

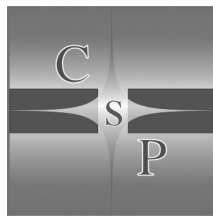
How Did I Survive?

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By Artavazd M. Minasyan

Edited Annotated Translation and Introduction by

Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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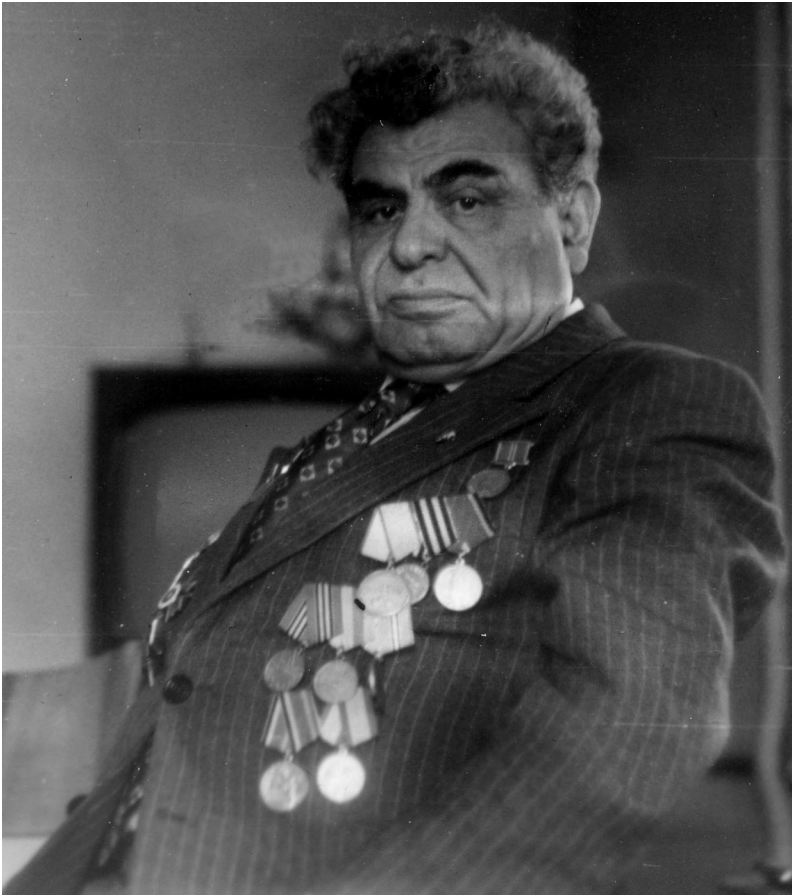
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Professor Artavazd M. Minasyan

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the first English language edition of *How Did I Survive?* by Professor A.M. Minasyan. The original hand-written manuscript was completed by the author in Russian in October 1992. Intensive work on editing and translation of the book went on for several years.

In translating the book, every effort was summoned to preserve originality and convey the individual peculiarities of the text's unique language and way of expression saturated with epithets, rich imaginary creative constructions intertwined with critical thoughts of Professor A.M. Minasyan.

The primary task was to make the translation clear, accurate and all encompassing. Without inflicting any deficiencies to the core content, that was accomplished through balance of strict grammar rules of English and a wide specter of synonyms and epithets of the Russian language.

Most problematic in translating and editing were references to historical events, specific expressions, and play of words customary in Russian but a bit complex for English language reader. For those cases explanatory notes and commentary were added within the text in square brackets. Additional background information was arranged in the Notes section of the present book. All such added commentaries are marked with my initials "AVG".

I am indebted and sincerely grateful to everyone who has reviewed numerous drafts of the text for their interest and comments that assisted in my work. I would like to express special appreciation and gratitude to my grandmother, Hera Kh. Minasyan, my Gevorkyan and Minasyan families without whose active dedicated assistance and support completion of this project would have been difficult.

Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan

PREFACE

The 21st century has brought a new era of advanced technology, grand scientific achievements, increased globalization and deeper interconnection, and interpenetration of cultures, philosophies, ways of thought and values of different peoples and countries. History teaches us that every phenomenon unfolding in the present has a specific chain of events preceding it in the past, serving as the concrete phenomenon's premise and cause. In turn, this present phenomenon is a prerequisite for events to come. This book is exactly about this developing process: this chain reaction in human history. In his autobiography spanning over the 20th century the prominent philosopher Professor Artavazd Mikhailovich Minasyan (01/21/1913 – 05/23/1993) analyzes each event [even those that seem unimportant] through the prism of his time; cause and effect bond as he speaks to the reader about his life and personal experiences. Strictly adhering to the laws of dialectic cognition of the world, the author studies each event in unity of its ingredient opposite occurrences, that at first appearing as separate and dispersed events, are integrally bound with each other and diverse events of the last century and vice versa. It is a dialectical analysis of one's life in macro perspective.

Beginning with the description of the author's childhood, *How Did I Survive?* depicts many of the details in the establishment of Soviet power in the Trans-Caucasus and related events in the early years of the 20th century. As he connects each day of his life with the national and international events occurring on a much grander scale, Professor A.M. Minasyan tells the story of 1937 in the USSR and Stalin's purges that affected him and his family directly. He critically assesses the conditions under which he served in the Red Army, taking part in all decisive battles of World War II and rising from the rank of private to major. Our author speaks with a great pride and honor about the courage and dedication of his comrades in arms, those with whom he defended their Motherland and that of the Soviet people in general. As he returns to academe and his study of science after the war, Professor A.M. Minasyan continues his struggle for the just and correct understanding and application of Marx's political economy within the realities of the Soviet Union. At times, the author's character—opposing and always intolerant to any forms of injustice, inequality and prejudice—created problems with those who tried to use science and academia for their selfish and often political goals.

