

Ichmeh:



**Its People, Customs and
Landscape: A Memoir
of a Genocide Survivor**

NIGOGHOS MAZADOORIAN



*Translated from Armenian and annotated,
with additional information, by*

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ICHMEH:
Its People, Customs and Landscape:
Memoir of a Genocide Survivor

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ON THE COVER: General view of Ichmeh and Mastar Mountain, 1934

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NIGOGHOS MAZADOORIAN

Nigoghos was born in Ichmeh, Province of Kharpert, in 1907. After surviving the Genocide, he came to the United States in 1924. After his marriage to Elizabeth (Yeghsapet) Aharonian, they lived in Detroit and Whitinsville, Massachusetts before settling in New Britain, Connecticut.

They had two children: Charlie Garabed and Harry Haroutiune.

Nigoghos worked most of his career at Stanley Works in New Britain from whence he retired. Stanley Works were manufacturers of hand tools, builders' hardware, security devices, bolts, nuts, rivets and washers, power hand tools.

Nigoghos died on May 13, 1997 in New Britain.

For more details, see Part 2 of this memoir.



Above left, Nigoghos and Yeghsapet; above right, front, Khachadoor Pilibosian (husband of Yeghsa Haboyan, a cousin of Nigoghos); Nigoghos; behind him, his cousin Mesrob Haboyan (brother of Yeghsa Haboyan above); last one is unknown below, Yeghsapet and Nigoghos (center) and grandchildren Lynne (left) and Beth; back row, from left, Charlie and Harry, children of Nigoghos and Yeghsapet, and Harry's wife Janice



NOTES FROM THE TRANSLATOR

♦ The town of Ichmeh was located twenty miles southeast of Kharpert. The author wrote his memoir in Armenian, in the delightful Kharpert dialect.

♦ The Armenian words enclosed between parentheses () are added for clarity or emphasis. Some of those words were added to give a taste of a local dialect.

♦ Translator's additions are enclosed between brackets [].

♦ For local dialect words I relied primarily on the dictionary at the end of the book *Kharpert and Its Children* by Manoug C. Gismegian, Fresno, California, 1955.

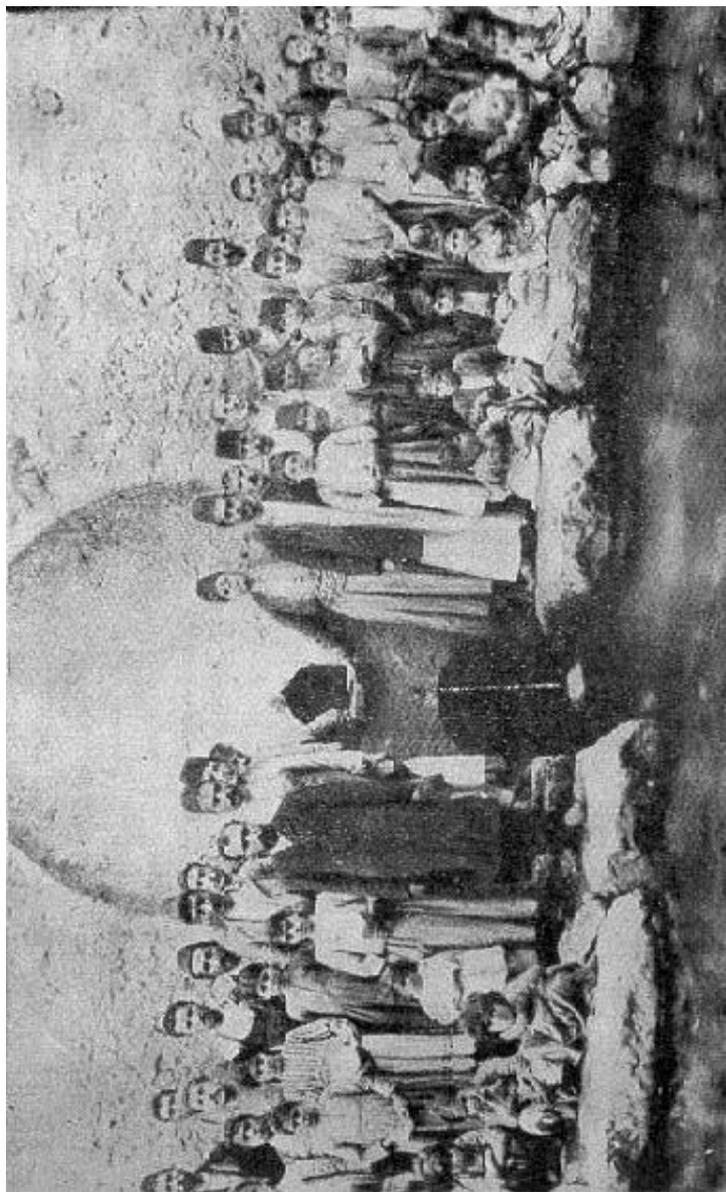
♦ The Armenian-English and Armenian-Armenian dictionaries available on the website www.nayiri.com were also very helpful.



The entrance of St. Nigoghos Armenian Apostolic Church
1913

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The water flows through the wall of St. Nigoghos Armenian Church to start the Ichmeh stream
(Manoug C. Gismegian, *Kharpert and its Children*, Fresno, California, 1955, p. 83)

PART 1

The Villages of Ichmeh and Zartarich

ABDUL MOUSHEKH AND ZARTARICH MONASTERY

Abdul Moushekh was the only son of a Muslim prince who hated immensely all the Christian Armenians. Moushekh, in contrast, had many Christian friends, and when he reached adulthood, one day said to his mother:

"I will accept the Christian faith."

"Don't do it," his mother pleaded, "your father will kill you."

Moushekh did not listen to his mother and got baptized. Then, as was the custom in those days, he had his ears pierced and put on earrings etched with Christian symbols.

When Moushekh returned home, his mother got very angry and, in order to conceal his earrings, covered his head with a wrap so that his father wouldn't see them.

Later on, Moushekh's father came home and asked to see his son.

When Moushekh appeared with his head covered, his father got suspicious and pulled the wrap, exposing his son's earrings and their Christian symbols. Extremely irate at what he saw, he pulled his sword to kill his son.

With his father in tow, Moushekh started to run. Soon he found refuge in a small house, inside of which was a stone fountain. Armenians and Kurds alike brought their sick to bathe in that pool. Tradition says many were cured.

