THERE IS A PLACE FOR VIGILANTISM

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Folk Hero Ghara Minas of Sepastia: Episodes from the Life of Minas Karageozian on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of his Death

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Translator's note: *The author of this piece, Manoog Davitian, was "Baboug's" brother-in-law, having been the husband of Baboug's first wife's sister. Baboug was my maternal grandfather, Hampartzoom Hampartzoomian (later shortened to Hamparian). He was from the village of Khorokhon in Western Armenia's Sepastia Province. Baboug's first wife and children perished during the Armenian Genocide. Baboug's living descendants are from his second marriage to Armaveni Kazarian, originally from Sepastia City. The protagonist in this true tale, Ghara Minas, was a vigilante. The events described below occurred in the mid-to-late 1800s.*

During the 19th- 20th centuries, there was a notorious prison in the Sahara Desert located in the then-Ottoman Province of Fezzan (present-day Libya). It housed hundreds of political prisoners from the Ottoman Turkish Empire (including Armenian activists, Young Turks, Persians, Macedonian guerrillas, as well as revolutionaries, anarchists, felons and hardened criminals). During the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909), Fezzan was selected as a place of political exile because it was the most remote province from Constantinople (today's Istanbul) within the Ottoman Empire. Fezzan was known as "The Siberia of Africa." Fezzan later became a stronghold for Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi through much of the 2011 Libyan Civil War. - **LK**



The author, "Uncle Manoog," standing in the center surrounded by his relations, the Hamparian and Kasbarian families, in 1974.

Khorokhon village's resident, Ghara Minas Karageozian, had an adventure-filled life. Minas' sister, Gyulvart, was my father's paternal uncle's wife. And for this reason, Ghara Minas, as an in-law, would visit our house from time to time.

By 1865, my father was already married. But I'd like to describe what happened during his wedding as it was told to me. Ghara Minas was entertaining the wedding guests when someone present asked him, "Is Ghavaghtsots Osman a friend of yours?" "Yes, we're like brothers," replied Ghara Minas. The wedding guest continued, "Don't you know that Turk Osman raped your brother's wife?" (This is not Gyulvart, but Minas' sister-in-law, the wife of his brother, Haji Kevork.) "Styuk eh?" remarked Ghara Minas. "Yes, it's true," replied the guest. "Wait and I'll go retrieve my neighbor, Turk Osman, bring him here and murder him in your presence ," said Ghara Minas.

Minas went to Osman's house. He wasn't at home so Ghara Minas inquired with Osman's father.

"Omar Agha, where is Osman?" asked Ghara Minas. Omar Agha replied, "Today, Osman went to his sister's house. There are no menfolk around so he will stay there overnight." Ghara Minas, as he was departing Agha's house, said, "Omar Agha, today I will kill Osman. Will you pardon my act?" Omar Agha thought Ghara Minas was joking. As he was so fond of Minas, Omar Agaha replied, "Minas, my boy, I look upon you as my own child. What can I say? You are pardoned."

Minas went to Osman's sister's house and persuaded Osman to come back with him to the wedding reception. On their arrival, Ghara Minas asked the wedding guest, "Is this the person you mean?" while at the same time drawing a dagger from his belt. The wedding guest said "Yes." While Ghara Minas raised his hand to strike Osman, Osman jumped back in alarm. The knife sliced off Osman's nose.

This author's father, Kaspar Davitian, sprung on Ghara Minas to seize the knife and prevent further harm. Omar Agha, Osman's father, soon arrived at the wedding reception. When he saw his son's condition, he said "I don't have a case here. I already pardoned Minas before the act."

Physicians treated Osman, but the wounded from then on went by the nickname "Osman with the stitched nose."

One year after this incident, in 1866, Ghara Minas got married. A few months later, he departed Khorokhon village for Bolis . In Bolis, there was a caravanserai called Oundji Khan, near Ghalatyo Cliff. The management of this guest house was given to the Karageozian family of Khorokhon village. Two members of the Karageozian family would work in the caravanserai earning a salary of 15 gold pieces a month. They, in turn, worked for two more relatives, Ghara Minas Karageozian and his brother, Haji Kevork Karageozian. Ghara Minas had many exploits and brawls while in Bolis. The owner of the Oundji Khan guest house, a non-Armenian, would defend Minas many times and even saved his life more than once.