Interestingly despite all trials and tribulations, all obstacles set by nay sayers on his way, and often feeling himself on the edge of total collapse, Professor A.M. Minasyan managed to create and preserve a hospitable and large family. He published many monographs, articles and textbooks in philosophy and earned recognition for his work. On innumerable occasions he lectured in the most prestigious universities of the former USSR and Eastern Europe. Above all he retained warmth in his heart and openness in his soul to his fellow human beings. This is what the book is about! The ancient Christian proverb, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” found its realization in this philosopher’s life. Seeing the richness in the teachings of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Marx and many other classical philosophers; understanding the true—underlining—essence of the processes taking place in the society of his time; being a contemporary of—often in direct contact with—the people empowered to change the lives of others, the author retained sincere love for his “neighbor,” his family, and anyone who turned to him for advice or help.

This is the last book of Professor A.M. Minasyan. He finished writing the book in 1992. He died on May 23, 1993. At that time, I, his eldest grandson, Khachatur (as he used to call me) was just finishing my last year of high school. The loss of a thinker of such great caliber, of a person with the kindest soul, and of a grandfather was a great shock for all of us. People came to bid their last farewell from all over Rostov-na-Donu, Moscow, a number of cities in Russia and Eastern Europe, and Armenia. Those who could not come telephoned or sent letters and telegrams to express their condolences and the feeling of a terrible loss to the world. Each person wanted to say their farewell to their teacher, friend, brother, and “knight” (as the academic U.A. Zhdanov characterized A. M. Minasyan at the memorial service).

In the years since his death our large family has grown larger, stronger and more solid. Now we his children and grandchildren have begun to realize the meaning of his words and the stories he used to share with us, most of which are found in his autobiography. Our grandfather’s books and teachings changed the course of the lives of many and have compelled us to ask controversial questions and continue his search for the truth. Still, as in our childhood we cry at the sounds of sad Armenian songs, not for fear but from realization of all that our grandfather endured for his family, for his people and for his neighbor—all so that people would live in peace and continue to hope for the best for humanity.

Aleksandr V. Gevorkyan

PROLOGUE

“How did I survive?” Well, you might say, anyone can ask the same question especially given the cruel time, in which we live. This is true, anyone. However, *any one* has one’s own “I,” one’s own “ego,” one’s own peculiar history. The story of my life coincides with the history of the 1917 Russian Bolshevik Revolution and the history of the USSR. Not many have experienced this. I am eighty years old. At this age, one can better comprehend the life path in its totality and recognize the various aspects and stages of existence differently. Is it not wisely said: “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape.”¹ Not “everybody” has all of that either. I have been through fire and water, I witnessed war against one’s own people, I fought Fascism, and I survived and returned to science. I created a strong family for posterity and life to go on. Please allow me to tell my story beginning with my childhood...

CHILDHOOD

Childhood? What *childhood*? Did I ever have a childhood? But there must have been something, right? I did not fall from the sky! *Something*. This “something” called childhood was perpetual cold, hunger, cruelty and a brutal struggle for existence. It was absolute damnation.

I was born in the depths of the Highlands of Armenia in the village of Tolors in the Zangezur province. Our large family consisted of the families of three brothers (Samson, Mikael, Andreas). In all there were 12 people, seven of whom were children. My father—the middle brother—died after he had been captured and tortured in 1918. By miracle he had managed to escape from his persecutors and reach home where he died after several days of torment. My father was a hero of the national liberation movement in Armenia and a member of an aid committee working with the refugees from Turkish Armenia after the 1915 Armenian Genocide.²

In the same year (1918) my father’s youngest brother Andreas left our village taking with him the only horse in our household. Nobody knew where he had gone. The only adult man left in the house was their older brother Samson Abrahamovich who was a teacher. But, he was not teaching at that time because there was no school in the village.³ Instead he worked with us in the field growing our very modest crops on the rocks of Armenia. Years later even after he had reopened the village school and became the first teacher in Tolors he continued working long hours in the field.

The most remarkable thing was that the traditions in this large family were rather strange: it was as if we lived in the ages of slavery and feudalism. In everything, and above everyone, ruled Haikanush, Samson’s wife. All children were to call her “mother”—even we, her nephews. We had to call our own mother by her first name, Shushanik (Armenian for Lilly or Lilia). Alas, my mother was a true slave. She was only 25 when she lost her husband—our father. She was continually sacrificing herself for us, her three sons. Many men came to our house asking for her hand in marriage, but emphatically, in a very determined way, she rejected them all! This beautiful, young woman rejected everyone for the sake of her children, carrying her cross in silence. Mother never spoke neither to her brother-in-law nor to any other men. Such were our customs.

Hunger, hunger, hunger. What a calamity! During all of my young

years in the family I starved constantly. There was never a single instance when I ate fully—well, perhaps there was this one time and this is how it happened. The eldest among the children was my brother Kolya. He was more respected in the family among the children because he was the eldest (according to the Armenian custom). On one occasion somebody in the family found a handful of flour with some additives, baked a small bun and gave it to Kolya. I was so awfully hungry that I ran outside, grabbed one of the supporting poles of our porch in the yard, and began to cry loudly and annoyingly. That day several Red Army soldiers were stationed in our village some of whom even stayed in our home. One of them named Apres, after finding out that Kolya had a loaf of bread and would not share it, brought me a loaf of bread. Garnik, Samson's son, asked me to share it with him.

“No way!” I replied.

I ran as fast as I could but Garnik followed me. He could not catch me, and although he begged and then later followed his begging with threats to beat me up (he was older), nothing helped him. I was surprised at how fast I ran that he could not catch up with me despite the fact that I was barefoot and had to run on sharp rocks. I wondered, from where did I get my strength?

Hunger. I cannot say this word without a shudder. Children and adults perished; animals perished. It seemed like anything living was to die from this starvation. I remember one day I was invited for *khovorats* [Armenian dish: grilled pieces of meat on a rib skewer – AVG]. Our neighbor, Mariam had cut some good pieces of meat from a dead horse she had found in a dump and later prepared *khovorats*. We ate it with a great pleasure.