Tradition also says that Moushekh's father killed his son there. Due to intense remorse, however, he too eventually accepted the Christian faith along with his whole family, and built the Abdul Moushekh Monastery to which he donated all his worldly possessions. Then, after he had one of his son's hands embalmed, he placed it in a glass-covered silver box so everyone could always see it.¹

This opulent monastery was erected in the sixth or seventh century. Before 1915, thousands of pilgrims visited the site during the Armenian holiday of Vartavar to see the saint's hand in the silver box. In the fall of that year, when the Ottoman Minister of War Enver Pasha visited Ichmeh, he had had many tortured to find out the whereabouts of that relic. But to no avail, as a group of Armenian women had rescued it and taken it to Mezreh. The mystery of its location now is unknown.

Near the monastery, on a level field, there is a grave covered with ash-colored stone. Tradition says that Moushekh is buried there.

ST. NIGOGHOS ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH AND THE STREAM OF ICHMEH

Going from Ichmeh toward the monastery, one had to cross a large stream formed by the waters running under the St. Nigoghos Armenian Church.

This underground stream flowed under the altar of the church. In front of the altar, in the center, the floor was built of flagstone, leaving in the middle a round hole through which a dish was lowered using metal chains to get water to be used for baptism.

The water then gushed out of the lower part of the church wall and formed a very large pool, one side of which was built in a way that the animals could get in to quench their thirst. The owners of these animals urged them to drink near the source of the water, fearing that the strong current downstream could wash them away.

After leaving the pool, the stream turned the wheels of twelve mills of Ichmeh, then watered its fields and gardens, and flowed more than an hour and poured into the Euphrates River.

ICHMEH AND MASTAR MOUNTAIN

Ichmeh was built on a very pretty location, on the flanks of Mastar Mountain. The majority of the population was Armenian; the remainders were Turks, who lived in their own neighborhoods.

The Armenians of Ichmeh were generally cultured and hospitable, and boasted three schools, two of which belonged to the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Protestant denominations, and the third was a school for girls. In 1913, with the help of immigrants to the United States from Ichmeh, a new school building was built and the three schools were merged. But alas, a year later, in 1914, Turkish authorities confiscated that school and converted it into a military police station. It was here, not long after, that the Turks tortured the priest and prominent members of the village of Habousi and killed them in a nearby ravine.²

THE AGHPERDOON

When traveling towards the Abdul Moushekh Monastery on the road to Zartarich [now renamed Değirmenönü], one crossed the stream of Ichmeh. On the left there was a building called *Aghperdoon* (*Աղբերան*), where people did their wash. Water came through a hole from the stream and went out from another.³

BLOCKS OF ICE AND THE JUGS

As everywhere at the time, there were no refrigerators in the village. In the summer, people brought blocks of ice from Buzluk, a cave on the road to Jamuz Ayaghi on Mastar.

However, by the time they returned to the village, most of the ice melted.

Therefore, members of each household filled their jugs with yogurt (*սածուկ*), *tahn* [liquid yogurt] and *tahnabour* [a meal mixed with yogurt] and covered the mouth of the jug with a piece of leather called *sareg* (*սարեկ*). Then they tied the *sareg* to the jug with a strong strap so that water did not seep into the jug.

These jugs had on each side handles through which they were tied to the stones on the side of the stream and thrown in the cold water.

During the summer hundreds of jugs were lined up on both sides of the stream. Yet villagers knew the location of their jugs. In the evening as people returned home from work, they picked up their jugs that were colder than if they were covered with ice.

The water of the stream was warm in the winter and cold in the summer.

THE PEOPLE AND ROADS OF ICHMEH

After passing the *Aghperdoon*, on the left, there were dozens of shoemaker stores, and on the right, an array of a mill, the stores of horseshoers (*հայկալան*), a bakery (*ֆուրուկ*) and a coffeehouse. Afterwards, still on the right, was the Turkish cemetery (*գոմ, գոմեօր*), then the Badijentz, Mkhsi-Mardigentz, Haboyentz, Khzlarentz, Maljanentz, and Diloyentz gardens and vineyards, followed by the wooden summer residence (*թախան*) of St. Krikor Monastery and its fields of fig trees (*թզկոց*).

Soon the road on the right split into three, one of which went to Chaghtetzor (*Չաղղթձոր*). On this road, on the left and through the Mardoyentz gardens, a road took one to a small pond (*ակնիկ*), which belonged to Der Kevorkentz. This huge property had a fountain whose waters ran into a large basin that was surrounded by a stone wall and had a depth of fifteen feet. Here the bathers learned how to swim before

venturing into the treacherous waters of the nearby Euphrates River.⁴

When a non-resident boasted to a resident of Ichmeh that he/she had been to Ichmeh, the resident asked:

"Have you seen Ichmeh's monastery, and the pond, the Euphrates River, Jamouz Ayaghi, and Mastar? If you have seen only Ichmeh, then you haven't seen Ichmeh."

Back on the road to Chaghtzetzor, on the right, the road continued on to the Chavoush Mill (*Ջալուռ Ջաղաց*) and then to Ichmeh Chour (*Իջուհ Զուր*). Here, there was a small fountain whose water was salty and it appeared that oil was mixed with it. On the upper side of the fountain there was a large flat field, and on its side flowed the stream coming from St. Nigoghos Church on its way to Euphrates River. By September, this field would be covered with magnificently green grass.

For centuries, it was here at this time that the Kurdish population of the villages of Shekhatul (*Շիխադուլ*), Jaouzlug (*Ճաուզլուլ*), Ganafig (*Կանաֆիկ*) and Kezin (*Կեզին*) brought their sick and fed them cucumbers that they had bought from the gardens of Ichmeh and had them drink the salty water. Then they had them run naked on the green grass until relief came and the constipation was over. Afterwards, the recovered sick were obligated to send a gift from the bounty of their farms – usually butter, or cheese, and sometimes a lamb – to the nearby miller because this miracle cure was his specialty.

THE LOWER ICHMEH AND ITS PEOPLE

There was another way to come to this location. From the left of the St. Nigoghos Church the road passed by grocery stores, paint stores, butchers, and blacksmith shops and reached the Chapanentz home and St. Minas neighborhood. Here the road split into two. The one on the right went toward Nakherdegh, Gaban and Shikhaji. The one on the left proceeded to Lower Ichmeh.

The Lower Ichmeh was divided into two neighborhoods. The notable families here were the Tari-Boghosians, the Gourghoians, the Mirigians, and the Tatirosians.

