

# "REMEMBERING MOUSHEGH ISHKHAN"

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## Yervant Babayan



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## Moushegh Ishkhan passes away in 1990.

As a poet, prose writer, playwright, and teacher, he has penned 17 books:

*The Song of the Homes; The Fire; Armenia; Life and Dreams; For Bread and Light; Three Great Armenians; For Bread and Love; Greetings, Fatherland; Golden Autumn; Affliction; It Is So Difficult to Die; The Wait; The Man from the Refrigerator; Plays; My Teachers; Sunset; Twilight Under the Shelling; Modern Armenian Literature (three-volume textbook); and Farewell, Childhood.*

With the latter book, Moushegh Ishkhan seeks to revisit his miserable childhood, one overwhelmed by the burden of deprivation and horror experienced during an itinerant existence, as his family moved from one country to another, from one city to the next.

Like an expert psychologist, Ishkhan examines the painful recollections of his youth. The most heart-wrenching of these is his mother's outpouring of grief at his father's gravesite.

At the end of World War I, the survivors of the Genocide return to their ancestral cities with great hopes. Ishkhan's family, along with others, returns to Sivri Hisar and settles in a meager house. Their splendid, two-story residence is now inhabited by a Turkish military doctor.

Sometimes they go to church to pray. The young Moushegh says his own special prayer: "Dear heavenly Father, protect us. Please don't allow the Turks to find out where we're hiding. Save us from deportation. Amen."

When his father dies, Ishkhan considers his paternal uncle to be his father and his wife becomes his mother. Because Ishkhan's biological mother has gone to Jerusalem, she is known as his "haji"  (pilgrim) mother.

The survivors speak only about the deportations. They tell of the starvation, the horrifying Turkish criminals, the massacres. This is all that Moushegh ever hears. His inner world is filled with "deathly phantasms." Terrifying visions torment him at night.

Father wants to teach him how to read Armenian. He resists, maintaining that he is incapable of learning. Father and Mother insist. Moushegh is upset and begins to cry. It is obvious that, in this condition, he can't learn anything. However, he cheers up when Father brings him a colorful book. "Curiosity," he says, "conquers fear."

Suddenly everything changes. More Turkish soldiers arrive, and the relative tranquility is disrupted. The Turks are infuriated by the triumph of the Greeks, and the Armenians are gripped with dread. One night, the remaining men—including Father—are taken, God knows where.

Everything changes once again. The Greeks occupy the city. Moushegh recalls Father's words: "The Greeks will win only if the British want it." The Armenians, especially the children, are happy. They see automobiles for the very first time. What an exciting novelty! Steam issues forth from the front of the vehicle. "It's going to explode!" someone exclaims. Mother suddenly carries him away.

Although he says nothing, Moushegh's pride is hurt. The other novelty introduced by the Greeks is chocolate. When Mother brings some home from the market and passes it out to them, they consume it eagerly. Moushegh notices that the piece of chocolate given to him is bigger than the rest. "I wasn't dissatisfied, of course, but I felt an inexplicable uneasiness in light of the injustice meted out to my sister and brother," writes Moushegh.

Unfortunately, the Armenians aren't happy for long. It is said that the Greeks have been defeated and have begun to withdraw. Haste and alarm—the Armenians despair. The only solution is to flee. The decision is made and, with innumerable difficulties, they reach Bursa.

Bursa has several silk mills. Moushegh's "haji" mother and his cousin find work in one of the silk factories. Bursa is also known for its mineral springs. Moushegh frequently suffers from anuria, or urine retention. Mother takes him to the springs, in an effort to cure him. A naked girl standing at the edge of the pool captures the attention of our pubescent youth. Embarrassed, he avoids looking at her nude body, especially at her shivering breasts. But he senses that it is difficult not to stare. Mother leaves him in her care. Regarding this he says: "We are together for two or three days now, and she is the one who carries me out of the water to hand me to Mother. At night I secretly pray that I won't pass my stones so that the Turkish girl and I may continue to descend into the pool of happiness for a long time."

