AN ESSENTIAL PREFACE

"… How could three monsters, even with the aid of a whole gang of executioners, destroy millions of people?"

"… People don't like to feel deceived. It's not their fault. They are victims too… People in the camps literally represented a single nation…"

"… After the martyr's death of the Haramyans, I have the right to think what I like about their murderers…"

Zori Balayan "No right to die".

Zori Balayan proved that he has the right to think what he likes by his long career in journalism and literature, in the newspapers of Kamchatka and Karabakh and in the Moscow "*Literary Gazette*", and he proved it through his books which were read throughout the whole country (the USSR). I shall name just a few of them, ones that he himself referred to looking back on his life: "*Between Hell and Paradise*", "*The Heart is not Stone*", "*The Abyss*", "*The Hearth*" and "*The Confrontation*". The titles themselves speak of the character of the story-teller: the edge of the abyss which the pilgrim reaches in his life, the hearth that he should return to, the solid defence that the heart needs in situations of confrontation.

His character is integrated and strong. That is the reputation of this writer, his image in the memory of people who have been reading his work for almost half a century.

And yet in this book "*No right to die*", that looks back over his whole life and that was so long and difficult in the writing, the force lines of human existence tightly intersect, and there is an all-pervading, soul-piercing feeling – unexpected for such a strong person – that it is impossible to tie up all the loose ends…

I'll begin with the physical form of the story-teller, as then it will be easier to approach the more complex aspects.

We see a man with steely muscles, a weightlifter, a sporting champion.

And at the height of his strength he collapses with a heart that is being torn apart – so much so that the doctors have to bring him back from death.

So, what is the reality here: steely toughness or gentle vulnerability?

I need to reveal the context in which they mesh together: strength and weakness.

The context of strength: weightlifting champion for Nagorno-Karabakh region, weightlifting champion among the students at the naval academies, heavy athletics champion of the Baltic Fleet. The holder of records for the Andizhan region of Uzbekistan in the squat, the bench press and the deadlift and for the combined total of 335 kilograms, which "the whole of Andizhan knew about from the newspapers". And which we know about from his book.

The naïve reader may suspect an elementary case of vanity. But this is something else – the insatiable desire to bring one's achievements to the life of the community, to find one's place in society, to make one's own contribution to this world, even through weightlifting.

The context of weakness: after the 1988 earthquake had demolished the town of Spitak, America invited crippled Armenian children for treatment and Balayan took part in sending them. Three months later, he was met in Los Angeles airport by these children after their treatment: they were walking with crutches and sticks, but they were on their feet and they were smiling! As he rushed to hug and kiss them he felt a lump in his throat… and a fire in his chest. "Surely one cannot die of happiness," he thought…

The American surgeons didn't let him die: they managed to operate in time.

The son of "enemies of the people", Balayan completed secondary school without problems in his native Karabakh, won a place at university in Moscow (his

muscles helped – sporting champions were highly prized), got a higher education and…

I am getting to the most terrifying point in Zori Balayan's book: the theme of repression. To the heart-piercing story of his mother, who after her camp sentence survived almost into the new millennium still struggling to understand why it all happened. To the story of his father, whose grave Zori Balayan sought for a long time, digging through the KGB archives, exploring the land of the Komi and finally unearthing, finding, piecing together and now describing the death of his father, writing in the blood of his heart. And trying to explain.

Approaching this topic, there are some things I should warn the reader of.

For half a century now, beginning with Solzhenitsyn's "*A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*" and Shalamov's "*Kolyma Tales*" – which shook me to the core and were etched in my consciousness for the rest of my life – and as the literature chronicling repression grew ever more extensive, I, for one, was increasingly overcome by a sensation of ever-accelerating insanity, from which the soul looks vainly for an escape. In an effort to save my soul from destructive despair, my feeble mind tries to cover this horror with some kind of protective shield – by attempting to explain what happened, so that it does not remain an endless insane lunacy.

I'm sorry, I'm trying to find at least some hint of an explanation in the midst of this all-encompassing frenzy. Otherwise it's too much for the soul to bear.

I'll begin with the first of the three monsters who symbolise for Balayan the vile nature of the era (these three are Lenin, Stalin and Beria).

And I'll take up the issue which more deeply than any other pains the Armenian soul – the cutting off of Karabakh. It was Lenin who "entered a criminal conspiracy with Ataturk" and secured the creation of the Muslim socialist republic of Azerbaijan on Armenian historic territory – which had been part of the Russian Empire. Why? To export revolution to the East. "Lenin encouraged the Muslims…"

Instinctively Lenin knew that on its own Russia could not cope with the West. The whole course of the First World War confirmed that – and Marxism was no help. It was necessary to find geopolitical allies. The Chinese were a long way away and unpredictable, but Ataturk was nearby and, it would seem, predictable, so the leader of the world proletariat embraced him.

One could say that the quick thinking of the leader worked, but his long-term geopolitical instinct let him down. Ataturk didn't help us. The logic of despair in a life-or-death situation led us to turn to him.

Stalin (the second monster in Balayan's list) simply inherited this policy from Lenin. And the result was the same – the opposite of what was intended. Retreating from the West, he sought support in the East. In order that the Armenians wouldn't get in the way, he would have been prepared to abolish the Armenian republic with a stroke of the pen, leaving it "at best as an autonomous unit within Georgia or Azerbaijan". It didn't make any difference where there were Christians and where there were Muslims. It was just that the Muslims turned out to be closer in that same old confrontation with the West, which was almost entirely Christian. It's crazy to try to find any sympathy for Islam in Stalin, whose initial education was as an Orthodox priest, and he certainly didn't encourage Islam. It was all calculated.

Was he proved right? Did Stalin's geopolitical instinct let him down when he felt in mortal danger? Hitler bid for Muslim support and Stalin had to change course and suppress possible resistance, rooting out the Muslim tribes of the North Caucasus, with the result that even today those who were deported and later returned home are filled with hatred for those who condemned them to banishment.

You have to pay for everything, you know, including for despair at the time of Hitler's attack, when Russia was looking for a way of being saved from destruction. It was the North Caucasus Muslims who paid for our fear. And now we are paying for the bitter inheritance from our fathers, for the deportations, which were illegal, merciless and irremediable, though not without cause.

It was Beria who organised the deportations. We got rid of the third of Balayan's monsters without any trial or investigation – Beria was shot in some obscure corner. But we allowed Lenin and Stalin to remain as the saviours of the country. Now we are working out who was better and who was worse.

Like Zori Balayan, we can count how many times in his communications Lenin used the word "shoot". We can weigh up how much respect there was for the Russians in Lenin's picturesque assessment: "The Russian is a laggard and a dolt." We can argue with the phrase "it's not a dictatorship that we have, we're about as tough as a bowl of porridge". It really was a dictatorship. But that Russia could perish in Lenin's porridge, and was to do so, is beyond argument. It was deadly. And the dolt was doomed along with the laggard. So Lenin issued his calls to shoot, knowing very well that in the lunacy of the civil war he would find plenty of those willing to respond and that everybody was ready to shoot – they just needed to know who to shoot and the only question was who would be most ruthless.

One monster followed another. And under Stalin cruelty reached an almost suicidal extent in the nation.

The terror of the Stalinist years raged primarily through the upper echelons of the system. Was the party destroying its sympathisers? Well, you could say that. Everybody claimed to be supporters of the party: the executioners and the victims. Especially at those moments when their roles were reversed. And everyone was constantly thinking about conspiracies and betrayals. Even at the very top. And not without reason. The most recent archival research shows that at times the willingness to remove the General Secretary, who was the supreme commander-in-chief, reached 70 percent among the highest ranks of state security, who were the ones zealously carrying out the terror. Of course, it was impossible to catch one of these thugs in the act – they had an instinct for secrecy. But the chief thug's instinct dictated constant purges at all levels, including the highest levels. When it came to blood-letting he was the champion.

But why? Why do the secret police seize and drag away thirty-three year old Haik Balayan, a communist protégé, the minister of education of the Nagorno-Karabakh republic, and send him to oblivion in a black prison van? This wasn't a rank-and-file educator or an insignificant Soviet official – before his arrest he was transferred to lead the district executive committee, though apparently because it would be easier to arrest him if he was in that position. But all the same, for what? He wasn't an opponent of the regime or even an ordinary man on the street – he was just the kind of young builder of the new society on which it depended. And did he, the grandson of a priest, who had exchanged belief in God for Marxist godlessness, understand what he was building? He had joined the party – and with his eyes wide open! And he had gone to Moscow, to the Communist University of the Peoples of the East named after comrade Stalin, with his eyes wide open, and he had been put forward and selected because he had genuinely accepted the Soviet ideals. And he had graduated with distinction and become a minister.

So was he consciously building the state which ditched him? Did he understand *what* he was building? Or does this question just repeat the rendering absurd of existence at all levels that overwhelms people in accursed epochs?

His wife, fifteen years younger, who had been a pupil in a village school, had much more right not to understand. She adored her husband, for his intellect, for his energy and for his conviction. Maybe it was even harder for her to be left, the wife of an "enemy of the people", with two young children on her hands, one not even a year old, the other just over two. And this one, the elder one, devoted his life to understand what had happened and to find his father's grave.

He searched all over Siberia and the Far North for any trace of his father in the frozen wastes of the GULAG and found him in the Komi republic, not far from the Arctic Ocean. And what was just as important, he tracked the fate of this "enemy of the people", right up to the hour of his death. And do you know where his father

ended his days? No, not in a mine shaft buried in rubble, not in a lumber camp pinned down by a tree trunk, not on a forced march, where one step out of line led to being shot without warning, and not in a secret police dungeon sentenced to be shot after a peremptory hearing of a three-man tribunal.

Haik Balayan died in the camp hospital, where a surgeon was trying to save his life after a tree at the lumber camp had been felled in such a way as to claim yet another victim.

What's going on? Is it a mixture of legality in the midst of darkness with enlightened behaviour that went against the law? Or is it yet another example of absurdity: the system tries to save the person that it has condemned to death? Is it possible to see any logic at all here other than the logic of a blind death machine? And how on earth, if you get out of it alive, do you try to understand why all this is possible?

Who should explain it? The mother to the son? Or the son to the mother?

And his mother, having done her ten years in camps, survived not only to the Twentieth Party Congress, which exonerated her, not only to the Twenty Second Congress which ordered Stalin's removal from the mausoleum, but even to the time when the Soviet system was carried out feet first. What can the mother answer the son when he can't make up his mind: whether to keep on asking his mother for answers to the accursed questions or to keep quiet so as not to exhaust her with his questions?

His mother breaks the silence and utters two words, as if for the whole generation of suffering Armenian women: "*Tsavyt tanem*" (I take your pain). That is something that is often said to family and friends – and has been for more than 4500 years.