The Tari-Boghosian home was built at the confluence of three roads. The left one went west toward Habousi and Kharpert. The other went east toward Palou. The third went up to Upper Ichmeh.

The large Tari-Boghosian family compound was comprised of more than forty members, including its farmhands and shepherds. It also had a very large stable for their sheep, cows, oxen, mares and horses, as well as a barn for smaller sheep. All year long, many travelers, no matter what their ethnic background – Armenian, Turkish or Kurdish – spent the night there in a specially built dwelling on what was called *sakou* (*սսքոն*)⁵ in local Armenian dialect.

The abundance of harvest enjoyed by this family was indescribable. Half of the Ichmeh Plain belonged to this family. Their wheat bins were overflowing. If one watched the threshing floor (*լսլ*)⁶ while farmers threshed the harvest, one surely wondered where this enormous provision of wheat, barley, beans and lentils would be stored.

The main house had a large yard (*դրդրսլ*). An array of 12-foot-high huge casks full of wine were lined up against the house's walls. The insides of these casks were coated (*շէխունսծ*) with a special black glaze (*ձէթ*). In the fall, the casks were filled with new wine and the tops covered with a sealant to prevent the wine from spoiling.

At Christmas, after a short prayer, the matriarch of the clan opened the first cask. Then she hanged on the wall two long-handled pumpkins previously hollowed and dried for anyone who wished to enjoy the wine.

The running of the household was in the hands of the matriarch. The women and girls of the extended families did nothing without her consent.

Anyone entering in the house was not let go without being fed. When a wedding party of any ethnicity passed by, immediately a dinner table (*խնճսլ*) was set up and all kinds

of food and drinks were brought out on large pans (*սիճի*). Meanwhile, the *davul* [drum] and *zurna* [wind instrument] played exciting music for everyone to enjoy and dance. Also, in a nearby field, a horse race was held, while others showed off their horses. These customs were repeated by the people of the Upper Ichmeh.

THE HOLIDAYS

A sight to behold was the dancing of young brides and girls during the Armenian holiday of *Paregentan* (*Բարկենդան*). The same took place during the festivities of *Vijag* (*Վիճկիճ*) or *Hampartzoum* [Ascension Day].

The festivities of *Vartavar* (*Չարգարար*) in Ichmeh made another exciting festival to witness. During that time of celebration, young men descended the canyon of Ichmeh and cut branches about four feet long. Then they peeled their bark and painted them fully with red, blue and yellow colors and used them to break the similar branch of a competing rival, just as they did during Easter when they tried to crack the red-colored boiled eggs of their opponents.

The festivities started in front of St. Nigoghos Church. First the contestants placed one end of their multicolored sticks on the stone steps of the church, letting the other end extend downward, then they boasted to their opponents that "you cannot break my stick by hitting it two-three times." And the stick war started. . . . That day the Turks abstained from entering the Armenian neighborhoods, fearing that the sticks might end up on their skulls, something that had happened before. [See the Addendum below for more information]

The New Year and Armenian Christmas were celebrated in Ichmeh with what was called *kodegakh* (*գօնդկախ*) [hanging the belt]. Boys and girls climbed to the roofs of houses and after tying their belts together to form a rope, they suspended them below and started singing Christmas hymns and declaring, "Whoever gives, heaven; whoever doesn't, hell." The residents of the house filled a small basket with walnuts,

almonds, *basdegh* [rolled-up fruit], *rojig* [walnuts and dried fruits], dried mulberries, raisins, jams (*բասսևէ*) etc. and tied to the rope. The boys and girls then pulled the goodies up. Incidentally, these baskets (*սալա*) were woven and sold by gypsies (*բռշա*).

In the evening of Christmas, mothers first bathed their children, then put on them new clothing and shoes. At midnight the whole family attended church services. The next morning people visited each other to wish each other Merry Christmas and Happy New Year (*Շինաֆոր Մնունդ էւ Նոր Տարի*). That day, the doors of all households in Ichmeh were left open, and the lady of the house stayed home to greet all visitors. The abundance of food that day on tables in Ichmeh was famous: In large pans there were arrais of walnuts, almonds, *bastegh*, raisins, dried apricots, dried mulberries, etc., and jams of apricot, quince and pear. For men, wine and *oghi* [alcoholic spirit, also known as *arak*, an aperitif from the anise drinks family], and for chasers (*մազա*), cheese, olives, *khdoud* (*խրսնսն*) [small fish caught in nearby Dzovk Lake and dried in the sun], *pojakh* (*բոճախ*) [wild Swiss chard], *zambour* (*զամբուր*) [oregano]. The latter two were brought from Mastar Mountain and preserved in salt; they were very delicious.

ADDENDUM TO THE HOLIDAYS

This description of the tradition of *Poon Paregentan* is taken from the website of St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Apostolic Church of Philadelphia:

"It is the last Sunday before Great Lent. It is composed of two words; *Paree-Gentanootioun* good living, rejoicing. *Poon* means the main. This points to the fact that the fasting period following *Paregentan* is longer than weekly Lents of other feasts, and it is tied to the main event of Christendom, the resurrection of our Lord.

"The best explanation of *Paregentan* is from our Church father, Krigor Datevatzi. According to him, the biblical base is from the Old Testament from the life of Elijah when the Angel of the Lord tells him, 'Eat and drink because you will be traveling a long road' (I King 19:7). In our case this long road is the 40 days of the Great Lent journey.

"*Paregentan*, according to Datevatzi, doesn't stand alone but points to the reality of a period of abstinence. Feasting of *Paregentan* will lead us into fasting; fun filled days will turn into days of penance. In other words, the zeal and ingenuity we show in the realm of having fun should be put into the work of enriching our spiritual life."

* * *

Hampartzoum (Ascension Day) is described as follows in the Sourp Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church of Montreal website:

"Following His glorious Resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples numerous times. On the fortieth day, again Jesus was with His eleven disciples. He gave them his final instructions and told them to go out in the world and become his witnesses. Jesus then went with them to Bethany, from where He rose to heaven.

"The traditions of *Hampartsoum* used to be a particularly joyful celebration for girls, who would collect flowers, which would be put in a bucket full of water, along with a small personal item from each girl. The girls would then sit around the bucket and sing the *Yar Gulé*. With each stanza of the song one object would be taken from the bucket and the owner of that item would know her fortune, happy or sad. The opera *Anoush* is based on this theme. It is believed that this celebration of the beauty of spring stems from Armenia's pagan past and is adopted into our Christian tradition."

