

From Tadem to Erzinjan: Boghos's Escape from the Grasp of the Turks

The following is a truncated 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, a young teenager at the time, flees his genocide-ravaged Armenian homeland. At this point in the narrative, most villagers of Tadem have either been executed, forcibly marched into the desert and abandoned, or recruited for the most dangerous and grueling positions of the Turkish Army. Those that remain are mostly women and adolescents who have survived by being absorbed into Turkish households, serving either as unpaid laborers, "wives," or both. The year is 1915.

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Boghos was caught in the latest government roundup of the remaining Armenians living in Tadem. Imprisoned in the nearby city of Mezre for several weeks, Boghos was eventually released. But Boghos had nowhere to go except back to the Turkish household in Tadem where he had been working as a slave. For, an Armenian travelling through the Anatolian countryside was at risk of being discovered by a Turkish gendarme, and then promptly killed.

So Boghos returned to work, where the conditions were as miserable as ever. The work was continuous and difficult physical labor, often in the fields, and rest was not granted even if one was sick or injured. His master did not even provide clothing—Boghos and others had to dress themselves with whatever rags they could scrounge together. All that was provided was regular food and physical protection. But Boghos never complained—keeping one's mouth shut was the key to survival in these difficult times.

1915 passed into 1916, and Boghos and another Armenian, Hagop Elloian, were acquired by a new master, a Turk named Bekir Agha. Bekir had a reputation for being a real criminal. It was said that he had shot Armenians in the past. Unfortunately, Bekir and Hagop developed a grudge against each other, and Boghos somehow got caught in the middle, stuck having to relay unfriendly messages between them. Boghos would often choose to ignore the Turk rather than

repeat the insults Hagop had chosen for Bekir. Boghos's silence angered the Turk, and one day he snapped and gave Boghos a beating. Later that night, Boghos reported to Bekir that some Kurdish refugees had been careless in how they cared for their oxen. Bekir's reply was, "Don't think that you're going to have a long life. I will kill you with my bare hands."

Frightened by Bekir's sudden bouts of anger, Boghos decided to flee the household, and seek shelter elsewhere. But first Boghos decided to visit Hagop in the wooden, barracks-type structure that Bekir had set up as sleeping quarters for his laborers, and tell him what was going on with Bekir. Hagop paid no attention and went to bed. However, later that night the Turk stormed into the sleeping quarters and ordered Hagop and Boghos to leave. During the episode, Bekir called Boghos a *pij*, or "bastard," which, despite their master-slave arrangement, and already acrimonious relationship, really rattled Boghos.

Boghos and Hagop had few options about where to go next. There were no Armenian homes remaining in the area. And most Turks were afraid to take them in, even as slaves, for the Young Turk government had threatened to kill Turks that were harboring Armenians. So Boghos and Hagop sought shelter in a local mill, where an Armenian and a Kurd were currently working. By chance, Bekir Agha visited the mill that day. While he must have noticed Boghos and Hagop there, he did not say anything to them. The two boys took this to indicate that tensions with the Turk had been relieved. So that night they returned to the Turk's house, entered surreptitiously, and went to bed there. But within a few hours, Bekir found them and again ordered them out.

Boghos and Hagop returned to the mill and stayed there until dawn. Taking a large bag of flour with them, they then travelled to the one house they knew of where a few surviving Armenians were living, cooking and baking there. Upon entering the house, Boghos and Hagop told the Armenian inhabitants their story, and offered up their flour to bake bread. But just then

Bekir entered, yelling, “So you are encouraging these men to disobey me!” Then he started to hit and slap the woman who was baking bread. Boghos ran away amid the commotion, and went to Hayta Giro’s for the night.

Luckily for Boghos, he had a maternal aunt, Nazan, as well as a maternal great-aunt still living in Mezre. The great-aunt heard that Boghos was living in Tadem, and came to escort him to Mezre so that he could live with his aunt Nazan. He stayed with Nazan for the remainder of 1916. Early the next year however, they relocated. Boghos and Nazan settled in Choutlik, where they stayed on a large piece of property owned by an Assyrian. Finally, Boghos had achieved refuge from the violence and subjection that was afflicting Tadem.

But Boghos was still very much in territory controlled by the Ottoman Turks, and so his escape was only partial. His best chance of obtaining genuine freedom for himself and remaining family, Boghos realized, lied in getting himself beyond the boundary of Ottoman Empire entirely. So that is what Boghos devised to do.

From the Armenian territories, the best way to escape the Ottoman Empire was north through the Dersim Plateau, a mass of mountains so rugged that, even after four centuries of rule, the Ottoman government had barely established a presence there. The target destination was Erzinjan, the last great town on the Upper Euphrates which, owing to a successful military campaign by the Russians, was forced outside the zone of Ottoman control.

But Boghos would not have to brave the treacherous mountains of Dersim alone. For there were groups of Kurds in the Dersim region belonging to a religious minority called the *Alawites*, and they were running a for-pay underground railroad that transported Armenians who wanted to flee. Travelling by the cover of darkness, the Alawites would guide their Armenian clients as they undertook the dangerous, multi-day trek to Erzinjan.