The most terrifying and frightening days of hunger were always the last days of winter. By springtime we usually had run out of all our food supplies. However with the arrival of spring we always felt relief. *Why*, one may ask? there was still no bread: “So what?” I would reply; there was grass growing. The only problem was that early in the spring there was not much grass yet and later in the year when it was abundant there was no salt. Nevertheless we ate grass even without salt. In the early spring we ate snowdrop flowers and some yellow leaves that grew under the stones and rocks.⁴

Women of our village sometimes with their children used to search for this “delicacy” in the mountains. Once, my mother took me with her. I was only three or four years old at that time. Women lifted large boulders and picked up the grass from under them. Of course one could not get much without *sots-sorevnovanie* [Russian term that translates as ‘socialist

competition'; a common term in Soviet times used in relation to work place competition to inspire higher "competitive" productivity. Here the word is used with some irony, denoting fierce competition among hungry villagers trying to gather as much grass as they could – AVGJ. That day being carried away by such work my mother was getting farther and farther away from me. I fell behind and by the time my mother remembered me and grew worried I was already lost. The following three or so days the entire village searched for me in the mountains and finally they found me. Later when I was old enough to comprehend things differently I asked my mother how I had survived? Three days in the mountains for a small child was enough time for hungry wolves to tear me into pieces! My mother explained my rescue in the following way: "The men from our village who were looking for you had rifles. They shot their guns in the mountains for three days continuously so the wolves did not have time for you." This was how I had survived. Later when I was seven years old I could already use a rifle myself. With my father's rifle I hunted rabbits and stunned fish.⁵

Enough about hunger. I would like instead to tell you about our labor, our everyday work. In this extended family five people worked tirelessly: Uncle Samson, my mother, Kolya, Garnik and I. We completed all the responsibilities of the peasantry: Kolya and Garnik worked as ploughmen, and I as muleteer. In the summer we worked as mowers, reapers and threshers. Kolya and Garnik were eight years old and I was only six. Out of all the children, Uncle Samson loved me most. I do not know why. Perhaps he did so because I was obedient and did everything I was told to do. For example, very early in the morning someone had to get up on the roof of our house to open a hole that served as a window, which was closed with a sack of hay for the night. There was not any other source of light for the house. Every morning Uncle Samson repeatedly called out: "Kolya! Garnik! Kolya! Garnik..." but neither of them would get up pretending they were still asleep. He never called me. Nevertheless whenever I heard his call, I would crawl up barefoot on the roof so that nobody saw me and then open the "window." Incidentally I remember that I did not have any shoes until I turned ten. You may ask how I could have walked barefoot in the freezing winter on snow and rocks? I will tell you—because I did not feel any frost or cold at all; my feet became "hoofs."

My mother, of course, worked the hardest of all in the family. A widow, she had to provide a living for her three young sons. Only with a great compassion, pity and tears in my eyes can I remember her unbearable fate: during the day she worked in the field; at night she

worked in the house with no sleep, with no rest.

Arshavir was Garnik's younger brother and was a year younger than me. Unlike Garnik, he did not like to work or study when he was a child. Once the three of us (Kolya, Garnik and I) were mowing in the field and Arshavir brought us some dinner. We were overwhelmed with joy! Here it was—our dinner! However very soon we found out that this dinner consisted of only one egg. "Kolya, you divide it." "No, let Garnik do it. Garnik, split it for three people," said Kolya. Arshavir started crying: "Why three? Mom told me four!" Garnik was studying the egg, how to divide it into four equal parts. He looked at it from different angles, turning it in his hand. Then he got up and threw it so far into the field, that poor Arshavir, crying, looked for it in the grass the whole day, but he never found it. Although he did find a sparrow's nest with some eggs, we could not risk eating them. Another interesting thing that was amazing and unexplainable was that we, the young boys in the family, although tired and "beaten" from unbearable labor, could not sleep at night. One must sleep and rest at night before early morning and a new job but yet we could not bring ourselves to sleep. Hungry, we lay on the floor in a row talking and whispering stories to each other. My mother fed us, giving each a little piece of something to eat. She had to be cautious not to wake up Haikanush, because if she did, then...

It was sometime in the early 1920s that Soviet power had finally reached us in Zangezour.⁶ Uncle Samson was the only educated person not only in our village but also in the entire surrounding region. He could read books in Armenian and Russian equally well. As mentioned before, it was with great difficulty that he managed to reopen the village school. He gathered all the children of the village ages six to sixteen in the building of the old school, which was near the cemetery and adjacent to the old church. Holding our breaths we listened to our teacher Samson. I sat in the front row with special pride. It was my uncle, whom we called "papa." He started: "My children! Mesrop Mashtots⁷ created our Armenian alphabet in the year of 405 AD, but my people, almost everybody are illiterate! Your task is, first of all, to learn how to read and write. Agreed?"

"Agreed, agreed!"

"Does everyone agree?"

"Yes, yes, everyone, all of us! We do."

"Good, then. We know what to do now."

This was the first time that I heard the name Mesrop Mashtots. I had heard the name Mesrop before. There were several Mesrops in our village. However I had never heard the name Mashtots until that moment. Later I asked my uncle if all Armenian names ended with "*yan*,"⁸ how could there

be an Armenian name ending with “*ts*”? There must have been something wrong there. My uncle explained to me that Armenian last names did not always end with “*yan*,” especially the very old Armenian names. Also, the names depended on such things as the place where a person was born, names of his ancestors, and what his family did for a living.