* * *

Festival of the Transfiguration (*Vartavar*) is presented in *Armenian Legends and Festivals*, Louis A. Boettiger, M.A., *Studies in the Social Sciences* Number 14, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, January, 1920 as follows:

"*Vartavar*, meaning 'flaming of the rose,' was celebrated in pagan times in honor of Anahit, goddess of chastity, at midsummer. The central act of the festival was the offering of a dove and a rose to her golden image. With the introduction of Christianity the temple and the image were destroyed, and it may be noted that upon the site of the Temple of Anahit in Vagharshapat was built the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin. This would lead to the strange conclusion that in the vision of St. Gregory, Jesus Christ descended upon a pagan temple. The fact seems to be that this marvelous vision was seen by a pious monk who published a life of St. Gregory some two or three centuries after the Illuminator's death. But the festival became the "Festival of the Transfiguration of Christ," although the name *Vartavar* still remains, and doves are still set flying.

"The festival is celebrated differently in various places. Upon the mountains of Armenia every family brings a sheep for sacrifice, adorned with colored papers and pigments, and as the sheep approach the shrine, lighted candles are fixed upon their horns. Sheaves of grain, fruit, flowers, and doves are also brought as sacrifices, while dust from beside the altar is carried home to children as a talisman to help them to learn their A B C's. In the absence of a church on the mountainside, which is usually the case, a large white tent with crosses is put up beside some sacred spring, with which the country abounds. The spring is necessary, for on this day the people amuse themselves by throwing water upon each other. For this reason the day is often called Armenian Water Day. After the doves are set flying, the priest sprinkles the people, and they in turn sprinkle water over each other. This practice probably dates to the legend of the deluge, the Universal Baptism with which God cleansed His sinful earth.

"The dove and the baptism are also suggestive of the baptism of Jesus by John in the waters of Jordan. This part of

the festival is probably an addition to the pagan rite, for the sprinkling of the water is symbolic of love and forgiveness; it is carried on with much laughing and merry-making.

"The festival includes also a kind of fair, for the people have to show what progress they have made during the year in art and the various handicrafts. Races, competitions, and games are held, and the victors are crowned with wreaths of roses, so that even the rose continues to have an important place in the festivities as it had in pagan days. The sprinkling of water, the games, the races, show how happy a time the people must have on this day; the exhibition of the year's accomplishment in handicraft and art points out the more serious side; while the essential religious symbolism is very clearly emphasized. What may also be noted is that there is entertainment for all, old and young, serious and frivolous. The pious-minded may sit on the mountainside contemplating the religious aspect of it all; the gay and light-hearted may sprinkle water over each other; the young and strong may run races and play games; men and women of a practical turn of mind may visit the fair and note the progress made during the year; and children may roll about on the mountainsides or gather roses, for these are in full bloom at this time."

WORLD WAR I AND THE TERROR STARTS

In 1914, Turkey entered into World War I. My father was a subscriber to an Armenian-language newspaper from Constantinople, and through it we were following the events of the war. Before long, however, this paper was closed, leaving us completely in the dark.

From the first day of the hostilities, the Turkish government conscribed all the Armenian males up to age 45 into the military. Then, as it's mentioned above, it confiscated the new school building and turned it into a police station. Before there were only three policemen in the station, now that number increased to fifteen. Also, the government confiscated the new Armenian Church building at Lower

Ichmeh. And, day and night, all the mills were busy milling the wheat supplied by the government.

Ichmeh had become a resting place for the Turkish military units on their way to the front toward Erzeroum. They came from Mezre, a six-hour walking distance away.

My father was a member of the board running the town affairs. His position was known in Turkish as *khojabashi* or *aza*. The Turks had a *mukhtar* [the head of a village; mukhtars were usually selected or elected]. These two had the authority to manage the affairs of the town. When a military unit was to stay overnight, the *mudir* [a local governor] called the *mukhtar*, the *khojabashi* and two *aza*'s and ordered them to deliver from the granary the necessary amount of flour to the bakery.

The authorities confiscated all the domestic animals from the Armenians. They also confiscated all the carts, ordering that a person should be designated to accompany the carts to keep an eye on the animals. Their job was to transport ammunition and provisions to the military.

Once the horses were taken, there was no hope of getting them back. Everyone in the village was in panic. Everyone was subjected to the terror of the whip. No one knew what the future held in store.

PART 2

One of the Happiest Days of My Life On Mastar Mountain

PROLOGUE

Mastar was the highest mountain in Kharpert and surrounding areas. In reality it looked like a huge eagle with stretched wings watching the fields of Ichmeh and environs. Its right wing pointed towards Garin (Erzerum); left wing towards Dikranagert (Diyarbakir). As mentioned in Part 1, in spring this mountain was full of various vegetables like mint (*ηωυγ*), rhubarb (*խաւարժիլ*), Swiss chard (*քոճախ*), oregano (*զամկոնր*), artichoke (*կանկար*), and mushroom (*սուճկ*). Mints and watercress (*կոնտեճ*) grew at the edge of brooks. The color of the mints was unique and tasted very delicious.

The people of Ichmeh regarded Swiss chard and oregano the central items of dinner tables. After collecting them, they preserved them in salt for the winter.

There were two ways to climb this mountain. First, over the Abdul Moushekh Armenian Monastery of Ichmeh and Zartarich. The other, over Ichmeh and Kapan.

After reaching the summit, one felt as if suddenly transported into another world, adrift in absolute silence and overwhelmed by breathtaking views. On a level stretch there was a wall warning everyone not to cross to the other side to avoid an old and very deep volcano.

Looking west, the silhouette of Dikranagert was visible in the distance. Looking east, the mountain range extended

towards Garin. On the left was visible the snaking view of Euphrates River, the river in which the Turks and Kurds threw the bodies of thousands upon thousands of Armenians they massacred in 1915. Of course when a body ends up in a river, it doesn't float far; it washes ashore. And the shores of this river were overflowing for great distances with the bodies of mostly women and children, as the young men were conscripted in the Ottoman army a few months earlier. They didn't fare any better, as they were all disarmed and killed.

Also visible from this vantage point was the beloved lake known to Armenians as Dzovk.¹ In this lake also the Turks and Kurds dumped the bodies of untold thousands of Armenians, again mostly women and children. Afterwards, for many years, the murderers could not eat the fish from this lake, since they would have fed themselves with the corpses of the Armenian dead.

