

From Erzinjan to Samara: Boghos's Retreat through War-Torn Lands

The following is a shortened version of a segment from the book Tadem, My Father's Village: Extinguished during the 1915 Armenian Genocide, by Robert A. Kaloosdian. Here, we follow the author's father Boghos as he continues his journey away from his genocide-ravaged Armenian homeland, from which he fled just months before. With the help of local Kurdish guides, Boghos has made it through the treacherous mountains of the Dersim Plateau and reached the city of Erzinjan on the other side, where for the moment he enjoys an uncertain refuge. It is currently springtime in the year 2017.

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For Armenian refugees such as Boghos who were trying to escape the grasp of the genocidal Turks by fleeing to the north, there was reason to be hopeful. The Ottoman Army's initial offensive against the Russian Caucasian army had been a disaster, and by 1916 Russia occupied the majority of Turkish Armenia. Boghos had found refuge in one Russian-controlled city in particular, the city of Erzinjan. In addition to being under the control of Russian forces, Erzinjan was also a strategic destination for Armenian refugees because it contained the headquarters of an Armenian Militia, led by Sepastasti Murad, that sought to protect Armenian refugees and noncombatants. When Boghos arrived at the headquarters of Murad's militia, he received a change of clothes, and was given a warm welcome by the volunteer fighters. Boghos was even reunited with a handful of individuals from his hometown village of Tadem, including Hovanes Der Hovanessian and Arakel Haboian.

Murad's forces helped the refugees primarily by finding them jobs. Boghos found work on the staff of the Moscow Committee, a Russian-Armenian organization based in Moscow that assisted Armenian refugees, especially by providing essentials such as food and clothing. In addition, he worked for a time in the stables caring for the horses of Murad's men, but quit when he witnessed one of Murad's friends treating the Armenian refugees inappropriately, especially the women.

Boghos also found another, more creative way to make money while in Erzinjan. Renting a donkey for use as a pack animal, he would import fifty to one hundred pounds of fruit at a time to Erzinjan from nearby Turkish vendors who did not dare enter the Russian-occupied city. Arakel Haboian later joined Boghos as a partner in this venture, and the two made good money, about five hundred rubles each.

When the pair decided to quit the business of importing fruit, at first Boghos thought he would return the donkey to the Turk he had borrowed it from. An acquaintance talked him out of it however, reminding Boghos that it had been the Turks who had stolen all the livestock from Boghos's family, and that the Turk who owned the donkey might well kill him. Boghos heeded the advice and kept the donkey.

After Boghos had spent the better part of a year in Erzinjan, one day the militia leader Murad called upon the Armenian refugees to leave Erzinjan and retreat to the city of Erzerum. At this time, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were gaining power in Russia, and Russian troops were beginning to withdraw from the war. This made Erzinjan extremely vulnerable to attack from the Turks. Discouraged, Boghos left Erzinjan and began travelling east toward Erzerum. He went with a friend name Krikor Shooshanian, and they took the donkey with them.

It was early 1918 as Boghos and Krikor braved the winding, mountainous pass that connected Erzinjan to Erzerum. The journey took many long days, and the pair traded off between walking and riding the donkey to avoid exhaustion. The route was also extremely dangerous, as Turks and Kurds from the area were known to ambush Armenian travellers, rob them, and sometimes kill them. Boghos and Krikor were lucky though—they made it to Erzerum unscathed.

When the pair arrived, they reported to Erzerum's Armenian Refugee Center, which was in complete disarray. They stayed there for about a month, and got to know some Armenians there that were from the same region that Boghos and Krikor were from, the province of Kharpert. Even though Boghos and Krikor had never met these refugees before, they naturally felt an affinity toward them. These were their own people after all, their compatriots.

While in Erzerum, Boghos acquired his first gun. He learned that guns were being stashed in a local mosque, and he had a young man steal one for him. Unfortunately, like most of the Armenian refugees, Boghos did not know how to use a gun properly. Even the men from Murad's militia had made no effort to arm or train him.

Also during this time, Boghos reconvened with his friend Hovanes Der Hovanessian. One of the first things they did together was sell the donkey. Hovanes helped by writing a statement in which he asserted that the donkey belonged to Boghos's family and that Boghos brought it with him from Dersim. This statement made it possible to execute the sale.