A year after their arrival in Bursa, worrisome news begins to circulate. Mustafa Kemal advances, and the Greeks withdraw. Bursa is in danger. It is necessary to leave as soon as possible. Armenians arrive in trucks at one of the gulfs of Marmara. Everyone is sad, but Moushegh is happy: he sees the sea for the first time.

Everyone gathers upon the wharf, rushing to board the steamship docked nearby. There is pushing and shoving, confusion and disorder. Some, like Moushegh's family, don't attempt to join the crowd. They move away and situate themselves in some abandoned wagons. In the morning, they are distressed to learn that the wharf's pier has collapsed and many have drowned. A few days later, a ship arrives and transports them to Istanbul.

Through a special arrangement, they settle in an old school. They are happy because there is no danger of deportation or massacre. However, serious challenges exist. In particular, the danger of Mustafa Kemal looms. It is said that on any given day he can capture Istanbul. In order to avoid new troubles, the Armenians begin to depart. They leave for Greece, Bulgaria, and other countries. Moushegh and his family go to Damascus. A few years later, the family is split apart. Moushegh's biological grandmother and uncle propose, in successive letters, that they come to live with them in Greece. Mother agrees to "haji" mother's relocation along with Moushegh's younger brother and sister. However, Moushegh will remain with Mother, naturally, since he has already been officially registered with the government as her child. They depart, bidding their loved ones farewell with affectionate yet anguished kisses.

This sad separation is followed by a happy reunion. Moushegh Ishkhan writes: "It took thirty-seven long years for the 'gates of hope' to open. I had the good fortune to visit Yerevan in 1962 and to embrace my 'haji' mother, sister, and brother there."

## EDUCATION

Istanbul. Along with refugee children who share his fate, Moushegh begins to attend the Ortakiugh school. Only he recognizes the Armenian alphabet.

"I'm not a bad boy," he writes. "My sickly constitution undoubtedly prevents me from doing anything evil...Regarding laziness, why conceal my sin? I'm afraid that I'm a bit lazy. When Father would teach me the alphabet, I would pretend to have a stomach ache."

✘ There are events that unexpectedly reveal hidden talents. This is what happens to Moushegh during geography class. When he names the various places that the refugees have been as he describes their sufferings, the local boys listen with astonishment. His teacher, interested in and moved by his story, praises him. "The local boys' dumbfounded curiosity makes me happy," he writes. "Not only have I overcome my usual timidity, but I feel like the hero of a famous epic novel as well." Moushegh's self-confidence is further bolstered during religion class. He, only he, answers the teacher's questions. Father has recounted all of the biblical episodes to him. In response to the question, "What did Moses give the Jews when he came down from the mountain?" he immediately replies: "the testament of the Ten Commandments." In response to a second question, "What is the difference between the Jews who leave Egypt and the Armenian refugees?" After thinking for a moment, he states: "The Jews go to their land; we go elsewhere."

Damascus. Moushegh is nine; his sister is six. His brother is very young. They attend the Catholic Sisters' Arabic school. Arabic is the primary language, but French is also taught. Arabic is a difficult language to learn. After suffering for a month, he finds the means of success. With the help of others, he writes his lesson using Armenian letters, memorizes it overnight, and earns his teacher's praise the next day: "Afek yah walad" ("Well done, boy"). However, he isn't happy. The environment is strange, and so sad that "my childhood died from day to day, pale and exhausted."

The second school that he attends is the Franco-Arménienne school. All of the students are Armenian, but they speak Turkish. The teachers are Armenian, too. The principal is a Jesuit priest who preaches Catholicism. The teachers' struggle against Turkish fails. Here is Moushegh's evaluation: "At the Franco-Arménienne school, I forgot the Arabic that I had learned at the Sisters' school, my Arabic improved, I learned the Armenian grammatical cases quite well, and I struggled endlessly to learn French."

Damascus' third school is the Protestant one. Moushegh is a fourth-grade student there. This school is unique for its morning worship. Every morning one teacher, in turn, discusses a biblical episode. Then they sing spiritual songs. In Moushegh's opinion, the best speaker is an Armenian teacher named Baron Boghos. He only emphasizes patriotism. In a conservative school, Baron

Boghos' audacity is worthy of praise, according to Moushegh. Furthermore, he manages to foster Moushegh's love for reading by providing him with books and encouraging him to write. Here is his opinion: "Baron Boghos was one of those exceptional teachers to whom students connect with unreserved adoration. A familial feeling had been created between us." At the year-end ceremony, the best students are awarded honor pins. Moushegh receives one as well.