Our teacher was a very intelligent and well-educated person. He taught us not only how to read and write, math, geography, etc., but to sing as well. Oh, what a beautiful voice he had! But he sang very rarely; either he was shy or thought that it was impolite to sing in public. At every celebration, weddings or birthdays, the entire village demanded that he sing: “*Varzhapet! Varzhapet! Sing!*” (*Armenian: teacher*). Sometimes he sang. Most of all he liked to sing “*Machkal*” (*Armenian: ploughman*). I vividly remember long winter nights when my uncle, sitting by a kerosene lamp, sang our sad Armenian songs. He sang with a gentle voice and sincerity. People in our village, those who did not sleep and those who slept but were awakened, would come together near our house, with bated breath, to listen to his songs. When he taught us to sing he would group us in a row, first Kolya, then Garnik, then me, and then Arshavir. None of us dared not to sing! Otherwise he would punish us. We used to stay in the row for four or five hours, singing and learning new songs. I still remember and can sing many of them. In singing, I was taking something from Garnik, who had his father’s voice, so gentle and happy. Once, many years later, when we were already in Baku [*capital of modern Azerbaijan – AVG*], I asked him to sing on the radio. He told me: “Absolutely not, Tosity (that was my nickname)! Do you want me to become an artist? Is an artist a person?” He could have become an artist but unfortunately he did not want to. Somewhere he got this idea that an artist was not a “person”! I still do not comprehend it.

Our teacher, Uncle Samson, practiced a somewhat peculiar system of discipline at our school based on coercion and corporal punishment. It is difficult for me to guess the reaction of today’s specialists to this teaching approach, but perhaps in those days it was well justified. For example, uncle would say to students: “In the morning, when you get up, you must wash your face. Is there water at home? Yes, there is. Besides that, you must clip your fingernails. Is that clear? Whoever does not obey will be punished!” Naturally, nothing was said about toothpaste in those times. Every morning when I came to school I would hear my uncle’s commanding voice: “Hands on the desks!” The teacher then would start examining our “clean” hands and clipped fingernails. With a long wooden ruler he walked along the aisles, saying, “You are a good boy! Very good!” to those students with clean hands. “And you are not!” to those

with dirt under their fingernails and then hit the dirty hands with the ruler.

Moreover there was ongoing stealing in our school. Anything could have been stolen: a pencil, a notebook, etc. I remember one time when I got involved in a “theft story.” I was sitting at my desk when I felt something under my foot. I looked under the desk and picked it up. It was a notebook! We used to make our notebooks ourselves in those times. Usually they were blank pages and clippings from books – we used empty white spaces on the margins to patch clean pages together. We used flowers to prepare ink. So, I took that notebook and exchanged it for *alchiki* (bone-dice) with another guy. Later, that same day, my classmate, a girl, saw her notebook in someone else’s possession and told the teacher about it. I confessed and waited for punishment. However the teacher said, “Since Ataz (this was my other name) has sincerely confessed to and admitted his mistake we don’t need to punish him.”

There was another incident; only this time it related more to my uncle’s discipline methods. One day I was mowing grass in the field with a few adults. Suddenly, my classmate Suren (lame from birth) ran up to me and stepped right on the scythe! He sustained deep cut in his leg and blood was everywhere. I was very afraid. I can still remember and relive the worry about that horrible moment! I was ready for severe punishment. I was not a child anymore—not six but seven-years-old, “a grown up.” How could this have happened? I even considered suicide to wash away my shame. I went to a barn to try but nothing worked. Somehow Garnik had found me, though. I was away from home for a long time so they got worried and uncle had sent Garnik to find me. When Garnik brought me home, there was silence and no conversation! I thought I would be punished at school in front of everybody. In the morning, we were walking with uncle to school in silence. He gave me a note and said: “Go to Akhlatian (a village four kilometers away from our school), find this teacher, give him this note and bring me an answer.” I was quick as lightning. I was happy! In Akhlatian I quickly found the school, the teacher, and at the speed of light ran back home. But my uncle was angry when I returned: “Why did you not go? Why didn’t you carry out my order?” But I reported to him everything and gave him the answer. Uncle Samson blushed and then became pale; he did not know what to say. I stood in front of him, afraid to meet his eyes, looking down. Suddenly he got up, embraced me, kissed me and told everyone: “Children, remember this boy! Let Ataz Ter-Minasyan be an example for you!” Had anyone else in the whole history of mankind ever received such a valuable prize for running a marathon? At that time I was overwhelmed with happiness, pride, and a deep and sincere love for my uncle. I am still amazed...

Yes, it was true. I was Uncle Samson's most beloved child. He protected me from everything and everyone, even from Garnik, though we were good friends and did the most difficult and complicated work together. There were times when Garnik and I worked in the field at nights. Yet, sometimes, he would beat me up! The first time he beat me up was when he could not catch me and take away my bread. The second time was for deceit. This is how it happened: Taking a break after a long day of work we stretched our bodies on the ground and talked dreamingly about something. Then Garnik said: "I wish I had a candy." Quietly I crawled away and then offered him a piece of "candy." It actually was hen's dung wrapped in paper! The third time was when I went down to the cellar to get some potatoes. I decided to satisfy my excruciating hunger that was torturing me (hunger that tortured all of us) by grabbing anything edible I could find and trying to eat it as fast as I could. Garnik was upstairs and quickly figured out what was going on and threw a metal basket right at my head. For this, Uncle Samson gave him a good beating.

As I said Uncle Samson protected me from everyone, but especially from the villagers. One day I was working in the field by myself without my immediate family near me. An older man from our village, Karo, was the ploughman and I was the muleteer. I do not remember why but this Karo threw a stone at me. Bleeding, I ran home and told everything to Uncle Samson. He was busy at that time but he stopped, dropped all his work and went to the field with me. As punishment he gave that Karo a severe beating.