In February 1918, the Turks began attacking Erzerum. Equipped with his gun, and also a horse he had acquired, this time Boghos participated in the armed resistance, although he was not officially part of any army. But the Turks proved too strong for the disunified and undisciplined defenders of Erzerum, and by March they had laid siege to the city. Once again Boghos and the other refugees were forced to retreat toward safer lands.

Boghos and Hovanes made their way to Sarikamish, where refugee leaders were holding a conference to determine what to do next. By this time, Hovanes had emerged as a natural leader, and a cluster of about ten or twelve men including Boghos had gathered around him. From Sarikamish, Hovanes's group was ordered to go to Kars where the Turks had launched another attack.

The situation at Kars was dire. Unbeknownst to the Armenians, the Russians had betrayed them by ceding Kars to the Ottomans in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which was signed on March 3, 1918. The Turkish army captured Kars on April 24, 1918, and the refugees there were forced to flee even further to the east.

Boghos and Hovanes's group travelled separately to the city of Alexandropol in Russian Armenia, and then reconvened. There was total chaos there. In his memoir, Hovanes described the scene this way:

People were wandering around aimlessly: deserted soldiers, refugees with justified and unjust complaints, dissensions between Russian-Armenians and Turkish-Armenians. Truly, there were suffering, unprotected people with no direction about what to do, unorganized...No one was thinking about the Turk, who just like a wolf was following their steps.

Indeed, there was a prevalent attitude in Alexandropol that even if the Turks faced little resistance as their army moved east, they would elect to stop their advance before they got as far as Alexandropol. This expectation turned out to be false, and on May 15, 1918, the Turks took the city.

Fortunately, Boghos had managed to escape to Sanahin before the Ottomans invaded Alexandropol. But Boghos had gone by himself, and so was now separated from Hovanes and his group. Boghos felt his chances of survival would be best in the company of his boys, so after about a week in Sanahin, he set out to try to find them. He took a train to the city of Tiflis and found them there taking shelter at an Armenian school.

At this point, there was little that Hovanes's group could do to defend their Armenian homeland. While they felt compelled to fight, the Turkish army had advanced south and east to

an area that had become very difficult to reach from Tiflis. Assessing it to be unlikely they could make a significant positive contribution to the military effort, the group decided to head north through the Caucasus Mountains. Boghos and Hovanes, thinking even further ahead, began exploring plans for how they might reach America.

Travel through the northern Caucasus was difficult, and dangerous. Bands of Dagestanis, a group allied to the Turks, attacked Hovanes's group at night, and at one city also blockaded the road. Still, owing in part to help from the Bolsheviks freeing up the road, the group was able to push forward. As they made their way further through the mountains, some decided to separate and go their own way. Not everyone dispersed though. When the group reached the delta of the Volga River on the other side of the Caucasus region, Boghos, Hovanes, and some others still remained.

Now August 1918, the travellers boarded a train and headed for Tsaritsyn (later renamed Stalingrad and then Volgograd), a city situated along the Volga River. The Volga, a river of great distance and a key trade route within Russia, provided an excellent opportunity for transportation. By taking a series of steamships along the river, the group realized they could get most of the way to Moscow. And from Moscow, they hoped to be able to make arrangements to depart from Russia. And so when their boat arrived, Boghos and the rest of Hovanes's group crowded in with the other travellers with third or fourth class tickets, and they set off.

By fall, they had made it as far as the Nizhny Novgorod, a city of a hundred thousand and the trade capital of the Russian Empire. The group stayed there about month, sleeping in the courtyard of an Armenian church. While they had travelled a long way up the Volga, it became clear at this point that reaching Moscow would be infeasible. The travellers boarded another steamship on the Volga and backtracked south. After a month-long stop in Kazan, during which

they were sheltered by a wealthy Armenian and provided paid work by the Bolsheviks, the group continued on until they reached the city of Samara.

In Samara, the travellers sought passports, as well as tickets to travel east on the Trans-Siberian Railway. With reaching Moscow out of the question, Boghos and Hovanes set their sights on Vladivostok, a major port city on Russia's east coast that was reachable by rail. They hoped that from Vladivostok they could make arrangements to finally travel to America. The pair did indeed obtain tickets, free of charge no less, as did the other refugees with whom they were travelling. A long ride in the large, dirty, and uncomfortable boxcars awaited them.