Lev Anninsky

Zori Balayan

No right to die

Prologue

In the course of my long life, I have died more than once. On one occasion I crashed headlong to the ground from the very top of a high mulberry tree and was found only on the following day – not breathing and most definitely unconscious, as I was told. Another time, raging surf crushed me and my tiny boat against a cliff and deposited me on a rocky shore – half-dead, according to the frontier guards who saved me. Then again, I once experienced clinical death in the course of a heart operation. People who have gone through this experience quite often tell all sorts of far-fetched stories about what they have seen and sensed "over there". I, however, didn't see or sense anything. I was simply told about my death by those who were present and who saved my life. What's important, though, is this: I have always been horrified by the thought that I might die without having told people about my mother, who went through the GULAG, or my father, who was murdered in the GULAG, about the period that is linked in our minds with 1937 (and with many other years just like 1937) and about what I myself had to live through.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the "*Literary Gazette*" published my discussion with William Saroyan, in the course of which I asked the great writer how he reacted to accusations that his works were too full of unnecessary autobiographical references. Let me quote just a small extract from his reply: "I shall never believe that the unbearable spiritual agony which we see in Dostoyevsky's heroes could have been 'imagined' by the author at his writing desk. Once I was struck by a title – something like 'A tale of my sufferings' or 'The story of what I have lived through'. I thought, a writer can't call a work of his that, because writers always write about what they themselves have experienced. That's why I don't accept terminology like 'excessive autobiographical references'. The personal life of Hemingway is all in his books. I truly love and admire Thomas Wolfe and I remember even feeling happy when he too was criticised for notoriously overdoing 'autobiographical references'."

I have not mentioned these famous names in order to put myself on the same level. I am simply reinforcing my own ideas about a time when events could be experienced only through me or, as Avetik Isahakyan said, "through my own heart". I am absolutely convinced that the victims of the year 1937 also included those who were not officially registered as among the repressed – the children born to them and even those as yet unborn. Strictly speaking, my book is about them too.

I have no doubt at all that, from the age of two, I somehow understood right away – all at once – or rather, I sensed intuitively that everything around me had changed. Life had changed. My mum had changed – her voice had become different. And I myself had changed. After all, I had been living with my father for two whole years – a whole eternity. It really was an immense period of time for someone my age – and I was already solving important problems: I had first learnt to crawl, then to walk, to run and to "travel" across the whole room to the balcony, making my first wonderful discoveries. Now having become a father and a grandfather, as my three children grew up and my six grandchildren are growing up before my very eyes, I see what's going on in their hearts and in their opinions when I return home. I see my grandsons running to greet me at the door, trying to outdo each other – but, above all, I see them laughing joyfully. All this is happening with the happy faces of their mothers in the background. Back then, however, when I was two years old, all this suddenly

changed, it came to an end as if it had never been. In those terrible years, when millions of fathers and mothers were just wood-chips flying, I and millions of children my age were merely “sawdust”.

The arguments still going on about the price paid for Stalin’s regime are mainly concerned with statistics (not with human beings and their fate, but with cold figures!), as recorded in the miraculously preserved secret lists of those executed. However, all of us were victims – even those whose families did not include a single “repressed person”. The statisticians for some reason assume that the victims of “repression” were those who were officially executed. Some researchers even include in their total calculations only those people who got recorded in the official documents as having been executed by firing squad.

Have we ever asked ourselves – was it harder, at that time, for the dead or for the living? It was that terrible question that once came into my own head – which is why this book is above all about myself and what I lived through and about the millions who were my brothers and sisters in misfortune, in their lives as orphans. It concerns those who, having lived through the horrors of the Stalinist epoch, did not set out in life bitter or vengeful, and those who lived through the collapse of our vast country with heartfelt personal sorrow and spiritual anguish.

As a child, I already sensed clearly that many human beings were not living so much as “surviving”. This was true even of our idols, on whom we modelled ourselves. However, none of my contemporaries, not even the adults, was able to understand that, in our country, there was not merely “lawlessness”, but slavery, which we simply did not recognize. I myself, fatherless, motherless and hungry, used to write poems about the happiness of childhood in my home town of Stepanakert, along whose streets, even after the victory in the Second World War, hundreds of people were being led away under guard and sent off to their deaths…

Nevertheless, first of all and above all, while working on this book, I was thinking of the fate of my mother, who herself often asked aloud: “Do we need to reopen the wounds of the past?” She wasn’t expecting us to answer her question. She would simply ask it quietly, as if wondering about the answer herself. After all, she was convinced that it was impossible to overcome hatred by means of hatred – and she would also add that everything evil and tragic in the world could be put right only through love. Once she described how, on 21 December 1989 – the 110th anniversary of Stalin’s birth – there was a programme on television which included a discussion about the repressions. One of the participants, while not exactly justifying the man whose anniversary was being marked, merely observed that this man’s name was linked not only with evil, but also with good things – in particular, winning the war. He suggested that, for the sake of the future, there should be less digging up the past.

I could not contain myself and told my mother all that I had been thinking about such attempts at compromise, as if there had been a good Stalin and a bad Stalin, that no-one was ideal. My mum began to try to calm me down. “What can you do?” she said. “People are all different. When I was in camp, I realised this more than once, so obviously we have to accept it as something inevitable.” But then five months went by. One evening, on coming home, I hardly recognised my mother: she was walking round the room, backwards and forwards, talking to herself, not noticing me. It was 8 May 1990. On the eve of Victory Day, film after film was being shown, with Stalin everywhere as the centre of attention. My mum, like all of us, had seen these films many times, but suddenly she simply got furious, seeing on the screen the wise, sensible, calm Stalin being constantly contrasted with the caricature-like, hysterical Hitler.

“The hell with it!” she exploded. “Perhaps the way they show it, that’s the way it was. But how does it turn out? Some people say, let’s not disturb the past, let’s not remember what was bad, but others, deciding that a page can’t just be torn out of

history, show that tyrant to new generations as some kind of saviour, like Christ himself…"

I shall never forget that day. Outside the window the curfew was in operation. That night my mum did not close her eyes. I knew what was the matter with her. She was upset, above all, because suddenly her life-long principle of the power of love was not working, the principle that evil only gives rise to evil, that hatred cannot rectify hatred. In this book, the reader will discover that, in the camps, mum did not always succeed in upholding the Christian principles she was so proud of. And then, on that forty-fifth anniversary of the victory in the Second World War, before she lay down to sleep, my mum calmly said: "Remembering the millions of souls that were destroyed doesn't mean you're stirring up the past. It means telling the truth and calling a murderer a murderer."

During the long years I spent working on this book, I collected a huge number of archival documents. It was difficult not to yield to the temptation of "preserving" in it all I wanted to say about my mother and father, about myself and my times. So I decided to put at least some of my memories in the "Appendix" at the end of the book. One thing I know clearly: I am fulfilling the promise I made to my mother in secret, by trying to give an honest account of all that I know, that I have seen, thought about and understood concerning the times I have lived in, the people close to me and myself.

No right to die

On the seventh of March 1973, early in the morning, I left flat No. 32 , on 28 Partizanskaya Street, in the town of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. As I was going down the stairs, I started searching through my small bunch of keys – as I had grown used to doing over the years – for the tiny key to my post box on the ground floor. Depending on the day of the week, I usually knew which newspapers would be awaiting me. Quite often I would be in a hurry to turn the key in the lock, anticipating the pleasure of seeing an article, sketch or short story by myself in one of the local or national publications. Usually an hour or two prior to leaving the house I would have been listening to the press reviews on the local radio, so I would know exactly which of my works would be appearing that day in "*Kamchatka Pravda*" or "*Kamchatka Young Communist*". It had happened more than once that, the evening before, I had stayed late into the evening at the editor's office, proof-reading my own galley proofs and making last minute corrections.

Nevertheless it was sometimes the case that, in the morning, I would search in vain for my published work in the newspaper: late that night, for one reason or another, it had been deleted by *Glavlit* (the Central Literary Department, i.e. the state censorship – Translator). To this day, even though half a century has gone by, I still remember the nervous, clammy feeling of fear of those unknown, hidden people, who unfortunately had been given the right to remove any material from the columns of a newspaper, without giving any explanation.

That day, 7 March, I was not expecting anything. None of my journalistic work was languishing at the local newspapers, awaiting its hour. What was more, for three days running the weather had grounded air transport – so how could any national papers have arrived? However, articles by me were due to appear in the "*Literary Gazette*", as well as in "*Young Communist Pravda*" and "*The Week*".

I calmly opened the post-box. As I expected, there were no newspapers in it. But there was some sort of slip of white paper lying at the bottom – obviously a telegram. In the Kamchatka territory, telegrams were often pushed into post-boxes. Nothing would ever be lost that way – nor was there any need for the postman to drag himself up to the second or third floor. I was quite used to receiving telegrams. After every earthquake that was reported in Moscow, telegrams for me arrived from Stepanakert and Andizhan, where relatives of mine lived. Even my links with editors were basically maintained with the help of the telegraph office.

I picked up a thick piece of paper, folded in four. I slowly closed the post-box, unfolded the paper and read it – and for a moment, I felt somehow detached from everything around me. "Congratulations, daughter born. Yervand." Yervand is my father-in-law's name; in those first moments, however, it never occurred to me that the telegram was from him – my wife's father. I remember, when I first knew him, I used to address him formally, by his first name and patronymic. Later, after our children were born, I began to call him "*papik*" (granddad), as they did. In the same way, my mother-in-law became "*tatik*" (grandma). From "*Literary Gazette*", where I became a freelance correspondent from 1968 onwards, I used to receive letters from Yervand Grigoryants. These thoughts must have passed through my brain in a flash – but it seemed to me I stood there, frozen, for quite a long time.

Coming to, I read through the telegram again and discovered in it another important clue: "Stepanakert". I hardly needed to look at the text again. I now knew that the telegram was from Stepanakert, the town where I myself had been born thirty eight years ago. A few hours earlier, my daughter had been born there too – in the town which, to me, was the absolute centre of the universe.

* * *

I smoothed down the telegram with my fingers and felt that I had from that moment become a quite different person. It was as this new character that I had to return to my home. A new life was beginning. Of course, first of all, I had to get ready for a flight to the outside world – which meant I had to put all my affairs in order immediately, answer my letters and make necessary phone calls. Inwardly, I somehow automatically became convinced that there would be a plane no earlier than in twenty-four hours, assuming that the weather conditions would allow the flight to take place. And however strange it may seem, at these moments I thought primarily, not about my wife or daughter, but about my mother. Looking back at our past, however, it was not really that strange.

