

From Samara to Vladivostok: Traversing Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway

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 more than a year ago. He has trekked through the mountains of the Dersim Plateau, retreated through the war torn-lands surrounding the border of Turkey and Russia, and by steamship travelled north on the Volga River to the city of Samara. Now Boghos, his friend Hovanes, and a small band of other Tadem refugees have just boarded an eastbound train on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Boghos and Hovanes's aim is to take the Trans-Siberian Railway all the way to the Russian port city of Vladivostok, and from there to seek arrangements for travel to the United States. The year is 1918.

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The boxcar that Boghos, Hovanes and the others were assigned to was third class. It was overcrowded and rife with unpleasant odors. Packages and bundles were stashed everywhere. Among the car's few rudimentary amenities were a long wooden bench along one side that gave passengers a place to sit, and, since temperatures had dropped, a stove that was kept burning.

As the train left the station, the two friends watched the great hilltop cathedral and churches of Samara disappear into the distance. Not long after, the train started to ascend out of the steppe of European Russia and into the Ural Mountains, allowing close views of the range's characteristic pine and birch forests and snowcapped peaks. The train zigzagged its way through the mountains for some time, before finally descending into the massive expanse of the Siberian Plateau. Through these flatlands the ride became monotonous, save the occasional station where Boghos and Hovanes could enjoy a hot cup of tea and purchase something to eat. Even sleep did not come easily, as incidents of thievery, looting, and even murder were known to occur in the third class.

Besides refugees like Boghos and Hovanes, there were also Russian families aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway travelling east to escape regions under Bolshevik control. The railroad

was also commonly crowded with soldiers from different groups that were fighting the Bolsheviks, including Aleksandr Kolchak's counterrevolutionary force of White Russians, the Czechoslovakian Legion, and the United States Army. Some of the soldiers were tasked specifically with defending the railroad, which had proven to be a key strategic resource.

Weeks passed before the train finally left the steppe and entered the Russian taiga, a vast forested landscape bursting with larch, spruce, and pine trees. Many of the forests were designated for timber production. There were also superb farmlands in the taiga, as well as coal mines near the city of Chermhovo. The taiga was dangerous, however, as Bolsheviks often attacked trains passing through the region. To mitigate the risk, Czech soldiers accompanied the trains by day, and all travel ceased at night.

Marking the end of the first leg of their Trans-Siberian journey, Boghos, Hovanes, and the other travellers arrived in Irkutsk, a city in the Russian taiga not far from the border of Mongolia. When the train reached the station there, Boghos and his group promptly headed into the main section of town. They were impressed by the town's size and affluence. It had hospitals, a handsome theater, an astronomical observatory, an impressive Greek Catholic church, and over fifty thousand inhabitants. And, like many other cities they had visited, the local Armenian population was very hospitable. They encouraged the band of refugees to stay, but Boghos and the others knew they had to continue east. But to continue on the Trans-Siberian Railway, the friendly Armenians warned, the travellers would need identification papers. So the group headed to the French Consulate and had the required documents made.

With their sights set on the Russian port city of Vladivostok, located along the Sea of Japan, the Tadem refugees soon boarded another eastbound train. With the Eastern Sayan Mountains at their back, the train followed the Angara River to the southern tip of Lake Baikal.

Known as “the blue eye of Siberia,” Lake Baikal is beautiful in milder weather, and with more water than all the Great Lakes combined, is also the most voluminous freshwater lake in the world. The train hugged the southern edge of the lake as it went along the curved stretch of rail called the Circum-Baikal, also known by the nickname “the buckle on the steel belt of Russia.”

At the train station in the city of Chita, Boghos, and Hovanes transferred to a train that would follow the Trans-Manchurian Line, which branched off of the main Trans-Siberian line and cut across northeastern China. The train sped through the hills surrounding Chita and then descended into another steppe, the land of the Cossacks and Mongols. When it reached the Chinese border, there was a delay as inspectors searched the passengers’ luggage. The Chinese stations looked very different from Russia’s. They were enclosed in fortifications and embellished with carved dragons, and some of the people wore silk skullcaps with a long tassel, or highly decorated robes.

In the Chinese city of Harbin, Boghos and Hovanes got off the train and rested for two days. There they were taken into the homes of some prosperous Armenian bakers. The pair had experienced this kind of generosity time and time again in their travels. They were surprised, however, to find an Armenian church in Harbin, a city that lay in the heart of China. During their time there, they checked in again with the French Consulate, where they received French identity cards and advice on their travel arrangements before they reboarded the train.

By Harbin, Boghos and Hovanes had completed the vast majority of their Trans-Siberian excursion, and it was not too long before they crossed back into Russia and made it to their intended destination of Vladivostok. Less than seventy-five miles from the Chinese border, Vladivostok was a cosmopolitan harbor city with crumbling streets and sidewalks, a place where

civilians and soldiers from a multitude of countries mingled. Many of its current occupants were refugees or other war victims.

With the arrival of the Allied forces in the Siberian Intervention, the American Red Cross had set up in Vladivostok, initially aiding mostly the Czechoslovakian troops. Now it had to provide shelter for the hundreds of Russians, Armenians, and Serbians pouring into the city. The agency equipped and operated a number of refugee barracks, six or seven kilometers from the city, that provided lodging and meals. Almost a hundred Armenians began living in the Vladivostok barracks until arrangements could be made for their departure. Some of the Armenian refugees spoke of returning to their home country. As for Boghos, although he would never forget where he came from, he knew he would never return there.

Rather than return to the lands of old Armenia, Boghos and Hovanes were intent on immigrating to America, where they already had family. At that time, however, it was difficult for refugees to relocate to America. Fearing the spread of Bolshevism, the United States had imposed restrictions on whom it would let into the country. Boghos and Hovanes would each need an American family member as a sponsor, and getting such sponsorships arranged would take time.

But Boghos and Hovanes were patient as they waited for authorization to enter the United States. In all they spent over half a year in Vladivostok. During that time they were unemployed, although they did find ways to volunteer their time. Hovanes dedicated himself to setting up an Armenian school in a hall of the Red Cross that was used for nightly events, and Boghos took on responsibilities for the other refugees, such as traveling to the city center to deliver and collect letters for them.

Eventually, Boghos and Hovanes each received by mail authorization to enter the United States, as well as money from family members living in America. Their next move would be to travel across the Sea of Japan to the Japanese port city of Yokohoma. Living there was a wealthy merchant named Diana Apcar who was providing aid to Armenian refugees. Hovanes had written a letter to her drawing her attention to the refugees living in Vladivostok, and she agreed to host and aid them. On June 15, 1919, Boghos and Hovanes said goodbye to the other refugees at the Red Cross, and then set off on an overnight ferry to Tzuriga, Japan. From there they traveled by rail to Yokohama. They immediately went to visit Apcar, and to their delight they found her to be a generous and hospitable host, and very helpful in facilitating their immigration. In time, Boghos and Hovanes would make it to the American shores of Seattle, Washington, travelling across the Pacific in the steerage deck of the Japanese steamship *Fushimi Maru*.