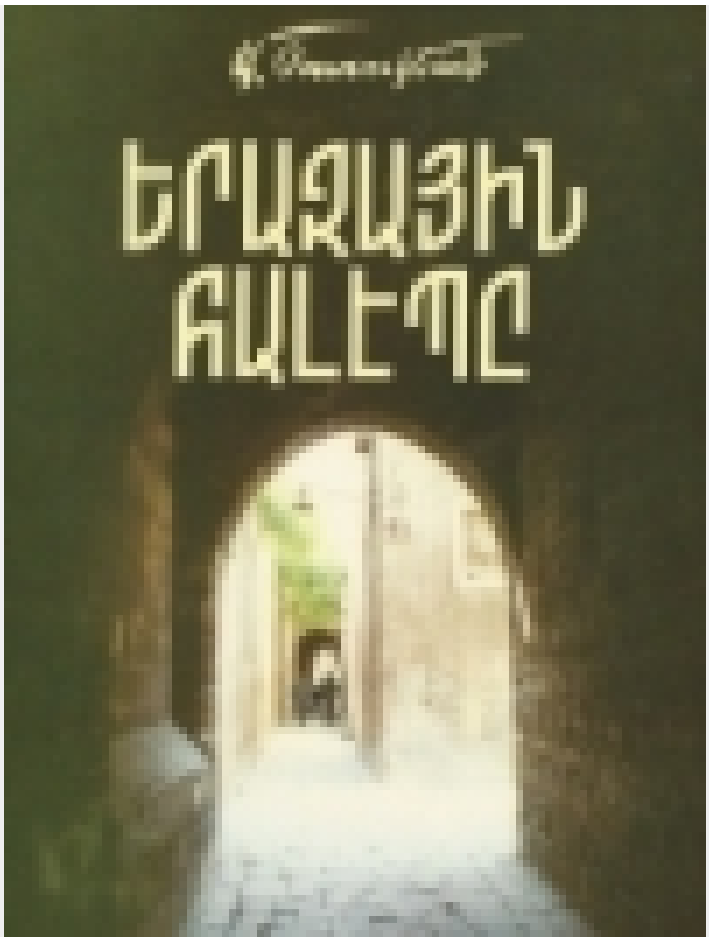
DREAMY HALEB ("YERAZAYEEN HALEB")

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Category: Opinions

By Antranig Zarougian, A segment from the same book, translated and abridged by Vahe H. Apelian, 23 September 2012

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The overwhelming majority of the Armenians in Haleb were Cilician Armenians; the Sassountsi Armenians were the second largest. Among them, the Aintabsi Armenians occupied a prominent and dominant position. Their numerical superiority was such that they had two schools, *Zavarian (Tashnag)* and *Grtasseerats* (the other kind). For some time they had their own church, next to the Cathedral of the Holy Forty Martyrs (Սրբոց Քառասնից Մանկանց Մայր Եկեղեցի). It was known as the "Aintabsis" church. When Catholicos Coadjutor Papken passed away, they did not let him be buried in Antelias. They brought the coffin to Haleb and with a large showing had him buried in "their" church.

Before the Genocide Aintab was considered the Athens among Cilician cities because of its schools, and American College. In spite of the fact that Aintabsi Armenians were Turkish speaking, love of learning and education were much stressed among them. The trustees of the schools naturally were all Aintabsi Armenian craftsmen who took care of the schools much like they took care of their households. However, they regarded that they had the same say in matters relating to education as they had in their own households.

I taught Armenian language and history for six or seven years at the *Zavarian* School. The middle school students were not as young then as they are now. The average age of the students in the 6th grade was 15 years then, while it is 10 to 12 years these days. It was a good school with a good teaching staff. One year three additional teachers in their twenties were invited. They were hard

working and industrious teachers. The atmosphere of the school changed. Even though they were not experienced they animated the school. They became the favorites of the students who congregated around them during recess. The situation did not sit well with the former teachers, some of whom did not look favorably at the situation. Since some of the former teachers had family relations with the trustees of the school, they managed to work out so that these three young teachers were not to be invited the following year.

It was a scandal. These young men had carried their tasks without any blemish. There were no reasons to let them go. Our principal, a good and a humble man, could not defend them and hence unwillingly went along with the decision of the trustees. I objected. Aram, the father of Archbishop Datev Sarkissian joined me. Together we staked the reputation we thought we had and put our names on the balance. Either these three teachers will be invited next year, or the two of us will resign as well.

The trustees remained adamant in their decision. We also remained adamant on our end and thus were forced to leave the school. After all, we were not Aintabsis and they could easily do away with our services. Aram returned to his hometown Kessab where he taught. The Education Council gave me a position of “Education Inspector” to put the Assyrian school in the neighborhood into order.

There was not anything to place in order in that school. All it was a kindergarten with one teacher. As to my “Education Inspector” title, it was the Prelate Zareh’s invention to give me a position and a salary.

The year became a fortuitous year for me. I wrote “Letter to Yerevan” (*Tought Ar Yerevan*) and decided to do away with teaching as a career and embarked on publishing *Nairi* instead.

What happened to three young teachers and who were they? They did not remain luckless either. On the contrary, due to their innate talents they blossomed and shaped a lasting identity of their own. The readers will not be surprised when I name them. The first was Zareh Melkonian, a well-known name among the Diaspora Armenian writers. The second was Souren Basmajian who also published under the assumed pen name Aram Armand and repatriated to Armenia. The third, Alfonse Attarian, became a known writer in the modern Armenian literature and wrote under the pen name Armen Tarian.