Ghara Minas always carried a stiletto with him, "7 fingers long." It was his only form of defense. He was a thin, bony man and full of heart. Because of his bravery, Ghara Minas was befriended by Yeni Khantsi Simon Pehlivan, who was a well-known wrestler in Sepastia. Minas would be his right-hand man and security detail during wrestling games near Khas village in the Okmeydan region.

A rich Jew lived in the Oundji Khan. He was a usurer. He would lend money at high rates of interest to exploit people, especially Armenians. Ghara Minas observed that the Jew was collecting large sums by harassing and molesting pitiable Armenian laborers. One day, Ghara Minas strangled the Jew to death and hurriedly buried the body under the staircase of Oundji Khan. Sometime later, the decomposing body released a stench throughout the Khan and the authorities were notified. An investigation got underway and the corpse was discovered. Neither the family members of the deceased nor the authorities suspected Ghara Minas. They arrested everyone in the caravanserai, including Ghara Minas and Haji Kevork. After questioning, the authorities tried and found Ghara Minas and Haji Kevork guilty of murder and sentenced them to life in prison.

In 1869, the authorities decided to send these two men to Tripoli to live out their sentences in exile. When the news reached Khorokhon, Gyulvart cried night and day. Ghara Minas' wife, upon hearing the announcement, disappeared from the village, never to be heard from again.

Twenty-five years later , word reached the village that Ghara Minas was set free from the African prison. He was not permitted to return to Bolis, however, but was to return to his native village of

Khorokhon.

I, Manoog Davitian, was 8 years old then, and witnessed Ghara Minas' return to Khorokhon. On the day of his return, he was thin and his head was covered with a wool cap. He wore a blue shirt and a blue blazer with a white belt tied around his middle. Among those who welcomed Minas was nose-cut Osman, who greeted him with a bear hug and said "we are old friends and will remain so" .

One day, a group of us went to harvest hay beyond Khorokhon in Kurd Yeotin's Aghlin field. We did not complete our harvest that day so stayed there overnight. When the others were sleeping, my father, Kaspar Davitian, insisted that Ghara Minas tell us about the 25 years he spent in Fezzan Prison in Africa. "I won't refuse your request," said Ghara Minas. Remaining awake with them, I remember the following portions of Minas' tale, as he told it.

"My life after Khorokhon, when I was in Bolis, is already familiar to you. After the sentencing, they sent us by boat to Tripoli. There, after we disembarked, Haji Kevork and I were separated. Even so, we ended up in the same prison together in Fezzan.

As I was escorted on foot by a police-guard to my designated prison, my hands were shackled. On the road, nature called. I told my escort, 'Help me drop my pants or unshackle my handcuffs so that I can relieve myself.' The police-guard refused to unshackle me but helped me drop my pants. As he was on his knees undoing my belt, he began to curse my religion and faith . I said to myself "I must punish this afflicted kosod *police-guard. I decided on the spot what I must do. Inasmuch as my wrists were bound, my fingers strangled the police-guard's throat. He had no opportunity to reach for his gun and I choked him to death.*

Still shackled, I set his corpse aside, hid his gun a distance away and continued my journey. When I reached a village police station, I went in and introduced myself.

'I am prisoner number ____.'

"Wasn't there a police-guard with you?" they asked. "There was," I replied, and told them exactly what happened. Under the authority of another police-guard from that village, I was taken, handcuffed, to my prison destination.

When I entered the prison and saw that the occupants looked like the living dead, I reconciled myself with the prospect of death. I realized I had nothing more to lose.