* * *

In Kamchatka, I was very fond of our wards in the physiotherapy department of the hospital for water-transport workers and my own small consulting room in the regional medical centre for physiotherapy. I loved flying out in the MI-8 helicopter on medical duties, travelling on sledges drawn by teams of dogs or reindeer, going off by ship along rivers and seas, sometimes even on the Pacific Ocean. I liked sitting up until late in the editor's offices of "*Kamchatka Pravda*" and "*Kamchatka Young Communist*", whiling away the hours with friends and guests, with a glass of Moscow vodka, or sometimes even pure spirits and snacks of red caviar or freshly salted fish.

Most of all, however, I liked receiving letters. They arrived in especially large numbers after long bouts of stormy weather, when the indefatigable working plane, the IL-18, wheezing from the strain, brought in from the outside world tons of newspapers, journals, letters, parcels and packets. How I rejoiced when the head of the "*Letters*" section at the "*Literary Gazette*", Zalman Rummer, informed me on the paper's official notepaper that my short sketch "*This is Kamchatka!*" had been acknowledged as the best in that issue – after which, for six to eight weeks, readers did not tire of sharing their innermost thoughts with me.

I remember well that in those days I had a strange way of opening envelopes. When I received a thick pile of letters all at once, I would invariably open the envelope from my mother last of all. Probably this was mainly because I used to talk to my mother on the phone once a week (sometimes more often). So we had no difficulties with exchanging news. My younger brother Boris was living in Andizhan together with my mother, as were many of my mother's relatives: her brother and sisters, their children and grandchildren. In other words, she had enough people to look after her.

Mum's letters from Andizhan always began in the same way. She would start by passing on greetings from her brother, uncle Aram, then from aunt Arevat, her sister, from her other sister, aunt Anna, and from their children, listing them all by name. Then came the names of my relatives on my father's side, who had also been exiled from Karabakh and, after the rigours of the Altai territory, settled down after the war in Central Asia. At the end of her epistle, mum would always write about what was troubling her most : "I simply can't watch any more as all your friends, all our relatives – those your own age – take their little children for walks, holding them by the hand – either to the kindergarten or to their school. Some already have two or three children. All my own friends spend days and nights looking after their grand-children, while I can't sleep at night."

I would even like to quote a bit more of this letter, because the following sentences reveal the full depth and seriousness of my mum's feelings: "Formerly, I used to read with interest your stories and articles, which you sent together with your letters. Now I no longer find these newspaper cuttings interesting. Who needs them, these stories and articles, if their author is a man with no family? I have always known that the most uninteresting kind of man in the world is a bachelor. Do you at least realise how old you are?"

I received this letter at the end of 1970, in the seventh year of my stay on Kamchatka. Of course, I felt that each such letter was like a bucket of cold water thrown over me. Why should I voluntarily renounce the journeys on boats and with dog-teams that fascinated me so? Or the nocturnal chats with friends and even chance conversations with people from another world, unusually interesting people, whose very varied activities take them into such distant, often almost unknown places in the world? Why, finally, should I abandon my work as a journalist and medical worker, which fulfilled my life in every way? Could I really exchange all these joys for the monotonous and tedious routine of family life, especially when presented to me in a completely abstract way?

In my own letters, I used to write in an uncommitted, joking manner. I tried to impress on her that I still had time, that thirty-five was certainly a mature age, but there was nothing so terrible about that. There was one more journey by dog-team and reindeer through the tundra of Kamchatka and Chukotka that I simply had to make (this was a reference to a tough and demanding expedition from southern Kamchatka to the northern Arctic Ocean). However, after that, I would certainly start thinking about my future personal life. In addition, I mentioned the practical difficulties. Where, out here at the edge of the world, was I to find a wife who would be the kind my mother would like? And even though it was an absolute age since I had left Karabakh, I still remembered our traditions. “So, my dear mum,” I wrote, “I promise to be an obedient son. And if you catch sight of a girl who is really to your liking, just point her out to me and I’ll come right away and marry her.” So that was that! Of course, I didn’t forget the most important condition: if the girl chosen by my mother would also fall in love with me.

I cannot say I had no idea what sort of risk I was taking. In Karabakh, a man must not break his sworn word to anyone, never mind breaking a promise made to his mother. But, in theory, I knew I could rely on my mother – she was a good judge of people and had excellent taste. She would pick the most beautiful girl, there could be no doubt of that.

Soon afterwards, a letter arrived from my mum. She told me she was travelling to Karabakh to visit relatives. It turned out that her sister Anna had returned from where she had been exiled to Stepanakert, where she had obtained a flat. Of course I realised this was not the only reason that my mother was going to the town that was close to my heart. I must admit I was waiting for my mum’s next letter as I had never awaited any other…

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I dealt quickly with my papers. As I was sure that the next day I would definitely be leaving by plane for Moscow and it was unclear how long I would be away, I decided to send telegrams rather than letters, especially to publishers. I did not fail to inform all those I was communicating with that a daughter had just been born to me and that as a result my former plans had radically changed. All I had left to do was to go from Partizanskaya Street down to the town centre of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to the main post office, in order to send the telegrams I had already written. On the ground floor, I automatically glanced at my post-box, where there should not have been anything waiting for me. However, through the holes in the post-box door, some white slips of paper were gleaming. These could only be new telegrams.

In Kamchatka at that time, telegrams were delivered from morning till evening, even at night. I think there were no other towns in the USSR where the telegraph was operating in such a civilised way. Perhaps the explanation lay in the geographical position of the town?

I had received the telegram from my father-in-law, as I have already mentioned, on 7 March. That meant that my flight to Moscow would not be before 11

o'clock in the morning on the eighth of the month. My flight would last sixteen hours. The flight from Moscow to Kirovabad would take three hours and from there it would take just two or three hours by road to Stepanakert. All night I could not get a wink of sleep – not only because I was thinking of my wife and my little daughter, who had not even been given a name as yet, but also because I was troubled by the howling of a blizzard. It looked as if it would not die down by morning – so then I would have to bid farewell to my night-time dreams: flight No.16 Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to Moscow would hardly be taking off on time.

Alas, I was not wrong. During the long years of my life on the edge of the world, I had become accustomed to announcements such as: "the flight has been postponed till…" or "the flight has been rescheduled..." and I had learnt to appreciate fully the line by Ryazanov: "in nature there is no such thing as bad weather". If then nothing depended on me, my only course was to remain calm and take the most sensible decision in the circumstances.

In the state I was in at the time, it was hard for me to get into a foul mood. I even found comfort in the fact that the IL-18 plane was already at Petropavlovsk airport. This meant that, if the weather over the sea of Okhotsk was not too bad, it might be able to take off.

Within a day, the weather over the sea of Okhotsk calmed down – and at one o'clock in the afternoon on 9 March, I took off for my meeting with my daughter. We stopped to refuel at Khabarovsk, then again at Irkutsk – and then we got completely stuck at Krasnoyarsk. After two sleepless nights, I had to spend another two endless days and nights hanging around in the restaurant at Krasnoyarsk airport. On the first evening, I sat down with a large group of passengers from Kamchatka, round a long table, to celebrate my daughter's birth. The waitress was hardly able to keep up, serving us all with champagne. Suddenly, in the midst of this mayhem, from some small corner in the room I seemed to see my mother, gazing at me reproachfully and shaking her head disapprovingly, as if saying "What are you up to? Celebrating the birth of our little girl, while there are still so many tables round you, crowded with people just like you, passengers who are stuck here through no fault of their own." She was absolutely right.

I called the waitress and asked her to stand beside me and carefully listen to what I had to say. Then I climbed onto a chair and addressed the whole hall.

"Dear friends! In a moment you're all going to be served some champagne. My mother has often told me that, when your soul is celebrating something, you simply must share it with the people closest to you. At this moment, I don't have anyone closer to me than all of you. And maybe there is some special reason why fate and bad weather have brought us together… Three days ago, far away from here, in the town of Stepanakert, a daughter was born to me. I invite you all to follow my mother's wise advice and to share in my joy."

Immediately a dozen waitresses carried champagne round the tables. The cold hall was filled with laughter, noise and whistling. The first corks popped. In the middle of the hall, a hearty lad in a colourful sweater followed my example by getting on a chair and asking everyone to get their champagne bottles ready for a mass salute at his command. A minute or two later, after making sure that they were all ready, he shouted out the artillery command "Fire!"

My God, what a row that set off! Corks flew into the air like missiles, some almost hitting the lofty ceiling. Everyone shouted "Hurrah!" together, laughing and animatedly clinking glasses with people who a moment ago had been total strangers. A long line of passengers with champagne glasses was queuing up to congratulate me and ask me what my daughter's name was.

I remember that among these well-wishers was a short man of about seventy, with a grey beard and black moustache. He already knew that my daughter had no name as yet, and though he had joined in the general toast dedicated to her, he now

wanted to know what my mother's name was, so that he could drink to her health with his whole heart.

"It's Gohar", I said

"Gohar," he repeated, adding in Armenian, "A good name, that". He turned to my neighbours at the table, speaking to them in Russian. "Gohar means a diamond, a precious stone. Your daughter will certainly be happy with such a grandmother. And give my especial greetings to your mother…"

"And what is your name?" – I asked.

"That's not important. Say the greetings are from an Armenian prodigal son. I just liked your mother's advice on how to behave when your soul is celebrating. But even more I liked the way that here, in this cold, smoke-filled room, you quoted your mother's words. That was just wonderful." He emptied his glass and slowly walked back to his table.

* * *

I arrived in Moscow on 12 March. From Domodedovo airport I set off at once for Vorovsky Street, to the home of Sergei Mikhalkov, the outstanding children's writer and co-author of the national anthem of the USSR.

An expedition, which I had organised and led, included a representative of the native population of Kamchatka, an employee of the Regional *komsomol* (Young Communist League) Committee and also a representative of the sailors serving on the peninsula. This was the place taken by Nikita Mikhalkov, Sergei's son, who was then serving in the most remote garrison in the country.

Nikita's participation in the expedition turned out to be unusually successful – without him, the film "At the edge of Asia" would not have been made, nor would his regular reports have been published in the newspaper "*Kamchatka Young Communist*", nor would our many joint articles have appeared in "*Young Communist Pravda*", which was read by millions. There would not even have been my commentary on the film broadcast by Yury Senkevich's "*Cinema Travellers' Club*", which was unusually popular at that time.

So it was not mere chance that, at that point, I was staying at the Mikhalkovs' home in Moscow. Later, I must say I rarely got together with Nikita, but Sergei Mikhalkov and I often met and became friends. He has stayed with me in Armenia. To this day, I feel a warm, if melancholy, attachment to Nikita's mother, Natalya Konchalovskaya, an unusually intelligent, high-minded and kind-hearted woman. Long conversations with her were not only interesting and meaningful, but full of unexpected revelations and awoke in me quite new thoughts and reflections. She was good at telling stories – and also knew how to listen. We would spend a long time chatting.

