are familiar with the Armenian text will certainly agree with me that Rev. Krikorian's work has been done well. He has managed not only to preserve the spirit of the text, but has also rendered the thought, essence and atmosphere intended.

In this book I abided by the principle to give glory to no one. For Christ's is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. It is my earnest hope that through these pages God will be honored. I add my prayers that this testimony will contribute to the salvation and spiritual awakening of many, both now and in the days to come. I also wish that young people in the coming generation will be benefited from this book and dedicate their lives to the supreme service of Jesus Christ.

V. S. BILEZIKIAN
Newtonville, Massachusetts



**The Reverend Mr. Vartan S. Bilezikian with his faithful wife, Elmas,
In their home in Newtonville, Massachusetts**

Note from Thomas Cosmades, an old friend, who updated the book

In November 1950 when I arrived in the USA at the age of twenty-seven, my uncle, Cosmas Cosmades, welcomed me at the port of New York and drove me to his home in Watertown, MA. I had the name and address of Reverend Vartan Bilezikian with me, given by a friend. Newtonville, where Brother Bilezikian and his wife, Sister Elmas (Elmas Hemshere) lived, was a stone's throw away. On my first evening in Watertown when I called him, he immediately invited me to their home. We were both extremely happy for our coming together. Brother Bilezikian was the very first Christian minister I had the joy of meeting in the USA. He took a fatherly interest in me, asking me to attend the Armenian Brethren Church in Watertown the following Sunday and relate to the fellowship my conversion experience. I shall not forget that Sunday when I spoke for the first time from a pulpit in America.

The congregation, almost all of whom — except for the young — had come from Anatolia, listened with keen interest. This was the start of a long friendship. Brother Bilezikian wanted me to study at some school in New England. He and his wife drove me to Providence, Rhode Island, where he got in contact with the dean of Providence Bible College. After explaining my intention to eventually serve the Lord among Turkish people he was able to obtain a financial arrangement with the school for which I am ever grateful to him. A few years later, both husband and wife were promoted to glory. Their sweet memory is ever fresh in my mind. While studying at Providence, many weekends they would invite me to their home and church. This was one of the many couples — they had no children — whose support and assistance in the USA I will gratefully remember until the day I die.

I am now in my eighty-fourth year of life. I thank the Lord for his assistance in enabling me to go over this book and put it into fresh form, along with my wife Lila, whose contribution to this work was invaluable. On my countless visits to the Bilezikian home Reverend Vartan would passionately recount his many experiences from the days of his youth in Turkey until moving to the United States in 1912. During our talks, I encouraged him to put his rich memoirs into writing. Many others induced him to do the same.

Brother Vartan was born in Marash in 1883 to Sarkis and Marta Bilezikian, being the last child (whose twin died in childbirth) in the family of five boys and one girl. The name '*Bilezik*' means 'bracelet' in Turkish. Armenians in Anatolia bear trade names. Very likely, one of his progenitors was a bracelet-

maker. Sarkis was an early convert to the evangelical faith. He became instrumental in establishing the first Armenian Evangelical Church in Marash, 'Birinji Kilise' (First Church), as it was called in Turkish. Vartan was a capable tailor by trade, had little education but was conversant in three languages: English, Armenian and Turkish. He had no experience in writing until he wrote this, his only book, '*Apraham Hoja of Aintab*'. He went to be with the Lord in the Armenian Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Jamaica Plain, MA, in 1972.

God had his gracious hand on him. Vartan experienced glorious revivals, preached widely in Anatolian cities and won many to Jesus Christ. After landing in the USA, he did extensive itinerant preaching. House meetings conducted around the Boston area eventually developed into the Armenian Brethren Church in Watertown. Brother Socrate Amiralian, also from Marash, was working with him. Vartan faithfully ministered in this church for many years. Some time after his arrival in the USA, he met Elmas Melkonian, who was from a village between Marash and Aintab. She was working as a cook at the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. In her Vartan found the beloved companion of his life. She was to stand with him very faithfully until the Lord called her home after a prolonged illness.

During his later years Brother Bilezikian acted on the many requests and began writing this book in Turkish with Armenian characters. This was the improvisation of the language used by Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Many of these people did not know their own Armenian language. This worthy production was put into Armenian, printed and sold to numerous Armenians around the world until the supply was exhausted. Many of them remembered their endless afflictions and, at the same time, heartening experiences related here. The book is not available anywhere today. When this book came out in Armenian, it was considered a great lack not to produce such a valuable source of information in English.

I wish to introduce you to the person who did the original English translation, which will offer further background about this valuable memorabilia. It was my joy to be acquainted with Brother Krikorian. I could have never thought that one day, my wife Lila and I would make a minor, but important contribution for the presentation of this book on the Internet. We both thank God for this privilege. We updated it linguistically and stylistically. Afterward we checked about some details with various sources, including the relatives of Vartan Bilezikian, all of whom we thank for their assistance. This story is now added to the rostrum of several noble accounts from Anatolia, once a land of glory. These can all be found at our website: www.cosmades.org. Our sincere wish is that those who read it will catch a vision for evangelism, be gripped to pray for Turkey and the conversion of the Turks, as well as for the many messengers of the Good News who labor there.

Translator's Note
Misak Paul Krikorian, *Translator (1888-1974)*
Philadelphia

This book is an unabridged translation from the Armenian-Turkish language of the Rev. V. S. Bilezikian's book "*Apraham Hoja Levonian and Co-workers in the First Half of the Twentieth Century.*"

I have known Rev. Bilezikian for over thirty years. Besides being together on a missionary journey the best part of a year following WW I (1914-1918), which covered eight states in America and several provinces in Canada, I have spent months at a time in his hospitable home in Newtonville, Massachusetts, while sharing a church-building operation with him and also preaching and ministering to his congregation. Consequently, I have come to know him most intimately as a brother in Christ, a warm and genial friend, a near relative and an esteemed servant of the Lord; a man who hazarded his life unto death and endured the tortures of the Turkish prison for the sake of the Gospel.

In the course of our association, I listened in private and in public to his poignantly dramatic and extraordinary experiences of apostolic nature. The more I heard, the more I became convinced that here were experiences and testimonies that should be made available to the reading public. Certainly the Christian church ought not to be deprived of a so gripping and soul-stirring message. Therefore, at every opportunity I kept before my brother the idea of a book, fanning into flame the smoldering fire of his own desire. Nor was I alone in this; others here in America as well as in the Near East — the seat and source of the text — joined in the call for the writing of such a book.

The Rev. Mr. Bilezikian was born in Marash, Turkey, in the year 1883, the son of godly parents, his father being a scholarly minister. At the age of fifteen, he accepted Christ as his Lord and Master; and his manner of preaching the Gospel has been apostolic, in that, like Paul the tent-maker, he has worked with his own hands and supported himself, laboring for the perpetuation of the faith without financial recompense. He is an accomplished tailor, and only in recent years, on account of a pilgrimage to the gates of death, retired from business activities. Happily, however, this has been rather a gain, in that it furnished the freedom so necessary for the task of writing. In the goodness of God restored to reasonably good health, he has accomplished what many have hoped and prayed would some day be done.

Early in the spring of 1951, Mr. Bilezikian wrote me that the manuscript was ready for publication in the Armenian language, and asked what I thought of an English edition. Judging from the warm reception the messages received during our missionary journey, and on other similar occasions, I had always visualized a welcome acceptance of such a book in English-reading circles. At once, therefore, I gladly endorsed the idea, little realizing, however, the part that would be mine in this endeavor. For he wrote me back: "If this book is to appear in English, you are the one to translate it." Here was a piece of work, a spiritual drama, the scenes of which were very close to my heart.

Shortly thereafter, while on a preaching mission in metropolitan Boston, a conference with Mr. Bilezikian resulted in the task of translation being prayerfully undertaken. The best part of two months, averaging eight hours a day, was devoted to the work, while the translator was established in the comfortable home in Newtonville. This afforded the advantage of easy access to each other for conference and consultation—prime requisites for such an engagement, as this translation asked of the translator not only his mind, but his spirit and his heart as well.

The author allowed the translator the broadest of latitude in executing into English the original manuscript, and meticulous care has been exercised to preserve the atmosphere without sacrificing the color of the original text. Whenever need of extension was deemed advantageous such as supplying Scriptural references which did not always appear in the manuscript to support statements of facts and claims, they have been freely supplied. As the English of several hymns was not available, the poetry was composed from the prose. However, as these extensions have received the author's imprimatur, no need has been felt to indicate them in the text. Also, it should be noted that the translator has made avid use of new material that has come to light since the original manuscript went to press.

The title of this English edition, the dedication, and the chapters in their present form, with the acquiescence of the author, is the work of the translator. It is the judgment of both author and translator that they adequately serve their purpose. The author and the translator have become collaborators, each welcoming the thoughts and words of the other—the translator enjoying complete autonomy with the full cooperation of the author.

I owe my thanks to the author for having conferred on me this distinction and honor, which, in spite of all the labor entailed, has been a rich and rewarding experience. This translation is offered with humility. If a tithe of the blessing that has come to me shall be the portion of the reader of this book, then author and translator alike shall rejoice in this labor of love.

M. P. K.

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Chapter 1

The Years and Cities of Revival 1901-1904

Aintab

October 1895 was one of the darkest and profoundly mournful months in the history of Armenia and the Armenian people. The Ottoman government acting under the cruel order of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1915), reigned from 1876-1909, the perpetrator of extensive and pitiless massacres, did away with more than two hundred thousand Armenians in the initial genocide in the eastern parts of the empire. This would reach unprecedented magnitude in the following century. In Eastern Anatolia the homes and businesses of Christians were pillaged. Wives were suddenly left widows and children orphans. Misery and wretchedness fell upon the land. In the face of such extreme cruelty by one group of people against another and the devastating catastrophe which ensued, people in need of comfort and support had nowhere to go but to the God of mercy. At this time of human extremity Hosea's words were literally fulfilled: "...in their distress they seek me, saying, 'Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up'" (5:15b, 6:1). Vast numbers of people took refuge in churches, whose doors were kept open. In their deepest heartache people came before the throne of grace to obtain mercy and find help in time of need.

The unimaginable physical suffering brought about a spiritual awakening. The deep longing of the soul for God was evident. Prophetic preaching became the daily theme in churches. The result of the calamity on the Christian population of Eastern Anatolia was a widespread spiritual awakening. The Holy Spirit was at work in many hearts. This was marked by weeping, public confession and the deep joy of salvation. People were repenting in deep agony. One could only estimate the number of those who came into a living relationship with Christ, as there were so many. The sorrow on people's faces gave way to deep joy by the new life discovered in Christ. Men and women, young and old, who had been mourning gave testimony to His saving grace. The number of the saved was increasing daily. Transformed lives were seen everywhere. Suddenly a deep passion for Bible study and prayer took hold of the people. Meetings were held in one house after the other, in small cottages and even in open fields. A unique fellowship reminiscent of apostolic times was pervading the whole region.

At this time of severe distress, as always happens when revival breaks out, God raised up a humble servant to be one of the leaders of the awakening. Commissioned for the task by the Lord himself, Apraham Hoja, his eyes flashing like an old Hebrew prophet and carrying only his Bible, went about preaching from house to house and church to church throughout the region. A man of unflinching courage, with uncompromising convictions, he preached repentance and the remission of sins. His aim was to see ordinary sinners soundly converted. Equipped with absolute faith and spurred on by his mission, he bore a likeness to his Master. As in several previous awakenings, here also the Lord highly honored the fervent testimony of his faithful servant. As a result, a number of little-known, uneducated young men and women were brought into the kingdom of Christ. They immediately joined ranks with Apraham, carrying on a burning witness to people undergoing an excruciating trial. In the midst of universal sorrow, they testified with power and authority of the heart-transforming grace they had experienced through Christ. The advance of Holy Spirit-induced evangelism through the courage and boldness of this dedicated evangelistic band caught people's attention. It was an unexpected development at a time when every person was totally caught up in saving his own neck. The courage of

this small band of untrained evangelists made a deep impression on all classes, including the educated and cultured.

Evangelical preachers, *'Lusavorjagan'* (the name is taken from Gregory, the Illuminator, who introduced the Armenian nation to Christianity) priests of the Armenian Apostolic Church and college teachers took note of the happenings, just as the Jewish tribunal did in the days of the apostles. Here was a small group of unlearned, uneducated young men boldly inviting people to repentance and belief in Christ the Redeemer. Apraham Hoja was the God-chosen leader for the hour. He gave full backing to the young evangelists by his simple, but powerful preaching to return to Christ for forgiveness of sin and life everlasting. The number of those who responded to God's message grew continually. Suddenly, doors of all churches were opened to this small group. There was a quickening breath of revival sweeping through the region. Churches were literally packed. While the massacre in the eastern regions was spreading, people were turning to God as the only refuge in their time of great need. Literally thousands were saved. The converts were discovering the power of God, not only to endure their ordinary trials but also the extraordinary onslaught being directed at them by a certain segment of their own people. Their homes, communities, businesses—in brief, their whole world—was collapsing around them.

As the ruthless execution of an unscrupulous government was being carried on in unimaginable ferocity, the Christian faith was being fortified in many hearts who until then had simply subscribed to their 'religion'. The authorities were seeking to stamp out Christianity, but in actuality they were buttressing the very faith they were determined to destroy. *"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit on your descendants and my blessing on your offspring" (Isaiah 44:3)*. Everybody was witnessing the fulfillment of these promises. Faithful to his word, God was pouring his Spirit on people who were approaching him in humility and repentance. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit were very evident. Everywhere, young and old, men and women, ministers and congregations were hushed by an incredible silence induced by the conviction of sin. While governmental powers were boasting of their harsh measures leveled at a helpless segment of the populace, the church targeted by the vicious cruelty did not become impotent. Authorities were quite satisfied with the accomplishment of the sword, totally unaware that hearts everywhere were being broken in contrition before God and experiencing a Holy Spirit revival.

The Holy Spirit's operation upon penitent hearts resulting in their restoration to the faith was absolute. Men broken before God were not only carpenters, blacksmiths and builders, but common sinners; also among them were church leaders and other folks in Christian ministry. There was no pulpit pressure put upon people, no prolonged pleading, but the act of reproof and convicting by the Holy Spirit. The confessions, conversions and restitutions were evident fulfillment of the Scriptures: *"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter" (II Corinthians 7:10, 11)*.

The striking feature of this revival, mostly forgotten, was that it originated from among the people. This was characteristic of many previous revivals. Here was a people smitten on every side, suffering intolerable injustice; the helpless prey of a pitiless government bringing terror everywhere. They needed one single consolation to make life bearable, that which would give them tangible hope for the future. The high road to the life ahead was covered with thorns; nevertheless it was leading to the eternal home prepared for them by God himself. The evangelical message was bringing tidings unparalleled by any earthly platitude. People everywhere were responding to the wooing of the Holy Spirit. This genuine revival was attended by deep sorrow, with redressing human wrongs and cruelties, with the defense of the helpless and transforming this sad world into God's kingdom.

Like all great revivals, this one also was spreading from one place to another on the wings of song. The singing of hymns in these meetings was something new — different from what had been experienced until then. This was singing inspired by the Holy Spirit. No one could recall such heartfelt melodious music being sung in the churches. The hymns were loaded with evangelical doctrine, spiritual fervor and linguistic clarity, all in Turkish. Trained and untrained voices joined in sweet harmony without perturbation or discord. Those who sang the songs were amazed at the extraordinary impact experienced through the singing of these hymns. One was reminded of the exhortation in the Scriptures: *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16)*.

The Holy Spirit did a special work in grieved hearts, bringing people into new touch with the heavenly Father, whose presence had not been quite real in their lives until then. There was an apostolic simplicity in these spontaneous gatherings. The revival was stirring hunger and thirst for spiritual reality everywhere. It brought forth a new sense of actuality and deep emotion, replacing all the deadness in the heart until then. People in deep sorrow were caught up with a new sense of Christ's verity. Faith was brought down to people who needed God's touch at their time of great need. Hearts burdened with the griefs and sorrows of this present world discovered true solace and rest. The Person of Jesus Christ and the Christian life were no longer something of mere habit. Someone was touching these hearts in a mysterious way, and Jesus Christ was becoming intimate and precious. The reality of the Incarnate Word was being thoroughly experienced.

Every day there was a set of three meetings: The first one from seven to nine in the evening, the second from nine to ten-thirty and the third from ten-thirty to midnight. There was an uncharacteristic freshness in each gathering — nothing stagnant or mere habitual. People came with a thirst for God and an expectation that His righteousness would become real in their lives. They came into the meetings feeling weak and helpless but went away endowed with new strength. They mounted up with spiritual wings like eagles. They walked long distances to attend; some even ran, but they never grew weary or faint along the way. The Lord was daily adding to the Church those who were regenerated. A great joy was felt throughout the metropolis of Aintab. Homes, businesses, market places and schools echoed what was happening in their immediate vicinity. The sole topic in the city and its environs was God's miraculous transforming of lives. Unexpectedly, God's mighty visitation of grace spilled over from the Christian population to the Turks. Word spread around that many Turks were drawn by this extraordinary power and started attending the meetings.

The order of these services was entirely different from the commonly known 'revival meetings'. There were no special leaders, no polished and persuasive sermons, and no lengthy doctrinal discourses. There was no publicity or promotion whatsoever. The meetings started with prayer, hymns of praise and expectation. Following was a message from the Bible on the Lord's all-sufficiency in any given situation. This spiritual awakening stirred people to read God's word, thus bringing uplift and hope to their anguishing hearts. The whole atmosphere was charged with the Holy Spirit's power. The Holy Spirit drove truths of God, probably often overlooked, into the depth of each hungry heart. *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12)*. The old person was replaced by the new in many a life through this sweeping spiritual awakening. *"Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jeremiah 23:29)*. Peripheral or incidental preaching gave way to solid presentation of God's pervading word. *"Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:28)*.

Marash

Marash is a city located one hundred and ten kilometers northwest of Aintab. Before the Armenian genocide, it was a large evangelical center with many churches. The revival which started in Aintab could not be confined to that city alone. Marash was the next city that was affected by what God was doing in Aintab. It was mentioned before that some young people had found their way into the Kingdom of God and become fervent evangelists.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mr. Speaker, a missionary sent by God, came to Marash to open an orphanage. As reference has previously been made to the genocide in the East, there were many orphaned Armenian children who needed a home. Mr. Speaker's first interest was to find out if there were true believers meeting together in the city. He was told of the fiery young evangelists who were holding meetings in churches and homes. Of course he was eager to meet them. On hearing about his desire, seven young men, including Vartan Bilezikian, initiated their contact with him by going to his home that same evening. Everybody was impatient to reach out in a city-wide effort to present Christ and offer comfort to the suffering people. Mr. Speaker didn't know Turkish, but had a great passion for evangelism. At that first meeting with the young people, the lack of a common language strangely did not constitute a barrier. It was as if the Holy Spirit was in control of the conversation. Details of that meeting could not be recalled exactly, but there was a general consensus among the young people about Mr.

Speaker's faith and evangelistic zeal. His humility reminded them all of Jesus Christ's meekness. It was an evening of great joy and inspiration.

Everybody contributed to the planning of an ongoing evangelistic outreach. They all thanked God for the opportunity before them. They decided that they should get together with Mr. Speaker once a week in his spacious home, so meetings were started after their initial commitment. More people started joining them and attendance grew from week to week, with many people coming to Christ. One day the Holy Spirit worked mightily in their midst. The brothers were so moved that they felt the urge to humble themselves in fasting and prayer in order to be used more effectively in the revival. A fresh dedication was made and meetings spread from house to house. One evening while they were praying, a visitor arrived from Aintab with the joyful news that a revival had broken out in that city. Hearing this was a great encouragement to everyone present. They prayed that a similar revival would come to Marash and envelop the surrounding communities.

In the spring of 1901, Pastor M. G. Papazian being greatly affected by the Aintab revival, was prompted to visit Marash and further enlighten the believers about the Holy Spirit-stirred awakening in his city. Great joy came upon the Christians in Marash when Pastor Papazian told them of the on-going revival in Aintab. Everyone concurred that special meetings should be held in Marash, expecting that revival would visit their city also. Meetings spilled over to a church and were held every evening. It wasn't long before revival showers fell upon the city. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was experienced in Marash for the first time. Meetings were charged with extraordinary power and divine presence. The preaching of the Word, the singing of hymns and fervent prayers under the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit touched hearts and brought many to repentance.

One by one, people would stand up, weeping and expressing the sentiments of their broken and contrite hearts. Attendance kept growing. The meeting place was overcrowded with all kinds of people present — men, women, young, old, educated and uneducated, coffee-house 'regulars' and people given to drink. The presence of the Holy Spirit was pervasive and persuasive. Sinners couldn't resist the Holy Spirit's conviction. The fear of judgment gripped hearts, causing them to turn to God. As happens everywhere, mockers and rabble-rousers were also present. Amazingly, some of them broke down in tears and confessed their sins. They took part in the meetings they had intended to disturb and disrupt. Suddenly they were transformed. One evening a humorous thing happened: a few people came with the intention of stealing coats, overshoes and umbrellas. But they were converted, their hearts stolen by the Holy Spirit! The revival touched them, too! The Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith became flesh and blood in these people. Meetings were saturated with the lively singing of hymns such as, "*Just as I am, without one Plea*", "*When the Roll is called up Yonder*", "*Holy Spirit, Light Divine*", among many others, sung vibrantly and harmoniously. If it had been possible to record that singing it would have been a stirring challenge to present-day choirs. Psalms and hymns sung in the power of the Holy Spirit were showing sinners the gateway to God's kingdom.

As happens in so many revivals, two outstanding features—confession of sin and reconciliation with restitution—dominated this one, as well. A prominent member of the church stood up one evening in the meeting, confessed his sin and asked forgiveness from people he had offended. This bold and yet humble stand taken by the well-known person brought a sense of hush and humility to others as well, and one confession followed another. It reminded the congregation of the prophecy recorded in Habakkuk 2:20: "*The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.*" At times, an unusual silence prevailed during the meetings. This was a sign of the Holy Spirit quieting hearts, leading them to confession and repentance. Men and women were being converted in this holy atmosphere. Those standing to their feet to confess and repent, obeying the wooing of the Holy Spirit, were a nightly marvel. Peace and joy fell upon the congregation and the unceasing confessions brought constant vitality to the meetings. The revival continued for weeks; in fact, it went on indefinitely. There was no sign of slackening of enthusiasm in these meetings. This extraordinary experience brought the divine presence down to the lives the Holy Spirit visited. It was as if their whole beings had been invigorated by a special medicine— even their bodies were rejuvenated. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on the mountain in the presence of the LORD and came down with a shining face. Here, too, many faces were shining, giving testimony of the unusual experience they had received from God.

News of the unusual events of the revival in Marash soon reached Aintab, which was itself in the excitement of a revival. The Christians in Aintab decided to send three people to witness the awakening and encourage the local Christians. They were: Dr. John Merrill, President of Central Turkey College,

Hovhannes Shnorhokian and Sarkis Akkelian. They recounted God's amazing work in their city and greatly encouraged the folks in Marash. Their visit brought uplift. The Holy Spirit revival which had begun in Aintab and touched Marash spread all over St. Paul's Cilicia like a prairie fire. Extraordinary moving of the Spirit was evident in every single place visited.