ABDUCTED BY A KURD

In 1915, while walking with my mother and three underage sisters, a Kurd abducted me from the caravan of hapless Armenians and took me to a Kurdish-populated village of Genefik. Shortly afterwards, I was dispatched to Zartarich to tend the animals of their relatives. Before 1915, this village was populated by Armenians and Turks, and as mentioned before, the Abdul Moushekh Monastery was nearby.

There were also three others like me brought from elsewhere, and I remained here for a number of years and grew up with Turks and Kurds, who made us believe that *there were no Armenians left anywhere, as they had killed them all and demolished their homes.*

Additionally, by order of the government, all the walnut trees of the Abdul Moushekh Monastery were cut and turned into boards. The plan was to send them away to appropriate plants be used for the construction of rifle butts. But one day a fire destroyed most of the boards, and the villagers stole most

of the remainder. Those boards had the width of a house door, indicating the size of the tree trunks.

Near the house where I stayed lived a Turkish woman and her two children. Her husband had been inducted in the army in 1914, and she hadn't heard from him for a long time, so everyone assumed that he had been killed. Older women often suggested to her:

"You are young, marry someone else."

But she was reluctant.

In the spring of 1919 the husband suddenly came home. Everyone was aghast and wanted to know where he had been all that time.

Mustafa had very interesting tales about his time in the Caucasus, fighting against the Russians. He also had depressing stories about the condition in the Turkish army.

"One day," he said, "I got very sick, but I got well quite soon, and craved onions. Imagine, I looked everywhere in the encampment, but couldn't find any."

Shortly afterwards, the villagers planned to ascend the Mastar to collect vegetables. As many times before, I was instructed to join them. Also joining the climb was the ex-soldier, the veteran of fighting in Caucasus. While walking through the ruins of the monastery, I noticed sadness on his face as he observed the conditions around him, but did not dare ask the reason for it.

Just before reaching the summit, we stopped at a level area where cool water gushed through the ash-colored sand. It had been a habit to stop there to rest for a while. Was it fatigue or the thin air? We all opened our sacks to gorge on whatever we were carrying as we felt extremely hungry.

Whenever a group of Turks got together, they talked a lot about the massacres of the Armenians. I have been a witness to such boastful conversations quite often. That day, on the mountain, a Turk was bragging to everyone about how he had been extremely cruel with Armenian women and how he had brought home a stocking full of gold. This Turk had been a soldier and in 1914 had gone with his unit as far as Keghi,

northeast of Kharpert, where he had deserted the army and had returned home. According to military decree, those caught in such circumstances were taken to Mezreh (Kharpert) blindfolded and executed them by firing squad under Sako Meylan bridge.

While this Turk continued to brag about his exploits, I thought Mustafa, the soldier who had just returned from the Caucasus, snapped as he pulled his knife and attacked the bragging soldier yelling:

"Armenians are not the enemies of our country. It was people like you who turned the country upside-down. You killed unarmed men, women and children and you brag here about that? What kind of bravery is that? If you had been brave, you wouldn't have escaped from the army. Then you would have seen the genuine Armenian! During the fighting at Sarikamish and Hasankale² I would have loved to see your face when Armenian soldiers dashed towards you with bayonets on their rifles and screaming "Revenge! Revenge!" They weren't afraid of bombs, nor machine guns! Either they would kill you, or they would be killed!"

The villagers interceded and separated them.

When Musrafa calmed down a little, he continued to grumble:

"This morning when we walked by the monastery, I felt a strong urge to cry witnessing the devastation. 'Look,' he said, 'they didn't spare even the walnut trees! Before when you came to this spot in the spring and gazed at the countryside around Ichmeh and surrounding villages, no empty fields were seen. Look at them now! Barely a few green meadows are visible'."

Mustafa was right. They themselves were responsible for this devastation. In 1915, they took away all Armenian males 12-years-old and up, including sick-in-bed elders, and killed them. Similarly, they evicted women and children from their homes and killed them. The Turks found a lot of wheat in the Armenian homes when they plundered them – the Armenians were saving that wheat as seed for the following autumn. After

the Turks took all the seed to their homes for consumption, they did not mow the wheat and barley that the Armenians had planted, and thus the crop of that year was destroyed. Consequently, the following year, 1916, the price of a *chareg* (*չարեղ*)³ of wheat rose to the staggering price of three Ottoman gold coins, and even then it was hard to find.

Furthermore, the Turkish government forbade the American missionaries to stock up on wheat and flour for their orphanages. Rather, they were ordered to buy these items daily from the local markets. Unfortunately, these commodities were hard to find, so the missionaries were forced to lessen the food of the orphans. In the spring of 1917, despite the hindrance of the orphanage administration, some orphans secretly sneaked out to the nearby cemetery and ate whatever greenery they could find, resulting in poisonings and deaths.

Incidentally, I had an eight-year-old sister. After my abduction, she also was separated from my mother and taken by a Turk. Later on, with the help of an Armenian woman, she was admitted to an orphanage, where she died from the lack of food.

"REVENGE! REVENGE!"

Mustafa had a lot more to convey about the Armenians. He revealed that they had their own country, their own government, a military with thirty thousand soldiers, and the name of their capital was Yerevan. The Turks listening to Mustafa were astonished:

"We thought we killed all the Armenians! Where did they come from? It's incredible!"

After resting about an hour, we separated in pairs to gather the vegetables we had come for. Despite the instructions to stay together, I wanted to get away from the Turkish neighbor I was with. I wanted to be alone. I had never cried since 1915, but today I was crying from happiness. I was crying and repeating, "Revenge! Revenge!" I had just learned

that there still were Armenians, and an Armenian government, and *Hayastan* (Armenia). I looked at the valleys of Deveboynu Mountains, then to Dzovk Lake, and after that to Euphrates River, places where so many Armenians perished, and repeated "Revenge! Revenge!" praying to God that with His help I would one day be able to see Armenia.

While immersed in these thoughts, I suddenly heard the rumble of clouds in the distance. When I gazed westward, I saw black clouds hanging over the Dzovk Lake. This was not a good sign, as being caught in the rain in these mountains was very dangerous. Previously I would have been frightened, but not today. Today I felt as if I had just awakened from a long sleep and was bursting with energy. The fear of tumbling down the mountain at other times had disappeared, and I was jumping from rock to rock like a gazelle.

My sack was already filled with the mountain goodies. Then I heard the roar of another thunder and the sky started to darken. As I was tightening the lace of one of my sandals, I heard a voice who said:

"Hurry up! We must get out of this mountain before the rain starts!"

