

Amid Hardship, Boghos Matures into a Young Man

Boghos Kezerian is the father of Robert A. Kaloosdian, and a central figure in the latter's recent book, *Tadem, My Father's Village: Extinguished during the 1915 Armenian Genocide*. Born in 1900 in the small Armenian village of Tadem, located within the Kharpert region of eastern Turkey, Boghos's childhood was, by his own account, not a happy one. Although early twentieth-century Tadem had many of the characteristics that should make for an idyllic, pre-industrial agrarian society—productive farmlands, a favorable climate, a strong cultural identity—in fact the village was experiencing considerable hardship at the time, and Boghos's childhood was not unaffected.

Just five years prior to Boghos's birth, the Ottoman government, in coordination with Hadji Bego, a local Turkish strongman and government proxy who had gained considerable control over Tadem, executed a brutal raid and massacre of the village. In October 1895, a mob of professional soldiers and other government hands stormed the village. They seized valuables, pillaged the food stocks, and robbed the villagers even of their farm animals. Houses were burned to the ground. Hundreds were murdered, some tortured to death. Males and community leaders were eliminated in the highest proportions. Women were held captive and raped, and some were forcibly converted to Islam and peddled off to Turkish households as “wives” or concubines.

The aftermath of the 1895 Tadem massacre was severe and long-lived, and it was during this trying period that Boghos grew up. Resources were scarce, and memories of trauma were close on people's minds. Indeed, some of Boghos's earliest memories were the accounts he heard of that harrowing episode.

However difficult the living conditions, at least young Boghos had a family that cared for and supported him the best they could. Both of Boghos's parents, Kevork and Sultana Kezerian, survived the massacres. He also had four siblings, three of them older than Boghos, one younger. And he had a relative Garabed who, although more distant on the family tree—he was Boghos's paternal grandfather's brother's son—contributed significantly to Boghos's care, and furthermore was someone Boghos greatly admired.

So Boghos could count among his blessings that, in early childhood at least, he did not have to fend for himself, but rather had elder family members to look out for him. But as the years passed, and Boghos reached adolescence, his family support structure began to disintegrate. In 1912, both of his older brothers journeyed to America in search of work, one of them making the trip for the second time. While the brothers' goal was to earn money to send back to the family in Tadem, the impact of their emigration turned out to be very costly. In order to obtain enough money to pay for the transport to America, Boghos's family had to take out high-interest loans with Hadji Bego, and post much of their valuable farmland as collateral. And while the brothers were indeed able to return a significant amount of wealth back to the family, it was deposited in a bank at the time World War I broke out, at which point the funds were embargoed and also devalued.

More family members would soon be lost. In August of 1914, word reached Tadem that the Ottoman government was calling on all able-bodied men, Turk, Kurd, and Armenian alike, to enlist in the military and defend the empire against the Russians. Boghos was too young to be drafted, his father Kevork too old, and his older brothers in America, too far away. Garabed, on the other hand, was subject to the draft. And while he could perhaps have avoided the first round of conscription by paying a special fee called a *bedel*, Garabed reasoned that he would in any

case be drafted at some point or another, and so proceeded to enlist. Sadly, as Boghos would later find out from a village Turk who served beside Garabed, Garabed perished that winter as the Turkish army began an ill-advised offensive against Russia in the Caucasus region.

Garabed's departure from Tadem and ensuing death robbed Boghos of an important adult figure in his life. With Boghos's absent older brothers and aged parents, Garabed was the family member most involved in Boghos's boyhood activities. He was a friend, a guardian, and someone for Boghos to look up to.