Zeytun (translated, 'Olive')

During the apostolic days the Holy Spirit led Philip first to Samaria and then to the desert to be used as an instrument of revival—initially to a city and afterwards to a prominent individual. The writer, Vartan Bilezikian, and Hovhannes Shnorhokian felt led of the Holy Spirit to visit Zeytun, an Armenian city of fifteen thousand, forty kilometers from Marash. When they arrived, the church people of Zeytun welcomed them with open arms and immediately invited them to hold meetings. Church doors were thrown open and nightly meetings got underway. Once again, the mighty work of the Holy Spirit was evident. Night after night attendance in the various churches grew. Just as had happened in Aintab and Marash people were being convicted by the Holy Spirit and ushered into the kingdom of God. The whole city was influenced by what was going on in a few churches. When the Holy Spirit works, he spreads his blessed touch in every direction.

Other cities were affected by what was happening in the places already referred to. These were Adana, Hadjin, Tarsus, Urfa (Edessa), Kilis and southward to Aleppo. Distant cities in the northeast like Van and Harput were also engulfed by this mighty visitation of the Holy Spirit. This was nothing less than another fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, "*Be glad, O sons of Zion, and rejoice in the LORD, your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before*" (Joel 2:23). One could say that what was happening reminded people of Joel's authoritative prediction. Also, the cheering prophecies in Hosea 6:3 and Zechariah 10:1 were finding their realization in these places of Anatolia. God was at work and a revival was occurring in the very areas where Paul and the other apostles had ardently labored with great effect.

Chapter 2

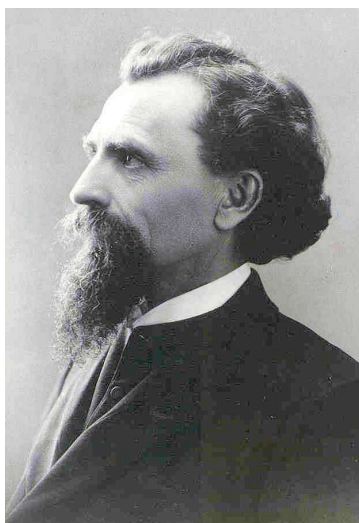
The Appearance of Fredrik Franson on the Scene 1905

Revivals don't go on perpetually. The awakenings which made history in the cities referred to waned. But the heart-longing of those who had experienced the blessing and uplift of revival induced them to pray unceasingly, "Lord, please do it again!" They had faith in God Almighty that he was able to rekindle the flame of the awakening which had brought many people into the kingdom of God and enriched so many lives. It was the fall of 1905, almost a hundred years from the time of the Haystack Prayer Meeting at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Word reached the believers in Marash that a renowned missionary-evangelist had included their city on his global itinerary. They rejoiced at the news of the coming of this foreigner whom they didn't know at all. They were informed of the day of his arrival and a number of them went to the outskirts of the city to welcome him. This was their first encounter with Fredrik Franson (1852-1908), a Swede with American citizenship. He was a true follower of Jesus Christ and one who spread the Good News in many places. When the believers of Marash first caught a glimpse of him, galloping toward them on his horse like a happy warrior, they were excited. His flashing blue eyes and shining face captivated the attention of everybody. He took a good look at those who came to welcome him. One after another they introduced themselves. Like the Apostle Paul being welcomed on the outskirts of Rome at the Appius Forum, Franson thanked God and took courage (*cf. Acts 28:15*). The believers sensed that their unabated earnest, expectant prayers for renewed revival had been answered.

On the same evening, a general meeting was called in one of the evangelical churches in Marash. The place was packed. Unfortunately, there is no record as to who was his interpreter. God's quickening word captivated the audience with mighty power, even before it could be translated. The longed-for revival started that first evening and continued for more than six weeks. Each day saw the attendance increasing. People were not only packed into every available space in the auditorium, but were clinging to the doors and sitting on window sills in order to see Mr. Franson and hear his anointed message. The church was crowded hours before the set time of the meeting. As words fell from the interpreter's lips, men and women were convicted by their impact. The messages were short, simple and generously enriched with pungent parables. Quickening illustrations and anecdotes made the truth live. He spoke to his listeners of their need to repent, of the joy of obedience to the will of God, of the brevity of life and the certainty of judgment to come. Behind his words the people saw a real giant of the faith whose heart was

aflame with the love of God. He was passionately convinced that he was on a divine mission to his hearers. At the close of his messages he tenderly and compassionately appealed to everyone to forsake evil and receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. As desert travelers run to cold water, thirsty souls ran to Christ, who was presented as the Fountain of Living Water where salvation and satisfaction were freely lavished on all who believed.

People from all backgrounds and walks of life came to hear Fredrik Franson's messages. The gatherings took on an ecumenical character as Evangelicals, Armenian Apostolics and Catholics, as well as other people, eagerly attended every meeting. Great numbers responded to his call for salvation. Other than the conversion of sinners, Christians not thoroughly disciplined were suddenly quickened. Their appreciation of the faith of Christ reached new heights. The enjoyment of triumphant days experienced in the previous awakening returned. The great majority of people in the city were indifferent to the truth of God, including gamblers, coffee-house regulars, tavern keepers and drunkards. But even from among these a good number of downcast sinners were attracted to the meetings. There the convicting and regenerating power of the Holy Spirit conquered their benighted hearts. They openly confessed their sins and became new creatures in Christ. This was a Holy Spirit-sent revival, in every meaning of the word. A mere writing cannot do justice to what happened there.



**Fredrik Franson –
Faithful to the Great Commission**

Fredrik Franson was a man sent from God. Such preaching in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit had never been heard in the city. The blessing went on—day after day, week after week. When he preached, his eyes and his face were literally transfigured. Saints and sinners alike saw no one except Jesus Christ and him crucified. After the conclusion of these revival meetings which shook the whole city of Marash, Fredrik Franson moved on to nearby Aintab, then up to Van and Harput in the northeast before going south again to Aleppo, Beirut and even on to Baghdad. Hardly any city in the Middle East was left untouched. God's blessing was evident throughout his journey, attending his preaching everywhere.

Mr. Bilezikian offered some insights about Fredrik Franson. Some readers may have heard a great deal about him; others probably not. We shall record here the information supplied by this man who witnessed Franson's ministry. Franson was born in Pershyttan, Sweden, on June 17, 1852. He migrated to the United States with his parents at the age of sixteen. When he was twenty, in answer to his mother's prayers, he experienced a remarkable conversion. After that, one day he repeated to himself the words of Romans 10:6-8: "...Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is, to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." Then, as in a vision and with a voice as though someone else was speaking, there came to him the rest of the passage in great power: "But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith...)" This certitude moved him. The divine light flooded his heart. In his soul he experienced the illumination that

turned darkness into light, a light which was never quenched; conversely it glowed with radiance wherever he went on land or sea. Having experienced so wonderful a salvation and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, he offered himself without reservation from that very hour to God's service. Carrying only a small satchel for his basic needs and his Bible, he tirelessly traveled from continent to continent. We should pray for present-day missionaries in Turkey to be endowed by the Holy Spirit with the same power given to this effective, outstanding evangelist.

About three years later, in 1875, Franson read how God had been mightily using Dwight L. Moody, a humble and dedicated man, to bring many to the knowledge of the Savior. Franson took a deep interest in the famous evangelist and decided to go to Chicago to experience for himself the blessings of D. L. Moody's meetings. From the very outset, he observed God's working through this plain but consecrated servant. He soon joined D. L. Moody's team of workers, taking active part in street meetings where he fervently preached the Gospel and invited people to believe in Christ and to attend the evangelistic services. Mr. Moody became aware of the extraordinary zeal of this young Scandinavian fellow. He and the whole church which bore his name offered Franson credentials to aid him in securing the cooperation and fellowship of Christians in his prospective evangelistic outreaches. While Fredrik Franson accepted these credentials his 'greater credentials' of devotion to Christ, the anointing and commissioning of the Holy Spirit, were sufficient. He seldom, if ever, used the certificate given to him by the church in Chicago.

At the age of twenty-three Fredrik Franson received God's call to be an evangelist not only in the United States, but throughout the whole world. God honored this unpretentious servant of his, using him in the ministry for thirty-three years. He circled the globe three times—in that day!—preaching Christ everywhere, leaving behind a great army of converts, many consecrated Christians and newly-formed churches. In addition, Franson was used by God to start mission societies in several countries with the aim of taking the Gospel to people around the world. The first of these was the Scandinavian Alliance Mission founded in 1890. This mission eventually extended its activity to North America recruiting missionaries particularly for China in cooperation with Hudson Taylor. It eventually came to be known as The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM). TEAM continues to send men and women worldwide to preach Christ by all means and uplift the needy, sick and destitute. Franson also contributed to the establishment of German missions.

In 1908 he returned to the States from his very taxing world tour. He was totally exhausted and needed rest. But he immediately started making his schedule for his next preaching itinerary. It was Saturday, August 7. He had just preached at an evening meeting and was scheduled to speak again the next morning. Suddenly he became ill. A few friends came to his room to see how he was faring. They found him in bed with his eyes raised up to heaven in prayer. He refused them permission to call a physician, saying, "My doctor is Jesus." Without prolonged sickness, pain or suffering, he passed into the presence of his Savior that very night, who met him with these words, "*Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master*" (Matthew 25:21).

Chapter 3

Second Revival in Marash 1907

The revival in Marash, home of the author, was extensively related at the beginning of this story. That revival actually happened within the churches, with the congregations being greatly benefited. The leaders of the churches—ministers, elders, deacons and board members—somehow were left outside of the extraordinary blessing from above. They did not seem disposed to avail themselves of a deeper work of the Holy Spirit in their cold hearts. When Christ said, "*You must be born again,*" no one was exempted, from Nicodemus down to the last ordinary individual of every age. The revival remained a grassroots awakening. This is to be regretted greatly. What a difference it would have made if those in the forefront would have welcomed the revival in their own souls. As a result, an unwelcome division occurred within the ranks of the church. Those who were converted and blessed during the meetings were joyfully testifying, whereas the others seemed to be satisfied with their stance, apparently considering themselves sufficiently committed because of their important positions in the church.

As in the apostolic days, ordinary people who gave joyful witness to their faith and were totally committed to the Lord Jesus Christ were not treated very kindly. Apparently the words of the Psalmist were not remembered: "*Let the redeemed of the Lord say so*" (107:2). Like the members of that determined

tribunal who sought to silence the testimony of Peter and John, those who did not want to depart from their formalistic church life rebuked the new converts and tried to silence them. In the fervor of their new and blessed Christian experience, people wanted to stay longer in the evenings to pray and testify, but some of the leaders tactfully told them it was time to close the doors of the church and that they would have to leave. At times, the rejuvenated Christians refused to budge. The lights were then extinguished, and sometimes men in the group were attacked and beaten because they 'chose to obey God rather than man', as they saw it. The believers identified themselves with the apostolic band in the early church who endured opposition, even persecution, from the religious establishment. An unpleasant rift occurred between the newly-converted people and the older element in the church who were not convinced of the necessity of the new birth.

Passions were running high. It would have spared both sides if the elders of the church had appreciated Christ's statement, "*He who is not against us is for us*" (Luke 9:50). But that was not to be. The opposition to the witness of the new believers emanated from untouched hearts and closed minds. The conflict caused genuine grief to those who were seeking to grow in grace and in their new faith. There was a holy task before the preachers and elders of the church to assist people to gain ground in their knowledge and progress with the Lord. The formalistic leaders had witnessed the mighty showers of blessing and noticed those who responded to the wooing of the Holy Spirit. Instead of nurturing them with praise and thanksgiving, they were now opposing this wide-spread transformation of lives among their number. There is no doubt that the adverse attitude of the church leaders toward the new converts grieved the Holy Spirit. The situation became quite unbearable. The new converts who were aflame for the Lord Jesus Christ were compelled to leave the existing evangelical churches and start holding meetings in different homes. A missionary, the Reverend James Burns wrote in his book, 'Revivals—their Laws and Leaders': "This sobering fact ought to be recalled, that nearly every great revival originated outside the church and awakened in her active and bitter hostility."

In April 1907 two scripture passages, Genesis 35:1-6 and Psalm 45:10, 11, became a subject of sober consideration for the new believers. "*God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.'* So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, '*Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; then let us arise and go up to Bethel, that I may make there an altar to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.'* So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem. And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were round about them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him..." (Genesis 35:1-6). "*Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house; and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your master, bow to him...*" (Psalm 45:10, 11).

The truths emanating from these passages impressed the new believers deeply, leading them to examine their lives. They already had the assurance of their salvation, knowledge that their sins were forgiven and the witness of the Holy Spirit telling them they were sons and daughters of God. Now they were being used to bring others to Christ. They realized that they needed cleansing and the abundant victorious life. In the light of the Scriptures they '*pressed on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*' (Philippians 3:14). With this conviction they came to realize that crucifixion to self, cleansing of the heart and a victorious life were the needs before them. In quietness and confidence they gave themselves to fasting and prayer, asking the Lord to purge them from all worldly inclinations, empty them of self and fill them with his Holy Spirit. They were convinced that only then could they effectively serve their Redeemer. They went on a retreat of seven weeks, corresponding to the period of Pentecost. During this time the brothers who were gathered together—no women among them—were dealt with by the Holy Spirit about areas in their lives which needed repentance and rectification.

Mr. Bilezikian relates that he was spoken to in a vision from the one of the psalms: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*" (139:23, 24). Then the writer goes on to relate his vision: "In a dream that night two heavenly visitors came to me. Their heads were uncovered; their eyes and faces were as bright as the noonday sun. Their appearance was indescribably beautiful. As they stood side-by-side, one of them in a soft and gentle voice, whispered the words of this psalm into Bilezikian's ear. Bilezikian said that the words which spoke to him in such plain and direct language made a great impression on his heart and mind. This illumination coming from the Holy Spirit proved to him that the inner person ought to be

thoroughly examined since it is written in the Word: *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? I the LORD search the mind and try the heart, to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings. (Jeremiah 17: 9, 10).* This revelation led the group to totally obey God’s Holy Spirit. They soon discovered that there were areas in their lives that had to be judged and forsaken. Then the writer goes on to mention two cases of obedience to God’s admonition:

“Among us Brother Hamparsum Kelejian was a lumberman. Prior to his conversion he had evaded paying taxes in the amount of forty *‘mejidyeh’* (one mejidyeh in those days was twenty kurush, one-fifth of a Turkish lira, a respectable sum at the time). Following his conversion he wasn’t aware of the need of making things right. During this period of self-examination the Holy Spirit pointed out to him that he had to confess his sin and make restitution. Without delay he called the tax office, confessed his guilt and returned the forty mejidyeh. The tax officials were taken aback. This opened the way for him to give them a clear-cut testimony of Christ’s saving and sanctifying power. Another case, Brother Moses Bilezikian—Vartan’s oldest brother—before his conversion had made a false statement involving some money in a business deal. Convicted of his wrong-doing, he went to the aggrieved person, confessed his sin and made restitution. The report of such deeds soon spread throughout the community, making a profound impression on everyone. On hearing about these genuine acts of restitution, the Turks were amazed that the God of these people could so affect their lives as to bring them to such altruistic deliberations.

As the process of purification and restitution continued, the spiritual lives of the brothers were empowered and their testimony became more effective. It was clear to all that their hearts were full of peace and joy. A different kind of love was evidenced among the brothers, also a new unity and spirit of self-denial. They sought to follow the apostolic way of life as recorded in Acts 4:32-37: *“Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”*

Everybody was noticing that a fresh dignity had taken over the hearts of the believers. The band of transformed Christians became aware of the many needs surrounding them and started getting involved in reaching out with assistance, not the least of these being financial. In the meetings, prayer, preaching and hymn-singing manifested a power not witnessed until then. Both the Word of God and the personal testimonies came over with fresh resonance. Of course, there were people who until then were not quite touched by the revival. Nevertheless, they could not restrain themselves from being affected by the whole course of events which had so deeply touched lives. This revival swept a large number of men and women into God’s kingdom. They immediately started enjoying the delight of the new birth and joined the ranks of the believers. Genuine Christian life was in evidence everywhere.

As the working of the Holy Spirit was noticeable throughout the whole community the adversary was eager to creep in with his diabolical schemes. Into this new fellowship some snuck in, carrying the program of the enemy who appeared as an angel of light. They soon showed themselves to be spots in the feasts of the believers. Their manner of talk and teaching ran contrary to the word of God: *“It is these who set up divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 19).* It became excruciatingly lamentable that heresies reminiscent to the time of the apostles once again manifested themselves. Paul’s admonition to the elders of the Ephesian church in his farewell message came to mind: *“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30).*

Those who discovered the secret of the committed life to Christ started living according to the Lord’s requirements. However, regrettably, some drew back, falling into teachings not consistent with the scriptures. But those who were enjoying the presence of the Lord began praying daily for the others. To everyone’s joy, quite a few of them found their way back into the fold. The whole group could sing with

Micah, the prophet of old: *“Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me” (7:8)*. David spoke with similar words following his restoration to communion with the Lord: *“...though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the LORD is the stay of his hand” (Psalm 37:24)*. We all rejoice over the return of a lapsed believer, offering thanks to the Savior who lifted up the one in error. On the other hand, we equally lament for the harm done to the life of the one who did not take his new-found faith seriously and did not consider the harm done to the community of believers. The Apostle Paul had this sort of lapsing in mind when he wrote to Timothy: *“Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16)*.

In ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’, Christian and Hopeful on their journey from the City of Destruction to Mount Zion endured a severe test. They left the road, lost their way and fell into the hands Giant Despair. In his hand they suffered cruel beatings. God’s grace reached down and brought them back to the right path, to the King’s Highway, where they once again were safe. To prevent others from falling into the hands of Giant Despair, they set up a pillar on which they engraved the following warning: “Over this step is the way to Doubting Castle, which is kept by Giant Despair. He despises the King of the Celestial Country and seeks to destroy his holy pilgrims.” Many, therefore, who followed after, read what was written and escaped the danger. Having left this warning, Christian and Hopeful continued their pilgrimage till they came to the Delectable Mountains, which Mountains belong to the Lord.

Chapter 4

Our Three Imprisonments

The year is 1906. Apraham Hoja is in Aintab. He sends an important letter to the writer, Vartan Bilezikian, and Hamparsum Kellejian. After they read it, Brother Hamparsum keeps it in his possession. Only a few days had passed when he was traveling with a few other brothers. Along the way they were stopped by a Turkish *‘zaptiye’*, (a national gendarme). He told them that he had been commissioned to carry out a search. Among Hamparsum’s belongings the gendarme discovered Apraham’s letter. So he arrested Hamparsum on the spot and took him to government headquarters. After the authorities interrogated him, they immediately threw him into prison without charge. Immediately they came to Vartan and arrested him, too, putting him in the same prison. The two brothers were held for several days with no explanation provided. It was summertime. The cramped quarters were full of prisoners from all walks of life. The air was putrid and extremely hot, so much so that they could hardly breathe. Hungry bedbugs were crawling everywhere. There was no bed of course, nor any cot. The prisoners were given no food. Their condition was deplorable, but thankfully they were not separated from each other, so they could talk and pray together. Finally, after several days, they were called to the government official for interrogation.

The first question directed their way was, “Who is this Apraham Hoja that wrote you the letter? Why did he write it? The two men spoke out in unison, “The writer is a man of God.” The interrogator abruptly said, “Just answer my questions.” He paused, “The writer of the letter talks about a war deadlier than the Russo-Japanese War. It says, *‘Therefore, take the whole armor of God...take the sword of the Spirit’ (Ephesians 6:13, 17b)*.’ Who is the enemy in this war? And what are the armor of God and the sword of the Spirit?” Again, the two men answered as one: “This is not a worldly warfare, sir; it is a spiritual battle against Satan and his kingdom.” The magistrate seemed to accept this explanation although he didn’t really understand it. He hastened to the next question: “Very well. In this letter is written: ‘We received the items sent to us by the young men in Zeytun and request that you forward the items we are sending to them.’ Who are these young men of Zeytun, what did they send and what are you sending to them?”

Bilezikian continues: “Not knowing what items were sent or received between Apraham Hoja and the young men in Zeytun, we were at a loss to know what answer to give. It was an embarrassing situation because the magistrate thought that we were somehow entangled in this give-and-take of items. The case developed into a sinister inquisition, way out of proportion to its original casualness. Undoubtedly, this was because the name ‘Zeytun’ with its entire Armenian population had become the most dreaded and disliked Christian element throughout the Cilician region. Its inhabitants numbered sixteen thousand. They were a sturdy people living in this rocky, mountainous district of Cilicia, who had engaged in no less than fifty separate battles against the best-trained Ottoman army units. The Armenians had won every one of them. Their desire was to preserve their faith, their Christian culture, their families and homes.

For generations the inhabitants, known as *'Zeytunlis'*, were a thorn in the flesh to the corrupt governmental system. They were also suspect, subject to merciless investigations.

The two brothers had no clue whatever about 'the items', which were the main subject of the letter. They answered the interrogator: "We know the man who wrote this letter. He is a very godly person. Without hesitation we should add that the young men referred to in the letter were spiritual followers and disciples of Jesus Christ. Neither we, nor they, have any connection with civil or political organizations." The questioning continued and the two men were put back into prison where they were incarcerated for another nineteen days. They were overwhelmed by a sense of uncertainty; but refused to be cast down. They continuously looked up to God in prayer, committing their cause to him. They fasted, prayed and studied the Word. Witnessing to the other prisoners brought fresh inner strength and joy. In answer to their prayers, their imprisonment came to an end. Suddenly and without any explanation, they were told that they were free to go back to their homes. Their release brought great rejoicing and thanksgiving to the brothers and sisters in Christ.

Second Imprisonment

The believers in Marash continued steadfastly with their witness for Christ while being engaged in their particular occupations. Having experienced a mighty spiritual awakening, they always could look back with gratitude and anticipate an even greater revival in the future. The whole city still remembered what had happened in the Christian community. But, as could be expected, the enemy was at work stirring up trouble. The nominal Christians who were mentioned before did not stop attacking the born-again believers. Those touched by the Holy Spirit generally were not looked on with favor by the others. This time the nominal Christians resorted to an unbelievable accusation. They informed the authorities that a subversive society had been formed aiming to work against the government. The officials immediately took measures against the men who were subject of the accusation. In August 1907, they arrested approximately fifteen of the leaders, including Reverend Bilezikian, and threw them into prison. This brought joy to the hearts of the believers, instead of sorrow. They were encouraged that they were imprisoned *'for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ'*. Their imprisonment became the cause for united rejoicing and thanksgiving. Their witness to other prisoners intensified day by day, along with their fellowship in prayer and study of God's word.

Finally they were called in for closer examination. The oft-repeated question was: "Are you a subversive society, or an organization aiming to stir up a revolution and topple the government?" Such a manipulated investigation brought new joy to the brothers in prison, as it gave them opportunity to testify to the wonderful work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Each time they returned to their cells after another interrogation they broke forth into loud and lively singing of the great hymns of the Church. During their seven days in jail they were living on a spiritual mountain-top, lifted above their miserable conditions. Humanly speaking, their situation was intolerable. The cells were hot and filthy, the air foul. The prison was infested with bedbugs. It was overcrowded with profane and lewd common criminals. But the Holy Spirit brought constant peace and support to the hearts of these children of God.

Naturally, all believers, men and women, were in earnest prayer for their fellow-Christians in prison. This was reminiscent of the prayer of the believers in the apostolic church under persecution who prayed for Peter. They had rejoiced with the opening of the prison gates through God's intervention when Peter again was restored to their fellowship. In a modern parallel, through God's taking matters over when these men were released on the seventh day, they returned to their homes and work, bringing great rejoicing and thanksgiving to everybody. Actually, there was gladness throughout the whole city when the news was heard of their release. Immediately, all Christians gathered for a service of thanksgiving where they encouraged each other to continue in their faithful witness for Christ and in meeting together regularly. Their new zeal exceeded what they had previously experienced. They were witnessing new conversions and increase in their numbers daily.