The following year, a young man is appointed principal. His affectionate manner towards the students quickly makes him everyone's favorite. Soon thereafter they begin to criticize him. Yet the criticism and slander do not undermine his authority. The cordial principal-student relationship endures.

Near the end of May, he organizes a May 28th commemoration along with a group of students. Tasks are assigned, and a program is prepared. Moushegh is to recite a poem by Siamanto. Everyone at school is excited about the upcoming event. Alas, the Board of Trustees cancels it. As a result, the principal decides not to return the following year. A group of disgruntled students decides to enroll at another school.

A year later, Moushegh is a senior at Damascus' National School. The school is run by a senior teacher. One morning, he enters the classroom accompanied by a man wearing a fez.

"Your Armenian teacher is poet Aris Shaklian. I wish you all success." After he leaves, whispers circulate in the classroom: "Who ever heard of a poet with a fez?" Moushegh and others are disappointed: "Based upon the photos found in books, this man does not have a writer's appearance at all."

However, this negative impression is rectified gradually. The instructor's teaching skill, his obvious efforts to be helpful, and his gentle smile secure the students' sympathy. He becomes a well-respected and loved teacher. One day, Moushegh composes a poem and submits it to the teacher as a composition. The next day, as the teacher hands back the corrected compositions, he reads Moushegh's poem. After making a few comments, he adds that Moushegh has the talent to write, and that he should develop this talent because he could become a famous poet someday.

Moushegh writes about the poet-teacher Aris Shaklian: "It's true. My spelling didn't improve, my analytical knowledge didn't advance, but from him I received the Holy Communion of fine literary arts." Later, he adds: "Now Baron Shaklian was unveiling the miraculous world of poetry before my dazzled eyes."

Moushegh graduates with highest honors. He delivers the commencement address and is awarded a prize.

Here is his conclusion regarding his graduation from elementary school: "The edifice of my education is complete. Its lower floor was built by the Catholics; its middle floor was constructed by the Protestants; and its upper floor—more correctly, its dome—was raised in the style of the Mother

Church. Is it possible to imagine a more cohesive and complete education than this?"

During those years, few elementary school graduates could afford to continue their education. Many would enter a trade profession. Moushegh decides to become a shoemaker. His first master, a rude man, compels him to seek another master, and he finds one. A benevolent man, his new master, Vartan, tries to help him. One day, after work, Vartan takes Moushegh to the Progressivists' Club. Moushegh enjoys their company, and he goes to the Club often. He registers as a member of the Youth Union, and he is put in charge of the library. Lectures are sometimes held at the Club. Poet and educator Armen Anoush visits the Club one day. Moushegh befriends him. On another occasion, Nigol Aghpalian, Education Minister of the Republic of Armenia, is greeted with great enthusiasm. A festival is organized in his honor, and a program is prepared. Moushegh recites Siamanto's "To: Idea." At the conclusion of the event, he is introduced to the Minister as a studious youth. There is talk about the college to be opened in Beirut two years later. Two years later? Moushegh isn't very excited by the prospect of such a distant likelihood. He continues to work as a shoemaker's apprentice.

One evening, on his way home, he runs into his dear Armenian teacher, Aris Shaklian. In response to his questions, he replies that he has decided to become a shoemaker. "No, Moushegh my son, no, you weren't meant to be a tradesman," he says and proposes that he continue his education at the Melkonian Educational Institute in Cyprus. He assures Moushegh that, if he is willing to go, he will arrange it for him.

Moushegh thankfully accepts his teacher's proposal and, after passing the entrance exams, departs for Cyprus.

Here is his assessment of his meeting with his teacher: "This chance meeting, in front of a coffeehouse on a Saturday evening, fatefully determines my entire future. Instead of becoming a shoemaker, I become an educator."

The book's conclusion: "My persecuted and exiled childhood comes to an end here. Farewell, childhood."

