

HADJENEN GAKKOM – I COME FROM HAJIN (IN ARMENIAN)

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To Krikoris, with fondest childhood memories

I never saw my grandfather Krikor, but I can imagine what kind of person he could have been from what my grandmother told me.

Grandmother used to speak about his handsome physique; her Kiko was robust and good-looking, and his upbeat and cheerful personality was infectious. Grandfather wouldn't sit down to eat if there weren't a guest, a companion, at the table (At mealtime, sometimes a passing stranger would share Grandfather Krikor's table, like a family member).

We didn't hear much about him from Grandmother because every time she started to tell about Krikor, her Krikor, she would get emotional, her eyes would well up with tears, and we too would get emotional such that we kids would change the subject so that neither she nor we would remain in that state.

Grandfather Krikor was an artisan (and not a farmer, leaving the care of the family vegetable garden to his beautiful Heghine). He earned his daily living, liked to jest and had a special sense of humor, like all Hajin natives. He was also a profound believer in the Armenian traditions and values.

Krikor and Heghine Krajian had three children: Baidzar, Hripsime and Armenag.

As of 1915, when the first deportation from Hajin occurred, Krikor was already dead (we don't know if he was murdered or if he died from illness.). It was Grandmother Heghine herself who managed to save her children and get them to a safe place after the kind of odyssey that had been rendered into a long film in our little brains.

"Grandma, tell how you saved Daddy."

And Grandmother would begin to tell the long story of her long journey.

"The Kurds had taken my Baidzar and my Hripsime. My Armenag was three years old. Carrying him, I used to walk at night and hide out during the day." Grandmother didn't finish the story quickly; often she would get choked by her tears so, to hide them from us, she used to sing "*Azadn Asdvadz ain orits*" or Antranig's song, "*iprev ardziv...*" These songs, the old heroes and good days were sufficient and just cause for all of us to become overtaken with emotion.

"Grandma, tell the part about the wolves, lions and tigers."

Grandmother would then testify about the miracle, about how one day at dawn, when she was looking for a hiding place, groups of wild animals passed by two fugitives. Meanwhile, firmly clutching three-year-old Armenag, Grandmother prayed and crossed herself; miraculously, none of the animals approached them.

This time, when she got to that part of the story where her two girls were found and saved, there were tears of joy. She wandered from village to village, inquired here and there, and finally learned the whereabouts of Baidzar and Hripsime. She resorted to all means; she begged, she pleaded, she used persuasion; finally she succeeded through deceit. At night she grabbed Baidzar and fled from one village; then she went to the other village and freed Hripsime. Thus, through superhuman efforts, Grandmother gathered her children together and reached Iskenderun (Alexandretta). At the end of the war, in 1918, Grandmother didn't return to Hajin. She remained in the camp of Hajin natives in the city of Iskenderun. It was Hairabed Eolmesekian, the future husband of her daughter Baidzar, who, together with approximately 6,000 Hajin natives, returned to rebuild their native city and make it prosper again. Two-three years later, together with a few hundred fighters, he managed to slip through the ring of Turkish *chetes* having laid siege to Hajin and escape from the city, which was breathing its last breath after having put up an eight-month-long resistance. In the final minutes, when the Turkish mob was entering the city from all sides, wounded Hajin natives, women and children, armed, fought till their death.

The Hajin camp of Iskenderun, with its unhealthy conditions, was unsatisfactory to the Hajin natives who had lived a prosperous life. These Armenian refugees began to settle in Lebanon, with the encouragement of foreign missionary organizations and Anglo-French supervision. The seaside region of Juni and Maameltein became the first stop for Grandmother and her children. From here she would move to the railroad line projected by the British, in whose construction she worked, alongside other Hajin natives; young, self-taught Armenag worked as an interpreter. Later on, in the 1930 's, the Swiss founded an asylum for the blind/workshop in the village of Ghazir, which brought together teachers, workers and assistants, together with their families. Grandmother and her family settled in this verdant village of Ghazir not far from the seashore, where a small Armenian community was formed in a short period of time.

Grandmother lived in Ghazir during World War II. By this time, she had married off her two daughters to young fellows from Hajin, Hairabed Eolmesekian (Anmahouni) and Hampartsoum Deyirmendjian (Aptian), who gave her grandchildren. As for her one and only son, she arranged her marriage to Osanna Tembelian from the Jebeil orphanage. Grandmother generated a new family from her little nest, in exchange for her lost relatives. From a nucleus of four were formed three families with their children.