However, my uncle was a true intellectual: a very educated and brilliant man. He was a man of rich culture and great standing. In addition to the many great things he did for our school and village he organized a drama class at school. For the first time in the history of the village there was a real theater. We put on a play called "For a Piece of Land" (I do not recall the author's name). I was offered the role of Manuk, an underage boy who had to get married to receive an additional little piece of cropland that was allotted to every family according to the number of family members. The whole village came to see the performance. We constructed our stage in a barn. People were all over the place; some sat on the floor, some on benches, and some on logs. A woman named Nianiagul sat in front of everyone. She was a widow and had nothing but a daughter, Arpik. People sitting behind her were shouting to her: "Hey, Nianiagul, get down. We can't see anything! You are blocking our view!" But she answered loudly and with pride, "I can't. My daughter is in the performance!" Arpik, my classmate, was in the second grade with me. She played the role of the bride. Soon, the play began. Acting according to my

role of the groom, I embraced my “bride,” i.e. Arpik. At this very moment, Nianiagul literally went off like a bomb: “You son of a bitch!” she screamed at me. “What are you doing to my daughter?” Pretty soon the barn was filled with yelling and arguing voices. The play had to be brought to a halt. The place was in absolute disorder; nobody was listening to anyone! Two groups had formed in the audience. One group of people was arguing against me saying that I could not hug someone’s daughter. The other group argued that it was not my fault since I was simply acting out my role; and furthermore, I did not hurt her daughter in any way. I did not even kiss her (as was in the script)! Nevertheless a fierce fight began but luckily it ended without any victims—all thanks to my uncle who got up on stage and explained to the audience that in a theater people hug and kiss and there was nothing wrong because there was no “theater”, i.e. *acting*, without that. In the end my uncle’s authority and respect triumphed. Everybody parted peacefully but the play was cancelled. I survived again but I think one could say that this was the end of my acting career.

This episode is a very good example of the customs, traditions and morals of Armenians in general and people of my particular village. The morals were strict; there were no streetwalking women or those who lived independently from their families. As a rule a young lady married only once and remained married for her whole life. Divorce was an unspeakable subject! A second marriage after a loss of a husband was a very exclusive and rare event. Such incidents turned women into objects of shame and disrespect. Did married couples kiss? My childhood observations in our village led me to believe that absolutely not. For example no Russian wedding is held without *gorko* [*“gorko” means “bitter” in Russian. Guests shout “gorko”, thus asking the groom and the bride to kiss in front of everybody. It is Russian wedding tradition. – AVG*]. In contrast I have been to many Armenian weddings but have never seen such a thing happen or anything even remotely close to it. Maybe this is simply a tradition and it does not mean a thing but, nevertheless, it is a fact.

I clearly remember the times when my brother Kolya was the secretary of the village Komsomol⁹ group (in the 1920s). By then some of the villagers had already learned how to read and write. We youngsters hardly knew how, but went from one village to another, from one house to another promoting education and liquidating illiteracy among our compatriots. “Glory to Literacy!” “Say No to Illiteracy!” “Knowledge is Light, No Knowledge is Darkness!” “Literacy is the Way to Socialism!” Such were the slogans of that time. It was a time when the *victims* [i.e. *people thrown in jails on others’ accusations – AVG*] of “mass

enlightenment” first appeared: the villagers started to write complaints against each other with or (most often) without any reason. People behaved like informers.

I remember there was a man named Nerses in our village who was lazy and unwilling to work. He dropped out of school, never owned a thing, and provided for himself by stealing from others. His mother Nazo baked lavash [*Armenian homemade bread, similar to pita bread – AVG*] for the whole village and thereby supported the both of them. This vagabond Nerses filed a complaint against a co-villager named Mushegh, brother of Bayadur, member of the Communist Party of the USSR. The complaint was filed with the Republic of Armenia Komsomol Central Committee (CC). From the CC the complaint was sent to the local organization for investigation and appropriate action. Kolya, my brother, kept everything in secret; he did not say anything to anyone except for those working on the case. I found out where the meeting was going to be held and together with a friend of mine, we hid under the window of the room where the private hearing was taking place. So that we could hear we made a hole in the newspaper that was used to cover the broken window. Holding our breath we listened to all that was happening. I never felt such great interest before. This is what followed:

Kolya: “We have received a complaint submitted by comrade Nerses against comrade Mushegh to the Central Committee. It states here that comrade Mushegh has hurt comrade Nerses’s donkey. Comrade Mushegh, how do you explain this?”

Mushegh: “This is not true. This is slander! I did not touch his donkey.”

Nerses: “Not just ‘touched’ it, but even hurt the poor animal!”

Kolya: “Comrade Nerses, can you prove that?”

Nerses: “I have a witness—comrade Tatos (*Tatos was a worker at the village mill who stammered*). He can confirm my words.”

Tatos: “I-I-I-I ccon-ffffir-mmm.”

For a while Tatos described in every imaginable detail about how everything had happened with Mushegh screaming the entire time that “He is lying, this damn pathetic stammered. He is making it up.” The discussion took place for a really long time, *very long*. Finally one of the Komsomol activists got up and simply said: “Comrades, what is going on here? Everybody knows that comrade Nerses does not own a donkey and never has! How could comrade Mushegh have hurt a nonexistent animal?” Then Nerses got up and started screaming: “So what if I do not have a donkey now. I will have one tomorrow! Soviet power is my power; it will help the poor to own a donkey.”