Third Imprisonment

The inspiring awakening picked up momentum. However, the enemy was preparing a new attack. The fear and suspicion of the authorities was fermenting. They decided to throw the brothers in jail again, just

three weeks after their release. But this small band of believers was not to be discouraged; their songs of praise were now shifted to their little cell.

Paradoxically, they were again encountering opposition from the church leaders whose faith did not transcend a mere nominal belief. There was much whispering among them and others who followed their line, against the born-again followers of Christ. A document signed by twelve of their people reached the government offices. In it the believers were accused of being revolutionaries, members of a subversive society and harboring hostility against the authorities. On the heels of this fabricated charge twenty-five of the leading believers were arrested by the police. They were taken away from their families and places of work. With an air of ridicule and reproach they were herded through the market places, like a gang of criminals. No opportunity was given them to express their belief or to make a defense.

The writer continues with a story from his personal experience: "I was away at the summer cottage in our family vineyard. So I was not in the company of those who had been imprisoned. However, I learned that the police had arrested my brother Moses in my place. They harshly interrogated him about me. That evening I prayed fervently with complete confidence that my Lord's will was going to be perfectly carried out and that we would be vindicated. With this assurance, I retired for the night. After being asleep for a couple hours, an amazing vision appeared before me which I have never forgotten. The heavens were opened like a rose which makes its appearance in early summer. My eyes were riveted on a dazzling scene. I saw a vast multitude marching forward two-by-two. These were celestial beings. The scene was indescribably glorious. It could not be put on paper by mere pen and ink. The crowd was robed in white, shining in the brightness of the noon-day sun. One would suppose that they were clothed with glory and the atmosphere of the holy. They walked from east to west. Their eyes were glowing with joy and love. Their movement was in perfect harmony and rhythm. It was very hard for me to take my eyes off these delightful heavenly beings. My concentration on the crowd intensified. A deep longing to know who they were gripped my heart. As this orderly march came closer, I saw that their hair was long. The leading pair was revealed as Jesus of Nazareth and the beloved disciple, John. Behind were the rest of Christ's apostles.

"As I feasted my eyes on this unspeakably arresting spectacle I concluded our Lord was despised on earth and rejected by ordinary men. He suffered death at their hands. This he did to verify the essence of the Gospel. Now God the Father highly exalted him and robed him with honor and glory, riches and blessing. Then and there, I heard the well-known words of Christ to the Church undergoing martyrdom: *"Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life"* (Revelation 2:10b). The message of the vision brought a fresh reality to my soul. Early in the morning I left the vineyard and made my way to the prison to join the brothers. Shortly after my arrival, the police chief called all of us to his office. There were more policemen and other officials in the room. The chief of police immediately started assailing us in a vindictive outburst, using abusive and foul language. Worse than this was the scourging and beating several of the brothers had to endure. They were tortured mercilessly and some suffered bad injuries. I was sitting in the corner of the room while this cruel drama was being enacted before my eyes.

All of a sudden, a holy boldness from the Lord came upon me. I stood up and with hands uplifted as if in prayer, turned to the magistrate and addressed him: 'Sir, your behavior and treatment has no place either in the law of God or man. Allow me to ask you the reason for reproaching and mistreating innocent people with beatings and vulgar language, which we never use among ourselves.' The reproof had its immediate effect. The magistrate with his face turned to me, quieted down, went back to his seat, knowing that he had been chastised. After a few minutes' pause, he said, 'Be gone now. I will call you again tomorrow.' We spent that night in prison, praising God and singing as Paul and Silas had done in the prison in Philippi. The following day we were called to his office. As we were being ushered in to the presence of this magistrate, next to him we saw the Bishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the ministerial head of the Armenian Protestant churches and the priest of the Roman Catholic Church. In their eyes we were regarded as heretics. The first thing the magistrate did was to ask them: 'Do you know these men? Are they members of your congregations?' Their answer in unison was, 'We do not know these men.' In a sudden fit of anger, the magistrate obviously irritated retorted: 'I don't know all the Turks by name, but I do know them to be Turks. It is hard to imagine that you don't know these men. Since this is the assumption, I better release them so that they can empty your churches by their preaching.' With this short speech he sent us back to our prison cells. Had these formal religious leaders understood the Church of Jesus Christ as a divine foundation and taken their stand for us on that day, supporting us in our spiritual mission, we would have been spared the agony of prison life. Instead, we

were denied and betrayed by our very leaders into the hands of the enemies of the Cross and extended imprisonment.

"The place we were kept in custody was called '*Nezaret*' in Turkish. The district attorney who received our affidavit sent it to the higher court in Aleppo which was the capital of the *vilayet* (region) known by the same name. Should the court in Aleppo declare us innocent we would undoubtedly be set free. But if it decided to the contrary, we would have to face a prolonged court case. It was now a matter of waiting for the verdict of the higher court.

"In this atmosphere of expectation the twenty-seven followers of Christ enduring hardship for the sake of his testimony spent their days singing hymns, studying the Word, praying and praising him. He counted them worthy to be his witnesses during this whole ordeal. One day the magistrate invited all the important officers in the courthouse to come together. He said, 'Come and listen to the inspiring singing of these Christian prisoners.' Bilezikian relates the following development: "All of us prisoners were called to the courtyard of the prison where the officers already had taken their places. The magistrate addressed us, '*Haydi, askerlerim*, (Come on, my soldiers), sing!' This was a very happy occasion for us to be given the privilege of singing songs of praise to our Lord. We were not restrained in our spirits, as the Israelite captives had been in Babylon when they plaintively moaned: "*How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*" (*Psalms 137:4*). That very moment the Holy Spirit gripped us with a sense of rejoicing and the wonderful opportunity that God had opened for us. We sang:

O sinner, do not reject His call.
Sin goes, but then comes its toll,
Never forget Hell's tormenting agony;
Accept your God's eternal love and mercy.

We sang the whole hymn while the officials were listening in awe. The following day we were called to sing again. This time, our audience was larger. We sang:

Blessed are the sons of God;
They are bought with Christ's own blood;
They are ransomed from the grave;
Life eternal they shall have.

They are lights upon the earth,
Children of a heavenly birth;
One with God, with Jesus one,
Glory is in them begun;
With them numbered may we be,
Here and in eternity.

When we had finished singing this hymn, they looked at us with wistful eyes as if hungry for more, and asked us to repeat the song 'Wheat and Tares' which we had sung the day before:

Comes the day of nations at the judgment bar;
Separated sinners depart to the everlasting fire;
No longer will tares co-mingle with the wheat;
The King speaks, their destiny is complete.

After singing this and other hymns dear to our hearts we were returned to our cells. One day, a prominent Turkish officer came to visit us. His revelation amazed us: "Don't be afraid, brothers. I am one of you. Jesus Christ is my Savior, too." Then he went on to explain how he had become a Christian. "One day I was traveling to Aintab with a missionary whose name was Miss Rohner. On the way, she told me about God's word and challenged me to accept Jesus Christ. Then and there, I prayed the penitent's prayer, 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.' My eyes were opened and I received Jesus Christ as my personal Savior and Lord." As he was giving his testimony his face radiated with the beauty of Jesus Christ.

On another day, again all of us were joyfully singing:

There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus,
No, not one! No, not one!
None else could heal all our soul's diseases,
No, not one! No, not one!

Jesus knows all about our struggles,
He will guide till the day is done;
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus,
No, not one! No, not one!

“One day the guard brought a young Turkish bandit, Faku, into our cell. His domain was the mountains where he and his cohorts terrorized travelers. He had been put on the ‘most wanted’ list of criminals. Finding himself in such narrow confinement, he didn’t know what to do with himself. He acted like a caged lion, continuously trying to open the door or window. His urgent desire was to get back to the freedom of his kingdom. To add to his misery, he encountered a menace about which he knew nothing in the mountains—bedbugs! These hungry creatures were having a feast on his entire body, around his eyes and even in his ears. He was swollen beyond recognition. He was weeping, but tried to forget his ordeal by singing folk songs that he knew by heart. On one occasion he came and sat next to us. We were reading God’s Word. He listened intently. He also gave attention to the prayers and singing. One of our group asked him: ‘Faku, aren’t you a sinner? Do you realize that you need salvation from sin?’ His prompt answer was, ‘Yes, I am a sinner.’ The conversation continued, ‘Would you like to be saved?’ His unhesitating reply was, ‘Yes, I would like to be saved.’ The believers directed him to a corner, where he knelt and openly prayed, confessing his sins and repenting before God with genuine sorrow. He sincerely asked God to have mercy on his soul. The signs of change immediately became apparent. After a few hours of worshipful silence, he came back to us. We asked him, ‘Faku, what did you do?’ ‘I encountered my sins,’ he replied. ‘I threw them on a cat and they are all gone!’ His answer was in colloquial terminology. Anything evil which someone seeks to get rid of is cast on a cat that runs away with it. He used his opportunity to yield his life to the power of Jesus Christ as described in the Gospel. The believers went on to assure Faku that Jesus Christ, God’s Son alone can remove sin and save the sinner, and cats have no part in it.

“Among us,” Bilezikian says, “there was a brother affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church. He had a beautiful voice and sang the liturgical hymns of his church. We all listened to him with deep appreciation. We called this brother, ‘Zechariah the priest’. His real name was Stephan Merjenian. Our stay in prison was not boring with all kinds of events taking place continually. We waited, watched and prayed, not knowing what tomorrow would bring.”

Chapter 5

From Nezaret (Custody Detention) to Kanli Mahpushane (Bloody Dungeon)

We were totally unaware of what lay ahead. One day all twenty-seven of us were taken from the Nezaret to Kanli Dungeon. The move was full of pageantry, drama, color and excitement. As together we walked out of our Nezaret detention, we felt like sheep being led to the slaughter. Immediately police and soldiers surrounded us. Like a band of desperados we were jeered and mocked at by those watching our transfer. Finally we arrived at Kanli Dungeon. The place was closely guarded by soldiers. Suddenly the iron gates flung open and we were thrust in. While entering the prison, the police commissar took our Bibles and hymnbooks, tersely and defiantly yelling, “If your Jesus is able, let him save you from my clutches!” The scene inside shocked us. We were surrounded by approximately four hundred and fifty criminals and long-term offenders. They mocked us, “Look, here come the ‘*Roohjular*’ (the spiritual ones), about whom we have been hearing so much!” We kept our composure. Our company consisted of the following brothers:

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|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Hamparsum Kellejian | 2. Boghos Abajian | 3. Panos Merjamian |
| 4. Hagop Deghirmenjian | 5. Migirdich Misisian | 6. Mihran Misisian |
| 7. Takvor Jenikian | 8. Arshavir Jenikian | 9. Aram Mumjian |
| 10. Moses Kazarian | 11. Hovhannes Ganimian | 12. Nishan Karjian |

- | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| 13. Minas Filibosian | 14. Harutiun Kanburian | 15. Panos Der Kazarian |
| 16. Nishan Terzian | 17. Bedros Agulian | 18. Garabed Rubian |
| 19. Bedros Mumjian | 20. Karekin Vaneskehian | 21. Minas Keshishian |
| 22. Nazareth Kurdoglian | 23. Hovhannes Bonjukjian | 24. Setrak Matosian |
| 25. Haig Mincherian | 26. Apraham Hoja Levonian | 27. Vartan Bilezikian |

All of us innocent young people found ourselves in a terrible imprisonment. This was a land of the shadow, an arena of sin and guilt, profanity, vulgarity and total confusion. A bin of base brawlers, men sold to sin, slaves of all sorts of addictions. In brief, this was a place that resembled hell. We felt like Daniel in the lions' den. Of the twenty-seven, six were married men with families. Undoubtedly, they suffered more than the rest of us. The very first evening the prison authorities separated our whole group from each other and assigned us in one's or in two's to cells already filled with hardened criminals. The cells were very small. There was only a single window, allowing a little light from the outside so that prisoners could distinguish between day and night. It may sound incredible, but between twenty and thirty criminals were crowded into each cell which was only large enough to hold a maximum of six people. How could we rest? How would we sleep? I was in a cell with fifteen others. The widest space I could squeeze in to rest my weary body at night was no more than half a square meter, and that at the feet of other prisoners. These guys ordered me not to move so I wouldn't disturb them. As I found out later, the other brothers had fared no better. The nights were an activity of gambling and profanity. These prisoners were trying to find some pleasure in the midst of their plight.

It was common knowledge that the charge against us was membership in a revolutionary conspiracy whose target was to overthrow the Ottoman government. The guards and the prisoners were merciless and exact with us. Contact with the outside world was denied. Our families and friends were not permitted to visit us. Furthermore, we were under constant surveillance to check what we were talking about with each other. The suspicion of the authorities was beyond all imagination and resulted in our maltreatment. As the Scriptures put it, *'in patience we possessed our souls'* and in humility of heart we comforted each other with God's promises. Our lives and conduct were constantly proclaiming Christ to the fallen prisoners and to the guards, at whose mercy we were cast. Our fellowship in prison was a true *unitas fratrum*; our love for one another was something the others around us had not seen until then. This started having the effect of melting the icy hearts. People's attitudes were changing from day to day. The guards and other prisoners began being friendly with us. Our personal testimonies about the change in our own lives began to leave a deep impression on everybody.

I distinctly remember the names of our three guards: Ali Efendi, Omer Agha, and Abdulkadir. They had strict orders to keep a watchful eye on us. They studied us carefully; they listened to our words and followed our movements. It reached our ears that they sent a favorable report about us to the authorities: "These men are not the kind of subversive characters as we had supposed them to be. No doubt, there are prisoners in this place who are involved in political schemes. But these young men are a totally different bunch. They are very humble and God-fearing. Their meat and drink is the Bible and worship of God." A certain influential official inquired from Ali what these *'politikajis'* (political conspirators) were doing. The reply he received was, "These people are not political conspirators, neither dangerous to the society. We have thoroughly examined them and found nothing but a deep devotion to their God." Having won the confidence of our guards, at last we were permitted to receive visitors and converse with them. This was a great relief to those both inside and out.

Chapter 6

Bible Restored – Prison Atmosphere Enlivened

On one of the many days we spent in this prison, I was invited to the office of the magistrate. At the outset, he had mercilessly scourged some of us, emptying all sorts of profanity and foul language on us. Now his arrogant manner had given way to a reasonable mien. Amazingly, he talked with a magnanimous spirit, displaying some concern. His attitude was like that of a father talking to his son. He asked, "Are the other prisoners giving you trouble?" I answered, "No, sir." Then he posed another question, "Is there any favor that I can do for you?" It may be recalled that when we entered this prison this man had taken away our Bibles. I was hungry and thirsty for the Word of God. Without any hesitation, I said, "Sir, if it would please your honor, let me have my Bible. I will be grateful to you." Immediately he responded, "Very well, my son. You may go now and I will send your Bible right away." Shortly after I returned to my cell a policeman brought my Bible to me. What a great favor this was!

What unspeakable joy filled my soul! The Words of Life were with me once again. Little wonder that the Apostle Paul shortly before his martyrdom wrote to Timothy, "My dearly beloved son, when you come, bring with you the books, but especially the parchments."

As I mentioned before, we were among the worst kinds of criminals, offenders who had been sentenced to long jail terms. Human beings could not survive long in the conditions we were subjected to. The cells were filled with filth; there was a terrible foul smell. The place was infested with lice, fleas and bedbugs, all of which were having a heyday biting us and sucking our blood. Not knowing the outcome of our case, day after day we were living in this hell on earth. This may surprise the reader, but we were given no food. One day, one of the brothers among us received food from his family. He immediately shared it with the rest of us. So we all got a little taste of home-cooked Armenian food. For five months we were kept in these strict and deplorable conditions. In faith we were anticipating our Lord's intervention. We believed that he would not delay in coming to our aid, rescuing us and taking vengeance on those who were treating us without any pity. As we waited day after day, we finally learned that our case was being examined by the provincial superior court in Aleppo and that the outcome would soon be made known. What else could we do, but to resort to the best practice, namely, fasting and prayer for three days? We asked the Lord that his mercy may soon touch the hearts of the members of the superior court and bring our long-overdue liberation. All twenty-seven of us joined with one heart in this earnest petition. During this time, people who knew our plight were remembering us. One of those who worked very fervently on our behalf was Dr. Shepard of the American hospital in Aintab. He directly appealed to the American and British Counsels in Aleppo to use their influence in order to extend some assistance.

This noble effort was to no avail because our case had gone to Sultan Abdul Hamid II. It is well known by all historians that he was a merciless and cruel emperor. He hated everybody, especially the Armenians. He had initiated the first Armenian genocide in the East in 1895. When our case was brought to his attention, being told that we were all Armenians, his reaction was typical of his character: "Do not let these prisoners go free." After three days, the news arrived that with imperial decree we were indicted and that we would be summoned to appear before the court for further hearing. Alas! The development was altogether contrary to what we were anticipating by faith in our Lord. We were all disappointed to the depth of our hearts, as this decree could be interpreted that we were all doomed to an indefinite time of uncertain waiting. We were cast into a misery which grew day by day. Our group consisted of men of different ages. The four youngest and most vulnerable endured much reproach and denigration at the hands of the other prisoners. We were men without food, without any opportunity to bathe or care for our hygienic needs. No hope of release was in sight. We came to a point where our faith was being tested. Sadness overtook all of us, as we knew well that we had committed no offense. In the midst of all, we thanked God that his renewed assurance was uplifting us moment by moment. We said to each other: "God must have a great purpose for our own good and the good of his testimony." Our faith rested firmly on the words of Romans 8:28, as our prison cell became a crucible to cleanse our hearts and test the genuineness of our faith. *"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the LORD tries the hearts" (Proverbs 17:3).*

We were constantly discussing our case among ourselves. One day the suggestion was put forward by one of our group that we should compose a joint letter to some of the leading citizens of Marash. Immediately we started to write. The gist of the letter was our request that they intercede on our behalf with the governor of the city. We mentioned that our case was a different one; therefore a decision should be given to separate us twenty-seven prisoners from the rest of the common criminals and allow us to stay in a different place. Our request was watered with much intercession and supplication. God intervened and twenty-four hours after our application reached the governor's hands, an affirmative decision was made! We were all removed from the rest of the prisoners and shifted to a large room in the prison which was cleared out beforehand so that everybody in our group could be with each other. What a blessing! That same evening all of us were together in this area. Our hearts were filled with joy and thanksgiving to our Lord who had graciously delivered us, his sheep, from among wolves. Our overwhelming joy nearly equaled what a word of release would have brought. For five months we had been separated from each other. Our heavenly father saw to it that once again we were in each other's company. All of us knelt and praised God with hymns of gratitude. We felt like being fibers worked into a single cord. We immediately started growing strong in one another's fellowship and above all, having Jesus Christ in our midst.

This move was very providential because here we spent another six months. I cannot refrain from recording some of the unforgettable experiences that we had in this God-provided place. One day

Brother Karekin and I were summoned to the city hall to meet the mayor. We were in excited anticipation to learn the reason of his beckoning us. The mayor ushered us into his private office and locked the door. His countenance expressed his curiosity. After the three of us had sat down together, he wanted to learn who we were and what our message was. The Lord gave us a sense of humility, mingled with joy. What an opportunity to testify of our faith in a living God and our having experienced repentance through our Savior Jesus Christ! We spoke of the transforming power of the blessed Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. The man listened attentively to words which he was probably hearing for the first time in his life. He had a beard to which his hand repeatedly reached, stroking it gently again and again. Looking at us sympathetically he spoke with restrained feeling: "My sons, there has come to you (*hidayati rahmani*) a God-inspired desire to seek the Truth. Don't worry; the Lord is going to set you free. If you encounter any trouble in the prison, let me know."

Vartan Bilezikian continues to relate: "I mentioned before that our cells were infested with bedbugs. Day and night, these were our chief tormentors. Every corner of space was teeming with these tormenting pests. But a miracle took place! These carnivorous blood-suckers became friendly toward us; they were all around like a herd of cattle in a wide pasture, but never came near us. It was the God of Daniel who had constrained the hungry lions' mouths who kept these merciless creatures from sucking our blood. Before we were moved to the larger quarters the prisoners in the cells heard of our experience with the bedbugs. It may sound strange, but it is true, and the prisoners started inquiring about it. They came to learn that this indeed was the case. This exciting news item spread among the prison officers. They started remarking, "Bedbugs are powerless against the '*Roohjular*' (*spiritual ones*). For some reason, they don't attack them." This event evoked plenty of discussion in the prison, arousing great curiosity. The officers were so eager to get the details that they delved into detail about this unusual state of affairs. When they were convinced that what they had heard was really true, they dropped the case in puzzlement.

The mayor's interrogation was thorough. The result of it reached the governor; both he and the district attorney were satisfied that all of us were innocent young men and that the charges against us were unfounded. However, this wasn't going to change their minds. The orders from headquarters were exact. The band of believers was to be destroyed. No favors of any kind were to be granted. However, our trust was in our sovereign God who had not forgotten or forsaken us until now. He answered our prayers in an unusual way. Suddenly, both the governor and district attorney who were working hard against us were dismissed from their positions.

About this time, Brother Hamparsum Kellejian had a vision which he related to us: "I saw the Prelate of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Marash. From his side through an opening there flowed black water, and he died a lamentable death, crying in great agony." A few days later we heard that a well-known churchman had attacked the Prelate, whose demeanor and conduct had been scandalous. The Prelate started brooding over the serious charges brought against him by the leading churchman. As a result, he suffered a stroke; strangely his side opened and he died an excruciating death. God's verdict came to our minds: "...*he who touches you touches the apple of his eye*" (*Zechariah 2:8b*). The unfortunate Prelate had been a person of great talents and abilities. By profession he was an architect and he held a very high ecclesiastical position. I regret to recall the conduct of Annas and Caiaphas who surrendered the apostolic band of believers to anti-Christian authorities.

One of the notorious men in prison was Zamir Hoja. He was a Muslim fanatic through and through, an avowed enemy of the Christian faith and the followers of Christ. He fought mercilessly against our singing and praying. In the prison he was the man who caused us the most trouble. We all considered him an incarnation of Satan, a man bent on scheming evil and executing it. Not only was he a determined enemy of the Christian faith and the believers, but he constantly instigated the prisoners against us. This was his daily routine. One day while he was carrying on one of his tirades, suddenly the Lord struck him. His senses left him and demons entered his body. Being governed by the evil spirits and unable to get rid of them, he started running in every direction, yelling menacing threats at the other prisoners. One night he became so violent that the rest of the prisoners and even the guards found themselves in the midst of a great nightmare. The prison police commanded him to shut up, but he paid no attention to them. As they were dragging him from his cell, he was ranting and raving, totally out of control. It was winter. In the courtyard, there was a fountain and its water was half-frozen. They grabbed him and threw him into the fountain. Afterwards, they transferred him soaking wet to a dark isolation cell. He was doomed to finish his days in that place. From then on we never saw his face. Once again, our sovereign God manifested his justice and way of executing judgment.

Our most-appreciated involvement was singing hymns, praying and studying God's word. The practice was an essential part of our prison routine. Amazingly, the prisoners who started memorizing the hymns we sang joined us. Among the many heart-lifting songs that we sang was the one that became our favorite:

Thou, my everlasting portion,
More than friend or life to me,
All along my pilgrim journey,
Savior, let me walk with thee.

In the prison there were both Turks and Arabs. They liked this hymn so much that whenever we sang it, they joined in singing the refrain, "Close to Thee, Close to Thee..." With joyful hearts we often heard the prisoners remark, "God sent you here to be a light to us in this dark prison at this awful period of our lives. Your companionship and witness has affected us greatly. May God's blessing be upon you."

