

CHALABIS, KHOJAS, AMIRAS AND EFFENDIS (PART 1 OF 2)

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by **Dr. Antranig Chalabian**, Translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian, November 2014



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Part I

1. The Chalabis

Even during the early days of the Ottoman Empire, in the 13th century, the Armenian feudal families saw that they were losing ground by the usurpation of their lands. They began trusting more in the mobility of monetary wealth. Over a period of time some of them, through the wealth they accumulated, were able to secure for themselves high positions within the Ottoman royalty. They were called the Chalabis.

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Part I

1. The Chalabis

Even during the early days of the Ottoman Empire, in the 13th century, the Armenian feudal families saw that they were losing ground by the usurpation of their lands. They began trusting more in the mobility of monetary wealth. Over a period of time some of them, through the wealth they accumulated, were able to secure for themselves high positions within the Ottoman royalty. They were called the Chalabis.

In Constantinople the primary occupation of the Armenians who attained that honorific title was money exchange. The Chalabis, wrote Hagop S. Anasian "overwhelmingly were devoted to banking transactions, servicing the members of the Ottoman court". The Chalabis at times were also involved in large-scale trade. However, even for those involved in trade, it was not their main occupation. "We

will not be mistaken", continues Anasian, "if we claim that the Armenian Chalabis of the 17th century became the predecessors of the Armenian Amiras in Constantinople in the coming centuries."

The Armenian Chalabis, having deeply rooted in banking and money exchange, cultivated the mannerism of upper cast nobles and became fiercely conservative when it came to the social changes affecting the western Armenians.

Among the known Armenian Chalabis were the following: Maghakia and Iskendar Chalabis from Ameda or Dikgranagerd (the Armenian Diarbekir), Sanos Chalabi from Aleppo, Andon and Abro Chalabis from Bursa, Shahen Chalabi from Drabezon and Yeremia Chalabi Keumurdjian. The latter was born in Constantinople in 1637. He mastered Turkish, Greek, Latin and other European languages. He served as the secretary of two Patriarchs, Yeghiazar I (1651-1652) known as Yeghiazar of Aintab (Եղիազար Այնթապցի) and Mardiros II (1659-1660) known as Mardiros of Kefez (Մարտիրոս Բ Զեֆեցի). He was also the tutor of the wealthy Abro Chalabi's children.

Yeremia Chalabi Keumurdjian authored historical works, poems, essays, and translations. Father Nerses Aginian, of the Mekhitarian Order, wrote extensively about him in 1930's. In 1952, Hrant Der Antreasian translated into Turkish Yeremia Chalabi's three volumes historical book about the history of Constantinople. The eminent Hagop Martayan wrote praising that he was a beacon of light in the prevalent darkness of his time.

The Chalabis exercised great influence especially in Bolis, the capital city that was the nerve center of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Because of their ties with the court and the influence they had there, they practically had the affairs of the Armenian Millet run at their discretion.

From the beginning of the 18th century and for the next 100 years the running of the Ottoman mint was the monopoly of the great Duzian family who were Chalabis themselves. The Duzian Chalabis minted the Empire's gold and silver monies. The members of the family were also the jewelers of the court. They were immensely wealthy.

During the 19th century Sarkis Chalabi Duz was one of the most noted member of the family. During the reign of Sultan Mahmud the Second, 1808-1839, Haled Effendi, a high placed official in the court envied the trust the Sultan had towards the members of the Christian Duzian family. With an Armenian accomplice who was an employee and a confidant of the Duzian family, Haled Effendi started spreading unfounded rumors that the Duzian family members plan to flee the country taking with them royal treasury or using their immense wealth and ties they intend to conspire with the Janissaries to have them rise against the Sultan himself. These rumors had their intended effects.

On the night of October 16, 1819, Sultan Mahmud had the Duzian palace surrounded and had all the members of the Duzian family apprehended. Two brothers were beheaded in front of the royal court and the other two brothers were hanged publicly. All that the Duzian family owned was confiscated

and put at the disposal of the Sultan.

After the demise of the family the Armenian accomplice of this treason was elevated to high position within the court. Who was he who helped orchestrate the destruction of the Duzian dynasty? "It's better that his name be lost forever in the dark pages of history", says the Mekhitarist Father Sahag Der Movsesian.

2. Khojas

On June 6, 1064, Alp Arslan ransacked Ani, the capital city of the Pakradouni dynasty. Most of the survivors fled to Crimea, Poland and elsewhere.

Some of the survivors of the devastation preferred to flee southbound and following the Akhourian River reached the southern end of Nakhijevan along the border of Persia, on the northern bank of the Arax River. That desolate area, cut off from the rest of the world, offered them a safe haven. The town they formed there came to be called Jugha.

The new inhabitants of Jugha were mostly artisans and traders. There was not enough fertile soil among the large boulders to sustain an economy based on agriculture. To make a living they became peddlers buying good from the shops in Nachijevan and transporting them on the back of their donkeys, roaming from village to another to sell the goods. Over the years they expanded their trade forming caravan routes transporting goods to the Caucasus and by the 16th century the enterprising Khojas of Jugha were trading in the far east in India and beyond, and in the west they had established trading houses in Venice and Italy and as far north as in Holland.

Khoja is a Persian word and it means master or lord. It is bestowed upon persons of wealth. In Persia large land holders and traders carried the title. The same title was also used in Turkey.