The case was closed but Nerses did not yield. Despite this fiasco Nerses continued writing complaints about people. There were no *kulaks*¹⁰ in our poverty-stricken village back then. There were few families that could constitute a so-called middle class but the majority of the villagers were poor people. I guess because of the number of able workers in the family, we were considered to be part of the middle class, although we lived worse than most of the people of that class. Right at the peak of the collectivization¹¹ process in the USSR, Nerses wrote another complaint. This time he accused Uncle Samson of being one of the *kulaks*. Nerses demanded investigation on the grounds that Uncle Samson had someone working for him and thus could be considered as one of the wealthy. That happened in 1930 and I had already been living elsewhere by that time. However my mother told me all about the incident. The Chairman of the local GPU¹² came to our village to sort out the issue. He gathered everyone at the church and presented his orders on *dekulakization*. Nerses, with another plaintiff, was trying to prove that Uncle Samson was a *kulak* because he had hired a worker. When the Chairman asked the people gathered whether or not this was true, some kept quiet (fearing to draw attention to themselves) while others agreed with Nerses. Then my mother, seeing that the situation was getting even worse for my uncle, forgot her damned silence and spoke loudly to prove the truth and refute the accusing arguments. On this single occasion my mother actually spoke to people with whom she had never spoken before! She spoke persuasively clearly and with a great degree of certainty. She said that many people in the village hired seasonal workers because peasants cooperated with and helped each other. For example if someone's crops had yielded more or earlier than his neighbor's then the second one helps the first one and, later on, the first would help the other one. Thus all crops would be saved and collected in time. In this case, who was then a *kulak* and who was poor? Neither of them because they were both equals! Her reasoning was very rational and persuasive. As a result and thanks in large to my mother's outburst, the *dekulakization* of my uncle was prevented.

This was another failure of Nerses and his cohorts. However irrepressible Nerses tried to defame even me. It happened several years after the incident with my uncle. Along with a man from our village by the name of Aroun, Nerses paid me a visit in Nakhichevan. It was 1937 and I had already been appointed as the First Secretary of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Oblast [AO] [*also Nakhichevan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) -- AVG*] Committee of the Communist Party. I acted as a good host to them and welcomed my guests with the best of our hospitable traditions. Nevertheless these bastards complained to my superiors, saying

they had been my hired workers, despite the well-known fact that they themselves had never worked a day in their lives and never did until their last days. By sheer luck their complaint was not given appropriate consideration by my immediate superior in the republican administration [of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzSSR), since Nakhichevan oblast was under protectorate of AzSSR – AVG] and got lost in the bureaucratic paper trail.

What happened next? Indeed the tramp remained true to oneself until the end. Such was the vagrant's pathology: as long as Soviet power is a power of the proletariat and the poor then someone else had to do the work for them and defend this power for them. When the enemy [i.e. Nazi Germany – AVG] had invaded our country and the war began in 1941, all the young people from our village went to defend the country except for Nerses. He actually pretended to be mute and deaf! When the war was over on May 9, 1945, Nerses got up on the roof of his house and using very strong language and curses screamed loudly so that people in the neighborhood could hear: "Damn you all! Is it me you call mute? deaf?" How many like Nerses, with the same pathology but on different levels, has our country had and continues to have? Did not the same thing happen on the scale of the whole country? To get the country out of stagnation and end the hunger, cold, poverty, typhus, and death, Lenin invented, yes invented, the New Economic Policy (NEP).¹³ N.I. Bukharin¹⁴ supported the new reforms and proclaimed a new motto to the masses: "Get rich!" Stalin, on the contrary, refused the proclamation declaring Bukharin's statement to be one of *kulaks*, which drove the country to further poverty. Stalin managed to do this not merely with words but through his actions as well. Here is a *Nerses* for you, only on a much higher level.

In remembering my childhood in Tolors I must say a few words about a very interesting man, Minas-apa (*Armenian: apa - uncle*). Minas was my father's second cousin. He was very energetic and industrious man. I often used to work with him and that was not a simple job. On hot summer days Minas and the other men used to split pieces of rock from the surrounding mountains in our area. Then those rocks were broken into smaller stones and finally the children, five to six years old, crushed these smaller stones into sand. Subsequently people would use that sand to sow seeds of wheat, barley or other cultivated plants in it. The need for such laborious exercise is explained by an almost absolute lack of agricultural land in Armenia—a country covered by rocks.

Minas-apa was one of those extraordinary individuals who would perform the most challenging tasks be it plowing, seeding, mowing or anything else, with a song. The whole village was asleep at night but if he

was in the field he would sing so loudly that people complained that they could not sleep!

However most of all Minas-apa was famous for his foul language! He could say anything to anyone at any time, even in front of women and children. It did not at all matter how rude or impolite his expressions were. One time we were on horseback together returning from the field, and his daughter-in-law was coming towards us. He called her to come forward. When she approached him, Minas-apa yelled: "Nubar, Nubar... *and then a very rude phrase.*" She yelled back: "Damn you!" Once a woman from the local district Communist Party Committee *[from here on we will use a more common Russian abbreviation: raikom – AVG]* came to our village. Seated on horseback and dressed in short pants, a sleeveless shirt, and a red tie, she rode right to the center of the village. We young boys ran up to her and gathered around her. We were very interested in observing an almost naked woman. One could never see something like that in the village! As we were gazing at her Minas-apa came with a mower on his shoulder and asked: "What has happened? What is this meeting for?" We told him that somebody from the *raikom* was there. Minas-apa came closer and exclaimed when he saw her: "Hey, a streetwalker has come! What *raikom*???" The woman tried to object: "No, I am not a streetwalker, I am the Women's Leader in the *raikom*!" Minas-apa started shouting and teasing her after which she disappeared together with the horse.

Minas-apa was also well known for his cruelty as he indiscriminately tortured everyone. One episode stands out in my memory. Sometimes I used to work in the field with Minas's son, Aram. We were about six years old then. Together we would load hay on the horse and transport the load from the field to a silo. One day as we were getting ready to go back to the village, Minas-apa came to us and helped his son mount the horse. As he was doing this he pinched Aram so strongly, that poor boy started to cry and cried all the way back to the village. Minas-apa explained that this act would help his son remember everything his father had taught him.

Minas-apa was also our village butcher. Every Sunday he killed either a cow or a pig in front of our house in the square. We, the children, really enjoyed that scene—especially when he removed the animal's bladder and poured it all on us.