In great haste I put my sack on a tall rock and after fastening a rope on my back like a military bag, placed my sack inside. I walked hastily and soon I reached the place where we rested that morning. Soon all the others arrived and we started the steep descent. When we left the valleys behind, it started to rain, then hail the size of walnuts fell on us accompanied by thunder and lightning. It appeared as if the end of the world had started.

We finally arrived at the monastery with extreme difficulty. Ten minutes later a torrential flood down the mountain gave the appearance that everything in its path was coming down with it – rocks, trees, everything! Stories were often recounted that in such events in the past the monks climbed to higher vantage points to witness this magnificent sight below them.

To return to our village we had to cross through the flooded canyon. This necessitated staying put for a while. As our clothes were soaking wet, we gathered dry branches and twigs and started a huge fire. Then we rolled large rocks near the fire and waited until they warmed up and sat on them so our clothes would dry.

While we gradually felt the heat on our bodies, Mustafa continued his narrative where he had left off:

"I'm not defending the Armenians. In times past when people of any ethnic background – Armenian, Turk or Kurd – were caught in similar storms, the good monks here took them in, helped them to dry their clothes, fed them and kept them overnight."

Another Turk complained about government actions:

"We killed the Armenians because we were told that they were infidels. But what was the issue with the Kurds? A lot of Kurdish refugees from Alashgerd [Eleşkirt] [displaced during the Caucasus Campaign of World War I] were brought here and placed in Armenian homes. These lazy Kurds moved in one of the rooms and dismantled the beams and rafters of the others to burn for heat. Thus they demolished all the homes left by the Armenians. They also came to the monastery and destroyed everything, preventing anyone to seek shelter there in bad weather."

MASSACRES AND MORE MASSACRES

The Abdul Moushekh Monastery in Zartarich once had a large fountain built centuries earlier by stonemasons using specially cut stones. Four times a week the water from this fountain was used to drench the willow trees surrounding it.

Riza Bey, the tyrannical official of Zartarich, wanted to have a similar fountain on his property named *Ishitmeh Dere*, situated near Ichmeh. This large property, laden with countless fruit trees, once belonged to the Der Barghamian family of Ichmeh. However, with the blessing of Turkish

authorities, the grandparents of Riza Bey had come from another part of the country and had confiscated the estate.

To build his dream fountain, Riza Bey had Armenian workers toil excessively to dismantle the stones of the monastery fountain as well as stone benches around it and had them restored on his property.

Based on previous experiences, the Armenians of Zartarich had a premonition that one day this place would be a place of torment for them. Indeed, during my captivity in Zartarich with a Kurdish family and at an all-male get-together, I heard accounts of how two leading Armenian men of Dikranagerd [Diyarbekir] were brought to this place in May 1915. First, the fountain's water level was lowered to human height, then the pair was stripped off and lowered in. They had to keep their heads up all the time if they didn't want to drown. Of course being in the water for a long time resulted in the body relaxing and then sleep beckoned. Guards armed with sharp awls took turns to prick them when the poor souls approached the walls of the fountain to seek support. The objective of this punishment was to compel them to confess a secret.

After torturing them for a long time, they took the wretched men to a nearby spot known to Armenians as "the summer residence of the monastery" (*վաճառից թախտ*) and killed them. One of the killed was an older man; the other was young.

After Turkey sided with Germany and declared war on the Allies in 1914, all the young Armenians in Turkey were drafted into the military. A few months later, however, they were summarily disarmed after false accusations that they were conspiring with the Russians. Until May 1915 Armenians in Ichmeh had a very difficult life as Turkish military units passed through the town on their way to the front in Garin [Erzeroum] and stole all the domestic animals they could put their hands on.

In May 1915, the Turkish gendarmes went to Habousi and arrested all the leading figures of the village, including the priest, and brought them to Ichmeh and confined them in the Armenian school building that was converted into police headquarters. For the next three weeks these wretched prisoners were tortured endlessly, after which no nails were left on their hands and feet – they all had been pulled one by one. Finally, one night they were all taken to a nearby field and ordered to sit on the ground. Then, they were all killed by knives and swords.

Three days later, accusing the young boys of non-military age of throwing rocks and smashing the windows of the *mudir* [local governor] the previous night, the gendarmes arrested all of them and imprisoned them in Mezreh.

Ichmeh was the seat of the *mudir*, who had at his disposal the police station and three policemen. The following villages were subordinate to Ichmeh: Shekhji, Geben, Akhor, Genefik, Zartarich and Habousi. For any minor legal cases people of these villages appealed to the *mudir* at Ichmeh.

Each community had representatives whose responsibility was to report to the authorities the incidence of births and deaths, as well as transfers of properties between people. A *mukhtar* represented the Turkish community and Armenians had a *khojabashi*. There were also two *aza*'s.

In May 1915, a town crier went street by street announcing that by the order of the local police, all Armenians had to bring their domestic animals to Nakherdegh the following morning, in order for the authorities to brand them. Those who did not obey this order would be shot!

Three weeks later, three civil engineers came to town and, after meeting with the *mudir*, began to survey the nearby mountains and valleys and placed crosswise markers. Armenians were puzzled about these activities in barren surroundings. Ichmeh Armenians had among them graduates of European higher institutions and even a graduate of the

Yerznka [Erzincan] military academy with a rank of major. They were puzzled too.

After the massacres, the reason of these goings-on became apparent – the authorities were looking for locations away from cities and towns to execute the plan of exterminating the Armenians. And indeed that's what they did!

Turks had already massacred the young Armenians in the military. Then one day one hundred *chete* forces [consisting of intentionally released convicts by the government] appeared on horseback in Ichmeh. Each day these irregular murdering marauders appeared in a village and gathered the Armenian men over the age of twelve. Then they brought them to Ichmeh and imprisoned them in the St. Nigoghos Armenian Church. Finally they picked up the men of Ichmeh and imprisoned them in the same church.

Next morning, the *chete*'s tied the prisoners in groups of ten and marched them through Genefik to a place called *Arpa Talasi* on the Deveboynu Mountains. The captain of the *chete*'s then read the following proclamation:

"We have received orders from the government to kill all the Armenians in Turkey, without sparing the old nor the women and children. We will also destroy all your churches and schools. No trace of Armenians must be left in our country."

Then he ordered his troops and a large number of Turkish mob assembled there to begin the slaughter. Not far from this site, near Lake Dzovk, the mob also killed the remnants of 60,000 Armenians from Garin and Keghi. They also killed hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the Deveboynu Mountains.