Even with few men of military age remaining in Tadem, the elimination of Boghos's family would continue. In early 1915, Ottoman gendarmes visited Tadem and demanded the villagers to surrender some of their oxen and oxcarts, in addition to men who would serve as oxcart drivers. The gendarmes said that the carts were needed to move military supplies and that the men, oxen, and carts would be returned in a couple of weeks. As the villagers agonized over this request, the officer in charge announced that for each family, donating either an ox or a driver would be sufficient. Kevork, an apolitical man known for his gregarious nature, volunteered himself for the mission, choosing to spare his ox. Kevork thought the economic risks of volunteering his ox would be too great. His family thought otherwise, and they pleaded with him not to go, but to no avail. Kevork stubbornly refused to give up an ox. But there was wisdom in the family's pleas. For indeed, Tadem's men, oxen, and carts would not be returned within a couple of weeks as promised. When Boghos and his mother Sultana watched Kevork exit Tadem with that convoy of oxcarts, it proved to be the last glimpse of him they would ever have. Kevork was worked under intolerable conditions, deprived of adequate food, water, and shelter. After five months under these conditions, Kevork's body succumbed to the stress, and he perished.

With his father's departure, Boghos, now fifteen years of age, became the oldest male within the family group that remained in Tadem. To a greater extent than ever before, he would have to look out for himself, as well as a few other family members such as his mother and his younger brother Zakar. But in the face of persecution and genocide, Boghos was not well prepared to be a leader. He grew up in a household that was poor, agrarian, and entirely apolitical. In all likelihood, the instincts necessary to survive the onslaught of a merciless and conniving government would elude Boghos, just as they had eluded his father and his uncle Garabed, who too willingly put themselves in the custody of the Turks.

Boghos's instincts would be tested in this regard just months after his father left with the ox carts. One night during the spring of 1915, Tadem was once again infiltrated by Ottoman soldiers. After rousing the villagers and gathering them outside their homes, the soldiers announced that each family must give up one man. Young Boghos, without considering what he might be volunteering for, innocently stepped forward, and was taken in by the soldiers. Boghos and the other captured men were then bound with rope and marched to the city of Mezre, where they were temporarily imprisoned. Luckily for Boghos, the fates of the captives were different depending on their respective ages. The young and the old were separated and returned to Tadem. All the others were taken away, combined with a larger group of men from other villages, marched into the mountains, and slaughtered.

Having returned to Tadem alive, Boghos was given an opportunity to learn from his blunder, an opportunity that Kevork and Garabed never had. Following the episode, Boghos became appropriately mistrustful of the Turks, and generally fearful. He rarely ventured out of his house or showed his face in public, hoping to avoid another traumatic experience.

Nonetheless, the trauma would continue for Boghos. Later that year, his mother Sultana and older sister Lucia were herded by Turkish soldiers into a caravan with other Tadem villagers, forced to abandon their homes and possessions, and marched into the desert. Sultana would not survive the ordeal.

Boghos was able to avoid the deportation only by being taken in by a Turkish household, where he worked as unpaid laborer, and was forcibly converted to Islam. At this point, Boghos was starting to act less like a naïve adolescent—the sort that would put himself at the mercy of his oppressors—and more like a survivor. There were two keys to survival that he knew for sure: one, do always as your master instructs, without complaint. And two, when soldiers or other Ottoman representatives come to the village, you hide.

But unfortunately, Boghos's application of this second rule revealed a tragic oversight. While Boghos knew that he was at great risk of being swept up and discarded by whatever loathsome individuals visited Tadem claiming government authority, he did not think the same held true for his brother Zakar. Zakar being only twelve years old, Boghos believed that Zakar was too young to be of much interest to the villager's oppressors, and thus believed he would be safe whenever outsiders came. This assumption turned out to be false, and the consequences for holding it, dire. On an occasion where Boghos hid himself but failed to warn Zakar to hide, Zakar was taken away, and along with a number of other Tadem villagers, marched to a distant village, felled into a ditch and cruelly butchered with knives and swords. For the rest of his life Boghos bore a heavy burden of guilt, believing that had he warned Zakar or kept him hidden by his side, Zakar, like Boghos, may have survived.

On a brighter note, after about a year of involuntary servitude to a series of Turkish masters, during which time Boghos was consistently underfed and overworked, he managed to

flee to Mezre to live with his maternal Aunt Nazan. Finally, Boghos had achieved refuge from the violence and subjection that was afflicting his Tadem.