There was another incident when Minas-apa showed himself an extraordinary person yet again. One day he dragged his daughter to the village square, exposed her butt, and told every kid in the village to spit and beat the naked butt of his young daughter. He did the same to his wife Banaush. He beat her saying, "There! Take that!" while she screamed and begged him to stop. Uncle Samson heard the screams and went to the

square. When he saw that savage scene he could only say to Minas-apa: “*Ai esh, ai esh! [esh, Armenian for donkey – AVG] What are you doing?*” Minas answered: “What else could I be doing? What kind of power do we have now? Soviet? Yes! Literate? Yes! And this pig does not want *likbez*, and does not want to study.” In response Banaush screamed even louder: “No! I do not want to! I do not want to! I am not going to learn anything!” The harder Minas beat her the louder she screamed. Eventually she got her way: she gave birth to 12 children, died at the age of 100 – an illiterate woman, but perhaps the only one like that in Armenia.

So this was my childhood in the village where I had finished the four-year primary school. My mother insisted that I continue my education and I remember her often telling us: “I have dedicated all my life so that you could learn, study and someday become professors.” To continue my education meant that I had to attend the only seven-year school in the whole region located in the town of Sisian. We studied there in terrible conditions; again the hunger was persistent anywhere I went. It never completely left me until later in my adult life. Aside from that the school was located far away from our village and it was not easy to walk there every morning. I had to walk 14 kilometers in the mountains regardless of the weather conditions. Winter months were the most difficult when the mountain paths were covered with snow and were impassable. But persistently we continued to attend the school in Sisian. We had overcome even that hardship! Kolya and Garnik had graduated from this school a year before I did. Consequently on our family’s advice we decided to send Kolya to attend education-instructor courses in Goris. Garnik went to Baku to continue his studies (at that time, the nine-year school closest to us with instruction in Armenian was there).

I was also set to go to Baku. In September 1929 my mother with tears in her eyes, packed my things. Aside from the obvious educational advantages the choice of Baku could be explained by the fact that I had uncles living there. Aghalo and Samson were my mother’s brothers and they owned a three-story house. Alas, Aghalo and Samson were of the *nepmans*¹⁵ and they did not accept me. Besides them in Baku there lived my uncle Andreas (my father’s long-lost brother). He lived in a small eight square meter apartment. Thankfully uncle Andreas welcomed me warmly to his place although with *difficulty* (“with difficulty” because he lived in very modest conditions). Despite this I settled in Baku and lived with my uncle in those modest eight square meters of space.

My first and primary task was to enter the eighth grade to continue my education in the only Armenian nine-year school, *School #25*. Naturally the problem came where it was least expected. My initial application to

enter the school was rejected. The school's principal, a man by the last name Arakelyan, argued: "First it is too late you should have thought about it before September 1, and secondly, we do not accept children of peasants." Help came from Garnik's uncle, Ashot, whose brother was an old Bolshevik. I recall the entrance exam in school. There were four or five teachers on the committee. I was asked, in *Armenian*, to define a "sentence." I answered quickly in *Russian*: "*A thought expressed in words is a sentence.*" Oh what a delight that caused among the most respectful professors! How could this village boy know Russian so well! They did not know that I hardly knew anything else in Russian at that time. By what means did I learn Russian? What miracle had made me say those words? The phrase must have stuck in my memory since the time when Uncle Samson – our first *Teacher* – had taught us. In the end the fact remains: this definition saved me and I was accepted to the eighth grade. There was no limit to my joy!

YOUTH AND MATURITY

1929

Indeed this year was the year of The Great Breakthrough.¹⁶ Usually in any [mostly Soviet] literature this breakthrough is explained as “the time when the middle class (*sub-kulaks*) went into collective farming, i.e. *kolkhoz*.” Well I must say that the middle class did not go anywhere. The middle class was merely penned in there. In reality The Great Breakthrough held a completely different meaning with completely different consequences. It was the last year of the New Economic Policy (NEP), and putting it more truthfully, those were the last days we saw abundance. I was lucky enough to “catch” the tail of that abundance: stores, kiosks, small shops, and street markets were bursting with various consumer products. Oh and the quality of those goods! It was simply the best! One must have a very rich fantasy to imagine the highest quality of any product in those times. And the prices—it must have been some sort of magic! I recall on one occasion when uncle Andreas gave me 20 kopecks (one fifth of a ruble) and said: “Look, there is a store, ‘Concordia’ right across the street. Go there and buy one gallon of wine, one kilogram of bread and a kilogram of apples.” I did exactly what he told me and even brought back some change. Everything tied out: one gallon of red dry wine—17 kopecks, one kilogram of bread—one kopeck, one kilogram of apples—one kopeck. One thing that must be added is that my uncle worked as a weaver at a *Vladimir I. Lenin Cotton Mill* in Baku with a salary of 90-100 rubles a month or maybe a bit more than that.

When I left for Baku my mother gave me a gold coin with an imprinted image of the last Tsar of Russia, Nicolas II, so that I would exchange it for a money bill. I went to almost everybody yet nobody wanted to exchange! The way we originally obtained that coin was simple. When we were selling sheep somebody paid with that coin. Later I did manage to exchange it for money and support myself for a while.

1930

The year 1930 was the beginning of total poverty. The products

disappeared quickly from stores. The rapid rate of en masse collectivization was sustained in the country's plunge into poverty; stores, large and small, went out of business. Those that stayed in business did not have anything to sell and most often the shelves were filled with useless things. Very soon a card system was instituted. It should be noted that the working class had been given certain privileges under the new system. The country was brought to full starvation once again. In spite of N.I. Bukharin's slogan 'Get rich!' poverty "flourished" everywhere. Most importantly destitution grew not only in the material sphere of society but also in the spiritual and cultural as well.

I clearly remember many discussions and arguments we had at that time about collectivization and liquidation of the "wealthy." Uncle Andreas and his comrades from the factory were arguing that Stalin was deviating from Lenin's teachings and I was arguing the contrary. Our debates were very heated and many times we very nearly fought each other, *literally*. But the opposing parties were not equal: I was only a student of the ninth grade and they were poorly educated factory workers. So what were my opponents trying to prove?