* * *

After the slaughter of all the men, it was the turn for the women and children. The same *chete*'s assembled all of them, young and old, from the outlying villages and brought them to Ichmeh. Then they added the women and children of Ichmeh

itself to the multitude already filling the fields from the Turkish cemetery to the St. Krikor Mountain.

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the caravan of unfortunates was forced to march towards Deveboynu Mountain. Tagging along with the soldiers were a horde of Turkish and Kurdish gangs, who were freely carrying out disorders at will – forcing marchers to take off and hand over their shoes, abduct girls from their mothers, or kidnap any woman or child they wished.

At 7 o'clock, near Genefik, we were ordered that we will stay overnight in a field, where a large mob of Kurds were already assembled waiting for their victims.

It was here that a Kurd separated me from my mother and abducted me.

ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY

In the spring of 1922, I fled from the Turkish hellhole as well as my Kurdish captors through the blood-spattered valleys of the Deveboynu Mountains, accompanied by a group of other escapees. As I mentioned above, the men of Ichmeh and surrounding villages were killed in these mountains, at a place called *Arpa Talasi*. My father was among those killed.

Before proceeding further, I told my friends:

"I want to visit this valley for the last time. By the time you meander to the top of the mountain through the zigzag road, I will join you at the other side."

When I reached the base, I said to myself:

"Accursed Turk! You couldn't leave in peace even the bones of the Armenians!"

In the fall of 1915, when Ottoman minister of war Enver Pasha visited the area, he had ordered gathering and burning all the Armenian dead scattered in these mountains, so that when the Russian Army arrived to this place from the Eastern front, they wouldn't know what had taken place here.

As Victor Hugo has penned so aptly:

"The Turks have passed through here.
All is bleak, in ruin."

The Turk had definitely passed through here!
Indeed, until 1922, Turks and Kurds came to these mountains, crushed the bones of the dead Armenians and sifted in sieves hoping to find anything valuable. Quite often they did find gold and silver coins and gold teeth.

After watching for a while the handiwork of the savage Turk, I picked up a broken bone and told myself:

"I will consider this to be my father's bone and will take it with me wherever I go" and started my upward climb. I almost made it to the road, when suddenly I felt a slackness as if someone behind me hindered my steps, so I looked for a level place to sit to avoid tumbling down the mountain.

Finally I sat down and looked behind me, sensing the presence of familiar faces. Yes, my father and the golden-bearded priest Father Margos of our village were there. My father was scolding me in an angry voice:

"Where are you taking my bone? While I eked out a living abroad, I was dreaming for years that my ashes would one day be buried in my birthplace. Here you are, taking my bone elsewhere!"

I started to argue with my father:

"Look, they killed all of you here, they burned your corpses here, and after crushing your bones here now they have piled your ashes in the middle of the valley so that next spring the flood would wash them to Bazakar Chay stream and then to Euphrates River in order to disperse all traces of your bones."

Father Der Margos said:

"My son, don't worry about that. The Turks will not be able to hide their crime by crushing our bones and piling the ashes in front of the flood. The wind will take the dust of our bones to the lofty Armenian mountains where we will behold our future generations that I'm sure will not forget what the Turks did to us."

I was still in a reverie when I heard the sound of a whistle. It was my friend Bedros who was looking for me. I got up, but I sat down again. I still felt the slackness.

When my friend saw me, he ran towards me and said:
"What happened to you? Why has your demeanor changed?"

I told him that my father was scolding me.

"Get up," he said, extending his hand, "there is no such thing. Don't be afraid, you were very agitated, that's why you were daydreaming," and suggested that I leave the bone there. But I wanted to take the bone back to where I found it.

My friend got angry and said:

"How do you know that is your father's bone?" and took the bone and placed it in a high place so that the flood wouldn't wash it away.

ARRIVAL TO ALEPPO, SYRIA

After much difficulty we finally reached Aleppo, where the misery continued. Many had relatives or friends in that city, but Bedros and I had no one. We had no money either. We slept on the stone floor of the Armenian Church courtyard, and each morning woke up with aching bones. We were advised to enter an orphanage. There was an Armenian orphanage nearby, but they wouldn't accept us, saying:

"We don't accept new orphans. The ones we have we will place elsewhere soon."

One morning an elderly gentleman from Urfa approached us and asked why we weren't applying to an orphanage.

We described our predicament. He then said:

"Come with me. I will take you to another orphanage. I'm sure they will take you in."

He took us to his shoemaker store and gave a note to his apprentice, instructing him to take us to Miss Jeppe's orphanage and hand over the note to her.

Soon we were called in and were presented to a smiling older woman:

"This is Miss Karen Jeppe from Denmark."

She called us near her and with flawless Armenian asked our names and the villages we hailed from. When we gave her details of our story, she was very touched. This woman had a condition – she blinked her eyes constantly, giving the impression that she was winking at you.

She then ordered her subordinates to take care of us. They took us to the bath where they discarded our dirty rags, washed us, cut our long hair, and gave us temporary clothes while a seamstress took our measurements for new ones. Afterwards, a young woman entered our biography in a large book and inquired about our parents and if we had relatives anywhere. By the time we answered all these questions that took a few hours, our new clothes were ready – after the war's end, the French Army had donated to the orphanage their surplus stockpile of military uniforms, which were fitted by the seamstress for the orphans as necessary.

When we were taken again to Miss Jeppe's office, she said:

"I will send you to Mister Mihran. Be obedient to him. He will explain to you the rules of the orphanage."

After questioning us, Mister Mihran said:

"You will remain in this orphanage for six months. We will send you to a tradesman in the city. You will work for him for six months gratis. In return he will teach you his trade."

Mihran was the guard of the orphanage run by Danish missionaries. Each morning he drilled us in physical exercises, dealing with us like a stern military commander. Everything had to be done in orderly fashion.

It was not possible to blame Mister Mihran for his strictness, since most of us were boys and girls who had lived for some years with Kurds, Turks and Arabs and had lost our Armenian heritage and language.

Every morning we orphans were taken as a group to the city. Once there, we were separated and each one of us went to an assigned destination to learn a trade. In the evening we had

to return at a specified time. If for a reason we were late, we had to explain the reason to Mister Mihran.

After supper, Mister Mihran taught us reading and writing in Armenian, and once a week he trained us in singing Armenian patriotic songs.

One day he was teaching us a new song that accentuated the word "Revenge!"