Five hundred and forty years after the ransack of Ani, in 1604, when the inhabitants of Jugha welcomed the Persian Shah Abbas the Great, the thriving town had already around 2000 households and seven splendid churches. The Khojas of Jugha, headed by Khoja Khachig, bribed the local warlords to secure their trading. These warlords would fill their pockets and would let the Khojas continue on with their trades.


After their forced deportation by Shah Abbas into the interior of Persia, in the southern part of Isfahan, they formed a new settlement calling it New Jugha. By forcing the relocation of the inhabitants of Jugha to the interior of Iran, Shah Abbas wanted to expand Iran's trade to the far reaches of the world. The Persians produced silk and other goods but they did not have the means and the connections to have their products sold in foreign markets.

The New Jugha prospered incredibly fast thanks also to monetary assistance by Shah Abbas. It soon overshadowed the fame the old Jugha had mustered after centuries of experience in trade. The Khojas of New Jugha, headed by Khoja Nazar, with the ships they owned, not only sailed to

Bombay and Madras in India, but also to Java and the Philippine Islands in the East, and in the West they established trading centers in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Poland and Russia as well.

The Khojas of New Jugha took their sons to Holland for education. Some of them studied art and painted the churches of New Jugha. Over the years the Armenian community in Amsterdam swelled and prospered. It was there that the first Armenian bible was printed in 1666.

The French merchant and traveler Jean-Bapstise Tavernier noted: "These people (khojas) in a short span of time became so proficient that they initiated trade reaching as far as Tonkin, Java and Philippines." Continuing his observations of the Armenian merchants, Tavernier wrote that the Armenians "have a knack for trade because they economize and are abstinent. I do not know if that is a virtue or a vice. When they, the Armenian khojas, are engaged in long lasting travels they carry with them dry food. Whenever they travel through mountainous region and come across a cheap goat or sheep, they purchase it. They also carry hooks with them to fish whenever they travel along riverbanks. When they reach a town they rent an empty room and five or six of them sleep in the same room, each of them carrying with them their own bedding and kitchen utensils."

In 1667 the Khojas of New Jugha secured from Tsar Alexey Mikhalovitc the monopoly of importing silk without custom duties for selling in Russia. Until the end of the 17th century the Armenian merchants had permission to trade in Russia from Astrakhan in the south to far north. 

Whenever the Khojas went to Moscow they would lavish gifts on the Tsar. On one occasion Khoja Nazar gifted Tsar Alexey a diamond laden crown that is kept to this day in the military history museum of Kremlin. The Armenian Khojas competed with English and European companies. The Armenian trade was family based. They did not have companies. Khoja Shahamir Shahamirian, for example, had settled from Nor Jugha into the Indian city Madras. From there he had trading centers in Persia, Mesopotamia and in European cities. Shah Abbas was so pleased with the enterprising Armenians that he would visit an Armenian church during Easter and would be hosted by the Khojas.

It is said that the Khojas of New Jugha had 24 churches erected of which 12 stand to this day. Khoja Khachig, who had hosted Shah Abbas in 1604 in the old Jugha, had financed the construction of one of the churches.


The prosperity of the New Jugha hardly lasted a century. By the end of the 17th century the policies of the Persian shahs and Ayatollahs towards their Christian Armenian subjects changed altogether giving way to persecution and high taxes. A great number of Armenians emigrated to Bombay, Madras, Calcutta in India where they thrived much like they had in the Old and New Jugha. Others emigrated to Moscow, St. Petersburg where they inducted the local merchants into the silk trade.

In 1740 one of the former princes of New Jugha, Khoja Aghazar Lazarian, sent his son to Moscow. Shortly after, the rest of the family joined and settled in Moscow along with their other three sons.

They established a silk factory. In 1815 one of Aghazar's sons established the Lazarian High School that later became Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages. The building of the former institute nowadays houses the Embassy of Armenia in Moscow.

The Armenians from Jugha in India traded in silk, gold and diamond and became enormously wealthy. At the beginning not only they did not have any conflict with the mighty East India Company, but collaborated with its principals. Later on as the Armenian Khojas prospered enormously, a conflict started between them. The East India Company had received a royal charter from Queen Elizabeth in 1600, therefore it had the backing of the British Empire. With the support of the British Empire it defeated its rivals, including the Armenian Khojas, monopolizing trade to and from India.

In order to find new trading grounds the Armenian Khojas spread to Dekka, Bangladesh; Rangoon, Burma; Singapore, Malaysia; Jakarta, Indonesia; Chinghai, China and to Harbin, Manchuria where they prospered, had beautiful churches constructed and faded away.

Presently not a trace has remained of the Armenian Chalabis in the Asia Minor. Other than the Armenian cemetery that contains some ten thousand funerary monuments, not much is left of the  Old Jugha, the birthplace of the Khojas. The New Jugha is still populated by few thousands of Armenians.

The Far East and the Pacific Ocean Armenian communities have all disappeared leaving behind churches that serve more as attractions to the interested tourists rather than houses of worship for the Armenians that do not exist there anymore. The rest of the Armenians from Yerevan to Los Angeles continue to growl repeating the poet that "we are, we will be and we will multiply."

Multiply? Poor Baruyr Sevag. Had he been alive he would have witnessed that indeed the number of the Armenians in the Diaspora is increasing, certainly temporarily, due to massive exodus of the mostly able-bodied conscript age young men and women from his native land, Armenia. If Armenia continues to bleed this way, more likely than not it will house an Armenian minority living in the shadows of the Mount Ararat.

(To be continued)