Among the prisoners was a *hoja* (Muslim teacher-priest). He was an honorable person from a town called Albistan. Often he came to hear the Word of God and our testimony. The Spirit of God worked marvelously in his heart. Finally, he repented of his sins, confessed his need of Christ the Savior and testified to the saving grace of God. "Now I am one of you, brothers," he said. No one noticing the wonderful transformation which had taken place in his heart and observing his changed countenance could doubt for a moment that the miracle of grace had been completed in this man's life. He was a truly born-again person, a child of God. Whenever he met with us, his face radiated the joy of the testimony he was sharing with others. Alas, one morning he disappeared. We can only assume that because of his determined faith and testimony for Christ he died as a martyr in the hands of blind and fanatic Muslims. We expect to meet him among the redeemed in glory, in fact among the company of the martyrs mentioned so distinctly in the book of Revelation.

I made reference to the fact that our meager supply of food came occasionally from the prisoners' families. Every recipient was mindful to share the food brought to him with the others. It will be well understood that all twenty-seven in the group had to go hungry often. We prayed and came to the decision that we should appeal to the authorities to recognize for us the same rights enjoyed by the other prisoners. Again, providentially, our request was granted and they decided to give each of us a loaf of black bread daily. We were blessed by having a piece of cloth which we spread on the floor, using it as a table cloth. We placed the bread on it, to eat along with any food provided through the kindness of the various families. With hymns of praise and thanksgiving we asked the Lord to bless the food, *'having all things in common'*, as it is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. Our bountiful heavenly Father always provided some food for us. It was obvious to all that we had a great love for each other. Nobody was selfish; everybody was eager to share from what he had received.

This sacrificial spirit made a deep impression on the other inmates and officials who observed our practice of sharing. At times the spirit of prayer would come on us and one after the other would lift his voice in rather long supplications. Such a session would last between three and four hours. We forgot the table set before us. The food and bread remained untouched. Again, this had a great impact on the personnel and on the other prisoners. They started wondering why we would sit around the table spread with food and wait so long before we began eating. Our putting spiritual nourishment before the physical, in this way displaying our self-discipline, was entirely new to everyone around us. This led them to make their way to the guards to complain: "These *'Roohjular'* (spiritual ones) don't eat their meals; they simply sit around the table and move their lips. One of the prison staff who heard this complaint was known as *'kel chavoush'* (bald-headed orderly). He was a ruffian. One day he angrily came in holding a club and a flashing sword. He shouted intimidatingly, "Ey, why don't you eat your food? Are you all crazy? Have you lost your minds?" After throwing these insults he attacked us. He shouted, "I will crush your heads with this club!" Our soft-spoken answer to him was, "We beg your pardon, sir, we are not crazy or off balance. We are at prayer, worshipping and praising our God." When *kel chavoush* heard our remark, with the words, 'prayer' and 'Allah' he was silenced. His furious manner was transformed: "Forgive me, my sons; I cannot threaten you any more." Would to God that more people had such regard for prayer and deep reverence for the name of Allah as this intimidating Muslim displayed on that day! The words 'Allah' and 'prayer' disarmed him. This was a clear example of how God could take the wind out of the sails of his enemies in times of immense insecurity and reckless threats, and calm them down.

Chapter 7

Araham Hoja of Aintab Joins the Prisoners

In the eighth month of our imprisonment the hero of our story, Araham Hoja of Aintab, along with Setrak Matosian, were arrested and added to our number. The charge against Araham Hoja was because of that letter which he had previously written. As for Setrak Matosian, it wasn't clear at all why he was arrested. As soon as Araham Hoja entered the prison gates he exclaimed in a humble and submissive spirit, "God's will be done!" This later joining of the two to the company brought both sadness and joy to all of us. We were sad because this physically weak brother had to suffer with the more robust young people in our group. On the other hand, we were joyful because a true man of God was brought in to be with us. His was the appearance of a prophet. God's hour came upon us with the bringing in of this man.

Araham Hoja in his impressive mien brought into the prison spiritual power and practical faith. He stayed three months with us. His life could be described in two words: 'prayer-saturated'. A new stimulus was added to our studying of God's word, our prayers and singing; now we could really wait in faith for the salvation of the Lord to manifest itself.

In the compound there was a prisoner named Ahmed Amme. He was such a hardened criminal that the sentence hanging over his head was one hundred and one years. From what we heard, he had killed his wife and along with her, his mother- and father-in-law. Against this horrible background, he gave the clear impression of being broken-hearted. Gloom and apathy had taken over his whole personality. He wanted to atone for his triple crime. In accordance with the prescription of his religion he daily prayed toward Mecca after undergoing the ritual of ablution. Instead of praying the required routine of five times daily, he resolved to pray three times that many. So he prayed five times a day to atone for the murder of his wife, and five times each for his mother- and father-in-law. So in addition to those fifteen times of ritual prayer for those he murdered, he had to fulfill his personal duty of praying another five times daily. It may sound very tedious to the reader, but this is what he went through every day. This practice consumed most of his day. He could only take two short breaks for meals. Because in Islam religious rituals are extremely basic and uncompromisingly required by Allah, he subjected his body and soul to these protracted periods of ablution and prayer.

The prison authorities were disturbed at Ahmed's continuous involvement in prayer. One day they brought him to us. He sat down in a worshipful manner and listened to the reading of God's Word and our prayers. One from our company asked him the question, "Ahmed Amme, don't you wish to confess your sins, ask for forgiveness from Jesus Christ and be saved?" His reply was quick, "My dear friends, which one of my countless sins should I confess? If I start with my confessing of stealing chickens from here and there, this alone will require many days." On another day Araham Hoja asked him, "Ahmed Amme, how did it happen that you killed three of your family members in one day?" Ahmet replied, "Hoja efendi, I really don't know. All that I remember is that in a fit of anger an unknown force clicked in my brain and the next thing I knew was that I had killed all three of them."

With deep pity and agonizing sympathy Araham Hoja exclaimed, "Oh, to what hot anger, uncontrolled wrath and surrender to sin the unregenerate heart is subject!" One truth emerged out of this sad encounter with Ahmed. He deeply regretted his crime and found the answer to his problem in undergoing the ritual of penance for his repulsive act. We started telling him of God's love, his readiness to save the sinner in the way he commands, and receive the person into his family. God's purpose is to save the worst sinner and make all things new in his life. Something happened in Ahmed's heart at that moment. Ahmed saw the light of God's redemption. He believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and was delivered from sin. The day we were released from prison was a very sad day for Ahmed Amme. He was left behind, separated from his best friends on earth. We rejoice that we will meet Ahmed in heaven as a wonderful trophy of our prison experience.

Araham Hoja, God's choice messenger, was a liberated sinner within the confines of the prison. He was constantly involved in making his redemption story known to others. He was on an apostolic mission. He would go from cell to cell preaching Jesus Christ to Muslims with passion and fervent zeal. His whole nature was radiant, as with a light from on high. His heart yearned for his fellow-prisoners on whom he looked as priceless pearls. All men in prison, most of whom were Muslims, looked upon Hoja as a prophet of God and listened reverently to him. He didn't give much thought to his own well-being. He

rather rejoiced in tribulation, showing his fellow-prisoners special kindness and consideration. Prisoners started looking at him with reverence and wonder. In the power of the Holy Spirit he entered every door which was open to him. He was continuously repeating to prisoners, "I am among you as one who serves." He extended every possible service. Soon his presence, his simplicity, his dynamic personality and evangelistic fervor became known to prisoners in the entire compound.

This man who had discovered the riches of the new life in Christ was not oppressed by imprisonment. Conversely, he always sang joyful songs in genuine communion with his Redeemer in heaven. Indeed, he was a free man, a source of encouragement and constant inspiration to his suffering brothers. One would think he was a storehouse of consolation toward each and every person around him. He was constantly striving to win souls for the Savior. Just as the Apostle Peter was miraculously delivered from prison, Apraham Hoja gloriously escaped a prison sentence of one hundred and one years when he denounced the prophet of Islam as a false prophet. He wholeheartedly believed that Peter's deliverer would perform another amazing miracle on behalf of us all and rescue us from this awful ordeal of imprisonment in Kanlı Mahpushane.

We all felt sad that there was no place to have our meetings. The thought came to one of our group to erect a small tent in the courtyard of the prison from pieces of material, which we did. We declared this place 'Bible study and prayer room'. It was once again God's goodness that we were not prevented from carrying out our plan. In one of our Bible studies, a beautiful promise of Christ came to our attention: *"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my Word and have not denied my name" (Revelation 3:8)*. After reading the verse aloud, Apraham Hoja jubilated with this comment, "My brothers, this is a direct message to us this morning from the Lord. Christ is going to open the iron gates of this prison and no one will be able to shut them again." Our attention was also drawn to a promise found in Isaiah, *"I will go before you and level the mountains; I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron" (45:2)*.

With these certainties in mind we taught ourselves to live daily by faith and wait for the verdict of the state superior court in Aleppo. Prisons are places where rumors circulate from many sources in all directions. So the hearsay reached us that we would either be sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment or sent as exiles to the desert of Arabia. Humanly speaking, our future looked grim. The hope of our deliverance was almost non-existent, but we had a living God in heaven who lifted our spirits with his glorious countenance. We could expect light in the morning. One day, we had a very heart-warming visitation by the Holy Spirit. In those moments our imprisonment and future were forgotten. The Spirit of God brought a peculiar calm and confidence to our hearts. We surrendered to the sovereign will of our God. The Lord was with us. We could recall once again the purging of the refiner's fire in Proverbs 17:3. In the ordeal of our imprisonment we gathered new vitality as we were enlivened with fresh hope and expectation. Now we could wait for the hand of the Mighty One to open the gates of Mahpushane and set us free.

Even though our firm anticipation didn't develop in the way we believed it would, the anxious waiting did bring us joy at last. The state superior court in Aleppo branded us as members of a subversive political organization. In accordance with this verdict our punishment would be harsh and protracted. Some people from the outside sent us word that the whole matter could be easily settled if we would collect a certain sum of money (*rushvet*) to purchase our freedom. We sent word back that bribery is sin in our faith. If our God is the God in whom we believe he will deliver us without the intervention of any human agency. Our unshakable decision brought us fresh strength and we trusted our Lord implicitly, come what may. But I admit that fear did sometimes disturb our inner peace. The harsh Ottoman authorities could let us rot in that prison if they chose to do so. Or they could send us off into exile. But they could not steal our faith. As Paul put it in Romans 8:33, *"Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies."* We decided that we must give ourselves to more diligent prayer, asking the Lord to keep our faith firm.

It wasn't very long until the test of faith came. One day we received a summons to appear before the tribunal for trial. We were eagerly waiting for the set date. We noticed Apraham Hoja was walking back and forth in the courtyard, with a tin cup dangling from his belt. We wondered about the cup and asked him, "Hoja, what does this mean? Why did you tie the cup to your belt?" He quickly replied, "It is a sign of faith. Be ready, brothers, in the very near future we will all be liberated from this prison." We were filled with joy since the answer came from a man whose faith was unshakeable. Yet we could not restrain ourselves from asking him, "How do you know what is going to happen?" His calm reply exuded

confidence: "The Lord revealed it to me." Such an answer was not unusual coming from him. He spent days and nights in intercession and communion with his God, so totally trusted Him to reveal what lay ahead. Now our faith was entering a period of testing. The cup was still dangling from his belt. The rest of the prisoners started wondering, "What is this man doing, walking around with a cup dangling from his belt?" But Apraham Hoja continued undisturbed.

Finally, the day of the court hearing arrived. Our thoughts were troubled with that famous letter written by Apraham Hoja to Brother Hamparsum and me. We started wondering how he would reply when he was encountered about the contents of that letter. Remember, in that letter, the name 'Zeytun' was mentioned. In the Turkish mind, this was like dynamite. It meant insurrection. There Apraham Hoja had written, "Convey our greetings to the young men in Zeytun. We have received the things they sent. Furthermore, we request that you forward to them the things we sent from this end." Although we read the letter often, we could never make any sense out of that particular section of the letter. What could the young men of Zeytun have sent to Apraham Hoja, and what did he send to us, which was to be forwarded to the Zeytun youth? The peculiar situation was that Hoja himself had forgotten the whole gist of this part of the letter. He tried hard to remember, but couldn't. Why did it happen that he wrote such a letter to us? At last, we had a brief conference among ourselves. Our well-calculated answer was that this reference had nothing to do with any political matter. We were formulating in our minds the answer we should give: The young men of Zeytun were our Christian brothers. If there was any doubt about it, Apraham would assume the total responsibility. This was our thinking, which we conveyed to Apraham Hoja. He was kind of agitated. His reply was one of reproof: "You are not at all capable of teaching me; the Lord is the inspirer of the fruit of the lips. The Lord himself will put into my mouth all that is necessary. Trust in him, and don't be afraid."

On July 1, 1908, we were notified that on the following day we should appear in court. Upon receiving this summons we dedicated the whole day and night to fasting and prayer. Our request to God was not that we may be delivered from prison; but rather that we may be supplied with divine wisdom and guidance. We wanted to speak with holy boldness, exalting our Lord Jesus Christ. Our aim was to bear witness at the court to the blessed Gospel of Christ which is the power of God unto salvation.

Morning arrived. The guards and soldiers marched in so that they could take us to the court. Exactly at that moment, the Spirit of the Lord came upon us in mighty power. Every one of us twenty-seven brothers was endowed with courage. The scene in the courtroom was awesome. The presiding judge, the prosecuting attorney for the state and the other members of the tribunal had all taken their respective places and were gazing at us with a stern expression on their faces. Trusting in God, we quietly took our assigned seats. A large crowd of spectators had filled the room. We also noticed that the twelve false witnesses who had delivered us into the hands of the authorities were there. We were wondering what they were going to say in the court.

The presiding judge rose to his feet, and stood before an open Bible. (In those days, those who were tried, if Christian took their oath on the Bible, just as Muslims took their oath on the Quran.) He uttered a quick order: "Stand up." We immediately jumped to our feet. His abrupt request was, "Will you before this book swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" We answered with a simple "Yes". The judge then proceeded to read our names, one by one. He asked each of us who he was, what he believed and the nature of his occupation. One after the other, we answered to this effect, "We are servants of the most high God. We were bestowed with divine grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We earnestly seek to live the moral and ethical life as commanded by Him. Furthermore, we are dedicated to proclaim our Lord to all men as Savior and Giver of eternal life to all who believe in him. We are law-abiding citizens, and have nothing to do with politics."

Then some of our correspondence that had gone back and forth between the brothers was read. One had written to another about how he was saved and how the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ had cleansed him from all sin. Another wrote how the Holy Spirit had convicted him of sin, showed him the way of righteousness and the judgment to come, unless he believed. Still another had written that subsequent to his conversion he made restitution to those he had wronged. Again, another brother wrote out the whole of Psalm 51. At this point, the clerk of the court was called upon to read this psalm, where David in all his openness is confessing the sin he committed. A soberness came upon all those in the room. Really, tongue could not describe, nor pen depict the awe which overwhelmed those present at that moment. Many other passages from the Bible which appeared in the letters were also read in the large courtroom.

Finally, Apraham Hoja's turn came. The judge motioned him to stand up and directed his questions: "What is your name?" "My name, your honor, is Apraham Levonian." "Where are you from?" "I'm a native of Aintab." "What is your address?" "I have no address." "Where do you stay, and how do you make your living?" "I start in the morning and preach Jesus Christ from house to house until evening. Wherever I happen to be at nightfall, there I sleep; whatever is put before me, I eat with thanksgiving." The following question of the judge was, "Do you have a license from a hierarchy, or permission to preach?" Apraham Hoja seized the opportunity and replied with deep emotion, "My license and commission are from God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ." To the judge's question, "What do you preach?" our brother answered as his black eyes flashed, "I preach repentance and remission of sins. I make no distinction between people. My message is directed to Muslims and Christians alike, showing people the only way to God. Wherever I am, I consider it my solemn duty to declare to everybody God's Good News of salvation."

The judge looked puzzled and was quiet for a moment before he asked, "What you do seems to be wonderful. However, there is a question before us. You wrote a letter. The court needs an explanation about its contents. In your letter you said you were involved in a fierce warfare surpassing the Russo-Japanese War. I want you to explain to the court what you meant by this. Apraham Hoja replied, "Your honor, our warfare is not against flesh and blood; it is a spiritual battle, a combat against Satan and his kingdom. We all know the cruel nature of the Russo-Japanese War, which took place last year. On the other hand, the fierce warfare about which I wrote to our friends is against Satan and is undoubtedly deadlier than that."

The judge retorted, "Well, you say in that letter to give regards to the young men in Zeytun, and that you received the things they sent. You also request that they forward the items sent to them. Who are these young men? What did they send you, and what did you send them?" This was the essence of the whole interrogation. At that moment, the atmosphere was tense and a deadly silence pervaded the room. The judge asked again, "What were the mysterious things you sent to the young men in Zeytun?" The suffocating silence was broken by Hoja's interruption: "Your honor, my handwriting is known by many people. Please allow me to read the lines in my letter to see exactly what I wrote. Then I will be ready to answer your question." There was a moment's silence and the judge asked, "Do you really wish to see your letter? It is not here. This is a copy; the original one was sent to Aleppo." Apraham Hoja without getting agitated replied, "If that be the case, there is no need to discuss the matter further." He was speaking with certainty and authority in the wisdom supplied from above. He lifted both of his hands like a prophet of the Old Testament and with powerful words, said, "Your honor and members of this honorable court, we wish you to realize that we have no political connection." With a dramatic flow of language, he continued, "We wouldn't give five *'para'* (smallest Ottoman coin) for all the governments of this world. We are servants of the most high God." At that moment, Apraham Hoja's extraordinary courage and boldness took control of the situation and he directed a very daring warning: "Take care, lest you judge us wrongly." Suddenly, he was possessed with divine passion and in a deep resonant voice he thundered, "If you unjustly condemn us, God Almighty will condemn you at his judgment seat." His hearers were swayed like water of the sea before a powerful wind. One would think they realized that there was a frightful punishment awaiting the unjust and evil doers of this age.

This was the powerful voice that all of us were expecting to hear. Apraham Hoja's keen and insightful mind studied the court thoroughly. The transparency and sincerity of his character armed him with extraordinary boldness to rebel against injustice. Summoning all his courage, he became the hero of the hour. The sap of prophetic zeal was still running through the trunk and branches of the aged tree. One could remember the reassuring words of our blessed Lord, "*...and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour*" (Matthew 10:18, 19). The effect of these concise, but precise words was dramatic and enormously forceful. The Lord made his mouth like a sharp sword. Under the spell of this defense the court was swayed as ripened wheat fields are swayed by the wind. Like his master, he spoke authoritatively. Just as Felix trembled at Paul's words about justice, self-control and future judgment, the judge of the court had no other option than to accept Apraham Hoja's impressive defense. This event reminds us that when a Christian is under the control of the Holy Spirit, the enemy of truth melts under his forceful words.

There was a whole series of favorable impressions upon those in the courtroom: the testimonies of several brothers, the letters loaded with praise of God presented to the court, the powerful passages from

the Word of God read during the hearing, all of which climaxed with Hoja's eloquent outburst, had a powerful effect on the judge and everyone present. These transformed the atmosphere in that court from a mere legal chamber to a classroom where principles of the new life in Christ and conduct of Christian behavior were taught. One would think that the spirit of revival was brought into the courtroom. The judge, after hearing and being convinced that there was a special divine power manifesting itself in these lives that were being tried, couldn't help but be a convert to our cause. At last, he called for the witnesses. He asked them one by one, "What is your charge and complaint against these men?" The answer of one witness was, "Your honor, these men say that 'we are not sinners.' We ask, can we be without sin?" The judge retorted, "This is not an item to be discussed in the court. Religious matters such as these must be solved in the church." His conduct reminded us of Gallio's answer to the Jews in Acts 17, and the town clerk of Ephesus who sought to quiet the over-exuberant crowd displaying their anger against Paul (*Acts 19*).

Another witness followed, looking very nervous as he, too, encountered the judge's question. He was trembling and could hardly talk. "You—ye—ye—your honor—ah—ah." Words froze on his lips. He was pushed into the position of witness by hypocrites who wanted to destroy the twenty-seven believers through false accusations. The poor man stood helplessly confounded and in abject humiliation. He couldn't answer the questions directed to him. The judge ordered that he be put out of the courtroom. What a wonderful hour it had been! Our just and righteous God totally negated all charges brought against us. He confused the tongues of false witnesses who through the instigation of others had conspired to do us harm. Not one of them was able to substantiate any destructive charge of lawlessness against God's men.

At this point, the judge who in total fairness conducted the trial, being irritated at what he was witnessing and troubled with this socio-religious injustice, demanded of the witnesses: "Why do you not tell the truth? Before me are the charges brought against these men." Then he proceeded to read them. "The arrested men are part of a subversive organization seeking to overthrow the government." The Turkish authorities added their own accusation against us: "These men, members of a dangerous, subversive organization, will stab the Turkish government in the heart." When the witnesses heard this, they suddenly protested, "We haven't made such an accusation against them; we only signed this statement without reading its contents." Then the judge branded them as liars and provocateurs. "How could a person sign a statement whose contents he's unaware of? If your dispute is based on religious matters and doings, why did you not solve it within your own Armenian church? Why did you trouble this court? Why did you allow innocent men to rot in prison cells for eleven months?" They were all confused and troubled. They left the courtroom and behind them a whole pile of deliberate deceit, betrayal and hypocrisy. Their sin followed them.

Pending the return from Aleppo of Apraham Hoja's famous or infamous letter, the court adjourned for a week. Once again, we returned to our miserable quarters, ready to appear at any given moment. Apraham's celebrated tin cup continued to dangle from his belt as he moved from cell to cell to tell each prisoner about the Savior. We experienced that the short, dark days of winter were overcome by the light and warmth supplied by our Savior which enabled us to daily sing hymns of worship and praise to Him. We continued to study of God's Word and spend much time in prayer. Fresh love and loyalty were generated in all our hearts. We were waiting expectantly for the next sitting of our trial.

The week was half gone. The day of our trial was fast approaching. One morning, my brother Moses came to me and whispered that he had some very important news to share. The guards had become very friendly toward us, so it was no problem to obtain their permission to go and have a special conversation with him. When we met, he excitedly said, "Vartan, I have some excellent news for you, but don't break it to the others yet. I have heard that liberty has been proclaimed throughout the Ottoman Empire and that the cruel emperor, Abdul Hamid II (1876-1908) has been deposed. The officers known as 'Young Turks', have taken over the reins of the government." The date was the 24th of July, 1908. This piece of news came to me as cold water to a thirsty traveler in the hot desert. To tell the truth, I was overwhelmed with joy. It was impossible to keep this fantastic item of news to myself. I returned to my prison cell and whispered to our other friends the heartening information conveyed by Moses that the cruel emperor had been deposed by an army junta. They looked into my eyes waiting to hear the sequel of this cheering, unexpected development. I said, "Quiet — we don't want the other prisoners to learn about it yet, because then we will find ourselves in trouble. Wait until the news can be confirmed." They complied and commented, "True, we need to be sure of the authenticity of this report." I went on explaining to them that the Young Turks had proclaimed liberty throughout the land. There were no

bounds to our joy. We eagerly anticipated the developments. It was only a few hours later when we found out that this information was accurate in its entirety. Looking around, we sensed an electrified atmosphere. The guards started whispering among themselves. Then the repetitious questions were heard throughout the prison compound, "What's happening? What's going on?" At last the confirmation of the news broke forth into a shout of contagious jubilation: "Liberty has finally come to Turkey!" Everything that had been heard and said turned out to be true.