But Boghos was maturing into a brave and capable young man, and he would not be content clinging to the uncertain refuge he had found in Mezre. Boghos was determined to take whatever action would yield the best chance of eventual liberation, both for himself and his remaining family. That course of action, Boghos decided, was to escape the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire entirely, and then send help for the remainder of his family. To make it easier to locate those family members when the time came, Boghos wanted them to be living together in the same place. He helped to make this a reality. Under Boghos's encouragement, his aunt Nazan, his cousin Taquohi, and his nephew Nishan moved in with another of Boghos's cousins, Vartanoosh Der Aharonian, who was living in the nearby town of Yeghiki. Besides being relatively safe, and being able to accommodate to all four of them, Boghos had another reason for preferring the Yeghiki house over other possible destinations: there was a missionary school in the town where Taquohi could learn to speak and write in Armenian. That Boghos considered this as a factor was something Taquohi found very moving. Taquohi would survive the genocide, and later report to author Robert Kaloosdian that, "You're father [Boghos] was my hero. Even in that chaos he was thinking that I should be going to school."

With his family now gathered in one place, Boghos prepared to make his escape from the Ottoman Empire. The way out was treacherous, but clear enough: Boghos would trek north through the rugged and sparsely populated mountains of the Dersim Plateau, aiming to reach the Russian-controlled city of Erzinjan on the other side. In Erzinjan was the headquarters of an Armenian militia dedicated to protecting Armenian refugees and noncombatants. If Boghos could make it there, he would be well on his way toward procuring a lasting freedom.

But the passage to Erzinjan could not be made safely on one's own. Boghos would need to recruit the services of local Kurdish guides who, usually requiring a fee, were transporting groups of hopeful escapees to Erzinjan through an underground railroad. Here there was a problem: Boghos had no money to offer them. As it was, he could not even afford to feed himself adequately.

Of course, Boghos's family did have some money in the bank. His older brothers in America had sent money to the Kezerian family for the acquisition of farmland, but the funds had been embargoed since the early days of the war. Boghos decided to see if this obstacle could be overcome, and some of the money could be withdrawn. At first, Boghos was unsuccessful. But then he learned that he might be able to get his way by threatening the banker overseeing his account. The key was to tell the banker that if he did not allow Boghos to make a withdrawal, Boghos would register with the adolescent group of Turkish military cadets led by the Dekenek Alayi. For, according to government policy, joining this group would license Boghos to collect all the money in his account should he insist on it. Upon being refused his funds for a second time, Boghos confidently delivered the threat to the banker: "I do not have any money. If you won't give me my money, I will not have any other means and ways of surviving. I will not die hungry, so I will go and register with the Dekenek Alayi and then I think that thanks to the government I can take all my money from you." No longer the innocent boy who volunteered to go with the Ottoman soldiers asked for men, Boghos was now willing and able to put up a sturdy resistance to his oppressors. The banker succumbed to the threat and allowed Boghos some of his money.

Boghos returned to the banker several times for additional withdrawals, and by early 1917, he had enough to begin the journey. It was on a mild winter night that Boghos and a group

of thirty or forty other travellers, led by Kurdish guides, quietly departed for the mountains of Dersim. Boghos, still just an adolescent, would face many dangers ahead. But he was not unprepared. Whereas hardship of the magnitude Boghos had experienced would have broken many young people, for Boghos it seemed to have accelerated his maturation. Having lost much of his closest family, Boghos became a guardian of his own destiny, and a steward for others in the family that needed his help. Having lived through the wrath of a genocidal regime, Boghos had acquired the instincts and the mental toughness that survival demanded. With these survival skills and sense of responsibility as a foundation, Boghos would succeed in his escape and begin a new life, reaching Erzinjan and beyond.

Boghos's new life would not be lived as a Kezerian, however—that name had been given to his family by the Turks, and Boghos wished to discard it. Soon after arriving in Erzinjan, Boghos renounced the name Kezerian in favor of *Kaloosdian*, which derives from the name of Boghos's grandfather, *Kaloosd*. Boghos Kezerian, the young boy who had volunteered himself to the Ottoman soldiers, had matured. It was now the time of Boghos Kaloosdian, the responsible young man who escaped the Armenian Genocide, but not before ensuring the safety of his surviving family members.