The majority of prisoners were Persians. One day, a seasoned prisoner in our cell block who appeared to be the chief agitator demanded ghovush parasi . *"We have no money," I announced. An argument ensued. This tormentor had a* ker tur *which he used to terrorize the prisoners in our cell. He threatened to tear me and Haji Kevork to pieces with the scimitar if we did not pay him. "I'm not afraid of your threat. Try me," I said. The bully jumped on me with his scimitar. And I, with my inseparable dagger, which I succeeded in holding onto, went toe-to-toe with him.*

I said to myself, "I'm already a dead man. Why should I be afraid of that ruffian?". The battle to the mena mart *began. This lout drew his scimitar over his head to bury the hook into my skull. With my left hand I grabbed my wool cap and put my hand around the blade and simultaneously with my right hand drove my shiv into his belly. Though my left wrist had been cut, the giant Persian scoundrel lay motionless on the ground.*

Then all the prisoners rushed at me to kiss my forehead and hands and said "You saved our lives from that cruel beast! From now on, you are the ghovush bed .

Twenty-two years continued in this fashion and we entered the year 1891. That year, one day, we had all congregated in the prison yard. A youth there was crying beneath the wall. He was a new prisoner. I approached him and asked why he was crying. He told me the following: "In our ghovush , *there's a Persian who is threatening my honor ." I asked the youth "What is your ethnicity?" "I'm a Turk," responded the youth. "Where are you from?" I inquired. "Bolis," replied the young man. The Turkish youth continued, "This Persian prosecutor of our cell block said that if I don't accede to his will, he will kill me tonight."*

"Don't be afraid. Don't cry," I replied. "I'm in the cell beside yours. Shout 'Minas Emmi' and I will come right away."

Halfway through the night, the youth yelled "Minas Emmi, for the love of God, save me!". I raced into the neighboring cell and saw that the Persian had overtaken the youth. I immediately grabbed the Persian's throat and choked him to death on the spot.

I invited the Turkish youth to our cell block. There was no control inside the prison. The only guards were by the entrances. In those days, when there were murders and deaths in prison, there were no investigations or trials. The guards would simply enter the cell blocks and remove the corpses for burial.

The Turkish youth began to tell us about his life. "My father is among the pashas currently serving in the palace of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. One of the Sultan's court spies accused me of being a liberal-progressive plotter and counter-spy. And for that reason, I've been exiled to Fezzan.

The father of this youth, being wealthy, would send large sums of money to the prison for his son, Abdullah Effendi. By the grace of those funds, which Abdullah would fraternally and equally share with me and my brother Haji Kevork, we lived bearably in that prison. Three years passed in this fashion.

In 1894, this son of the Turkish pasha was called out of the prison and notified by the authorities that he was a free man. The pasha, with "release papers" in his hand, had come to escort his son back to Bolis. Abdullah Effendi said to his father, "If the two Armenian prisoners with me, Ghara Minas and Haji Kevork are not freed with me, I will not emerge from this prison, as I owe my life to them."

That was Abdullah's final word. The pasha, with broken heart, returned to Bolis. There, he met Sultan Abdul Hamid II and requested a release for "two ailing prisoners" who would probably die before returning to their birthplaces.

By Hamid's royal pardon-decree, the two Armenians were permitted to be released from prison on the condition that they remain banished from Bolis and return to their birthplaces. That decree marked the 25th year of our imprisonment. Upon our departure from Tripoli, Abdullah said "Minas, we will meet again in Bolis," but that opportunity did not come to pass.

Ghara Minas embarked from Tripoli and arrived in Bolis but was not allowed to disembark. He continued to Samson, then arrived in Sepastia before finally reaching his destination, Khorokhon village. Haji Kevork somehow disembarked in Bolis and stayed there for two months before making his way to Khorokhon.

In 1895, the Hamidian Turkish Massacres took place in the Armenian provinces. The day of the Massacres, which occurred on the last day of October in Khorokhon, Minas sat in front of his house clutching his inseparable dagger. In that village, not one Turk raised a hand to the Armenians. Ghara Minas' presence filled the Turks with dread.

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Comments



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This is what Armenia has always needed - and needs now.