Revenge! they roar from the depth of graves,
Revenge! they roar . . .

Each time we came to the word "Revenge!" my throat shriveled and I could not continue. Exasperated, Mister Mihran gave me a soft smack, a slap that I will never forget, and said:

"You are stifling the best part of the song!"

When the singing lesson ended and everyone started to disperse, Mister Mihran signaled me to stay:

"You were singing other songs very confidently, why did your voice give in singing this particular song?"

I told him the story of the Turkish soldier who had just returned from the Caucasus and who was part of a group ascending the Mastar Mountain to collect various vegetables. "That's the reason that every time I hear the word 'Revenge!' I choke and my voice gets muzzled."

Mister Mihran was very stern with us, but at the same time he was very caring. He come up to me, hugged me closely, took out his handkerchief, wiped his eyes and went off.

Next day, at the start of the Armenian history class, he declared:

"Today I will recount to you the recent painful events. I know every one of you has a heartbreaking story. I will tell you mine.

"I was born in Urfa. After graduating from local schools, I enrolled in the Turkish military school. In 1914, after graduating with the rank of captain, I entered into military service. After a few months, the Turkish military started to

disarm the Armenian soldiers. Before long I was informed that the commandant wanted to see me.

"When I presented myself to him, the commandant ordered me to hand over my sword hanging on my side.

"I protested that my sword was given to me by the Sultan and I promised never to hand it over to anyone.

"He replied angrily that 'Yes, the sultan has given it to you, but now he wants it back,' and he ordered two soldiers present to undo my sword and send me to join the 'amele tabouru' (work battalions), a specially organized work force organized by the Turkish government to conscript the male non-Turkish population consisting mainly of Armenians.

"For a while, they made us work cruelly in road construction. Then they sent us to Baghdad and Basra to build railroad tracks. Often we witnessed Turkish soldiers show off their 'talents' to us by pulling starving Armenian women from the marching caravans of deportees and using them torturously.

"The German commandant there kept me in his service so that the Turks wouldn't kill me, but death was preferable to such living conditions."

After telling us his tragic story, Mister Mihran concluded:

"You will not be orphans forever. When some day you get married and have children, tell your story to them. Above all, try to form a family worthy of the Armenian people."

The author signed his memoir thus:

Written by

NIGOGHOS MAZADOORIAN

From the Karen Yeppe Danish orphanage

Aleppo, Syria

END NOTES – PART 1

¹ In his book *Kharpert and Its Children*, Fresno, California, 1955, p. 64, Manoug C. Gismegian cites a variation of the name Abdul Moushekh as follows: "The Zartarich Monastery was dedicated to the barefooted saint Abdul-Mesih of Mastar."

www.houshamadyan.org cites another variation: "Zartarich monastery is near the villages of Ichme and Zartarich, and is located on the foot of Mount Mastar. The monastery bears the name of an Assyrian saint – Abdul Mesih or St. Mergerios.

² Manoug C. Gismegian, cited above, gives the following additional details:

"Ichmeh was twenty miles southeast of Kharpert, on the sides of Mastar Mountain. Some of the residents, however, to be closer to their fields, had relocated downward to the valley known as Lower Ichmeh.

"Ichmeh had a population of 500, half Armenian and the rest Turkish.

"Ichmeh was the center of 18 villages, and supplied all of their economic, business and trades needs.

"The monastery of Zartarich was two miles away from Ichmeh.

"There was a cave near Ichmeh named Jamuz Ayaghi. It was formed in between two gigantic rocks, next to a rivulet. It reminded the author the Yosemite Park in California."

³ Manoug C. Gismegian, cited above, p. 38: "The Zartarich Monastery was located two miles from Ichmeh, near Zartarich village. It had abundant water, healthy air and giant walnut trees. It was surrounded by many villages populated by Armenians. The sanctuary, cells and surrounding walls were in ruins, but the resident abbot, Rev. Fr. Garabed (1889) had made many improvements. After his death, however, everything was in ruins again. On 180 acres, the monastery had vineyards, many trees, and its diocese extended over 24 Armenian villages."

⁴ The local style of identifying individuals and families apparently was taking out the 'ian' after their last names and adding 'entz'. Thus, 'Maljanentz gardens' above would describe the adjoining gardens of all the Maljanian families. Also, to describe the family tie of an individual, one would be described as 'Khzlarentz Khachadoor.' For its unique flavor, that style was kept during the translation.

⁵ "A sitting or sleeping bench, usually the length of a wall, built by wood, stone or other building material. The old Armenian houses usually did not have furniture. Guests usually sat or slept on the floor or on the sakou." —See Archbishop Knel Jerejian, Paramaz G. Doniguan,

and Ardashes Der Khachadourian, *New Dictionary of Armenian Language*, Beirut, Lebanon: G. Doniguian and Sons, 1992.

⁶ "A threshing floor is a specially flattened outdoor surface, usually circular and paved, where a farmer would thresh the grain harvest and then winnow it. Animal and steam powered threshing machines from the nineteenth century onward made threshing floors obsolete. The outdoor threshing floor was either owned by the entire village or by a single family, and it was usually located outside the village in a place exposed to the wind." —From Wikipedia

END NOTES – PART 2

¹ Manoug C. Gismegian, *Kharpert and Its Children*, Fresno, California, 1955, p. 78:

"Dzovk, also known as Gölcük, is now known as Lake Hazar; it has the distinction of being the source of Tigris River.

"On the shore of Dzovk was a village with the same name and on a peninsula in the lake was the St. Nishan Armenian Church and a castle by the same name. History tells us that in the twelfth century Catholicos Krikor III Bahlavouni resided here, as did his brother, St. Nerses the Graceful (1102–1173), a prolific writer and theologian of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

"It is obvious that the lake previously was much smaller, and the existence of a peninsula can be ascertained by the still extant ruins of the church and the village under the waters of the lake. In 1836, unimaginable amount of snow and rain had caused the lake to rise and inundate everything around it."

² The Battle of Sarikamish was an engagement between the Russian and Ottoman empires during World War I. It took place from December 22, 1914 to January 17, 1915 as part of the Caucasus Campaign. The outcome was a Russian victory.

Another battle during the Caucasus Campaign took place at Hasankale with the same result.

³ According to Manoug C. Gismegian, cited above, p. 712, 1 chareg = 60 oka. Further Internet search reveals that 1 oka is 2.75 pounds. Therefore, 1 chareg = 60 oka = $2.75 \times 60 = 165$ pounds.