I even told her how my mother used to say that, when she was a child, people often called her Shushan or Shushi – and not just because she was born in Shushi. It was simply because one of her grandmothers had this name. Everyone in the house got used to it. Mum also said the name was sometimes pronounced differently – as Susanna. From time to time, mum would remind me that she really had to have a lot of grandchildren – and among them must be a Haik and a Susanna.

Not long before my departure, Natalya and I were having a little tea together by ourselves at the Mikhalkovs' home. Suddenly, out of the blue, she asked me: "Yesterday you said that you were indebted not only to your wife for the birth of your daughter, but to your mother and your mother-in-law as well. What did you mean by that?"

"Well, it's very simple. My mother-in-law is the senior midwife and gynaecologist in Karabakh. My wife spent the last few months of her pregnancy at her parents' home. I had to stay in Kamchatka, out of necessity – you know why. I had started to prepare for our journey into the tundra long before I got married – and I

couldn't change anything, as I couldn't let people down when I myself had persuaded them to join the expedition. So it was God's will that my wife spent those last months under the care, not just of her own mother, but of a gynaecologist and doctor well-known all over Karabakh. My mother's part in the story was more complicated. I have to give her her due: if it had not been for my mum, we wouldn't even have known one another."

Natalya topped up my glass of hot tea, made herself more comfortable in her seat and asked:

"How old was your mother then, when your father was taken away?"

It occurred to me that I had never seriously thought about this. As far as age went, she must have been still quite a young girl. She was very young when she herself was arrested. Her story and the story of the other sixteen wives of the "enemies of the people" will come later. Meanwhile I answered the question put to me by Natalya.

"She was nineteen. I was two years old and my brother was six months old. However, I wanted to tell you about her role in my marriage. For some years, my mum's letters to me in Kamchatka were full of endless reproaches about how the years were going by, while I was wandering about aimlessly and concentrating on writing things nobody needed, instead of thinking seriously about my future. I must admit that I got pretty fed up with this prolonged monotonous carry-on – so I just suggested that she should find me a bride herself. I had underestimated my mum. Even when she was still serving time in the camp, members of the family would say of her '*Vaztvokh – brnokh, vakhchokh – prtsnokh*' ('If she runs, she'll overtake you, if she runs away, you won't catch up with her'). And she stayed like that all her life.

"Having received my letter with its joking suggestion, she immediately set off for Stepanakert. There she met with some of her old friends. She went to visit her close and distant relatives, whom she had not met for a long time. In their confidential, feminine chats, subjects often came up, which my mum found very interesting indeed. She had a strong principle of her own, which people in Karabakh had kept to since olden days: 'You must graft a cutting from a well-known bush.' Mum even brought with her from Andizhan a small notebook, just in case she should overlook something."

Natalya heard me out, clearly sympathizing with my mother. She was afraid that someone would interrupt us and stop me going on with my story. On my side, I was trying not to leave out anything that might particularly interest her. Mum was not much bothered about the colour of my bride's eyes or hair. She felt that the most important question was that of her family tree. One family in particular attracted her attention. The possible bride was not only studying at the Yerevan Medical Institute, but was already about to graduate. Her parents came from two "well-known bushes". The bride's brother lived somewhere in Siberia and was well-known there as a wonderful doctor and scientist – which was always respected in Karabakh. Her mother was the stuff legends are made of. I'm not joking – she had been the senior midwife and gynaecologist of Karabakh for quarter of a century.

In this whole process my mum did not meet any of the relatives of the potential bride, with the sole exception of aunt Ashkhen (sister of my future mother-in-law) and that, I think, was because they had been neighbours before my mother's arrest. Aunt Ashkhen's oldest son – Beniamin Eritsyan – had been my classmate and as children we had often been at their house. In the hungry years of the war and after the war, they had always tried to share their meals of boiled potatoes and onions with us, sometimes even party fare like potato pies. However, even aunt Ashkhen did not guess why my mother had travelled to Stepanakert on this occasion – even though mum had settled down with her brother and sister in Central Asia after leaving the camps, she used to make regular visits to her native Karabakh.

* * *

From Stepanakert, my mum travelled to Yerevan – and from the bus station she went straight to the Medical Institute. She took a walk round the building, looking at the students in their white coats. She stopped a number of them and carefully enquired about a girl whom she described as a relative of hers. Finally she succeeded in catching sight of the girl herself, whose name was Nelly. Without attracting notice, mum watched her for some time. Much later, she told me that, as soon as she saw the potential bride, she had a feeling that she was being guided in her intentions and actions by the Lord Himself. In addition, my mum admitted that she had been sure from the very start that her plan would come off only on one condition – if I fell madly in love, at first glance, with the girl she had chosen.

Everything else was straightforward. My mother easily discovered Nelly's temporary address in Yerevan – and sent me a detailed letter, including her reflections, not only on my bride, but on the "bush" from whose roots this "little branch" or "cutting" had sprung.

My mum understood perfectly well what a vital and serious piece of work she had done, and she was quite sure that her son would realise this and have full confidence in her good taste. She said nothing to anyone in Stepanakert. It was a small town and who knows how things would turn out. A girl's reputation was a serious matter. Mum sent me the address and telephone number, realising she was letting a seed fall into my heart and soul. She was not at all mistaken.

… Three days after the letter landed in the post-box at 28 Partizanskaya Street, flat No. 32, I left by plane for Yerevan. During my ten years of life in Kamchatka, I had flown to Moscow about forty times. Once I added up the number of kilometres flown – it turned out the same number of kilometres would have allowed me to fly to the Moon and return to Earth. All in all, I had spent about forty days and nights up in the air, flying over Russia, heading either West or East – either in the same direction as the sun or heading towards it. The flights did not always leave on time – so sometimes I flew out of Moscow early in the morning, sometimes at midday, sometimes at midnight. And if I left at daybreak, in the rosy morning light of dawn, then over Khabarovsk or the Sea of Okhotsk, I would be greeted by the dawning sunlight of the next day.

For me, time spent in flight was like a normal working day. I have never learned to sleep while flying. So I would take with me on the journey all that I needed for work: notebooks, books, manuscripts, crosswords – in other words, what had been lying on my work desk the day before. When I heard the order: "Fold your trays away", I would put my papers into a folder, which I would then stuff into my thick briefcase.

* * *

Hurrying to my meeting with my daughter, I took nothing with me – not even newspapers. I fell back on memories and thoughts and tried to imagine something of what it would be like. Yervand's telegram had stated her weight and size: three kilograms six hundred grams and fifty-two centimetres. But it was these statistical-type facts that prevented me imagining anything properly. I remembered that, as soon as my mum had made her final choice (of my bride), she had hastened to destroy her notebook, with the notes she had made in Karabakh. All her life, as I had noticed, she was more than anything else afraid of offending someone by chance or, even worse, of hurting someone's feelings – especially someone who was unable to defend himself or herself.

… In Stepanakert we lived, until my mother was arrested, at No. 25 Kommunisticheskaya Street, where on 10 February 1937 (on my second birthday), a "black raven" police van had rolled up to take away my father. Next door to us lived a

family with a boy my own age, called Stalik. Stalik's father had been taken away six months before mine. Everyone was sure that the reason for his arrest was the continuous tirade of scolding uttered by Stalik's grandmother against the naughty behaviour of her greatly beloved only grandson. The whole yard had heard it, but someone had snitched to the NKVD secret police. So one night a car called for the parents of little Stalik (named after Stalin). The grandmother was left alone with her grandson. In fact, even before the war, in our courtyard, which was shared by ten families, there was a complete lack of fathers. However, until Stalik's parents were both arrested, all the boys and girls still had their mothers left.

Stalik's grandmother was thin, wrinkled and very pale. After her son's arrest, she hardly appeared in the courtyard any more. They used to be visited by Stalik's aunt, who would bring them some bread. Stalik was a self-sufficient individual, but life can't have been much fun for him. He was often bullied, as people knew he had nobody to stand up for him. By the age of five or six, he had begun to be afraid of all his contemporaries. I remember that I too once gave way to the temptation of bullying an orphan without fearing punishment. This was sometime just before the war. I would hardly have recalled this incident, if it had not been followed up by a lesson taught to me by my mum.

My mum called me home, sent my younger brother out into the yard and gave me a painful slap on the cheek. I did not start to cry, which clearly pleased my mum. Then she made me sit down on the sofa with her and said something I remembered all my life – not the exact words, but the overall meaning of what she said. She gave me to understand that Stalik was defenceless and weak because he had been deprived of his parents. If he still had his father and mother beside him, the poor little boy would have had a quite different kind of life. And in addition, my mother told me, last night Stalik's only aunt had died, the one who used to bring him and his grandmother half a loaf of bread every day.

After that, Stalik and I became real friends. Once, while defending him, I got into a fight with a neighbouring boy, who was a whole year older than me. This fact undoubtedly improved my image as a sportsman. Of course, even a professional referee would not have been able to tell which of us won the fight. But the most important thing at that age – as in the Olympics – was not winning, but taking part. Since that time, I felt that I was not only my younger brother's defender, but also the orphan Stalik's. Secretly, not even telling my mother, I began to take him bread from home – a slice every day. However, I wasn't able to learn lessons from my mum for much longer.

* * *

In the cot there lay an unknown unique little person. She spent most of the time asleep and therefore didn't open her eyes. This tiny being was nevertheless so engrossed in her own world – which for her was not at all simple – that we were of no interest to her whatsoever. I wanted to discover something about her, but it seemed that she had no intention of making my acquaintance. And where her closed eyes were, twitching slightly, there slept two tiny commas, admittedly lying horizontally.

From time to time I caught my wife's intent gaze – most likely she was thinking something similar. And for the first time I had a real feeling that this little person had made us securely one. She had opened up a completely new life in which I would have to be responsible for everything that from now on took place in the lives of these people who were my nearest and dearest – for their present and their future, for their successes and disappointments. I knew that I would care for them and love them for all of my life, forever.

I didn't notice the time passing as I sat by my Susanna, carried away by strangely alternating recollections…

* * *

My mum, having achieved everything that she had planned, somehow quietly stood aside. She didn't need to hint anything more to me. She didn't even need to get me to hurry. On 14th June 1971 I landed in Yerevan after eighteen hours flying and three hours later phoned the number which I hadn't needed to note down, as my mum's letter was in my pocket.

… These events unfolded on Moskovskaya Street in Yerevan, not far from Scientists' House. I sat on a low fence made of metal tubing with a bundle of folded newspapers under my arm. I knew she would come out of the third entrance of the Armenergo building. I knew this particular building, as the only person in Yerevan that I was really friends with, the talented writer Leonid Hurunts, lived there.

A girl came out, very serious and engrossed in her own thoughts. She didn't see me, didn't notice me. But somehow it seemed to me that she felt that I was looking at her. And I also had the thought that from somewhere a long way off my mum was observing us with great interest.