The joy and thrill we experienced on that occasion cannot be easily imagined. We threw our arms around each other, hugging and kissing one another, all the while laughing, weeping and praising God. This emperor had initiated the Armenian massacre in the East in 1895. However, we could not foresee that a much worse massacre was in the offing instigated by the very officers who had taken over the reins of the government. But we were all rejoicing at the development of the hour. It was impossible to sleep that night. We were relieved that there would not be another court trial before us; also there was no need left for Araham Hoja's oft-mentioned letter to come from Aleppo. We were free! All of us twenty-seven believers were now crowned with the reward of our faith and prayer. Praise God, Araham Hoja's prophecy turned out to be true. The dangling cup at his belt was a token of a journey before each one of us – not to exile in an Arabian desert from which travelers never return – but to glorious liberty.

Where was our presiding judge? Where was the person who forged the chains for our feet? Where was the man who prepared the gallows to break our necks? At the sound of 'liberty' those who did evil became frightened. They left the city of Marash in the darkness of night, fleeing for their lives: *"The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion" (Proverbs 28:1)*. I could remember the arrogant threat of the commissioner who had boasted to us, "If your Jesus can deliver you out of my hands, let him do it." This man barely escaped the assault of his fellow-Turks. The soldiers assisted him to hide; he became a prisoner in his own land.

The God whom we loved and worshiped and his Son, Jesus Christ, whom we adored and served, brought to naught all the villainous conspiracy of evil-planners and shattered their might. In the eleventh hour the Lord heard our cry and the Almighty came down from heaven with his unimagined deliverance. The angel of the Lord who delivered the imprisoned Peter from the hands of Herod did an equally great act when he shook the Ottoman Empire from its very foundation, demolished the iron bars and set us at liberty. He turned six hundred years of Turkish misrule and misery upside down. He brought the long overdue freedom which was not in anyone's mind. Abdul Hamid was sent into exile to the city of Selanik (Thessaloniki, then in Turkish hands). To think of forcing such a ruler to abdicate and then imprison him in a salt mine was beyond our wildest imagination. But it really happened. That night passed; morning came, and everything was calm and quiet. *"...weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5b)*.

Our freedom did not come immediately. No official representative or responsible person could be found to pronounce our release. Brother Moses sent a telegram to a Kemal Pasha in Istanbul, inquiring why prisoners were still incarcerated even after liberty had been proclaimed throughout the country. A short while later the orders came to release all political prisoners, among whom we were the important ones.

Chapter 8

Out of Prison, into Freedom

During the harsh and brutal reign of the emperor Abdul Hamid II, there was wide-spread political opposition in the country. This inevitably ended up in long prison sentences for those accused. All jails were full of such prisoners. Even though our group was not involved in politics we were unjustly considered political prisoners. At the opening of the prison gates all prisoners accused of some political offense were set free. The chief attorney for the state came to the courtyard where we customarily gathered to sing hymns. He addressed us in particular: "Roohjular! Through the liberty just proclaimed you are gaining your freedom. From now on, no one can disturb you. You are free to worship God in accordance with the dictates of your conscience." The remark made by the mayor in the privacy of his office some time before has been mentioned: "My sons, you are recipients of divine illumination. Don't be afraid; God will set you free." This morning again he came to the courtyard and addressed us, "Roohjular! I encouraged you before and now I repeat it, that God has set you free. No one can do any harm to you. You are at liberty to go into the highways and by-ways, to your vineyards and hills, glorifying and praising your God."

When this kind official concluded his proclamation of our freedom, one of our group, Garabed Roubian, was joined by an Armenian Apostolic priest, Der Hagop. They led us all out of prison accompanied by a band playing hymns. Our appearance as free people was the signal for a joyful outburst of celebration. The whole city had already heard that the 'Roohjular' had gained their freedom. People rushed to line both sides of the streets to see us as we passed by. Music filled the air. Hymns of praise rose above the volume of the instruments. Heart-stirring chants swept over the ecstatic crowds, which grew in volume as the procession advanced. One could resemble the spectacle to a mighty river uninterruptedly running its course. Roads were filled with throngs of rejoicing men and women. Housetops were the vantage point for many happy spectators. Shop owners and merchants along the route joined in jubilant celebration. Literally everyone took part in the festivities. It was a time when people didn't hold back their emotions. But there were some who didn't actually know what was going on. They were asking, "What's happening?" The reply was supplied by those who knew: "The 'Roohjular' have been set free from prison. This is a miracle!" Others remarked, "The liberty proclaimed today has happened for the sake of these innocent 'Roohjular'." The spontaneous outpouring of joy from pent-up sentiments was a release of unrestrained emotion. To us prisoners the whole series of events was like an inexplicable dream. Only a few days before, the prospect of being sent off to an Arabian desert had hung over our heads like a dark cloud. Now, here we were, a happy group of released prisoners being cheered on by an impromptu assembly.

Following an unjust imprisonment Joseph was freed with Pharaoh's order. He rode triumphantly in his chariot to become chancellor of Egypt. Mordecai received high honor from the King of Persia to the chagrin of his arch-enemy Haman, and in Shushan he became the chief minister of the country. And now we, a group of insignificant citizens of Marash, were being set free by the grace of our sovereign God. The whole procession moved on to *Karasun Manoog* (Forty Children) Church. There Arsen Efendi Bilezikian killed a young goat at our feet as a token of sacrifice and offering of thanksgiving to our heavenly Father. Following this, we entered the crowded church where Reverend Aharon gave a message of gratitude and praise to God. He emphasized the Lord's mighty power to perform miracles. He had delivered these prisoners of Christ just as He had saved the apostles from the hands of Herod in the early stage of the Church.

Apraham Hoja was standing at the door of the church as the rest of us were entering. Afterwards, we looked around but we couldn't detect him in the crowd. We later learned that our eccentric brother with the cup still dangling from his belt and his bedding on his back was already on his way to his native Aintab, a two-day journey on foot. He hadn't even stayed for the service. As was his custom, he didn't carry any food along for the road. He was simply trekking on toward his destination, becoming increasingly hungry as the hours wore on. Suddenly he heard a voice calling him from behind. He stopped. The man who called him came closer and immediately spoke to the hoja: "God revealed to me that I should take food to a certain lone traveler. So here it is. Please eat. Good appetite!" Apraham Hoja had been sure that God would provide food for his nourishment. He gratefully accepted the offering, and with deep appreciation started eating his favorite dish, pilaf, after expressing his gratitude to the Lord. Following this divine provision, he again went on his way. No doubt, other God-sent helpers came to his assistance. He arrived in Aintab safely.

Apraham Hoja's sudden departure from Marash, especially when all of us were holding a thanksgiving and victory celebration, made everybody feel sad. They would have wanted to see him among us. However, I knew what prompted him to act in the way he did. He had told me that on the night of the first day of the proclamation of liberty in the Ottoman Empire, he had a dream. "I was in a room with a wild, mad cat. It attacked me. I tried to defend myself with a club." At this point, I interrupted him: "Hoja, can you give me the interpretation of this dream?" He immediately replied, "The cat is the cruel Sultan Abdul Hamid. Even though liberty has been proclaimed and we now enjoy freedom, it will be short-lived while Hamid is still alive. We may be arrested again."

Hoja's dream and its interpretation proved to be right. Barely six months elapsed from the time we breathed a little air of freedom when those happy songs and hearty shouts were again muffled. The bloody massacre of fifty thousand Christians brought an end to the brief period of rejoicing. They sealed their commitment to Jesus Christ in martyrdom in the Cilician region. That fierce cat in the dream was an omen of the death of Armenian Christians in yet another massacre.

We enjoyed immensely our six-month period of freedom when each of us was reunited with his family and friends. We jubilated as the Jews did at their release from the Babylonian captivity: *"When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad...May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him"* (Psalm 126:1-3, 5, 6).

How we wished that this joy were country-wide and permanent. After the toppling of Abdul Hamid, the country was in further confusion and distress. There were some whose hearts were still with the deposed emperor, and others who desired genuine democracy. The segment which came out as victor from this conflict was arresting and imprisoning the leaders of the corrupt monarchy. What was happening in all other areas was also wrecking our city of Marash. I have already mentioned that the governor, the judiciary and other officials all fled from the city under cover. The police commissioner was hiding, being protected by soldiers. There was good reason for it. He was attacked by angry mobs of released inmates. One of the false witnesses in our court case, an Armenian chiefly responsible for our incarceration and suffering, was apprehended. Those who captured him did something that went to the extreme. They painted his face black and paraded him through the streets and market places, totally humiliating him. Quite by accident one of our liberated brothers witnessed this sad spectacle. He also heard that another one of those false accusers, responsible for our imprisonment, was due to undergo the same treatment. Immediately the brothers ran to him, and in the spirit of mercy and forgiveness told him what was about to happen. They urged him to hide himself as quickly as possible. But it was too late; they had been preceded by the angry mob that had already inflicted the same punishment on the first man they caught. The Scriptural maxim always turns out to be true: *"...behold, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out"* (Numbers 32:23). It was a clear display of the Lord's delivering his own. *"...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment"* (II Peter 2:9).

Abdul Hamid's cruel and merciless reign could not crush those who boldly witnessed for Christ; it could not bind the Word of God. Now with his fall a fresh challenge was before us to start witnessing with renewed vigor for our Lord Jesus Christ. Soon after our release, we began proclaiming the Gospel with great enthusiasm. Apraham Hoja, who was always in touch with his Lord, had told me in prison that a massacre of immense magnitude was going to happen. It would bring an end to many Christian lives, especially able-bodied men. The awful memories from the period of the cruel emperor still haunted everybody. The mourning and weeping of widows and orphans continued. Life was vague and meaningless for many bereaved people. *"Who is sufficient for these things?"* We knew well that *"the Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all our tribulation"* was entirely sufficient to meet everybody's need at that hour. Our life continued in proclaiming the Good News and comforting the bereaved.

Four of our company, Panos Der Kazarian, Karekin Vaneskehian, Arshaver Janikian and Takwor Janikian, went to Hasanbeyli, a beautiful town at the Cilician Gateway, about a hundred kilometers northeast of Tarsus. All able-bodied men in the town had been massacred. Our brothers started powerfully preaching to the remnant of Armenians still living there. The Word was sown faithfully to sorrow-laden hearts, prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive Christ and his comfort.

Sometime later, God directed my steps to go to Hasanbeyli. There I witnessed God's wonderful grace accomplishing his work of salvation in many people's hearts. We held meetings every night in different houses. People would break spontaneously into singing and without any urging, they would stand up and share their testimonies. Our proclamation of the Good News in homes and market places went on unabated. People from all walks of life, after encountering the Savior, entered into the true spirit of fellowship with each other. The whole town felt the impact of the profound working of the Holy Spirit. The blessed Comforter seemed to have come to this place with a special mission. He crushed sinners' hearts, broke the spirits of unrepentant people and bathed their wounds in the balm of God's love. In their new-found joy, they almost forgot their sorrow. *"...to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified"* (Isaiah 61:3).

Being entirely overwhelmed by the joy experienced in Hasanbeyli, I returned to Marash. In this great city of Christianity, *Germanoikeia*, before being given its Turkish name, the American Congregational missionaries had established a strong center, which included a theological seminary. One of the brilliant students in this school was Reverend Mihran Bozuklian. Even though the school did not teach much about eschatology this young man was immersed in the study of Christ's Second Coming. Evening after evening he conducted a series of Bible studies around the subject of 'The Blessed Hope' in our home. People were delighted with the wonderful prospect of Christ's return. They thronged to hear the convincing messages of Brother Bozuklian on this marvelous theme. It was a strenuous undertaking for him, since during the day he was immersed in his studies. However, he was constrained by the Holy Spirit to render this service to people who were in the midst of a revival.

Stirred by this fresh study of Christ's return to earth, Brother Bedros Agulian and I were commissioned by the Holy Spirit to reach out to the various cities and towns on an evangelistic itinerary. These trips at times took us to distant locations. Here are the places we were privileged to visit: Hajin, Everek, Zinjidere, Kayseri, Kirshehir, Aksaray, and Konya. The Lord, who had set us apart for this ministry, used us in our weakness for the salvation of many people, and also for the edification of believers. Other towns visited were Adana, Tarsus and Osmaniye, where we also witnessed the moving of the Holy Spirit in bringing joy and delight to hearts of men and women. Everywhere we went, people living in the uncertainty of the time welcomed us as if we were angels sent from God. We were on the threshold of WW I. The Ottoman Empire was being wrecked, both domestically and externally. The passing of the governmental machine to the young revolutionaries did not make any difference. Matters were only getting worse. We met troubled souls everywhere. Those who could interpret the times knew that ominous days lay ahead. Only the message of Jesus Christ was a balm to the hearts of hurting people. In the midst of these rich blessings, it seemed strange that our time in Anatolia was coming to its close. We remembered that God took Philip from the revival in Samaria and carried him to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. On this desert road he met the Ethiopian official and had the joy of introducing him to the Savior. Now at last, some of us were being led to leave Anatolia and launch out to another part of the world to preach to our people who had left the country before us.

Chapter 9

On to America

We wanted to establish a new life for ourselves and our desired destination was the young country of the United States of America. At that time people could freely immigrate. The first restriction came in 1924. So our lives took a turn. In 1912, two years before the outbreak of WW I, four of us made up our minds to leave Turkey and migrate to the United States. We were: Nishan Terzian, Panos Der Kazarian, Bedros Agulian and I. The ocean voyage offered us a marvelous opportunity to freely witness to other passengers of the grace of God. The ship was full of sorrowful people who had left their land and all they knew, in the hope of finding a promising future in a new country. Most of them were totally unaware of the message of Jesus Christ. While they had their hopes set on attaining physical and material betterment, we could offer them the great value which was immediately within their grasp by faith in Christ. We of course sought out the Armenians, most of whom gladly received our testimony. We had no New Testaments or other literature at that time, but communicated the saving message of Jesus Christ from the depths of our hearts. The voyage was rough and many were seasick. At last we spotted land and knew we had reached our new country. After the ship docked, we were led to Ellis Island where health checks were carried out. At that time there was no visa requirement and no one was questioned as to his/her motive for migrating to the U.S.A.

Here in this beautiful land to which the Lord had led us we felt truly liberated; discrimination and persecution were matters of the past. We gratefully looked back on our evangelistic tours in the various towns and cities in Anatolia. Now in America we were entirely free to make wide-reaching evangelistic travels, holding meetings in major cities where Armenians had migrated prior to our coming. Our experiences in Anatolia, fresh in our minds, were a wonderful prelude to this new ministry. In those days, there wasn't much evangelism done among the Armenian folks since the Americans didn't speak Turkish or Armenian. The Armenians were following their traditional religion, mostly without the assistance of priests. We could sense from the outset that God had a special purpose in leading us to the United States. We stood in amazement at the salvation of so many precious lives, the majority of whom had escaped the cruel regime of oppressive Abdul Hamid. The hearts of these people were prepared to hear

the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. They experienced a delight far exceeding that of having found freedom in the new country which had opened her arms to them. As a result of our evangelistic efforts, small groups of Christians developed into independent churches, later called The Armenian Brethren Churches. God who had honored our preaching in Turkey was now doing the same in this new land.

Some of our newcomer brothers had been forced to serve in the Turkish army. They were carrying many bitter memories with them. Now they were soldiers in Christ's army, witnessing to their own people in their adopted country. The Armenians we encountered were from every Middle Eastern land, especially from Turkey. However, Armenians also migrated to Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, France and South America. After WW I, great numbers of Armenians found refuge in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Many of those who were scattered to these various places, even though they didn't speak the local language, acclimated themselves to the country where they had been forced to flee and carried on the witness of Christ among their own people.

A considerable number of Armenians who fled from the Ottoman Empire hailed from Zeytun in Cilicia. Zeytun, being an Armenian stronghold, also witnessed a Holy Spirit revival during which scores of men and women were converted. Following this revival many dispersed to surrounding towns and villages, preaching the message of Christ. When WW I struck in the latter part of 1914, ominous clouds were already gathering. One of the plans of the Ottoman government was to do away with the Armenian population. People from all over the Empire were uprooted from the cities and towns where their ancestors had lived for centuries. Zeytun was one of the locations targeted. Following some resistance, it fell. Homes, churches and schools were destroyed and looted. Some who escaped from Zeytun found refuge in Marash which was still in the wave of spiritual awakening. However, with the start of WW I, the great deportation fell upon these people. Able-bodied men were killed and the rest of the population was set on the road with the destination of Der-el-Zor in the Syrian desert. Of course, a large number perished along the way.

Some of our remaining men felt that the Lord would have them assist the women, children, and older people, all of whom were weak and starving. The authorities did not appreciate this act of philanthropy and asked the men, "What are you doing?" They replied, "We are trying to alleviate the suffering of our poor people." The officials were aggravated and retorted, "We drove you out here, and now you are trying to save lives? We will show you what treatment you deserve!" They gave orders for the execution of the men who were involved in their act of mercy. One of the brothers known as 'Mavy' said to the soldiers, "In your book it is written that you don't take a life without first giving him an opportunity to worship God." He apparently convinced the soldiers, who let him fulfill his wish. Brother Mavy opened his New Testament, from where he gave a word of comfort and cheer to those destined for execution. He read from Revelation 2:10, "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*" Through several other precious promises from God's Word, he gave these weary people the assurance that they would soon be with their Savior and Lord. All at once, the men awaiting execution broke forth into singing a hymn in Armenian, of which the English words are:

"On Jordan's stormy bank I stand
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

Filled with delight, my raptured soul
Would here no longer stay;
Though Jordan's waves around me roll,
Fearless I'd launch away.

We will rest in the fair and happy land,
Just across on the evergreen shore,
Sing the song of Moses and the Lamb
And dwell with Jesus evermore."

After the singing of this hymn, time came for communion. But where was the bread? The stout-hearted leader, Brother Mavy, bent down to the scorching sand and took a handful of it. In the presence of the soldiers, ignorant of Christian practices, he distributed a few grains of sand to each of the condemned men. In the words of Luke 22:19, he said, "*Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in*

remembrance of me." The brothers then put the grains of sand into their mouths in remembrance of him who said, *"I am the living Bread"* (John 6:51). Christ must have looked down upon this strange spectacle of remembering His death with great joy.

Strengthened and prepared for life's glorious journey, Brother Mavy stood before the other brothers and with a radiant smile said to the executioners: "We are now ready to be offered." Following these words, he addressed his loyal co-workers, "Brothers, this is not an hour of sorrow, but of joy and victory." At this valiant behavior, the enemies of the Cross stood motionless and impotent. Minutes ticked by. The potential murderers of this small company of believers, unable to speak or act, stood facing them. Finally they lifted their weapons and began to fire, for fear of their commanding officer. As the bodies fell onto the ground, God's word could be recalled, *"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes."* There on the graveless waste of the empty desert these martyrs for the testimony of Christ are awaiting the sound of the resurrection trumpet when the earth shall give up its dead.

At this point, the reader may wonder how this information was obtained since all the Christian brothers were shot. One of them, a native of Zeytun, was badly wounded and fell with the rest. Nobody realized that he was alive. Under the cover of darkness he crept away from the fallen bodies of his companions. The Lord provided His light in pitch darkness to illumine the road ahead. He also put His hand of healing upon him, giving him extraordinary strength to move on. After a long journey, the brother could finally reach Aleppo where he located the meeting place of the Christians. They were all stunned at the sight of this exhausted man when he stepped into the room. The meeting was already in progress, but the group asked him to speak. He told them about the last communion conducted by Brother Mavy among the sand dunes in the desert. He related that each and every one of the brothers on being shot dipped his finger into his own blood and tasted his own life blood for the cup of communion. Then this man, saved through God's miraculous providence and having made this long journey, breathed his last and went into the presence of the Lord to join the other martyrs. What a joy that meeting must have been! Some day they will all sit at the marriage supper of the Lamb and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes.

Chapter 10

Rostrum of those who witnessed the Revival

A. Yeghoian

In this book, I should also make reference to great heroes of the faith who contributed prominently to the spiritual life of churches and individuals in Anatolia. There was a theological seminary in Marash which was founded by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. For quite a while, this seminary kept itself clear of modern theology. Brother A. Yeghoian was one of the graduates of the school. He was a very competent pastor who ministered in churches in Harput in the East and Urfa (Edessa) in the South. He was a seeker of the deep truths of God. At one stage, he came to realize that his messages didn't have an effective impact upon his hearers. There were no results from his preaching. He took serious stock of his personal life as well as of his presentation of the Gospel message.

During this time, a dynamic British evangelist (whose name the author doesn't supply) preached in our cities. The distressed and discontented Yeghoian observed that this man's preaching possessed a power which he had never seen. Sinners were being brought to repentance and salvation. Wishing to know the secret of his ministry, the first discovery Yeghoian made was the man's total reliance on God's Word. He never deviated from it as he preached. There was a spiritual tone in his preaching that Yeghoian had never known.

The Reverend Yeghoian arranged to meet with the evangelist who told him that his preaching was based on personal experiences emanating from the Scriptures. He gave him a few pieces of literature to read in which he mentioned that he had studied in a liberal seminary. That training made him like a tree with leaves, but no fruit. He realized that there were two courses before him which required him to make a choice: He could go on in the teaching he had received and deprive his people of the liberating message. This type of preaching would have left him with a stagnant ministry. Or, he could humble himself before God and faithfully proclaim the message from the Word, whether it hurt or comforted. He chose the second course. In his own words, he 'returned to the faith of his fathers'. He left the dispassionate teaching he had received at the seminary and relied on the life-giving message his own soul craved. At

this time there was an ongoing revival in Aintab, which came to Reverend Yeghoian's hearing. Without delay, he traveled there to experience it firsthand. At each meeting, the young people at the large evangelical church were giving fervent testimonies about their faith in Jesus Christ. They were relating their experiences of witnessing for Christ and making converts for him. He realized that he needed this liberty, convincingly related by those precious young people who had recently come to trust in Christ. He surrendered himself to the full control of the Holy Spirit, who in turn came and filled his life. From that day on, Yeghoian who had been exasperated with his coldness of heart became a flaming witness to the grace of God. He moved around from place to place, winning people to Christ.

There was rejoicing in some circles for the change that had come over him and on the other hand, dismay from the liberals, some of whom were his former associates. Pastor Yeghoian spoke boldly about the uniqueness and supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ. He started exposing the errors of liberal theology, urging people not to make any concession to the truth of God's word. Increasingly he became more effective in his preaching with people being drawn to the love of Christ. The impact of his prayer life and humble mien was profound on all who knew him. He traveled widely in Asia Minor and foreign countries, including Syria, Germany, France, and the United States, where he finally settled. There were many believers scattered in all the lands and cities he had ministered who attributed their conversion to him. He died in the United States among many brothers and sisters who loved the Lord.

Haralambos Bostanjoglu

Bostanjoglu was born in the city of Adana in Cilicia. He was of Greek origin, but ministered widely among the Armenians in Anatolia. He was one of the most effective and fiery evangelists ever seen in this land. It was here that he lost his life for Christ and His testimony at the end of 1916. He was hung in Marash, where most of the events recorded here transacted. He was a man mightily used by God for evangelism, teaching and discipling believers. We can say that he blazed the trail in Anatolia in expounding scriptural truths not touched until then. He introduced the teaching of the pre-millennial return of Christ which caused great consternation in Protestant circles. Among the several books and articles he authored were books on the Holy Spirit and Healing by Faith. He was a gifted musician, who enriched his ministry with his beautiful playing of the violin. He often played and sang hymns that he had written himself. Some of these were sung widely in meetings across the region. He started a thoroughly independent church in Aintab where his bold and aggressive preaching actually became the cause of his arrest. Following a hard and protracted ordeal of trials, he was condemned to death. All his books, among them the hymns he had written, were confiscated by the authorities never to be seen again. Finally, he was forced to march from Aintab to Marash encumbered with heavy chains on his neck and arms, along with other people condemned to be executed. There he died for his faith in Christ, giving his last witness from the gallows before being hung. (Those interested in reading a fuller account can find it under the title, "*Anatolia! Anatolia!*" on this same website.)