The Alawites' price for their service was one gold Ottoman sovereign. But Boghos was fighting starvation—he could not afford to feed himself adequately, and he certainly did not have that kind of cash on hand. Frustratingly, his family did have some money in the bank—his older brother, who was living in America, had sent money for the purpose of acquiring farmland for the family—but Boghos knew from past experience that it would be very difficult to withdraw the money from the Turks who controlled the bank.

Despite the narrow chances of success, Boghos visited the bank and attempted to make a withdrawal of his family's money. And indeed, he was denied service at first. But with persistence, and a little help from a sympathetic banker, Boghos succeeded in gaining partial access to his account. He was able to make withdrawals over the course of a few weeks.

Soon, Boghos had collected enough money to afford the services of the Kurdish guides. However, when the guides finally gathered in a nearby town with Boghos and other hopeful escapees to make preparations for the journey, he took the advice of a distant relative and told the guides he had no money to pay them. The guides allowed him to join the group without paying. And so on a mild winter night in early 1917, probably during the month of February, a group of about thirty or forty travellers, Boghos included, quietly set off toward the mountains of Dersim.

During the first night of the trek, the biggest danger was arousing the attention of nearby Ottoman soldiers or gendarmes, at least ones that had not been bribed by the Kurds to turn a blind eye to the transport operation being conducted. The travellers therefore had to walk very cautiously, and make as little noise as possible.

It was just before dawn when the group reached their first intersection with the Euphrates River. The Kurdish guides used rafts to transport people across. The guides then

reported that the most dangerous part of the journey was now over. For the travellers were now in Dersim, a territory so heavily populated by Kurds that Turks usually did not dare to interfere with the Kurds' operation of transporting Armenians.

Along the trek, Boghos used some of his money to purchase *prinj*, a kind of sugar-coated dried fruit. The guides caught him eating it, and became indignant that Boghos had not paid them anything when clearly he had been holding on to some money. The guides contemplated escorting Boghos all the way back to where they started, although according to Boghos this was probably a bluff. They did take Boghos some of the way back, but were persuaded along the way by another Kurdish guide to allow Boghos to rejoin the group. What that guide argued was that Boghos's aunt had been very helpful to the Alawites, and it would not be wise to do anything that would jeopardize that relationship.

By the time Boghos reunited with his group, it had merged with another group, putting the group's new numbers into the sixties or seventies. Soon they reached the ancient town of Aghtsnik, where they had to wait several weeks until the guides could establish the point of their next crossing over the northern branch of the Euphrates. When everyone finally got across the river, the travellers found that snowfall had blocked the roads they needed to follow. Young men like Boghos helped to shovel the snow out of the way. After three days of continuous travel, the group reached a small hamlet called Idara. Here, a generous Kurd gave them all shelter in a large room with a fireplace, and fed them two meals. Boghos was able to dry out his clothes, and prepare for the next leg of the journey.

The most difficult terrain laid ahead—the frozen face of the snow-clad mountain, Merjan Dagh. Boghos and the other travellers were given wooden clogs to improve their traction on the snow and ice. At the base of the mountain was a small brook, which everyone except Boghos

crossed by bridge. Boghos, who was tailing the group at the rear, instead decided to hop over the brook. But as he prepared to jump one of his feet slipped into the water. Boghos did not pay any attention to the issue at first, and began ascending the mountain.

It took two days to pass over the mountain, by which time Boghos's foot became more and more painful and walking became increasingly difficult. After one more day of walking, with one more crossing of the Upper Euphrates, the travellers finally arrived at a place where there was sunshine. As the group rested, Boghos removed his boots, which were so uncomfortable now he thought he would no longer walk in them. To his dismay, Boghos discovered that his toes were frozen on one foot, his big toe especially.

For Boghos, the most difficult part of the journey was the final stretch to Erzinjan. There was no way to get there except to walk, and because of his injured foot, walking was at this point terribly painful. But Boghos and the other travellers did eventually arrive at Erzinjan. Once there, the Kurdish guides did what they had agreed to do, and delivered their clients to the headquarters of an Armenian militia commanded by Sepastasti Murad, a militia whose purpose was to protect Armenian refugees and noncombatants. Here the weary travellers were provided with new clothes. Also at this point the Kurdish guides may have been paid for their services—Murad was generally known to pay the guides one gold piece for each Armenian delivered.

Erzinjan was a place that brought much hope to young Boghos. Finally, he was beyond the grasp of the Ottoman Turks and into a territory controlled by Russia of the Allied Powers. He even found himself among a few fellow Armenians from Tadem. For although the indigenous Armenian population of Erzinjan had mostly been deported when the city was still in Turkish hands, a major influx of Armenians had been taking place ever since the Russians took control of the city. The new arrivals included Russian Armenians who were there under the protection of

the Russian army as well as Armenians from other regions, who, like Boghos, were refugees. Not that Erzinjan was Boghos's final destination, or that reaching it via the Dersim Plateau was his last big challenge—far from it. Still, it seemed that the tides of misfortune were finally starting to recede. Young Boghos Kaloosdian stood at the threshold of a new life.