The girl slowly came towards me. I continued to sit on the fence, casually staring at this most serious looking sixth-year medical student who hadn't a clue that the man who had asked to meet her was sitting there rooted to the spot like a cockerel on a fence. Still not paying any attention to me she walked past. I had already sent her a couple of letters and I was sure that she would have read some of my stories and essays in "*Young Communist Pravda*", "*The Week*" and "*Literary Gazette*". So, she should have been able to form an impression of the author of these works as a person of some standing. But my prospective betrothed calmly walked on and the distance between us was growing more and more, and then I called out after her quite loudly "Stepanakert!"

She stopped as though hearing the command "Halt!" For a moment she dared not turn around. I smiled at this girlish hesitation and suddenly quite distinctly heard mum's laugh. It was as though mum, observing what was happening with interest, burst out laughing at the way her future daughter-in-law reacted to this strange exclamation "Stepanakert!"

Finally I jumped off my fence. The girl had not only turned towards me, but even taken a few steps in my direction. Now in the light of the bright Yerevan sunshine I saw her huge dark eyes. They shone so radiantly that I couldn't tear myself away from them. I immediately realised that mum had confirmed her choice as soon as she saw Nelly's dark eyes, almost without pupils. And I have to admit that at this very moment I understood that my choice was made. The only issue was her consent.

* * *

A tenderness which I had never previously experienced enveloped me in a lavish warm wave. But even then I could not imagine that a totally different era was beginning for me. I felt this new era when for the first time I bent over the cot where our daughter was sleeping. This happiness that came to us from heaven had to be carefully protected. I realised that I would never again listen to vulgar stories or laugh at dirty jokes and would never allow myself to utter a coarse word, not even by accident or in irritation.

So, the English philosophers and teachers are right when they affirm that from the moment it comes into the world a child begins to educate its father. Indeed, when I became a father I became tangibly aware that apart from anything else I

began to relate in a different way even to my own mother who had never in her life lectured me.

* * *

Our life was such that I really got to know my mum when I was already an adult, after I had completed my military service in the navy. While I was with the Baltic Fleet mum and Boris had settled in Andizhan, where almost all her relatives who had been exiled from Karabakh had found refuge. Later I will come back to the time when after military service I joined my mother and brother, but for the moment I will relate one story which remained in my memory for ever, even though it does not involve any significant events.

Chatting cheerfully, mum and I were walking along the hot main street of Andizhan. I was a demobilised sailor still in my naval uniform but without insignia and my mum a beautiful 36-year old woman. We lived in the so-called Old Town where most of the population was "European", as the locals put it. Even the faculties in the pedagogical and medical institutes were named "Uzbek" and "European". Indeed, calling them Russian would have been stretching a point – eighty percent of the residents in the Old Town were Armenians, the rest Jews, Russians and other non-Uzbeks.

During the years of Khrushchev's urban expansion the growth was in the Andizhan New Town, where the indigenous Uzbeks mostly lived. We were passing the "*Vesna*" cinema, chatting in our native Armenian, or to be more precise our Karabakh dialect. A poorly dressed woman, no longer young, was sitting by the cinema holding out her hands. I paid attention to her only because I noticed mum putting her hand in her bag. She never passed by people who were seeking alms – "seekers" as she called them rather than "beggars".

Mum leant over the rusty tin in front of the woman and threw a few coins in. The woman looked intently at mum and to my surprise called out loudly and joyfully a word that seemed strange in this situation: "diamond". Mum glanced at me, then once more bent down to the beggar and barely audibly said: "I'm giving you an hour, not a minute more. You are going to leave and I will never again meet you here." She took out of her bag a large 100-rouble note, folded it and pushed it into the pocket of the woman's colourful smock.

I stood rooted to the spot, bewildered by this unexpected situation. I did notice what a fright the poor woman got – when just a minute earlier it seemed she was happy to meet mum. She struggled onto her feet, smiled at mum, apparently expressing her gratitude and hurried off down an alley. And I never met her again in Andizhan, though I lived there for three more years.

We continued on our way, but the earlier cheerfulness had evaporated. Mum didn't want to give any explanation and I didn't dare ask, because I knew how she disliked going into details about her time in the camps. She never told me and Boris or any of her many relatives what she had seen and been forced to live through. Even after the Twentieth Party Congress at which Stalin was denounced she did not believe that the population had taken on board the reality of everything that had happened.

Mum could not help noticing how the belief was still popular that: "That's just how things are and what's more innocent people don't get imprisoned." She felt powerless in the face of this terrible dogma. And even after she was invited to Baku for the trial of Bagirov – the Azerbaijani Stalinist leader – and handed an official paper stating that her husband Haik Balayan had been a victim of a malicious slander and that he had now been legally rehabilitated, she never believed that the changes in the country had taken place seriously and irreversibly. And if you don't believe that, what can you say about all that you have experienced? She was the mother of two sons who had their whole lives before them. Alas, she knew only too

well how they broke the backbone of children of enemies of the people… She had to place a taboo on the very theme of camps and repression.

* * *

With time I learnt how my mother got the nickname "Diamond" in the camp. One day one of her fellow prisoners asked her how to translate her name from Armenian. Mum told her. And from then on the translation became her camp nickname, for the prisoners, for the armed escorts and for the guards. It's hard to imagine what a shock it was for mum when she received this unexpected greeting from her recent and terrible GULAG past here in this town so far from Stepanakert where first her relatives from Karabakh and now her sons had found refuge.

This encounter by the "*Vesna*" cinema enabled me to see mum in a new light and to understand some of the features of her character. I was struck how obediently and quickly this woman who had been squatting with her rusty can took mum's words as an order and carried it out at once. Where, I wondered, did mum get such certainty that she had the right to decide something for another person?

Only later I learnt that in camp mum not only stood up for herself but also fearlessly defended many helpless people. Of course, it helped that she was a nurse, since in Stalin's camps nurses were valued as highly as doctors. The prisoners rarely got proper medical treatment, but nurses were quietly able to give the necessary practical assistance every day. People who needed qualified medical attention were simply left to die because for the administration it was too much trouble to treat them.

For the camp administrations, medical assistants and female and male nurses were infinitely preferable to doctors. Her profession enabled mum to show will-power and firmness of character, which she preserved to the end of her life. For example, as I've said before, she never lectured me and my brother about how to behave. She had her own method of teaching us life's lessons. Some kind of tangible waves reached us from her actions, her gently irony, her constant readiness to come to the help of her neighbour and from some kind of innate hatred of sneaks and slanderers.

* * *

I spent a month with my daughter Susanna. She changed every day. She opened her eyes that were so dark and alert. Then a smile appeared, touching and toothless, making one feel warm and joyous inside. Before my departure for Kamchatka, I was unwilling even to leave her side. I walked her for a long time in her pram. I made humorous speeches to my princess. She always responded with her wonderful smile. Her daughter Margarita was to inherit this smile from the moment she came into the world. The doctor who delivered her, Georgi Okoyev said to us, not without a degree of surprise: "Well I never, first of all the smile was born, then your granddaughter."

* * *

I flew to Kamchatka little suspecting that I was flying there for the last time. If someone had said that to me then, there is no way I would have believed them. Although who knows, maybe I will still manage to fly once more to this place on the edge of the world, which I wrote about so much in my books, articles and essays. I became very attached to this peninsula during the exactly ten years I lived there. And what years! From twenty-eight to thirty-eight! I often dreamed of Kamchatka. I would stand on the Hill of Love and look out rapturously, sometimes down on Avacha Bay and sometimes up to the Avacha volcano. I would approach by yacht the legendary "Three Brothers" – three giant cliffs that rose out of the waters of the Bay on the edge

of the Pacific Ocean itself. I would bathe in the “Geizernaya” river sprinkled by the hot spray of the “Velikan” and “Zhemchuzhnaya” geysers. I would take a dog-sleigh through the hummocky tundra looking forward to the end of the journey when I would feed the fluffy huskies with frozen fish. I especially enjoyed feeding the dogs at the end of a day’s journey. And what wonderful Kamchatka dreams I had!

Usually the further I got from the peninsula the closer it grew to my heart. During long journeys by boat, missing the land I had left behind, I wrote a song including this line: “We knew no land on Earth closer to us than distant Kamchatka.”

I don’t know whether there is some mystical meaning or whether it was just coincidence, but the first time I flew to Kamchatka in 1963 it was from Andizhan, where my mum lived. Now, ten years later I was going to repeat the same journey: from Stepanakert I went to visit my mum taking with me a polaroid photo of Susanna – her granddaughter with the name she had always dreamed of.

* * *

We were flying over the Caspian Sea. I looked through the window at the mirror-smooth water and remembered how seventeen years earlier after my military service I had arrived in my native Stepanakert from Baltiisk, received my new identity card and a month later, on a cold windy autumn morning had sailed on a passenger steamer from Baku to Krasnovodsk. I still had to travel by train right through Central Asia to get to my mother in Andizhan. The sea was not as still as it now looked from on board the plane. It was stormy. Many passengers were sea-sick.

But those who felt more or less well entertained themselves as best they could. People gathered in groups around an accordion player or someone strumming a guitar and sang and sang and sang… On the upper deck on a hard wooden platform muscular young men competed to lift 72-pound weights. It wasn’t so easy with the ship heaving. A hefty guy in a striped naval vest was loudly inviting the amateur athletes to lift the weights to receive the title of champion passenger.

My heart began to beat joyfully. Nobody on the ship knew that among the passengers was the former weight-lifting champion of Nagorno-Karabakh region and of the naval colleges and the heavy athletics champion of the Baltic Fleet. If he’d known all this the master of ceremonies in the striped vest would surely have been over the moon.

However, the delighted self-confident champion knew nothing about the hefty guy in the striped vest. It never occurred to me that in organising the trial of strength among the dilettante passengers the guy intended to take the platform himself. For the moment the untrained young and not so young men panted as they lifted the weight to waist level not knowing how to continue. Or they heaved up the weight holding it for two or three seconds above their head. The spectators, trying to encourage them, applauded conscientiously. Only after all this would the time come for the overwhelming triumph of the athlete in the striped vest.

He would go onto the platform and ignoring the heaving of the ship and the cold wind would begin to play with the weights as though they were toys. First of all ten or even twenty times in a row he would lift the weight with one hand, then throwing two weights to his chest he would push them up with both hands. He would even perform tricks: he’d throw up a weight and as it rotated in the air catch it by the handle. This was the kind of professional show that the hefty boatswain put on.

One of the passengers whom I had met on the pier in Baku before embarkation told me about him. He was called Shahen. He lived in Andizhan and it turned out that he knew my mum very well. Shahen had made this journey very often, so he was familiar with the boatswain’s show.