Mardiros Komoorian

This brother lived more-or-less the life of a monk. His house was like a monastery. In his room where he had only the barest furnishings he spent his time in studying the Bible and praying. Often the brothers would visit him, bringing him food and being profited from his teaching. He studied particularly the lives of old saints of the Church. He passed this knowledge on to others for their edification. From time to time he would be invited to preach in one of the churches. At the expulsion of the Armenian population, he was among the deportees in the desert, where he died. Those of us who knew his life and devotion to the Lord will never forget his dedication to Jesus Christ.

Araxie Jebejian

During the earthly life of our Lord, women gathered around him, being vastly benefited from his life-imparting message and miracles. The established tradition of ladies having a vital role in church life continued throughout the centuries. It gives me pleasure in this brief account to mention several women among the Armenian believers in Anatolia who were greatly instrumental in the progress of the Gospel. One of these is Araxie Jebejian. She was a woman of exemplary life and testimony who inspired all who knew her. Like other women, she was instrumental in leading many to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Her background was in the Armenian Apostolic Church. Being a seeker of the deep truths of her faith, one day she encountered the Savior and repented with tears. So began her life with Jesus Christ. But she never stopped seeking God. After her conversion she was characterized by deep hunger and

thirst after the righteousness of Christ. She spoke to many Christians about their spiritual experience and became convinced that a new encounter with the Holy Spirit was necessary. She prayed for this and in faith she received the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Following her joyful experience with the Holy Spirit, Araxie got heavily involved in evangelism as a 'Bible woman', visiting houses from door-to-door and holding meetings in churches. These meetings grew to remarkable numbers. The Prelate of the Armenian Apostolic Church became fearful, particularly of the role of a young woman contributing to spiritual awakening in various churches. She was preaching the Word of God and talking to people about their need of the Savior. Finally, the prelate asked her to give up her preaching. Holding a fragrant rose in her hand, she addressed him with these words: "Respectable sir, could you expect this rose not to spread its fragrance around? Would the rose find it possible to yield to such human advice? You will excuse me that I cannot refrain from shedding abroad the fragrance of Christ, the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley." The prelate was left speechless at this reasoning, and never interfered again with her epoch-making ministry in her own Apostolic Church.

Araxie Jebejian not only enjoyed the deeper Christian life and shedding the love of her Lord all around, she continued to proclaim the Good News in refined language. She was a well-educated woman, a cultured daughter of her family. While preaching the Good News, she emulated her Master, using an abundance of parables. Many lives were affected. After preaching the Lord Jesus Christ in Aintab and its surroundings for a while she took off for England in order to improve her knowledge of God's Word. She came back as a qualified teacher and accepted a position at the Girls' College in Marash, where she was loved by her students. She was a humble woman, displaying gracious and sanctified conduct. Her witness and messages carried a power beyond the ordinary. Her prayers left an impression upon everyone in and outside the college. On one occasion she was asked to pray at a large gathering in Marash. It was such a powerful prayer that the meeting place was filled with the glory of God. Those present never forgot the overwhelming power and presence of God. It was like heaven coming down to earth.

Finally, the awful deportation and genocide fell on Aintab and Marash, as it did on so many other Anatolian cities and towns. Araxie and her whole family were among the deportees. Motivated by her Lord's love and compassion, she moved among the refugees with total self-giving, assisting as many as she could. The Turkish soldiers could not bear the effect of her testimony and service. At Der-el-Zor the functionaries of the army arrested her, along with some other witnessing Christians, and put them in prison. One day, the top official of Der-el-Zor came to see the prisoners. He was captivated by Araxie's beauty and saintly appearance and inquired who she was. They told him of her educational background and amazing service among the refugees. This proud man, in typical Islamic manner, proceeded with the abrupt request to marry the girl. Upon learning of his repulsive demand, she remarked, "I would rather be hung on the gallows than marry a person who is adverse to my Savior." This man who had full authority over helpless refugees couldn't take the rebuff. His ego insulted, he ordered her execution. This was Araxie's end. This compelling Christian Armenian woman went to meet her Savior before her time. She was one of the most effective and attractive soul-winners among our people, for whom the following lines were written:

Lives sacrificed for Christ's eternal love
Gallant men and maidens, martyrs for heaven above.

The Armenian lines go like this:

Ant sini Nooeryalk Tsiroyn Christosy
Yerknavor Nahadakn yev goot sank Emasdoony.

Beatrice Rohner

Beatrice Rohner was a native of Switzerland. Early in life she committed herself to Jesus Christ for salvation and dedicated service. She was a well educated woman. Following her training, she was involved in Christian service in Germany and Switzerland. Then she received God's call to go to Turkey. She came directly to Marash where she opened an orphanage for girls. Unmarried, she was a true mother to these bereft little Armenians. She looked after the spiritual, material and physical needs of the children in the orphanage. Her ministry, however, wasn't confined to the orphanage and the girls in her care there. She was a most dedicated missionary evangelist. Her passion was to proclaim the message

of Jesus Christ to everybody and bring people to his salvation. She would conduct evangelistic meetings, where she herself would preach with power and anointing. Her evangelistic mission began in her own Jerusalem, i.e., the girls in her orphanage. She wanted to make sure that every one of them had a conversion experience. The place was called 'Bethel". No visitor could ever leave the orphanage without being highly charged by the spiritual atmosphere. The girls were so thoroughly instructed in the Scriptures and knowledge of the spiritual life that they all became single-hearted devotees of Christ. Rev. Bilezikian's niece, born in the USA, was named Bethel after this orphanage.

Beatrice Rohner's testimony was effective in every way. She displayed a spirit of gentleness and humility, compassion and tenderness toward the downtrodden and the weak. Each person who came her way was recipient of her generosity. The writer always reminisces about the tender-heartedness she displayed to him and the rest of the men who were imprisoned during their long ordeal. She provided funds and food, always mindful of their basic needs. Finally, the deportation of the population struck. She went with one group to Aleppo, offering all possible assistance and comfort to the people undergoing immense suffering and agony. She had the spirit of total dedication, taught by Christ. She always felt great pity for the plight of the Armenian people. She finally returned to Germany where she spent her last years, and there she finished her earthly course.

Nouritsa Levonian

Apraham Hoja, the man for whom the title of this book is named, had a godly sister, Nouritsa Vartouhi Levonian, also born in Aintab, who was very much like him. She was converted as a young girl and from the early stage of her Christian life she dedicated herself and her service to her Master. The main influence upon her life was her brother Apraham.

Nouritsa could be termed a mystic. Very often she went into deep communion with the Lord, receiving divine illumination. Her encounters with the Lord induced a great passion for the lost. Consequently, she spent much time interceding with tears that the Lord would draw them to himself. The Lord responded to her pleas by bringing many to Christ through her. At a time when traveling for women was often risky, she went around preaching the Gospel, urging people to come to Jesus Christ. It is amazing how many places she visited going out from her home in Aintab: Marash, Zeytun, Hadjin, Everek, Kayseri, Kirkshehir, Aksaray, Ürgüp, Tarsus, Adana, Aleppo, to mention just a few. She was an unusual woman for her time. She lived to a ripe old age and victoriously went to meet her Lord and Master.

Rebecca Krikorian

The Krikorian family is an illustrious one among the evangelicals in Anatolia. Rebecca was the seventh child of the Reverend Krikor Harutunian, who was the earliest evangelical minister in Aintab. She was another one of those illustrious saints of Anatolia who had an encounter with the Savior at a very early age, when she committed her life to his service. She was a well-educated woman. Her early training was at the American Girls' Academy at Aintab. Seeing her unusual intellect and desire for knowledge her parents sent her to Constantinople to the American College for Girls in Arnavutkoy when she was eighteen. After being graduated from this historic school she went to England. Being eager to establish contact with true Christians she attached herself to the Baptist Church where Charles Haddon Spurgeon was the minister. There she was baptized by him. Under Spurgeon's ministry, Rebecca was prepared for a life of effective service. In the fall of 1892, she received her diploma from the London Obstetrical Society. Her life in London was full of colorful experiences relating to her wide service to Christ.

While she could have remained in England for a comfortable professional life, she preferred to return to Aintab, her native city. There she started her service at the American Hospital, becoming a very competent gynecologist. She was a self-giving person, who readily assisted the poor, the forlorn and friendless. The women she treated saw in her the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. She was very ardent in leading people to the Savior. All her activities were nourished by long hours of fasting and prayer. She also trained herself to be a skillful dressmaker. She collected used clothing wherever she could find them, which she remade into attractive dresses for poor women.

Her life was a true saga. She finally moved to the United States and settled in Pasadena, California. While in America, she got acquainted with Miss Frances E. Willard, America's foremost suffragist. From those early days, Rebecca espoused the rights of women and gave herself to defend them. She did a

great deal of writing and preached in various places. At last she went to be with her Lord at the age of eighty-eight.

Philippos Sarkisian

We can hardly think of the mighty revival in Aintab and the effect of the Holy Spirit upon countless lives without mentioning the services of a Christian lay person by the name of Philippos Sarkisian. In the Psalmist's words, he was a man thirsty after God. A lay person, he preached with holy boldness and apostolic fullness. Like Stephen, he was full of the Holy Spirit, passion and love, and had a burning desire to bring people into God's kingdom. His roots were in the Armenian Apostolic Church, which opened the door for him to witness and minister among his own people. He would go to one of the *Lusavorjagan* (name given to the national church, after its founder, Gregory the Illuminator) churches in Aintab, stand on a rock or box in the courtyard and proclaim God's message in clear-cut terms. People coming out of the church listened to him very respectfully, fully convinced that God was speaking to them through him.

On Easter Sunday and other religious holidays, when large crowds visited the cemeteries remembering their dead, Brother Sarkisian again would find an elevated place to stand and with tears flowing down his cheeks, would preach Christ the giver of eternal life and Savior of all who believe. He used every opportunity at every place to preach Christ. He went to political meetings, his aim always to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those attending. Repentance and redemption were his theme. Of course there were those who wanted to interrupt and stop him. These did not move Brother Philippos. He felt he had a mandate to preach at all costs wherever he was. In one of the political meetings, there was a man called *Paramaz*, apparently very secular, who spoke against matters of faith. Sarkisian spoke up and shouted: "*Paramaz, bu adam buraya yaramaz!*" (Referring to his name, he was saying in a rhyme, 'this man is not fit for this place!') Another time, again in such a gathering while Sarkisian was speaking, a few scoundrels beat him up and injured his head. A woman at the meeting who witnessed the incident, said, "I saw his head profusely bleeding, but he was happy. He kept on preaching and his face shone with the glory of God. With his unusual courage and valiant behavior," the woman continued, "the Holy Spirit quickened my heart. Right there I repented of my sins and surrendered my life to Jesus Christ."

Brother Sarkisian's witness for Christ became more and more effective, and many people received Jesus as their Savior. He related this experience: "In 1904, I was traveling from Adana to Aintab. My intention was to see how the brothers were faring. In the course of our journey one of the passengers in the coach said to me, 'In Aintab, there are three Christians—Araham Hoja Levonian, Philippos Sarkisian, and Dr. Shepard.'" Brother Sarkisian's testimony for Christ had left a profound impression on everybody.

He was also known for his generosity and benevolence. Once, at Easter time, a poor woman with her little daughter was begging for help. As she was going from house to house she stopped at Philippos Sarkisian's house and knocked at the door. Philippos saw this poor woman with her child and was gripped with deep pity for her condition. He immediately ran to the kitchen to get some food to give to her. On the table he saw *ichli koefte* (balls of raw fine bulgur, hollowed out with the finger and stuffed with finely ground beef). He called out to his wife, "We often have *ichli koefte* and undoubtedly will have it again. Let's give what you prepared for today's meal to this poor woman and her little child." The wife was very happy to do so, saying, "They seldom, perhaps never, have this kind of food." So the whole platter for that day's meal went to the begging woman, who after receiving it went joyfully on her way. The incident was heard around, with people being inspired by his thoughtfulness and generosity to do the same.

Philippos Sarkisian had a deep burden to present the Gospel to the Muslims. He always said, "We must speak in love and humility to our Turkish neighbors. We ought to tell them that we are ready to suffer the loss, even of our own lives, in order to enlighten the Turks about our wonderful Savior." He won many souls to the Kingdom of Christ. The words of Daniel 12:3 once again were finding their expression in Brother Philippos' life.

Araham Seferian and Minas Bozuklian

Tens of thousands of Armenian deportees hailing from every city, town and village suddenly found themselves in the desert town of Syria, called Der-el-Zor. They were witnesses to the most cruel and infamous acts of merciless rulers. A conservative figure of those who ended up in Der-el-Zor was around

two hundred and fifty thousand. They had lost countless family members and close friends during the deportation. On the road to the hostile desert, they were dying of starvation, thirst, disease, and some by outright butchering. The survivors having gone through that tortuous trek now found themselves in this alien desert city, southeast of Aleppo, along the Euphrates. They had no possessions or money. But they were not altogether forlorn. A large number had met the Savior along the way, subsequently learning hymns of praise and adoration. They were now singing these in this place which until then had not heard such songs. Der-el-Zor was converted to a place of spiritual awakening where people met God, some in life and others at the point of death.

In 1918, WW I ceased, leaving destruction all across Anatolia. Homes, shops, churches, schools and whatever else, were all devastated. A few of the remnant in Der-el-Zor couldn't get their beloved towns and cities out of their minds, so decided to return to their ruined areas. Others did not want to see Turkey again. The few who dared to return encountered hostility, making them realize that this could no longer be their home. In the meantime, Syria was occupied by the British forces. Many of the displaced people found a home in Aleppo and later in Beirut, which two cities absorbed a vast number of totally bereft Armenians. The survivors had undergone a treacherous journey on foot. One could quote Hebrews 11:37, 38: "...they were killed with the sword...destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."

In those heart-breaking times, sufferers needed capable men to comfort and encourage them in their faith and the hard pilgrimage of life. God was mindful to raise up leaders who could lessen to some degree the agony of the afflicted. Two such men were Apraham Seferian and Minas Bozuklian, themselves refugees. They, too, had endured every kind of suffering, privation and torment imaginable during the deportation. By God's mercy, they were both spared. They had been ministering God's Word before they were expelled. Brother Seferian immediately started gathering the refugees together. How could he comfort his people in this situation? What could he say to them to alleviate their pain? They were all woefully broken-hearted, wounded and bruised, physically and psychologically. There was only one source from where true comfort could emanate, and that was God's living Word. The Lord equipped the two brothers with anointing and unusual unction to proclaim the Word to their fellow-sufferers. Immediately the message got hold of broken lives. The meetings increased in numbers. The colorless desert town became like a brilliant tabernacle where people were converted and fed from God's unsearchable riches. Believers grew in faith and multiplied in number. In the meantime, God also sent philanthropic organizations such as Middle East Relief, to feed and clothe these destitute people. Without their contribution the multitudes could not have been adequately cared for, or even survived.

Apraham Seferian's service was becoming more taxing by the day. He was working day and night. He desperately needed someone to help him. It was at this point that God raised up and sent Minas Bozuklian as a co-worker. The two joined hands in putting their whole energy into serving the Lord among the desperate refugees. A large congregation came into being, bound together in love and unity. Each person helped the other in his/her need. Until this point, the whole ministry was confined to preaching. There was a crying need to produce something in writing to feed these spiritually-hungry people. Many of them were educated and sought to read the message of Christ in fuller detail. In fact, those who did not know how to read or write became literate during the time of this ordeal. The need of the hour was very pressing.

The well-known periodical, 'MARANATHA'

Both Seferian and Bozuklian held the position of the pre-millennial return of Christ. This truth was first introduced in Asia Minor by Haralambos Bostanjoglu. It spread among all believers, who accepted it with enthusiasm. Both men were solidly grounded in this teaching. They wanted to spread this message with all its implications for life and eternity. They found a primitive printing-press in Der-el-Zor and started publishing an Armenian magazine which would eventually gather interest among their people world-wide. The compelling title of the newly-born periodical was: MARANATHA: 'Our Lord, come!' (*1 Corinthians 16:22b*), a salvation periodical with solid Bible teaching. Alongside the publication, it was in this refugee city that the Armenian Brotherhood movement was born. It would soon establish itself in Aleppo and from there spread all over the world: Beirut, Amman, Baghdad, Palestine, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, France and all the way to North and South America. The Brethren fellowships grew by leaps and bounds in all places where there were Armenian people.

Vahram Tahmisian and Misak Aijian

During the mighty Aintab revival, two young men were studying at Central Turkey College in the same city. Touched by the Holy Spirit, they were both converted. At the time of their graduation a letter was sent to the college by the Armenian Evangelical Church in Kayseri, asking for two capable young men to come to that city as high school principals. The high school operated under the auspices of the Evangelical Church. One of the professors suggested Vahram and Misak to the Kayseri church. Right after graduation, they departed to take up their new positions. But being full of the Holy Spirit and zeal for Christ, their first interest was to testify widely for Him in their new city. Their witness had great effect and a revival, reminiscent of the one in Aintab, broke out in Kayseri. Many hundreds were converted as the Holy Spirit visited this historic Christian city (Caesarea). Attendance in the meetings rapidly grew and crowds overflowed into courtyards. The revival was not confined to this main city, but spread to other towns and villages throughout this ancient province of Cappadocia. The prevailing atmosphere brought to mind the glory of apostolic times.

Until then, believers sang mostly memorized hymns. The time was ripe to produce a hymnal with evangelistic and revival songs. Reverend Vahram Tahmisian, who had the God-given ability to write hymns and compose the music for them, was the right person to take on this work. In 1911, I was on an evangelistic tour with a few others. Our itinerary included Kayseri, where we were delighted to witness the spreading spiritual awakening spearheaded by these two young men. As has happened to so many other revivalists, Reverend Tahmisian became the target of organized opposition against his ministry. A courageous person, fully dedicated to Christ, he encountered all resistance with steadfast faith.

As Kayseri was one of the important centers of Armenian folks in Anatolia, it was mercilessly hit by the wave of genocide. Again, at this difficult time, Vahram Tahmisian conducted himself as a worthy pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Church. One day he was called in by the *mutasarraf* (highest Ottoman official in the city). This man knew Tahmisian's importance and influence as a leader and attempted to woo him to Islam. With extraordinary God-given boldness, Vahram answered the *mutasarraf*: "Shall I abandon my living Christ and yield my life to your dead prophet?" Placing his head on the table he said, "Here is my head; cut it off if you like." This unusually courageous allegiance to Christ shocked the official; he stood there motionless, unable to speak. Vahram's life was spared then, but eventually he was forced to join the deportees. Along the way, he devoted himself to helping his fellow-sufferers.

At the end of the war Vahram Tahmisian, along with his family, moved to Greece. In 1920 he, his wife Kalliopi, their two sons and a daughter migrated to the United States. They settled in Fresno, California, where there was an Armenian community who had preceded them. In this rich valley with vineyards, farms and orchards, the Armenians fared very well. Many of them lost their zeal for Christianity, becoming nominal church people. Vahram was a God-sent person to this very important ethnic group. As soon as he arrived, he started proclaiming the Gospel, just as he had done in Kayseri. People of Fresno who had settled for routine church life experienced a wave of spiritual awakening. Many were converted, discovering the substance of the Christian faith. Again, Tahmisian was ministering with the same zeal for which he was widely known in Kayseri. He established a print-shop and started publishing the Armenian periodical, '*Salvation*' (in Armenian, '*Pergutune*'). It was printed in Armenian and also with Armenian letters in Turkish for people who did not know their own language. They were accustomed only to their own alphabet. This magazine continued for several decades, bringing God's message to many Armenian homes in the U.S.A., as well as in other lands. Single-handedly Tahmisian produced this magazine in a small room behind the church. The ministry of the Fresno Armenian Brethren Church continued in fervency until Tahmisian was too old to preach; then it closed. The old people had died off and young people were attending American churches. Vahram Tahmisian is in the illustrious rostrum of ministers who carried the message of the Gospel first in Turkey and afterwards in the United States.

Chapter 11

Apraham Hoja Levonian

The renowned land of Asia Minor has seen mighty heroes of the faith since the apostolic days. While I was living in Marash word reached us that there was a distinguished soldier of the Cross in Aintab who was God's instrument in the revival there. A deep desire to get acquainted with this man welled up in every heart who had heard about him. A missionary of the American Board in Aintab, Mr. Speakers, encouraged him to visit Marash. When Apraham Hoja inconspicuously arrived some of us brothers called on him at Mr. Speakers' home. In our minds we had envisaged a person of attractive physical

appearance. But here we were, face to face with a plain-looking, weak man who normally wouldn't attract anyone. We thought he would be wearing some sort of elegant outfit. But we were astonished to see an ordinary-looking man, clothed as if he were from the poorest peasant class. Although he was tall, he was lacking the strong physical features characteristic of the typical Anatolian. He had no mustache or flowing beard which would distinguish him as a religious leader. Just as the evangelist Isaiah described his Master, 'he had no form or comeliness...; no beauty that we should desire him.' Following an initial salutation, our conversation switched very quickly to heavenly realms. We soon forgot our original impression and realized that we were sitting in the company of a holy person. He was dressed as a pilgrim, and true to form he transported us to the very presence and power of God. We listened attentively to his words which were permeated with grace and feeling. We were enraptured by the words he uttered. They were unforgettable truths. This first meeting ended with the deep impression that we had been with a unique person. We departed from his company with grateful hearts to God for allowing us to be in the company of this noteworthy Christian.

He was visiting Marash with the intention of spending some time here. The desire of his heart materialized shortly. He began preaching in the various churches. When we heard him, our hearts were set on fire for Christ. As days went by, we were mutually knit to each other. Many of his words and explanations left an indelible impression on us. We were greatly enriched. The blessing wasn't ours only, but from day to day it touched others, as well.



Apraham Hoja in his ordinary outfit

One day he was ministering in a place called Abez. During one of his messages he called the person adhered to by the people of the country an imposter and false prophet. He confirmed his conviction by declaring that Jesus Christ alone is the Son of God and that only he saves sinners. In the sort of country where we lived the word spread around rapidly. Somehow it came to the ears of the authorities what Apraham Hoja had said about the person they call prophet. They arrested Hoja immediately and dragged him to court. The judge directed the question: "Have you really called our prophet an imposter and false prophet?" His reply was short and simple: "Yes." All his friends, including Dr. Shepard, head doctor of the American Hospital in Aintab, sought to calm the troubled waters. They advised him to tone down his

uncompromising statement. At this, he took a New Testament out of his pocket and read, *“Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (Matthew 5:37)*. After this reading, he added, “Beware of hypocrites. I would rather rot in prison than change one iota of my indisputable statement.” Subsequently, the sentence was pronounced by the judge: “Imprisonment of one hundred and one years in Jebel, in the Taurus range, among murderers and major offenders.”