First they insisted that nobody, not even Stalin himself, knew what a total collectivization encompassed! Some said that everything would be unionized—even wives! Others said that aside from wives everything else would be shared while still others argued that only cattle suitable for work in the fields would be brought together in one collective farm. One of my opponents who had just come from our village witnessed the creation of a *kolkhoz* (a collective farm). He related the following: in the village square there was a huge pile of various household things. People had to throw all their things in this pile: dishes, pots, plates, torn blankets, rugs, sticks, spades, ploughs and other things one would need to live in a village. At that time an executive from *raikom* came to the village and upon seeing the pile ordered that mess to be "cleaned up" and so it was and people took their belongings back. Yet some time later a new order arrived and a new pile appeared on the same place. At that time Minas-apa, supported by the subsequent laughter of the people, asked the committee representative: "How about our fleas and lice? Don't you drive our lice in kolkhoz as well?" This eyewitness further told us that some "irresponsible" peasants had been killing cattle and hid the corpses underground so that kolkhoz would not find them and take them.

The second major issue that my opponents argued was that the kulak could not, nor should, be eliminated. He was not a parasite; he was a diligent worker: "You are saying Stalin does not alter Lenin's policy, but Lenin never said that the kulak must be liquidated! On the contrary, Lenin

said that the kulak was an experienced worker and we must use that experience. Stalin's policy is a complete liquidation of the kulak as a class on the basis of en masse collectivization. Is this not an alteration and change of Lenin's policy?"

Although I was nominally more literate than my opponents were, I could hardly offer any resistance to their "attacks." It took decades before the deceived, distorted consciousness, not simply my own literate one, but those of dozens of millions of other people received confirmation of my opponents' assertion. The truth was, back in the 1930s, ultimately on the side of my opponents.

Today¹⁷ we have a process of *perestroika* [literally from Russian: "rebuilding" - process of political, social and economic transformation started in mid 1980s in the USSR – AVG] under way in our country. I welcome it. No I am not a "wind gauge." I have come to the realization that the whole symbol of this 'perestroika' is to rebuild and reestablish the principles of V.I. Lenin's New Economic Policy. The idea is to interest the worker of a city or a village in the results of their labor—something that Stalin's policy had uprooted. To bring the discussion of collectivization to some sort of a conclusion it is necessary to try to provide a reasonable answer to one question: How could one person, a seminarian, without any higher education fight his way through the different strata to the very seat of power in such a gigantic country and control it for more than 30 years? These days there are many publications and discussions on this subject. It seems to me that all attempts to answer this question miss one major point. Namely it must be admitted that Stalin was an unprecedented liar, unsurpassed in the whole history of mankind! His lies were superb so to speak. They were deeply justified, relatively sophisticated, and abundant with sophism so that people believed that his lie was a truth at the ultimate authority. For example let's look at the case of the total collectivization: Stalin, the author of the *The Great Breakthrough* wrote an article *Dizzy from Success*¹⁸ in which he blamed everybody but himself for the mistakes of collectivization. What shameless hypocrisy, prudishness, blasphemy, and brazen lies!

Stalin was smart and cunning. He labeled all his speeches with Lenin's name but always acted on the contrary to Lenin's ideals! People ask how he defeated such intelligent people, party activists, as L.D. Trotsky, G.E. Zinoviev, L.B. Kamenev, N.I. Bukharin, A.I. Rykov, and many others. Again, quite simply: he acted using the authority in Lenin's name and accused his opponents of being anti-Leninists. After all V.I. Lenin was a sacred figure for the Communist Party and for the people. Naturally anyone acting against his ideas and contradicting his vision (in Stalin's

interpretation of course) could not follow Stalin—the “Lenin” of those days. He brought the country to starvation with his collectivization.

In the beginning of the 1930s millions of people in Kuban’, Don, Ukraine, and in the regions with barren land were dying from hunger. Yet simultaneously Stalin proclaimed his slogan: “Life is getting better, comrades, life is getting happier!” What unprecedented deception! No instance of political prostitution could ever compare with this. Of course the people closest to Stalin supported him: L.M. Kaganovich, K.E. Voroshilov, V.M. Molotov and others were there when he needed them. A sort of a mafia-type group had been formed. Kaganovich was the second person in the government after Stalin and was proclaiming his own slogans. I remember how *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party published his slogan: “Put a rabbit on the worker’s table!” Rabbit breeding was propagandized in the country. And why not?! There was no meat in the entire country! In one of the issues of the satire magazine *Crocodile*, a cartoon displayed a giant rabbit with the caption ‘Milk cow of a new breed.’

But let me return to the story of my life in 1930s. I had been already living in Baku for several months and giving primary focus and undivided attention to my education. However I had developed a strong desire to work, to get a “real” job besides attending my classes and there were a few reasons for that. By that time I had already adjusted to living in the city of Baku. I even started to converse in Russian and Turkish (back then Azerbaijanis, used to call themselves Turks). There was even a street in Baku of the “Liberated Turkish Girl.” Perhaps people who lived in Baku and in the republic found the word “Turks” to be disharmonious and because of that started addressing each other as ‘Azerbaijanis’. It happened sometime in the late 1930s, early 1940s.

Despite feeling settled in city life, I began to feel very uncomfortable remaining at my uncle’s home. Uncle Andreas was divorced and his female friend often visited him at our apartment. Obviously, I was getting in their way. Finally, I simply yearned to be a laborer—or, collectively, of the “working class”—a privileged title in those days; someone who in recognition for their hard labor received special treatment and respect.

My uncle offered to help me find a job. But our numerous visits to several employment agencies (ironically all housed in one building) were fruitless. There we found crowds of unemployed and there were either no vacancies or maybe just one or two. Convinced that I would not gain much from a daily trip to the agencies, I decided to find a job myself. It was already May 1930 and I remember walking, walking, walking... Where to? I do not know myself, though I did get lucky in the end. As I passed a