In Andizhan Shahen came to visit us and avidly told mum the story of how I got the better of this self-satisfied strong-man. I quietly went onto the platform after his performance and just did some circus tricks with the 72-pound weights. I noticed

that mum was not in the least delighted by my victories and seemed openly bored. Shahen noticed it too. I at once understood what the matter was. I interrupted to suggest that Shahen tell how a little girl from Baku on this same voyage across the Caspian sang an Armenian song in a clear voice. The passengers listened to her and then applauded for a long time. It turned out that the grandmother of this little girl was from Karabakh, as indeed are all Baku and Central Asian Armenians. Mum smoothed over the awkward situation by saying quietly with a smile:

"Well, really you should have lifted the weights with all the other passengers who took part in the contest and definitely not after the organiser. Six months ago I travelled on this same steamer and myself saw not a trial of strength but a real concert which was given by this not-so-young, greying and stout strong man. It's just that there is nothing else that he is able to do. I guess that's the only way he can earn a living…"

"No, it wasn't like that at all, aunty Gohar", Shahen interrupted her. "When I learnt that the passenger in the naval uniform was your son I told him about life in Andizhan. I said that we are all very fond of you and that at weddings you sing and dance better than anybody. And when they made the announcement that there would be a trial of strength on the ship Zori took off his jacket and on his tunic I noticed the badge of a first class weight-lifter. I was delighted. Someone needed to get the better of this show-off. It was I who suggested to Zori that he go after the boatswain."

"Very well. Let's go to table. I've cooked *dolma* (stuffed leaves) – some with cabbage and some with vine leaves. As for what you suggested to him and his listening to you, that's the nub of the matter."

Shahen probably didn't understand a thing – not because he's slow and I grasp everything instantly. It's just that he didn't know what aunty Gohar – who dances and sings better than anybody at Armenian weddings far from home – was really like. Of course, I didn't know mum as well as if I had always lived with her. But I am her son and that made a difference.

When mum was transported to Siberia I was in the first class at school. When she came back I was in class ten. Admittedly, when she came back from Stalin's camps and walked into the house, where for all these ten years of school I had lived in the care of my father's sister, I simply didn't recognise my own mother. And that wasn't surprising in the circumstances.

A pale-faced woman with a high forehead, long auburn hair and a small birthmark on her right cheek stood in the doorway. I was sitting at the table and was engrossed in a most important task: the director of studies at school, Ilya Mikhailidis, had commissioned me to paint a portrait of Stalin. The portrait was to be hung in the classroom where a visiting lecturer was to give a lecture entitled "*The economic problems of socialism*" to the senior pupils on the brilliant work of the leader of all the nations. At that time my oil paintings and drawings were displayed not just at school exhibitions but alongside the work of adults. It just remains to be amazed at how strangely events in our daily lives are yet again interwoven…

All the same I understood very well why mum didn't like Shahen's story. It wasn't a question of how the boatswain behaved. The problem was with me. I should not have humiliated this man in front of everybody, putting myself forward, as mum would have put it, as the "bee's knees". And, of course, Shahen's argument that the boatswain was himself trying to make fun of untrained people, was not in the least convincing for mum. But all that was seventeen years ago…

The memories involving my mum went round in my head until the plane landed in Tashkent. I caught the train and a day later I was already in Andizhan. As well as mum and Boris, I was met by old friends – former sportsmen and former fellow students. Realising that we all wanted to talk, mum invited my friends to the house. Right on the station platform I gave her the photo of Susanna. You should have seen the happiness shining in her eyes!

* * *

From the station we all went home. A large and tasty meal, of the kind that mum loved making, was waiting for us. Late in the evening I didn't go out with my friends but stayed with her. Boris had left with the others, as he already lived with his own family in the New Town. In a rare state of happy tranquillity I settled on the settee with a pile of family photo-albums. Mum, having cleared up after our guests, sat next to me on the edge of the settee.

"Didn't you tell me that you were going to Kamchatka for only three years after you graduated?"

"Why 'only'? Is three years such a short time?"

"I know what three years means, and ten years and unfortunately even three days and ten days. However, between three years and ten years there is a huge difference. What I really want to ask you is – what next?"

"I shall take my wife and daughter and we shall go to my beloved edge of the world and live happily ever after."

"Don't you want to take me with you? You'll see, I can make myself useful there. I've got used to the cold, so that won't be a problem. At least there will be someone to baby-sit."

"I'd take you, mum, but you won't go. I know you. You're good at first aid from a distance. You don't even want to spend the night at Boris' house."

"Alright, let's assume that I was joking. But I hope you were joking when you said you would take your wife and new-born child to Kamchatka."

"Yes, it was a joke! Well, we could come to you here in Andizhan."

"You won't move to Andizhan. It wasn't for nothing that you escaped to Ryazan after your third year. Yet you lived very well here, didn't you?"

"You'd be better to tell me how you felt in the summer of 1960 when you came back from holiday in Stepanakert and found that I had left Andizhan. We've never talked about it, have we?"

"I gasped when I opened the door. The flat was an absolute mess. It took me at least a week to tidy up."

"But before that you probably read my letter?"

"Of course. First of all I didn't understand anything. And when I did understand, everything was clear. But I worried a lot. I just couldn't conceive that it was possible in a month to apply for and complete a transfer to another university in another city in another republic."

"I sent enquiries to several places. And, can you imagine, I received three acceptances just because I was a highly qualified sportsman who had already been awarded the tile of 'master of sport'. And I chose Moscow…"

"Not Moscow, it was Ryazan."

"No, it was Moscow. The Third Moscow Medical Institute was transferred to Ryazan with all its departments and laboratories, and many of the professors and assistants. And even the bronze bust of the great master of the scalpel Nikolai Pirogov, the work, believe it or not, of the world famous artist Ilya Repin, known for his talent with the paintbrush rather than as a sculptor…"

Mum laughed out loud, having picked up that I had chosen such a lavish style to render especially convincing the thought that if it was Ryazan and not Moscow, then the Ryazan Medical Institute was actually a Moscow institute.

"To be honest," mum admitted in a more serious tone, "I was glad at your decision. I always thought that you should find your feet in Moscow and then move to Yerevan to be closer to Karabakh. But you, as usual, over-fulfilled my plan and headed off for Kamchatka. For ten years. Maybe that's long enough?"

"You know, mum, now I have a new person making plans for me. Now Susanna will decide everything – via her mother."

"I'm glad of that, son. I'm glad at everything – but above all at the name of Susanna or Shushan, dreamed of always by my mother, your grandmother with the pet name of Barishka. I can have greater peace of mind. There's someone to think of you. And I am grateful and appreciative of Ryazan. What I liked most of all is that this town is on the route of the train from Andizhan to Moscow…"

Mum worked as a nurse at the railway workers' clinic. This gave her the right every year to make one free return train journey to anywhere in the country. But she used this right only to travel to Karabakh. Twice a year I came from Ryazan to visit her in Andizhan. But I regularly received parcels from her, delivered by the Uzbek train attendants who were unusually kind and honest people. One of the parcels was truly fateful, not so much for me as for three of my friends. So I've remembered this parcel all my life. In it were the usual melons and water-melons, grapes, weighty bags of raisins and dried apricots, garlic and granulated sugar and also ten dozen large light-chocolate coloured hens' eggs, each one wrapped in tissue paper.

* * *

At that time I lived in a student hostel on Gagarin Street. It was probably the happiest and most carefree time of my life. Judging by the fun we had going out and celebrating every red-letter day in the calendar, every birthday and even every stipend payment, you would never have imagined that the inhabitants of this dormitory would one day become doctors to whom people would be able to entrust their health. Yet in time some of us turned out to be pretty good doctors. Most got masters degrees and doctorates.

Just about everybody in the hostel knew about the Uzbek paradise where my mum lived. In the mornings, instead of greeting me, my friends asked in a businesslike way when I was expecting the next parcel from Andizhan and whether mum was sending me Uzbek melons this time? That day which is etched in my memory all of us together fell on mum's parcel and in minutes there was nothing left of the water-melons and melons – not even the peel.

The problem was storing the eggs. Well, where could we find somewhere to put all ten dozen? It was Baityakov from Saransk who had the idea. He suggested making an omelette out of all one hundred and twenty eggs and throwing a party for the whole hostel. Everyone thought the idea was a stroke of genius. In the room that served as a kitchen there was a four-ring gas cooker.

The instigator of the egg party scoured the hostel for anything that could be used to make our omelette: bits of butter, pork fat, even salami. Instead of a frying pan we placed over all four rings a basin in which the girls washed their and our white lab coats. In the kitchen there wasn't an inch of free space. Furthermore everybody felt they needed to give Baityakov advice at the top of their voices on how to get the best results. Baityakov threw into the basin everything he had collected. On the bottom of the basin there appeared four brown spots that then turned black. In the centre and at the edges the fat hadn't even melted. When Baityakov gave the command: "Break the eggs!" there was such a scream you would have thought that piglets were being slaughtered in our kitchen.

My four-bedded room was close to the kitchen. Someone on somebody's instructions had folded up all the bedding and taken it to another room. Equally rapidly all four beds had been dismantled and carried out to the corridor. Someone went to treat our portly floor-lady – aunty Masha – to a glass of vodka and a huge piece of ripe water-melon. Four tables appeared in our room, set with mugs, bowls, cups, glasses and plates. I don't think any two were the same. Then quite unexpectedly a row of identical vodka bottles materialised: the then popular "twig" vodka that cost two roubles and twenty kopecks in new money. There was an unprecedented quantity of it.

The quick-witted Baityakov, who later became a venerable ear nose and throat specialist in Mordovia, cut a huge number of thin slices of bread and threw them into the basin, pressing them into the runny parts of the omelette. Boris Dudkin, subsequently a well-known surgeon in one of the city hospitals in Moscow, shouted something like “Eureka”, grabbed a towel so as not to burn himself, raised the basin a little above the gas and began slowly and evenly passing it over the flame. This was such a simple and clever move that everyone fell silent for a moment. The runny parts became deliciously cooked through and the kitchen was filled with an appetising smell of omelette and pork fat. Someone dared to comment that it didn’t really look terribly refined, to which several voices retorted instantly: “At least there’s enough for everybody!”

Baityakov had suggested taking the omelette to the room in the basin, but Nina Sukhareva, the most erudite of our students and a fan of Western literature, announced grandly:

“I’m categorically opposed to such lack of table manners…”

Nobody wanted to object. Maybe for a short time the cultured Anton Chekhov awoke in us future doctors. But a way out was found. From goodness knows where four huge trays were found. And when with a choral flourish the four trays floated into the room it was not just the girls who squealed. Somebody shouted out: “Glory to mummy Galya!” – that was how my mother was called outside Karabakh. And everybody repeated it together once more. Then the vodka was poured into the cups and I said that my mum was actually called Gohar and it was Russian-speakers who had re-christened her as Galya. Then Dudkin raised his glass high and proposed chanting “Go – har! Go – har! Go – har!” Nobody proposed any more toasts. Everybody talked at once. Nobody listened to anybody else. Everyone was in high spirits. The adrenaline bubbled in the blood.

