

JOURNEY WITH A SKULL

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By **Hamasdegh**

Translation and Illustration by Tatul Sonentz



Once, many, many years ago (these words sound like the start of a fable...), in 1929, I went on a trip to become more familiar with our people's sadness. Those were the years that the deportees of 1915, with heroic effort, enduring a thousand and one torments, had made it to some foreign shore where they could keep their collective existence and identity going.

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I saw the hovels of Marseille, Aleppo, Lebanon. People reaching Jerusalem were a bit luckier settling in the Armenian Monastery.

All, all were destitute and sad with a dust-colored sadness. If there still remained something alive in them, it was their native spirit, awake as their eyes and nerves.

On their faces lingered the gray wisdom of suffering, like the ancient stones of our thousand year old monasteries.

Sadness always has its moments of introspection, and I wanted to bond with our people's grief, to make it part of my body and consciousness. I wanted to go from Lebanon to Der- Zor – that immense graveyard of our martyrs...

The owner and driver of the car was a young Armenian man, thin, slight, with a quiet melancholy in his features, especially in his Armenian eyes. He had not only witnessed the horrors of Der-Zor, he had lived and been physically part of the daily turmoil and temper of the place.

His name was Manas. I also recall his vivid voice and sad smile. With all that, Manas was audacious -- he had covered all the roads we were traveling on that day. There wasn't a rock, a field of thorn-bushes, a hill, a path that did not have its dreadful tale for Manas.

"Right there, near the bridge, the bandits assaulted skeletal creatures, while on the slope of that hill, the corpses had become the share of vultures and crawling beasts. In those days, monstrous

animals, never seen before, had appeared, no one knows from where..."

Manas showed me a spot, where her mother had collapsed, unable to walk anymore.

"Strangely enough, I saw, that at the last moments of her life, my mother was calm, and seemingly content that she was dying; she was particularly happy, that she had trusted me to a woman with whom they had become sisters in adversity -- she too, having lost everything... children, husband. With great courage, she took me all the way to Aleppo, and became a mother to me."

With similar stories, we continued on our dusty, rocky road to the Euphrates River. On one of its banks was the city of Der Zor, and on the other started and expanded the vast desert of Jezireh, with a copper-colored, red-hot sun and limitless sand, where, in a very short while, forty thousand Armenians had succumbed en mass and melded with the sands.

Manas kept telling how, in those days, the Turks of that alien desert would not allow these forty thousand Armenians, huddled together in stark terror, to reach Der Zor on the other bank of the Euphrates, to the outskirts of habitations and shelter. There were still decayed wooden planks sticking out of the banks of the river. They were erected there to give shade in the scorching sun. Some writings in pencil on those planks were yet to vanish: "I had 20 gold coins I acquired 20 loaves of bread". There were words of curses and prayers, their significance still preserved on those crumbling planks.

It was in the immensity of that desert, that I saw bleached bones and shattered skeletons, ribs ripped from spinal columns, knee caps and skulls, all of it half buried in the sand. The Euphrates, cresting and flooding once in a while, had performed that interment under a cool, bone-colored moon. That flooding had formed layers, and in between those strata, stuck out countless limbs and skulls, large and small skulls. It was from one of these sandy crevices that I removed, with both hands, a heavy, sand filled skull, with awe and reverence -- as a celebrant priest would raise the Chalice with both hands, during Mass.

The shiny pallor of the skull had almost acquired the color of ivory in the dry sand. Its sturdy array of teeth was powerful and expressive as a curse and the two cave-like eye cavities -- where the eternal unknown seemed to start -- conjured the image of ruined Armenian monasteries, with crumbling walls crusted with the ageless moss of tradition...

We became travel companions -- the skull and I. We became sharing intimates, of green fields and desert days, me and the skull... The story of that journey is yet to be written.

If only I knew the name of that skull... In my agitated imagination, names paraded in single file and became alive, growing tall with an intense countenance. I could even hear their voices, powerful and wise as silence.

Mahtesi Arutin? Perhaps from Erzurum, tall and stately, with bushy eyebrows, heavy moustache and clear eyes. He is wearing a coarse woolen shalvar, a gold watch chain across his Lahore shawl belt.

Mahtesi Arutin was a merchant and deacon of his church. He was expecting bales of merchandise to arrive via the Black sea, when the Turkish mob attacked his big store and large house on nightfall. They looted and burned, then seized and delivered him and his spouse to the caravan gathered at the cemetery. They abducted his two lovely daughters in whom beauty bloomed like a flower – they were so pampered and nurtured in the warmth of oriental rugs and plush pillows.

Makar Varzhapet? That day, the blackboard of the advanced students' class was covered with Anania Shirakatsi's equations, while the alert eyes of the students reflected a sadness; there were troubling rumors: A caravan of tormented Armenians had been seen passing on the highway skirting the town; a caravan of shivering dogs... "Tomorrow's assignment is Lazar Pharpetsi," had said Makar Varzhapet, restraining the distress in his voice.

The next day, neither the teacher, nor the students were back.

Ter Tatik? Incense lingered in his voice and breath. The goodness of Holy Chrism was in his eyes as he raised his arms to the heavens in prayer. It was Sunday and Mass was being celebrated. A heavy, silver threaded cape and a silk miter, around which were silver embroidered renderings of the twelve Apostles. The angel-voiced children's choir of acolytes was singing.

People were slowly coming out of the church.

"Father! Father!", yelled the people in vain.

White robed children of the acolyte choir scattered like doves. From the upper road of the surrounding fields, Kurds and Turks were entering the village armed with clubs and sabers.

The church was now empty just like that skull, while the priest continued his celebration of Mass... and I heard the skull's incantations of the Holy Mass.
If only I knew the name of that skull...

The skull was there, on the table, sometimes in a dim candlelight. The skull pondered, the skull lived. It seemed to breathe and to speak in silent wisdom. There were still dreams in it, despite the enemy's wish to fill it with sand. And it waited, as all the martyrs of 1915 waited for the mighty trumpet of Haik, the heroic Bowman, calling them to gather their bones, to stand up, form ranks as mighty armies and reclaim their land, their monasteries, schools, their green fields and the rising smokes at the dawn of Navasard.