The Eolmesekians had Garbis, Krikor (Krikoris), Jirair, Vanig, Araxie and Anahid. The Deyirmendjians had Hagop, Yeprem, Edward, Kegham and Alice. The Krajians had Vartkes, Vahak, Krikor and Sona.

Grandmother always kept her little army under her umbrella.

After the war, the neighborhood of Nor Hajin was founded with the assistance of Hajin natives living in America. Grandmother gathered her clan and went to settle among others who were originally from Hajin.

The neighborhood of Nor Hajin was constructed with great enthusiasm. The Hajin natives, without giving consideration to political party or denominational affiliation, built and made Nor Hajin prosper, with a population of at least two hundred families. Grandmother never missed an opportunity to plant in her stone house without a yard or garden, as well as continue customs reminiscent of Hajin. Having filled tin boxes with soil, Grandmother planted tomatoes and other vegetables and let them grow on the roof of her two-story residence. Every time she picked a ripe red tomato, she would pluck the green stem and sniff it, most probably to revive memory of her tomatoes back in Hajin.

For us "little ones," it was a day of unimaginable joy, when the family would go up to the summer house, namely...the roof. When the weather got hot, Grandmother would order us to take the bedding up to the roof; in the mornings, it would be gathered up in one corner of the roof and then, at night, the mattresses would be spread out, side by side, and we, jumping from one bed to the other, would go occupy our corner. We used to enjoy the cool nights, watching the starlit sky and listening to the serious yet oft repeated jokes told by the elders, before becoming transported to the world of sleep and imagination.

Grandmother was an expert cook. Her specialties were Hajin jidabour and dzileren about.

The name jidabour suggests that it is made with chicken meat but Grandmother used to make it with beef. First, she boiled the meat; then, after it cooled down, she rendered it into thin strips or strings. While the barley was being cooked in water, the strings of meat were added and constantly mixed until the meat melted and became blended with the barley.

Grandmother used to carefully pick the newly sprouted greens. Then she would cook them with lentils and rice to make sprout soup.

At the end of the summer, the roof was thoroughly washed and cleaned for Grandmother to make *tarhana*, together with her daughters and daughter-in-law. The hot mixture of boiled wheat and yogurt was spread out on the cold stone roof floor to harden. We youngsters didn't miss the opportunity to take our share of the sourish pieces of *tarhana* that resembled lavash. During the cold winter weather, the hardened pieces of *tarhana* were put into boiling water to make *tarhana* soup.

Grandmother Heghine didn't know how to speak any other language but the Hajin dialect. For her, Arabic was a foreign language, of which she knew a few words. When British or French visitors came to the house, after quietly listening to them, she would say, "*Ishallah birouh memleket*", namely "God willing, you'll return to your homeland." As far as Grandmother was concerned, those persons who weren't in their own country were refugees like her, and she conveyed her best wishes to them. We tried to convince Grandmother that these persons had left their homeland on business, but to no avail. As far as she was concerned, every man with a mustache was a Bolshevik (very probably, she saw a resemblance between Stalin's and that man's mustaches).

Prior to the birth of her grandchildren, she was the one who decided their names (for example, it was

on her insistence that the last son of her one and only son was named after his grandfather Krikor).

Then, when she was told that the grandson Krikoris, who was the first of the siblings to get married, had a second child and named him Vicken, Grandmother, surprised, asked what new name that was – Duben? What does Duben mean?

Grandmother's simple mindedness was legendary, like all the grandmothers (especially grandmothers who were natives of Hajin).

Grandmother's personality traits were transmitted to succeeding generations. The new generation of artists, professionals and youths endowed with physical beauty came to show that the superhuman efforts of Grandmother Heghine to save her children from death and assimilation, her determination to form a family nucleus had been productive.

At present, there are more than 80 grandchildren and great-grandchildren descended from Grandmother Heghine.

Grandmother didn't see all of you but she lives in you with her *Hajintsi* genes.

Grandmother Heghine now rests alongside her one and only son Armenag and daughter Baidzar's older son Garbis in the cemetery of Bourj Hammoud.

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