The omelette was a great success. The snacks were enough for everyone. And everybody liked the rosy slices of bread for which a special name was invented: “omelette sandwiches”. More and more students joined us. And, as was the tradition, nobody came without something to contribute. The table sagged under the goodies: all kinds of salami, boiled potato, various pickled vegetables and open jars of Bulgarian green beans and peas. And as ever a huge number of bottles of vodka. Soon, as usual, the crowd began to disperse. It was a non-working day. I remember noticing that there was not one sober person at the table.

By the next morning the word had spread throughout the institute: “Zori organised a drunken binge in the hostel as a result of which three students were arrested.” A day later Anatoli Nikulin, the rector, rescued them from the police cells and forthwith ordered the three expelled from the institute. I didn’t escape punishment either. I wasn’t expelled but I was thrown out of the hostel.

That same day I went to see the rector. I was told he didn’t want to see me. I remember I was very upset at him. Nikulin regarded me quite favourably. First of all I was a champion weight-lifter and secondly for all the public holidays I never refused to draw charcoal portraits of the members of the Politburo and masses of posters with rockets soaring into space. As a fee, the rector had given me an inscribed watch with an alarm and secured me a place in the hostel. I wanted to see him not at all in order to get back into the hostel on Gagarin Street. I wanted to talk about my expelled comrades who had suffered unjustly because of me.

I didn’t yet know that the mother of one of the three had got my mum’s address from the personnel department of the institute and had sent her a letter. I had lost my room. The problem of where to live was solved instantly: my friends found me a room at the knock-down price of ten roubles a month. But the rector still refused to see me. A week after my mates were expelled I stopped going first to lectures and then to seminars.

A few days later my closest friend Yura Ukhov who always got top marks (he never had a single grade less then excellent) bumped into me exclaiming: “The rector

is summoning you!" I had no doubt that now I would be able to look in the eye my comrades, teachers and even the parents of my friends who had been punished, for the rector was summoning me to expel me not only for what had happened at the hostel but also for missing classes.

When I closed the door of the rector's spacious office behind me the first thing I noticed was the smile on Nikulin's face. I understood that something unexpected had happened in my case. Otherwise why on earth would this tough and dry professor of pharmacology be beaming like that? What's more, he came out from behind his desk and moved towards me with outstretched hand, and invited me to sit down in a most friendly voice.

"Well, how are things with you, hero of our time?"

"How can things be good for someone because of whom his totally innocent friends have suffered?" – I responded.

"Tell me please… It was, you say, completely innocent people who suffered. Maybe your mother was to blame for everything? She's the one who sends you parcels so that you can study… And she sends you forty roubles by postal transfer every month as well. By the way, what is her patronymic?"

"Davidovna. She's called Gohar Davidovna."

"Well now, I received a letter from Gohar Davidovna. I can tell you, it amazed me. When I signed off the documents for your transfer from Andizhan Medical Institute I didn't even know that your father was a victim of the cult of personality and that your mum was imprisoned in Siberian camps for many years."

"Did she write you that?"

"No, your mum wrote about other matters. I discovered this in a phone call with my friend Pasternak, the head of the department of pathological physiology."

"Nathan Pasternak? You could say he's a friend of mine."

"Yes, that's what he said on the phone. He said you were the only student with whom he made friends. That he knows your family well. He told me about your parents."

"And what did mum write to you?"

"She proposed expelling you from the institute and reinstating your three friends. She confessed that she could not bear the condemnation of these students' parents. She wanted justice to triumph, that the parents of these expelled students should calm down and not curse you. Your mum considers that you should also be expelled."

"I think she's right."

"I think so too," and the rector pressed the bell to summon his secretary.

"Yes, Mr Nikulin!" rang out the voice of the secretary as she came almost instantly into the office.

"Please ask Mariya Petrovna to come to see me and bring the draft resolution for me to sign."

"You know," I said, "it's a great relief for me. I've not been able to sleep…"

A thin grey-haired woman entered the office and seeing me gave me a friendly smile. I was again surprised. What's up with them, first the one smiles and then the other. Is it cynicism or simply sadism?

Nikulin took the paper with the resolution, dipped his pen into the crystal ink-well and signed it with a flourish.

"Give my regards to your mum. Tell her that none of the mothers of these unfortunate revellers will write her any more condemnatory letters. On the contrary, tell her that they should be immensely grateful to Gohar Davidovna for the rest of their lives."

It was only afterwards that I discovered that the rector had already met the lads who had initially been expelled from the institute. He had also spoken with their parents and told them that he was puzzled that they were willing to lay all the blame not only on me but even on my mum. And a few years later I discovered from my

mum how she had visited my friend who was a journalist on the "*Andizhan Pravda*". She outlined to him the thoughts that she wanted to put in the letter. And he wrote them down for her. She never showed me the letter that she had received from one of the mothers in Ryazan. In fact she always kept secret any evil words or bad news, let alone empty gossip. But she always hurried to bring people good news.

* * *

To the end of her days mum always felt very good about Ryazan. She didn't disguise her pride when telling new acquaintances that her son had graduated not from any old medical institute, but from the Ryazan institute named after Ivan Pavlov. She was very proud of my Kamchatka, too. In her flat in Andizhan a map of the peninsula hung on the wall. Right into old age she had a quite phenomenal memory and she could name without a single mistake all the population settlements and all the volcanoes, bays, capes and gulfs. She fell in love with Kamchatka, just as she did with Ryazan.

When I lived in Kamchatka I sent her cuttings from newspapers and magazines with my articles. All the problems, the heroes, the descriptions of nature and the peculiarities of the climate were a fairly detailed reflection of my life. Mum very quickly understood and was able to imagine the key thing: what was important in my life, what I was doing and why. Once in Andizhan, when I came for my first three-month holiday from Kamchatka on my way to Stepanakert, mum confessed to me frankly: "To be honest, the first year you went there I was very worried. There wasn't a day when I didn't listen to the weather report on the radio. As it happened the report always began with Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. When I heard of cyclones, hurricanes, heavy snowfalls and earthquakes, I couldn't help remembering Siberia. Admittedly, there was never once an earthquake there – I would have remembered that. Of course, I was worried that you had volunteered to go to a place where other people were forced to live. But then I read your printed work and passed on the newspapers and magazines to my relatives and neighbours, and I gradually grew calmer. I realised that harsh living conditions are not a reason to be afraid if a person is free and if he is interested in his work. It is just lack of freedom which is terrible."

I can remember the look on her face when she said these words "lack of freedom". Usually mum looks the person she is talking with straight in the eye. But now she looked aside. I thought that she had recalled some episode from her life in the GULAG. Though by the mid-sixties, when Boris and I were already working as doctors, or, as they say, had got somewhere in life, and even more so after the Twenty Second Party Congress when Stalin was removed from the mausoleum on Red Square, mum did not observe quite so strictly her taboo on speaking about the camps under Stalin.

I remembered this moment, but at the time I didn't ask her about it. I asked her much later and identified the key words as "lack of freedom".

"You know," mum admitted, "at first I was simply afraid of severe conditions in the place where you had voluntarily chosen to work. At the beginning I just couldn't get away from the parallels with the places where I lived as the wife of an 'enemy of the people'. But then, after I had read and thought about it a lot, I realised that it wasn't at all a matter of the climate but of how a person lives, the degree to which he is free in his actions. You know, lack of freedom really is a terrible thing. And it's not just a question of the isolation of where you are and of the brazen bad treatment by the people in charge who take advantage of the fact that you can't answer back. On the very first day you arrive, every cell of your body grasps the lesson that you are being given. They choose their victims from among the newcomers who have only just arrived, more often than not those who dare to look the warders in the eye. Or those who refuse to tremble. I saw quite a few such people.

“Having chosen a victim the warder focuses on him. He insults the person with all the bad language he can muster and threatens him. He chooses the right moment to punch him in the face, deliberately and very painfully. If the prisoner falls down he tries to kick him. What’s more, women mistreat and punch women. They are just dressed differently, one in a padded jacket the other in a shortened sheepskin coat. And this spectacle plays out not just before a whole section of newcomers, but also a crowd of warders who observe this performance without any objection, making you realise that you can’t expect any sympathy from them. Not to mention the total senselessness of our life in camp, that no ideals or interests are possible there. And all the efforts of those in charge and the guards are focused on making people constantly feel humiliated and worthless.

“I remember you bringing me Solzhenitsyn’s book in Andizhan. As a matter of fact it was then that I started talking about the GULAG rather than the camps. In the third or fourth year of my time in the camp they began sending some of the prisoners from one place of imprisonment to another. So we began getting information from all over the Soviet Union, wherever there were camps. Solzhenitsyn’s choice of name for his book ‘*The GULAG Archipelago*’ was good. After all it seemed not only that the camps all had a common origin, but also that the people who lived there literally represented a single nation. We had a very similar perception of everything around us and we were interested in the same news.”

* * *

Mum didn’t manage to finish her story. The phone rang. We were living through a terrible time – April 1992 in Stepanakert. It was a front-line town. It was the commander Arkadi Ter-Tadevosyan phoning. He asked me to come to headquarters at once. I still needed to take mum to the cellar – the people of Stepanakert had been living in cellars for six months already. During the day, though, many returned to their houses. But at night people were afraid of one thing before all else: ending up under the ruins of one’s own house while one slept. It appeared that people are afraid of dying in their sleep.

Having taken mum to our neighbours’ cellar I set off for HQ. I probably won’t forget this April 1992 till the end of my days. Day and night volleys from the “*Grad*” rocket-launchers rained down on the town where I had been born fifty-seven years earlier. The rockets were fired from Shushi and Agdam.

In the HQ of the commander of operation “*Shushi*” there was a conference which I was to attend as a doctor and a commissar. I couldn’t leave the HQ till morning. In the intense tension of the night there were long discussions about how we could destroy the battery at Shushi.

My heart felt heavy because my home town was being destroyed before my very eyes. Every day we buried ten or sometimes twenty residents of Stepanakert including small children. Day and night we prepared for the liberation of Shushi, realising that if we failed to eliminate the battery there, nobody would come out of the cellars alive.

* * *

The next morning I arrived earlier than usual to fetch mum from the cellar. We had developed a tradition that I would take her home and we’d have a cup of tea together before I set off for HQ.

Over breakfast I confessed to mum that during the night I constantly recalled what she had been talking about the day before and that I would like to hear more. Mum readily agreed – it turned out that she had been thinking about it during the evening and the night.