During the early days of his imprisonment he endured unspeakable maltreatment, both at the hands the prison officials and from the other prisoners. He was beaten, left hungry for days at a time, was mocked and denigrated with many insults. All these he graciously endured. He manifested a fortitude and patience characteristic of a faithful soldier of Jesus Christ. In the courtroom he had displayed humility and prayer, which attitude he carried into prison. Slowly the officials were noticing a different kind of person than the other prisoners, and started changing their attitude toward him. These men who were full of hatred and spite gradually began demonstrating warmth and friendship toward Hoja. They came to realize that he was not an ordinary law-breaker, but a true man of God.

All of a sudden, the son of a top official got sick. He was wrestling with death. The news reached him that there was a prophet in prison and that his faith and intercession could heal the sick. Immediately the top official gave the order to bring Hoja from the prison to his home. God was extending an unusual opportunity to glorify His name and He was going to use Hoja to fulfill the longing of this important man. Just as James verifies it, Hoja, a righteous man, gave himself to prayer, and indeed, a miracle occurred; the child was healed. The father, flabbergasted, fell at Hoja’s feet, crying: “This man is a prophet of God!” As the Apostle Paul had done in Lystra where the crowds were going to deify him and Barnabas, Hoja restrained this exuberant man with the same words that Paul had used: *“We also are men, of like nature with you...” (Acts 14:15)*. From then on, Hoja enjoyed the favor of the official as well as of the other prisoners. As happened from time to time on certain given occasions, a general amnesty emanating from the Porte’s palace in Constantinople was declared. On one of these, Hoja was among the many prisoners set free. While he was still in prison, I enjoyed a few visits with him. We had excellent fellowship, as Paul had with those who came to visit him at the prison in Rome. Once he remarked to me that this experience was a wonderful spiritual schooling and refining fire. He said, “The Lord taught me what it means to die to self.”

Following this happy outcome, Hoja concluded that God’s call for him was not to work as a pastor with a set salary. The little money that he possessed he distributed to the poor and needy. Then he returned from Marash to Aintab, his native city. Like the Apostle Paul, he felt that he should work for his living. By trade he was a weaver. He took a part-time job in this line. In his spare time he preached the Gospel from house to house and wherever he could find a hearing. He was constantly pleading with people to repent of their sin, turn to Jesus Christ and receive his salvation. He never accepted any money for his preaching from this point on. During a financial crisis, he couldn’t find employment. This did not move him; he devoted himself to prayer, meditation and proclamation of the Gospel.

In 1905, I took a mission trip to Aintab. Every morning I went to Apraham Hoja for fellowship and prayer. His custom was to get up very early and go straight to a cave outside the city. I joined him in this. There in the cave we studied God’s Word on our knees and gave ourselves to prayer. Filled with the consciousness of the Lord’s sweet presence, we returned to the city and proclaimed the Gospel on the streets, in shops and wherever the Lord opened a door for us. During this unusual association and cooperation I observed certain distinctives in Hoja’s life which influenced me from then on. In 1915, oppressive darkness hung over the Armenian segment of the Aintab population. Deportation was starting in all its fury. Christians were compelled to leave their churches, schools, homes, lands, shops, possessions and whatever else they had, to be driven through tortuous paths into the death-dealing desert. Amazingly, there was an exception made for Hoja. “This man is a prophet, a man of God,” they said. In 1920, having migrated to the United States eight years earlier, I sent him a gift of twenty-five dollars. I asked him to use this amount for his immediate needs. To my great surprise, he returned the check, saying, “In twenty-five years, my hands have not handled twenty-five cents. Now I have no need for money.” This shook me at a time when many ministries were valued by the amount of money given to them.

Such experiences were Apraham Hoja’s practical demonstrations of his total commitment to the teaching of Jesus Christ. I should immediately add that his doctrine was impeccable. He kept himself unspotted from the world. He often made this remark: “To live the right kind of Christian life, one ought to be possessed by the right kind of teaching.” He felt sorry for those who said, “I do not preach doctrine; I

preach Christianity.” He would say, “Doctrine is the foundation. A life that is built upon the shaky basis of clay will certainly fall.” Apraham Hoja was among those who stood firmly for Christian truth. He witnessed the creeping of liberal theology into Asia Minor and lamented about it. His indisputable devotion to the historical Christian faith was shared by his other contemporaries in this land. Whenever he would hear of some preaching which did not subscribe fully to the teaching of God’s Word and to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, he would respond by saying, “This is the position of the enemies of the Cross. It must be rejected.”

In 1906, the Armenian Evangelical Union held its annual convention in Marash. Visitors from many regions came—preachers, missionaries and lay delegates. Apraham Hoja and several of our brothers also were in attendance. One of the leading ministers, the Reverend Simon Terzian, opened the session by reading from Acts 15:28—“*For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*” Then he added these words: “This convention likewise ought to seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” Immediately Apraham Hoja leapt to his feet saying, “Listen to the Word of God. If this convention is to seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us, then let all those who have not received the Holy Spirit leave the meeting.” Everyone was taken aback by this unanticipated warning. A hush fell upon the entire body of delegates as if they had been struck by a thunder bolt. The moderator broke the silence by stating, “Apraham Hoja is out of order.” Hoja immediately replied, “It is not I, but those who do not believe the Word of God who are out of order. They should leave this assembly at once.” The Reverend M. G. Papazian ordered Apraham Hoja to sit down. He said, “I will not sit down.” Someone who wanted to pacify the tense atmosphere asked what Apraham Hoja meant, and what his intention was. Apraham Hoja replied, “There are adherents of liberal theology in this place who reject the deity of Jesus Christ. There is no room for them here.” Hoja was given the assurance that if this was the case, the liberals would be examined. He then sat down.

Shortly afterward, Hoja rose to his feet again, “Our people are of plain, simple faith,” he declared. After saying this, he pointed to the missionaries and continued: “These are the people who came and caused our believers to depart from the true faith. Would to God that they had never come!” We were all astonished at Hoja’s agitation. Some of us asked him, “Why are you so excited?” He answered, “For some time I have been attending morning devotions with the students at Central Turkey College in Aintab. I heard some of the teachers flagrantly denying the Word of God, the Incarnation of Christ, and the deity of our Lord. All these deviations are being quietly overlooked. This modernist teaching is ruining the spiritual life of our believers and the evangelical churches. It is draining the very sap of our spiritual strength. If we are true believers we must be awakened and be on the alert about this insidious peril. We ought earnestly to contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints, and now to us.”

Chapter 12

Hoja’s Visions and Revelations

“The prophet of Islam was an imposter,” a statement boldly made by Apraham Hoja. For this he was sentenced to life imprisonment at Jebel-el-Bereket. Many of his influential friends interceded with the authorities on his behalf. Under normal circumstances it would have been unthinkable to obtain his release. One day while he was fasting and praying in his prison cell, God revealed to him that on the seventeenth day of that month he would be set free. As Hoja explained later, he did not entertain any doubt concerning the validity of this vision. Following this, he wrote a letter to Mrs. Miriam Koundakjian, who was the resourceful wife of the minister in Hasanbeyli, one day’s journey from Marash. The prisoner on whose head was hanging a sentence of one hundred and one years, wrote the following: “By the grace of God, on the seventeenth day of the month I shall be free and will be on the way to your home in Hasanbeyli where I will preach and exalt the name of Christ. Please prepare a nice meal for me—by this I mean, a good pilaf.” Nothing being impossible with God, He fulfilled his promise to Hoja and the prisoner was set free. The expectation promised in the vision materialized. The imperial edict from the Sultan came on the very day indicated in the vision. Hoja was freed from prison and made the long journey on foot to the Koundakjian home.

In the spring of 1909 the triennial convention of the Armenian Evangelical Churches in Asia Minor was set to be held in Adana. Pastors, evangelists, missionaries and many lay delegates prepared for the journey. Professor Sarkis Levonian, Apraham’s brother, was among them. Before the group which had gathered in Aintab left, Apraham Hoja warned his professor brother: “I perceive that this journey will be dangerous. The Lord has shown me that there is fire ahead waiting to devour all of you. I entreat you to abandon this

trip.” However, his brother had made up his mind to attend the convention. Furthermore, he and the others entertained no qualms about going. The professor and the twenty-seven delegates set out on their journey.

On the way to Adana, they came to Osmaniye, which was a town in the province of Adana at the foot of the Taurus Range. There they gathered in the church for a night of prayer and meditation concerning the journey and the convention. It was a quiet, starry night, very calm. But suddenly, a storm broke out, as happens in the Taurus Mountains from time to time. Another vehement storm, much more dangerous, was about to come upon them. All of a sudden, the Christian leaders found themselves surrounded by a frenzied mob of soldiers and civilians whose hatred of Christians was profound. A secret edict had been issued from Constantinople to massacre Christian leaders in that region. The church building was an old wooden structure. The mob drenched it with kerosene and set it alight. Within moments the church became a blazing inferno, from where no one could escape. The participants of this ghastly plot stood off at a distance, enjoying the tragedy. They were armed with knives, clubs and axes, lest anyone should attempt to escape. The professor and twenty-seven chosen leaders of the evangelical congregations in Cilicia were burned to a crisp, leaving their ashes among the rubble. This way they joined the mighty convention of the Church Triumphant.

This was a very sad and woeful fulfillment of Apraham Hoja’s vision and prophetic warning. The consequence was widespread weeping and lamentation in all the family and church circles of these men. Women were widowed, children suddenly became orphans and churches were left shepherdless. While the flames were surrounding the praying delegates, Professor Sarkis Levonian admonished the whole group: “Brethren, be strong and courageous. Stand fast in the faith. Soon we will join the ranks of the martyrs in Christ’s presence.” Following this, he stretched his hand out of the window of the flame-swept church building as if pronouncing a benediction on their determined foes. He prayed the prayer of Jesus on the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This villainous murder came to be known as “The Adana Massacre of Pastors”.

Sarkis Levonian, a venerable man and an illustrious person, was commonly known as ‘Sarkis Hoja’. He was without any particular attraction. He was of medium height, of pale complexion. His hair had receded, and his countenance had the look of a scholar. He was a very able and distinguished professor at Central Turkey College in Aintab. He was third in a family of twelve children. He received his early education in his father Asdwazadour’s school until he was fifteen. Even as a child he had to contribute to the support of the large family. He became an apprentice to a weaver, a menial occupation. However his abilities and talents did not go unnoticed. Mr. Marden, an American missionary in Aintab, took the initiative to send him to Marash for training at the seminary there. Following this preliminary education, he went to the United States in 1880 and studied three years at Yale University. His intention was always to return to his native country. His alma mater, Central Turkey College, invited him to teach. He became chairman of the mathematics department. His ability in mathematics was unsurpassed. He wrote a book on mathematics which he sent to Yale University. This achievement aroused amazement of the faculty that one of their graduates in the remote Ottoman Empire should author such a book.

Even while teaching in the Department of Sciences, his mind was set on God and His Word. He was one of the highly respected leaders of the Armenian Evangelicals, speaking often in their churches. Backtracking to the beginning of the 1900’s, the aforementioned revival in Aintab touched many teachers and students, among them Sarkis Levonian. He traced his spiritual awakening to that revival. As a professor at the college he always liked to listen to young people give their radiant testimonies. They renewed his own spiritual life, so he shared them with others.

The climax to his spiritual experiences was when he was visited amazingly by the Holy Spirit. One morning, he did not go down for breakfast. Neither did he go to teach his class. At noon, again he was absent. He had a higher mission to fulfill. He devoted the entire day to his Lord, praying on his knees and enjoying sweet communion with his Savior. Supertime came and went and still no sign of him! That evening he attended vespers in the nearby church. The congregation was very large. The Spirit of God was working conspicuously in their midst. He approached the leader of the meeting and asked if he would be allowed to speak for a few minutes. The whole assembly waited in expectancy of what Sarkis Hoja was going to say. In profound humility he confessed that up to that day he had not lived the life that his Lord wanted him to live; therefore, he had not been used by him. Right there in front of everyone, he publicly submitted his life to Christ to serve him totally.

The evident humility of this outstanding leader struck awe in every heart. People were genuinely affected by this unexpected testimony, and discussed it for several days. As a direct result of his breaking down in confession many present in that meeting examined themselves. Some repented of their sin; others dedicated themselves anew to Jesus Christ. There were reconciliations in the church and restitutions were made. From that day on, Sarkis Hoja's life was a constant demonstration of the Holy Spirit's indwelling. I can say that he was living a continuous experience on the Mt. of Transfiguration. His messages took on a new dimension as he expounded God's Word with fresh fervor and power. His deep devotion to the Word of God was evidenced by his absolute firmness to live it and proclaim it. After that he was writing deeply studied articles based on God's Word. These fortified the faith of the saints and resulted in full commitment of many. I shall never forget this message taken from Ephesians 3:17, *'that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.'* While he was visiting and preaching in our city of Marash, I happened to be in one of the services. His message was Spirit-directed and life-transforming.

Professor Levonian was one of the highly-educated leaders of our Armenian Evangelical community. But this position didn't cause any element of pride in him. He would interact with ordinary people and after talking with them, would say, "Let us kneel and pray." He always made it a point to encourage Christians who were struggling with some problem. He truly was an epistle written in the hearts of the believers, read by everyone.

It was he, along with twenty-seven other Christian believers, who were burned to death in Osmaniye on April 14, 1909, on their way to the Cilician Convention in Adana. When the Muslims burned Sarkis Hoja and his companions to death, they actually set aflame a new commitment among the Christians. From then on the evangelical churches marched victoriously forward, overcoming hurdles and barriers, including the menacing storms ahead. These martyrs joined the ranks of heroes in the tradition of Abel, the first martyr in the Bible.

Chapter 13

Apraham Hoja's Personal Testimony

"The grace of God reached me, by which grace I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10)

The Lord fulfilled a marvelous work of grace in my heart, bestowing me a life which is blessed beyond measure. This can neither be purchased at any price nor be expressed by mortal tongue. For this marvelous fulfillment in my life I praise and bless the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit forever. He totally separated me from the world, knitted my heart to himself and filled me with all-surpassing peace and joy. It is impossible to describe my sixty-eight years of spiritual life and experience with my God. All glory and praise be to him! I pray that this testimony will be a blessing to my readers. It is with this purpose that I am recording a few of the highlights.

My birth was in January, 1855, in the well-known city of Aintab. My father's name was Asdwazadur (translated, 'Gift of God'). He was a well-known school teacher. His devoted allegiance was to the *Lusavorjagan* Armenian Apostolic Church. He loved his church and the psalms and rituals sung there. But above all, he loved the interpretation of God's Word whenever it happened to be given. He had a large number of books and much devotional literature. He was a person known to have a positive influence in the church. He was looked upon as a man of God. People would frequently come to him with a list of requests for prayer, particularly for their sick. There was a common belief at the time that if a man like my father would spend a night at the house of a sick person the sick one would receive healing. This must have been his gift. Because of this belief, my father often had to be away from home! His mission was to help others and pray for the healing of the sick. My father had an uncle whose name was Levon Krikorian. He was a person of great influence in Aintab because of his wealth and position. My mother's name was Manushak (translated, 'Carnation'). She was an only child, so was my father. But they made up for it in their marriage. Their wedding was a big and happy event. God blessed them with twelve children, ten sons and two daughters. The first son died shortly after birth, which was fairly common in those days. The two daughters were Nouritsa and Anna. My father was a man of perseverant prayer. Whenever the Lord's Supper was going to be commemorated, he gave himself to fasting and prayer the day before. He built a secluded place in our basement, which I called his 'grotto'. He would retreat there, kneel on a straw mat and spend the whole day in prayer, often with tears. Those in the house who overheard him could not restrain their emotions either, and joined him in the spirit of prayer, also with tears.

When the American Congregational missionaries reached Aintab and proclaimed the Good News of Christ, my father was among the first to accept their message. His soul was set on fire when he came into touch with the teaching of the Bible. He hardly ever missed the midweek prayer meeting. He would also attend any special service at the church. He grew very rapidly in his new faith. Shortly after this life-changing encounter, he was appointed as a teacher at the school which had been started by the New England missionaries. His teaching skills proved to be very effective and he came to be known as one of the best teachers. Bible and Theology were his favorite subjects. Training students in this area brought him great respect and also much joy.

If anyone were to ask me about my mother and her life, I would say that in my view she stood out as a unique Christian woman. She was truly a spiritual mother, entirely yielded to Jesus Christ and full of faith, a modest woman who would fit the description in *1 Peter 3:3-5*: *"Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of fine clothing, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands..."* She never allowed any fancy or showy dress to enter the house, and did not favor any item of decorative nature. She repeatedly remarked, "Whenever fashion comes into a house, the blessing of God goes out!" She seldom served meat at our meals and always cautioned against festive activity. She called highly-seasoned food a lustful habit. She never allowed a guest to smoke in her house. She never served coffee, tea or sweet cakes. Naturally, alcoholic beverages were excluded.

My mother would often remark, "I am in the wrong world; this is not my home. My place is elsewhere." With prayer and tears she would plead God to take her out of this world. Prayer was her most delightful exercise. No matter what hour of the day I returned home I found her on her knees, given to concentrated prayer. She always prayed with a loud voice. She cried until her eyes were red. Her longing was to depart and be with Christ *'which is far better'*. She slept very little at night and whenever I woke, I saw her on her knees praying.

During my childhood I was sent to a flour mill to work at night. The place was extremely cold and my body trembled with chills throughout the night. I was seized with excruciating colic, so the folks at the mill had to give me some medication. The medicine they resorted to was a spoonful of whiskey. When my mother learned of it, she admonished me by saying, "My son, no matter what your condition is—colic, sickness or some other distress—even if you are at the point of death, tough it out and never again let liquor touch your lips." Both father and mother cautioned all of us boys not to set foot in coffee houses. They would say, "Keep your eyes from looking into those places. Such places are gateways to hell. When you pass by them, turn your face the other way. Never let it be said of you that you took a good look at what was going on in those centers of leisure." My father was a person of meager income. However, whatever he earned he committed it to God with a special prayer that God would bless what he had allowed him to earn. The scanty provision which we enjoyed was not only ample to meet our needs, but also enough to lay money aside. My parents considered family worship a most important function of daily life. They would never neglect it. Even during our family worship my mother's face was saturated with tears. She was always touched in these times of reading God's Word and prayer.

My mother told us that it was better not to play with other children in the neighborhood, lest we hear bad language. She was very strict about this. She refrained from frequent visits to neighbors for fear of being caught in idle words or gossip. She often remarked, "I fear more the company of a few women than standing before an executioner. I cannot conform to their ways." She was a woman truly separated from the world. There was no trace of love for the world in her soul. One day after a long time of prayer, her countenance radiant with heavenly light, mother said with great joy, "My son, I have good news for you. It has been revealed to me that in the near future I shall move out of this present world." Strangely, from that day on, she ceased her weeping and crying. Instead, an attitude of joyful praise took over. Singing spiritual hymns were her constant expression. Two months after this vision, she breathed her last. She closed her eyes to this world, which she had not liked. She opened them in that heavenly realm for which she had intensely longed. The love I had for my mother far surpassed all other love, except of course, for my Lord. The greatest influence upon my life came from my mother. I was eighteen when she died.

Six years earlier the Lord had come into my life. This invigorating text made a deep impression on me at the time: *"And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised"* (*11 Corinthians 5:15*). The Lord Jesus Christ became precious to me

through this verse. He disclosed himself in an ineffable way, which is beyond the power of my pen to describe. From that time on, Christianity was not a faith inherited from my godly mother. I now enjoyed a personal and living relationship with my Savior. God's truth became my own treasure. Christ was so valuable to me that I often wondered whether there was another living person who loved him as wholeheartedly with soul and mind, and was as fascinated with him, as I was. I can truthfully bear witness that my call to God through this Scripture was as real and clear to my heart as the call to Abraham was in the life of the old patriarch.

One Sunday morning I stood before six hundred Sunday school children. I read the verse just quoted and then I went on to speak to them. "Listen to me, young friends. From this day on, I have turned over my whole being and all my possessions to Jesus Christ. I shall live for him alone." God's work in my life and the testimony with which I expressed it was not something I took lightly. To me, it was an unforgettable experience. The Lord Jesus Christ worked in my heart in such a deep way that all fear and doubt evaporated.

During my childhood years I had memorized the three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew (five through seven). Following my conversion the verse which influenced me most was *Matthew 6:24*: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Christ's utterance 'you cannot' made a complete and profound impression on my life. It gave me a new direction for my earthly life. This unforgettable experience grew stronger and stronger as the days went by. There are numerous valuable passages in God's Word, but these two words took possession of my whole existence.

In 1880, a pressing urge gripped my heart. An extraordinary power was leading me to the work of evangelism all the way up in Harput at the source of the Euphrates River. In obedience I left Aintab and departed for Harput. Harput was completely inhabited by Armenians. Among the many churches and schools was also Harput College, established by the Congregational missionaries. There were several evangelical churches in the wider area. God opened my way to visit one church after another and proclaim the Good News of his Son. My message was quite direct: "You have misunderstood Christianity; you are serving two masters. This is impossible. Do not be deceived. You cannot be the servant of two masters. Wake up!" I could sense that my heart was on fire for God. The Lord showed me that I must avoid all talk of religious politics in my messages. I should not be preaching ethical culture. The Lord gave me strength to proclaim the uncompromising, unadulterated truth of his Gospel.

One of God's notable acts in my life was to allow a serious sickness to grip me for a period of two years. During this time, I became an invalid. The doctors offered no hope for recovery. But to the astonishment of many, my Lord raised me up. People started calling me Lazarus. The time of my convalescence was spent in Jibin. There I met St. Minas. He was a totally consecrated believer in Christ, one who was worthy of the title 'holy'. In the whole area villagers and townspeople looked at him as a man of God. His life not only influenced me most positively, but also gave me true purpose and direction. I joined ranks with him, spending night after night together in song and prayer. Anyone hearing him pray would be moved to tears. To utter a frivolous word or act in any sinful manner before him would bring tears to his eyes and deep lamentation to his soul.

After my mother's death, my heart was set on fire for God. As a result I secluded myself in a cave for two days. No one knew where I was. There in the secrecy of my cloister I wept and cried unto the Lord. I wrote a solemn contract of twenty-four paragraphs, entitled, 'My Covenant with God'. I signed this covenant in an absolutely unforgettable and indisputable surrender. The gist of it was to obey God the Father to the utmost till death, to surrender thoroughly to his Son and depend on the Holy Spirit once and for all. How thankful I am to God that to this day he has cared for me and protected me by his daily presence and grace! Otherwise, I would not have had the strength to continue my earthly pilgrimage.

Reference to a lesson of great value which I learned during this period is apropos. At the time I was in a town called Abez; hundreds repented and were converted. The scene before me was so strange and other-worldly that it seemed like heaven on earth. How sad I am to confess that at this juncture, to my shock and sorrow, that cursed sin—spiritual pride—manifested its ugly head in me. Although Satan was powerless to drag me back to the world, by this sin he sought to ruin and overcome me. God saw my wretched condition and knew that I was in danger. To help me see myself and be raised from the pit into which I had fallen He brought me to a prison experience. The outer cause of this imprisonment was one

thing; the inner cause an entirely different one. I knew it. The Lord was seeking to cleanse and purge me of that awful spiritual pride. The price of this pride was very costly. For long hours I wept, with my tears falling on the ground. Those lamentations, confessions and mortifications were God's grace working in me. I bless his name for it. By this the Lord taught me that I should constantly be on guard with utmost caution against the sin of spiritual pride. As a result my heart was overwhelmed with an inner desire that I should not work among those who loved me, but among those who mocked and despised me.

I mentioned that the external outlook of my imprisonment was different than the internal aspect. The actuality was that in my field of labor I preached and proclaimed to the Muslims that if they did not believe in Christ there was no salvation for them. The Lord had given me extraordinary courage and strength to put forward this truth to every Muslim I met. The emphasis of my ministry was heard all around, ultimately taking me to court. There once again the Lord enabled me to give a clear-cut testimony in the presence of government officials. Humanly speaking, it would have been unthinkable for me to be delivered alive from that prison. As a matter of fact, I was gripped with a deep desire that if it pleased the Lord I might endure martyrdom for him, for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Oh! What a blessed privilege to become a martyr for Christ! I longed for it, but I was denied this privilege.

Finally, one of the government spokesmen said, "We have been in this office for many years, but we have never met a man of such strength and consuming passion. No one has ever spoken as fearlessly regarding his faith as you have." By God's grace, I found favor with a centurion and the governor. With unbelievable reverence, they listened to God's Word. I could clearly detect that their aim was to set me free. Indeed, the Lord honored their efforts and once again I became a free person through my Lord's intervention.

This was a valuable schooling for me. The lessons taught by the Lord and the truths learned were priceless. I cannot name them one by one, but the distinctive truth came from Philippians 3:3: "*For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.*" May the Lord who taught me not to have any confidence in the flesh be pleased to teach everyone who reads this the same lesson. Your brother in the Lord, Apraham Levonian

Chapter 14

Apraham Hoja's Letters and his Latter Days

Love is fundamental

"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another" (John 13:34)

We all are encountering a peril if we forget or neglect this fundamental rule. To be correct in creed is honorable. To be steadfast in its teaching is admirable, but not enough. Creed must be exercised in daily living. Our blessed Lord with this last command to his disciples impressed upon them the truth that love emanating from him is essential and a special mark of every believer. If our creed does not help us to live like Christ, what is it good for? There are those who forget brotherly love. They allow trifles to shape and control their conduct. This attitude inevitably leads them to envy and strife. Beware of the wiles of the devil! He is the most cunning and crafty creature, lying in wait to deceive and manipulate careless believers. We need to make the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians our life motto.

Unity among believers and display of love one toward another is the most pressing need in churches. There is no substitute for brotherly love. Nothing can take its place. The need is not for eloquent preachers, but for those who live their sermons eloquently. The need is not for men and women endowed with wisdom who can prove the deity of Jesus Christ through logic, but it is for believers who daily demonstrate proof of Christ's deity by the testimony of their lives and witness. Whenever people are persuaded that Christ is living in a certain person, they are speechless. They can have no objection because the person is living an unobjectionable life. Men and women can and do object to everything, but they can never object to a genuine Christian life. Objections can be raised against the most profound and capable preacher, but no one can object to the humble believer who lives the life of Christ. These people work for Christ most effectively. Brothers! Believe this and strive to let Christ be seen in you. This is the daily need of those who are in the Church of born-again believers. I know for sure that he who denies the new birth cannot manifest the love of Christ in his or her life. He can only display its counterfeit. The appearance of that love basically is spurious. It is absolutely clear that the person who

has not received that true life from Christ cannot live the Christ-like life. It doesn't matter how earnestly he tries, he cannot display the love of Christ. For such a person the vital confession which needs to be uttered is seen in the words of St. Paul: *"Oh wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:25).*

The reason for the decline of the Christian faith to such a low level in our time is the number of counterfeit Christians who do not live Christ's life. It befalls on each one of us to seriously examine ourselves. It is a great blessing to be found on the solid rock of Truth. It is very good to say to Christ, *"My Lord and my God!"* but if that life does not fit the professed faith, if it doesn't measure up to his standard, Satan laughs at it. Orthodoxy and correct doctrinal persuasion are good. Satan will never be afraid of these. There are literally millions of people who do not read the Bible, and no doubt there are some who are satisfied by reading the lives of Christians. People are aware of what you are really like and what you profess. The person who knows the truth of Christianity and is born of God loves even as God loves. This reality will certainly impress observing people. Therefore, let us be on our guard because people are constantly reading us. He who is living a genuine Christian life can show men and women the way to Christ. The most essential thing in the sight of God is for his children to be like Christ. Those who are like him do the greatest work in the world.

How can it be known if a person is a true Christian? By his Christ-like love. Love is greater than faith and hope. This is specifically stressed in I Corinthians 13:13. If Christ-like love is lost then everything else is of no value. This causes a deadly blow to Christ's work and irreparable injury to his testimony. Of how much value will your fingers be if your thumb is cut off? If we do not love one another fervently, esteeming each other better than ourselves, seeking each other's interest, our Christianity becomes a hollow mockery. We simply get involved in formalities. When we strive among ourselves as to who should be the greatest, then and there we deny the Christian faith.

Dr. S. D. Gordon explains it this way, "Christians, like the Holy Bible, must live the breath of God; they must be the breath of God; they must receive their very life from God." Such a person will accomplish great deeds because whatever he speaks he speaks from God. He can do more than the author of many books. Every word of his has a powerful influence because it is God working in him, speaking through him, both to will and do his good pleasure. Prove righteousness by your life, rather than trying to defend this doctrine apologetically. Let all men and women know of a truth that Christ is living in you and working through you. Don't be ashamed of the Gospel, and Christ will not be ashamed of you.

Apraham Levonian ~~

Aleppo

Chapter 15

Two Further Letters sent by Apraham Hoja While Still in Aintab

Letter Two

Dear ones in the Lord,

The deity and overall sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ has been my basic belief for a long time. The very proof of it is the fulfillment of all his words in my life. Now I live a life based on Galatians 2:20: *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Being crucified to the flesh and to the world I am now living on heavenly manna and heavenly springs of water. The earthly bread and water are incidental. Earthly things don't represent great value to me. I now live solely by faith in the Son of God. The truth emphasized by Jesus Christ has become my reality: *"He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water' "* (John 7:38). Jesus did not speak about springs, but rivers.

I cannot make myself very clear through a mere letter. Were I to write ten letters a day, still it wouldn't suffice to express my thoughts. I can truthfully verify what the Apostle John wrote: *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—"*

“(I John 1:1, 2). Would to God I had a way to make this Jesus known all over the world: very God and very man, the only Savior and Redeemer, true and trustworthy friend for all people everywhere, source of every blessing— material or spiritual. He who has him has eternal life, but he who does not have the Son abides in death.

Have you ever heard how majestic the walls of Babylon were? These were a particular grandiose construction of the day. Six chariots could travel side by side through the walls. No military might of the time could conquer Babylon behind the protection of those walls. Nevertheless, God manifested his absolute power, and in one night the city was conquered. The amazing story and the tragic end of Babylon are recorded in the fifth chapter of Daniel in the Old Testament. In the face of King Belshazzar's profanity and despising God, he was weighed and was found to be wanting. In one night the city was conquered by the Persians and the king of mighty Babylon was slain. Just as happened in this extraordinary instance, suddenly and without any warning the prophecy spoken by Jesus will be fulfilled: *“I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left” (Luke 17:34).* Then will begin the millennial reign of Christ. Following Christ's brilliant reign this old world will be destroyed. The Holy City, the New Jerusalem, will descend from heaven by God's mighty power. The Lord Jesus Christ will be the universal king, with his triumphant Church around him. This is why I am filled with joy—my cup runs over.

If someone were to ask me, “What is your most poignant and penetrating sorrow?” my reply would be, “It is the lamentable ignorance and dullness of people concerning the world-shaking and destiny-shaping events to come. Everywhere church members, with a few exceptions — preachers, teachers, even missionaries — are in pitiful oblivion. They are not aware of the prevailing conditions, so go on with their lives assuming they are genuine believers in Christ. This is a great tragedy. In the days of our Lord Jesus Christ here on earth, how pitiful it was that the scribes and Pharisees counted themselves righteous. On the other hand, they were filled with wrath against the Son of God and sought to kill him: *‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness’” (Matthew 23:27).*

Similar to this, the modern scribes and Pharisees dwell in darkness. They weigh themselves with worldly balances and measure their importance with man's yardstick. What a pity! They will be weighed by the balance of the Gospel, and the judgment with which Belshazzar was judged will be applied to them (*cf. Daniel 22:25*). That was a just and impartial balance. Those who follow in the steps of the Pharisees consider themselves righteous because they have not committed any gross transgression. On the other hand, they remain ignorant of Christ's command, *“...those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24)*. Satan's occupation is to deceive humans. He has so blinded people of this century that few are aware of their plight. It is clear that such people are living merely for self and for the satisfaction of the flesh. They take great care of outward appearance and physical cleanliness, like the scribes and the Pharisees, and then deceive themselves that by so doing they serve God and please him. Is there any great difference between them and the heathen? Does one's importance lie in the elegance of one's dress? Is it cultured conversation that puts one above the other? Is it higher education and wider understanding of the sciences? Will all these and other numerous practices profit the heart if it is not pure, if the person goes on living in the pleasure and satisfaction of the flesh? Feed three times a day on sumptuous meals, dress yourself with royal garb, live in an ostentatious mansion, sleep between silk sheets and fine linen with the latest embroidery. Have your servants all around to cook and wait on you hand and foot, to take care of the children and train them. Have a stable attendant to look after your fine horses, or a chauffeur to drive you around. How can one read the Gospel and involve himself in all these? People who give themselves to this kind of living pass their days as if the Gospel were never given, never heard and Jesus Christ never descended to this world as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Why was King Belshazzar's guilt so great as to bring God's wrath upon him? He knew very well that what he was doing was wrong. Our age and generation knows much better than what King Belshazzar knew. The greatest wonder and profoundest miracle, in my opinion, is that Jesus, the Word, *“was made flesh and dwelt among us”*. He came in human body and as a man revealed to man God's deep secrets. I cry bitterly because men and women do not hear God's Word and heed it. *“As it was in the days of Noah...they eat, they drink, they marry and are given in marriage” (Luke 17:27a)*. Without hesitation, I bear witness that the people of this generation are living as if they were without the light of the Gospel. Many are struggling to live a moral life. They imagine that if they make their living and manage their various affairs without injustice and injury to their fellow-humans, they have achieved the highest form of moral life on earth, the ultimate satisfaction and recognition of worth. But they are wrong!

Aintab

Letter Three

My dearest brothers in the Lord,
 Greetings with heartfelt love! I thank God with all my heart and soul for your steadfast walk in faith and in his blessed hope. I can never express in words my appreciation of your letters which assure me of your journey of faith in truth. *"No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth"* (III John 4). Twenty-eight years ago the truth expressed in this passage got hold of me and with this stimulus I went to Malatya and Harput, including their surrounding towns and villages. In every place I preached Jesus Christ. Twelve years ago in the churches of Aintab I had arguments with Reverend M. G. Papazian and missionary, Mr. Lee, concerning the same truth. I earnestly contended with them that the trend in the churches was not encouraging. The person who has the love of God in his heart cannot entertain love for things that are in the world. *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him"* (I John 2:15).

The love of God is like a blazing furnace: anything and everything that belong to the world or the carnal nature, is consumed to ashes in this furnace. When a person loves his possessions, his wealth and his family more than he loves God, his attitude betrays a lack of love for his Lord. St. Augustine once exclaimed, "Oh, God, you are the supreme object of love; he who loves you cannot love anything else." I am thoroughly persuaded that the one who loves God with his whole being and with all his strength becomes incapable of loving any enticement. The mixture of other attractions defiles and profanes the love of God, as sewage breaking into a water main or conduit contaminates pure water. It makes it unfit to drink or for any other use. Whenever the love of self, the world, or the flesh breaks into the reservoir of God's love, the purity and dignity of God's love is spoiled. *"So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth"* (Revelation 3:16). You should always keep in mind, never putting it out of your thoughts, that the profound and practical truth of this passage is a commentary on the age in which we live. People have generally become lovers of the world while claiming to love God. I suffer more at the hands of worldly Christians than from unbelievers.

I am very glad that in the long chapter of II Kings 17, God has recorded an event which clearly sets forth the calamity awaiting those who keep pace with the world while claiming to be Christians. I exhort each and every one to carefully read this sad chapter. The warnings conveyed in this passage have greater value to each one of us than silver and gold, or all the pearls and diamonds in the world. In their own minds and hearts the people of that age thought they feared God, but in God's judgment they were of a totally different disposition. *"...they do according to the former manner"* (II Kings 17:34). I sadly remark that people of our day are like the transplanted crowd of Samaria who invented a strange mixture of religions.

Some members of modern churches by a strange mixture of the world and Christianity, think that they love Christ, but the truth of the matter is that they don't love him simply because two authorities cannot rule or reign simultaneously in the same heart. The basic foundation upon which my argument rests and my contention expressed is drawn from the words of Jesus Christ at the Sermon on the Mount *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon"* (Matthew 6:24). The emphasis on the words 'you cannot' should be taken into consideration. Jesus Christ did not say, 'you must not', but 'you cannot'. It ought to be clearly understood that the lover of money cannot love God. *"For the love of money is a root of all evil..."* (I Timothy 6:10a). God and evil: on one hand, the love of the flesh or the world and on the other hand, love for God cannot co-exist. For this reason many modern Christians are struggling to make an impossible matter possible. In a little while Jesus will come and address them with this castigation: *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"* (Matthew 25:41).

Rejoice in the Lord, and I wish to repeat it: Rejoice that God has made clear his exceedingly great and valuable truth to each one of us. This is a most ominous rebuke and warning. Believe it and you will live by it. Don't be disobedient to the heavenly vision. We are living in a most dangerous age. Don't be conformed to it or be influenced by it. Don't be a follower of it. Wherever you are, live like the monastics of the old times. Let all men and women be aware that you are living for God and not for this passing world. Let nothing in this world entice you. Act as the Apostle Paul admonishes each Christian: *"Be*

imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (I Corinthians 11:1). Don't give yourself to eating and drinking. Don't fashion yourself according to this world. Let your deeds and your conduct as much as is possible within you be meek. By your daily life prove that you are not in this world to accumulate wealth. Realize that you are here to preach Jesus Christ, fearlessly making him known to the world. If you save any money, let it be solely for the purpose of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter if people will believe you. Make up your mind that you are not going to deviate one inch from the purpose Christ has set before you. Let your calling become an example to everybody. If there is any light, any brightness, anything that impresses, let it be on your countenance. Let everybody know that you are servant of the most high God. Like those three Hebrew boys in the first chapter of Daniel, refuse to bow to the image of gold. Be content with little. I ask you here, do not send me any money. Refuse all dishonesty that goes along with the pursuance of making money. There are those who under pretence of benevolence and good works make money dishonestly. God does not take notice of such charitableness. He considers it vain. Let your consuming passion and main purpose be to live for God.

Bear in mind the straight commandment of our Lord Jesus Christ: *"...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).* If you love your fellow men and women because you love God, this is the right and acceptable attitude, both toward God and man. But if you love and help your fellow-humans in order to be praised from some quarter, your deeds are in vain. Remember the Old Testament admonition, *"To obey is better than sacrifice" (I Samuel 15:22b).*

I have come to understand that one of the most common sins of people everywhere is the seeking of high regard from those around them. Don't wish for the praises and acclaim of humans. Flee from this temptation. Don't ever bow the knee before this subtle idol. Strive to be well-pleasing and acceptable to your heavenly father. Let it be clearly understood that God does not regard how much or how little we do. Contrariwise, he regards the spirit which prompts our deeds: *(cf. Luke 21:1-3).* With all my heart I wish to warn everyone to abstain from accumulating money. If you talk about giving, God wants nothing more than that which is within your ability to offer.

Let your foremost work be to gather the heavenly manna. Never undertake a piece of work without reading God's word and without praying. Don't go out after material gain at the expense of your prayer and Bible-reading time. Value the price of your spiritual life above rubies, in fact, above everything else. Let everything else go by. If you can retain your secular and material life without hurting the spiritual, it is well and good. If not, always be prepared to sacrifice the material to the spiritual. All these truths emphasized here may be your practice, but I consider it necessary to remind you of them, always considering the admonition in Hebrews 12:15-17. This edification is summarized in a single phrase, *"...that no 'root of bitterness' spring up and cause trouble..." (15b).* Fellow-believers and friends, conduct and govern yourselves with absolute watchfulness. Always be wide awake. Realize that behind all evil is our age-long subtle adversary, Satan. Take heed lest he deceives you. With deep sorrow in my heart I am led to remind us all that Satan is able to deceive some of the most esteemed believers. If any of you is living close to the world and have been contaminated by it, watch out. The pity and tragedy of it is that these people are unaware of their condition and defilement.

Marriage is a holy institution, but its abuse cannot be overlooked. Some couples while identified with the faith, are at the same time seeking the ease and comfort of this present world. They are not interested in hearing what I am saying, but rather the dictates of their own desire. I love you with all my heart and I would spare you. I beseech you to crucify self and do not allow its natural bent and propensities to master you. As much as lies in you, live far from the system of this world. *"We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, and his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (I John 5:18-21).*

Give my tender love and sincere regards to all who know me and ask about me.

Apraham Levonian ~~

Aintab

Biographer's Note:

August 1913

Time was going fast. The disturbance was evident everywhere. Without anyone knowing when it would start, it was generally felt that a war was in the making. The Armenian population throughout was feeling uneasy under the nationalistic government of Ittihad ve Terakki (Union and Progress). There was unrest everywhere. This government which succeeded the cruel emperor Abdul Hamid was giving every indication that it was not one iota tamer than the preceding absolutist reign. Aintab where Apraham Hoja had always lived, was sensing wide-spread restiveness. Those who could, were moving to nearby Aleppo. That city, being mostly populated by Arabs, gave the feeling that it was somewhat safer. So Apraham Hoja, along with some other folks from Aintab, moved to Aleppo. Finally, WW I struck the whole empire in all its brutality, bringing with it the notorious massacre of Apraham Hoja's people (1915-1916).

Although his years were advancing, he was going to live for a good many years to come. This servant of God, who had been preaching the Gospel and encouraging believers in Aintab, was now doing the same in Aleppo. He was going around from house to house proclaiming Christ, also spending time every day in fasting, praying and studying God's Word. He particularly concentrated his message on the Second Coming of Christ, as the government in the Ottoman Empire was becoming more decadent, belligerent and oppressive. He would often say, "The Lord is coming soon; I long to meet him in the air."

The Last Will and Testament of Apraham Hoja

Apraham Hoja did not neglect making a last will and testament. Following are its contents:

"Dear friends in the Lord Jesus Christ, Endless praises to my Lord, the One who revealed Himself and his unalterable truth in His Word. He revealed it to me, the most unworthy and least known servant of his. There is nothing worthy in me. I am what I am by the grace of God. A particular attribute of God is his delight to do good. Whatever goodness I may possess, if any, it is simply and solely a work of his sovereign grace. The Kingdom is his, and all the power and all the glory. Up to this point, he has nourished me like a mother and carried me in his arms. I am now an old man of past age. The end of my journey is approaching. I don't know what a joyful life awaits me. I have had the secret hope that Jesus Christ would allow me to live until he returns. However, if I am to depart from this body by natural death, I wish to leave a testament before I die.

If there is one thing that I totally detest it is the box they call 'coffin'. In Aleppo and all over, its use is general. This practice I find very stupid. While knowing the folly of the 'coffin concept', they go on using it. People are so filled with pride that they put a dead body in a coffin. If I die here in Aleppo, and anyone plans to make a coffin for my remains, don't let him! Tell him in no uncertain terms that in my estimation, he is involved in a very pernicious procedure. I want no outward mark or honor, no pomp or ceremony – not even the smallest ritual. For the kingdom and the power and the glory belong to my Lord.

Apraham Levonian

~~Aleppo

1941

P.S. Now a word about my burial: I have prepared a set of underwear, a shirt and a tunic. Please bury me in these. Don't spend even five *para* (the smallest coin) extra on my mortal remains. While life was in my body, I kept it under and subjected it to my Lord's command. Now when life will be gone from it, don't ever eulogize me at death, for all honor belongs to my Lord alone. To him be all glory for ever and ever. Please understand what I am writing.

From the one who loves you with all his soul and covets your salvation, to the glory of God, *A. L.*

Biographer's Final Remarks

In the aftermath of the tragic years of genocides and the expulsion of our people from beloved Anatolia, the land was practically emptied of Armenians. Aleppo was filled with the refugees who could make their way to stay in that city temporarily. Most of them were to disperse to different countries in Europe, the USA and South America. A goodly number of Armenians made their home in Aleppo, where they lived,

worked and some of them once again prospered. Apraham Hoja was living among these people. No one could have foreseen that this frail man would live to the ripe old age of eighty-eight. His death came in 1941. Before he died, he wrote the following: "There are those who are afraid of dying. If anyone overcomes the fear of death, he has conquered all other fears. One could say about him that he lived a life which triumphed over death and therefore, he lived without fear. During Apraham Hoja's God-assigned mission on earth he captured hearts, leading people to repent and to trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior. He lived the simplest life. He possessed nothing in the world, loved nothing worldly, felt safe in all places, overcame fears, was not distracted by any care and lived a life of peace in mind and heart. When evening came, without any anxiety he expected God to provide a lodging place for him and prepare him for the following day. He sought nothing for himself. He lived a life of total renunciation of the world, without feeling any grief or regret in his spirit. Nothing could rob him, even for a moment, of the joy of his Lord and his salvation.

On the night of his death, he put on his clean tunic and underwear, which he had washed beforehand in preparation. One would have thought that he was like the bride waiting for her groom. He said, "Tonight the Lord will come to take me to his presence. Ask my sister to come and keep watch with me." However, his sister remarked, "The Lord alone knows," and quietly slipped out of his room. Nevertheless, a sister in the faith volunteered to stay and keep company with him until he died. She found him in his clean clothing, lying on his bed. Just as Hoja had prophesied, his never-failing Lord came that night and took him to his mansion above. So one of the purest and noblest men that I have known passed from earth to heaven. He died as a conqueror. He died for the greatest cause, which for him was always to be spreading the message of God's kingdom. The whole of eternity was open before him and he went to join the Church Triumphant.

Apraham Hoja's Funeral

No other funeral in his lifetime attracted as great a crowd of mourners. They were from every class and background. They gathered around his earthly remains to pay their last tribute to the saint they had loved so much.

Apraham Hoja was a genuine follower of Christ who could truly say with the Apostle Paul, "*The world is crucified to me and I to the world.*" Like the Son of Man, he had no prepared tomb. He was a luminary, a pilgrim and a stranger who lived in dark surroundings. Many who died in the faith of Christ had the words of the Apostle Paul quoted at their funeral. Probably Apraham Hoja was one of the most fitting saints to this description: "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing*" (II Timothy 4:7, 8).

I have not written this account to give glory to this humble saint. He wanted no eulogy at his death. If I had intended to eulogize him, he would have been the first to protest. Throughout his life, he fought against any recognition or praise. He lived the life of a hermit with total self-denial and humility, a life resembling that of John the Baptist. Like Samuel, the mighty Hebrew prophet, he would testify, "*Here I am; testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose ass have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you*" (I Samuel 12:3).

This book has been written so that people who read it may reflect on past times and some of the saints who lived then. They will see that a meaningful life on earth can be lived with overcoming victory. They will observe what God can do in and through a person who is totally surrendered to him and his sovereign will. They may trust Jesus Christ, believing that he is always ready to use the person of unswerving loyalty, supreme passion and singleness of heart. "*Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?*" (I John 5:5). Apraham Hoja believed in his Lord, lived for him and overcame the world through His power.

At Hoja's coffin-less burial in a donated tomb in the presence of a great throng, one of the noblest testimonies ever given to a mortal was spoken by an obscure mourner: "*The world made fools of millions. Here is the man who made a fool of the world.*" Hoja's faithfulness to Christ and his witness for Him are incomparable. **The Memory of the Just is Blessed.**

Vartan S. Bilezikian