“One day we heard that an instruction had been sent to the camps that all prisoners at the end of their sentence were to remain in the area where they had been imprisoned. The more informed and intelligent women among us explained that the Kremlin was very afraid of those – especially the ones who had served ten years – who would return to the centre, say to Moscow, Leningrad and other large cities. This was terrible news for us. I was afraid I would go mad. And there were some women who had recently been transferred to our camp who had heard that in the Far North and in the Kolyma region there was a practice which the camp inhabitants had simply turned into a law. In our camp it was called ‘the child of slavery’. We were told that in other places it had a different name. But it was also clear that this law was formed out of lack of freedom. Well, how else can a law be born under which a woman (or a man) on leaving the gate of the camp (a relative description) was, as it was said at the time, to wait for his or her fate. Knowing that in any case they would not be allowed home, the ex-prisoners had to find their own way out of the situation.

“Waiting for their fate, a male and female ex-prisoner would approach each other and according to the ‘law of slavery’ take one another by the hand and set off for the nearest settlement. Another awful thing was that there were rumours that if anyone violated this law the prisoners themselves would kill them.”

“And when did this law come into being?”

“I think it was after 1947 or 1948.”

“That makes sense.”

“How does it make sense?” mum asked in surprise.

“I have heard of this law. The poet Victoria Goldovskaya told me about it. Where she was in camp they called it the ‘law of fate’. We met in Magadan. It was 1968. I had come there from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to visit two of my journalist friends, Oleg Stukalov and Tamara Shefer. They introduced me to Goldovskaya.

“Later I came to Yerevan and began seeking out those who by some miracle had survived the camps. One of the people I met was Samson Gabrielyan. His son Emil Gabrielyan was at that time the rector of the Yerevan Medical Institute and later became minister of health. Samson told me how and when this law had been born. Later on we’ll make a special point of talking about this again. But tell me, mum, don’t you think there is some kind of logic in this law?”

“The terrible thing is that, of course, there is. Otherwise it would not only not have taken root, but not even been born. Just imagine, you have been inside for ten to fifteen years and lost your hair and teeth. You are skin and bone. For years you have had no news from home. After 1947 we were completely cut off. You know you won’t be able to get to your family. You are on your own. No money, your only clothing a torn padded jacket. And for you all roads are closed. And so this law was born, which offers some kind of way out. Your fate, as it were. I remember, I was ready to go mad at the thought that someone could come up to me, take me by the hand and lead me off into the unknown. I thought that in three or four years’ time when my sentence ended I would do something so that I would get another sentence. I was afraid that I would be weak and then betray not only your father but also my dream of meeting my sons. There was one thing that encouraged me: I was not yet thirty, while the country was preparing to celebrate Stalin’s seventieth birthday. He might after all die. Then, without a doubt, much would have to change.”

* * *

A lot changed even before Stalin’s death. At any rate, the “Child of slavery” law did not take root for long – if only because there was a great difference between the number of men’s and women’s camps. Not to mention that very rarely the gates of the men’s and women’s camps were opposite one another, as was the case that Victoria Goldovskaya told me about.

However, despite all the changes, then in 1968 it never entered my head that a day would come when it would be possible to tell in detail about this page of the GULAG. I shall permit myself to return to one of my very old pieces devoted to the times about which mum and I were talking. It was printed much later than it was written – in the "*Literary Gazette*" of 27 March 1997. It contains quite a lot of living details which were either forgotten or not preserved for posterity in the memoirs of GULAG prisoners and my own diary notes.

… A telegram arrived in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky from Magadan. My friend Oleg Stukalov, a journalist on the "*Magadan Pravda*", asked me to fly to visit him urgently. The telegram ended with the words "It's important". A day later I was in Magadan.

This was my first trip to Magadan, although later I had many opportunities to visit, and I fell in love with the city. God rewarded me for my obedience with an evening, the memory of which has lasted all my life. Oleg and his mother Tamara took me to visit the "mistress of the Kolyma region". On the way they vied with each other to tell me all they knew about her. She was a poet. She spent an eternity in the GULAG. She was called Victoria Goldovskaya.

The door was opened by a dry little old lady with short-cropped grey hair. Noticing how Oleg was bent with arthritis she joked: "Send me the ageing pirates".

Oleg and Tamara didn't allow our host to busy herself in the kitchen. They went there themselves to think up something for supper. And we sat at the table in the living room to chat and get to know one another. It turned out that Victoria had read my "*Doctor's notes*" in the "*Literary Gazette*". She remarked that the best genre for writing about the Far North, from her point of view, was "notes", "comments" and "diaries". She stressed that "every complete thought should occupy no more than a paragraph".

"What a coincidence," I interrupted. "My literary god-father, who opened the door to the '*Literary Gazette'* for me, wrote something very similar to me in Kamchatka."

"What's his name?"

"Rumer, the head of the letters page."

"My God!" Victoria exclaimed loudly and joyfully. "Zyama Rumer."

I laughed. It was funny to hear this domestic pet name applied to this grey-headed old man.

"Zalman Rumer worked not only on the '*Literary Gazette'*, he was also the chief secretary at '*Young Communist Pravda',* when in 1937 he was arrested in the Kosarev case. He was imprisoned in our region for eighteen years. Admittedly, for the last few years, up to 1954 or 1955, like many of us he was a "free prisoner". You thought your sentence was finished, but from 1947 everybody was banned from leaving Magadan. It was called "free settlement". You had no right to meet your family. Don't even think about meeting – you weren't even allowed to correspond with the outside world. As a journalist Zyama Rumer worked in the regional radio committee. He was a handsome man with jet-black hair. When he walked along the street in Magadan the women turned to look at him…"

The day before meeting Goldovskaya Oleg had taken me in a jeep to the part of the Kolyma road where during roadworks they had discovered in the permafrost mass graves piled with the bodies of victims of the GULAG who had died or been killed. I told Goldovskaya about it.

"Yes, there were a few rags preserved on the corpses, though they had bare feet."

I could barely hold back my tears at the thought that my father might have been among them, for neither I, nor my brothers, nor my mum knew where he was buried. And most likely the place would never be made known to anyone.

When I got back to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky I phoned Victoria Goldovskaya to thank her for the book "*Three Kolyma tales*" which she had given me.

Then, as was my custom, I used to send her postcards. Four years later I left for good for the outside world. But that wonderful evening and the little dried-up old lady with grey hair and faded eyes remained as a highlight in my mind and memory.

Recently I met in Moscow someone from Magadan. I asked him about Goldovskaya. He shrugged his shoulders and confessed that apart from the late Vadim Kozin he didn't know anyone. I thought that most likely she had died long ago without publishing her many oral stories.

At home in Yerevan I took "*Three Kolyma tales*" down from the bookshelf. On the cover there was a branch of a tree against a background of snowflakes. Alas, there was no photo of the author in the book. I re-read the inscription which she had written that evening: to Zori Balayan. And below a stanza of poetry:

It slipped away… And there was no going back
For the one that had sunk to the bottom of the ocean.
The ageing pirates
Came to my hearth…

And below that: "As a reminder of our good meeting on 29 January – with best wishes. Magadan." For some reason she didn't write the year. But I remember – it was 1968.

I sat at my writing desk and almost three decades on tried to remember some of what Victoria Goldovskaya had told me. For her sake.

"… At the end of 1947 rumours began going round the camp that the currency was going to be reformed. The women started telling about some of their friends by name. Over the years some had managed to save up and hide quite a bit of money. Now they were worried, their hearts missed a beat. Three thousand roubles could be changed one for one. But then ten old roubles for one new rouble. And everything was complicated by the fact that they would have to explain where so much money had come from. I don't think there were many that lost out, but an enormous number of legends were invented.

"This topic, despite its exotic nature, didn't occupy our minds for long. It died away quite unexpectedly, just as though it had been crushed under the wheels of new rumours. In those days we didn't use the term 'thirty-seven'. For us every year was like 1937, starting from 1934 or 1935. Or even from the end of the twenties. The most common sentence was ten years. It seemed that the '*troika'* tribunals were devotees of the decimal system. And so it happened that at the end of the war many people were completing their sentences. Since at that time the leading officials couldn't be bothered with us, after some hesitation they began releasing prisoners starting from 1946-47.

"Most of us immediately after the end of the war expected to be released any day. It's hard to convey what was going on in our hearts and minds! It was very rare that the "black raven" trucks on their nocturnal rounds picked up those who were young, that is, unmarried. Usually they were family people with jobs. There was one woman imprisoned with us who had five children left behind in the outside world. She was the wife of an important official who had been arrested. She had five children in four years because the last time she had given birth to twins. When she arrived in camp she just couldn't grasp what had happened to her. Apparently her numbed breasts hurt a lot because two or three times a day she hid in the toilet to express her milk. Just imagine her situation: now she had no right to receive a single word from home. And how she went about beaming when her sentence was drawing to an end. How can one live through that?

"I want to tell another story that I heard only recently. The commanding officer of the rocket forces came to Magadan. His elder brother had perished in our area and he decided to try to find out something about his fate. He told me how one of Stalin's former staff had returned to Moscow at the end of his ten year sentence in the GULAG and using his old connections had managed to arrange a meeting with an influential member of the Politburo. He explained to the member of the Politburo

that he still couldn't understand why he had been sent to Siberia. He had no other wish than to demonstrate his devotion to Stalin. The Politburo member refused outright to arrange a meeting with the Boss, but agreed to pass on a letter.

"Stalin took the letter. He read it. Saying nothing, he put it in his pocket and called a meeting of the Politburo. As usual, Stalin came in last. Everybody rose to their feet! Stalin took the letter out of his pocket and said in a toneless voice: 'When are we going to stop having to deal with thirty-seven?' And straightaway he dictated the text of a resolution. All those who had managed to return from exile were to return immediately to the places where they had previously been imprisoned. Those whose sentences were expiring in the near future were to remain where they were in the closed areas. They were to have no contact with their families, no correspondence.

"I don't know whether it was all really just as the commanding officer told me, but facts are facts: trains full of former prisoners headed to the East. And came back empty. And we envied them. They had managed to spend time with their families, even if it was just a day. And what about us? What about the woman who had left behind five children in the outside world, each one smaller than the last? And what about those who had got half-way home when they were turned back? Although, if I am honest, they did give us some degree of freedom.

"For example, those who had family in Magadan itself were not at all affected by the Politburo resolution. Admittedly, you could count them on your fingers. For we were the ones who had built Magadan. There were practically no original inhabitants. We had started from scratch. Or maybe Stalin had decided all this from the start?

"Before long people started talking about the 'unwritten law'. I don't think you could find a specific author of this law. It was just that the gates of the women's and men's camp enclosures were opposite one another. The same iron doors built into the gates for some reason opened upwards. When people came in and out it was like eyelids blinking. Since the released prisoners anyway had no right to return home the 'unwritten law' was soon renamed the 'law of fate', according to which a man who was released had to wait until a woman appeared from the gate opposite. They had to approach each other without saying a word. They had to go to meet their fate. The law was severe but not strict. Severe, because it was impossible not to step forward. But not strict, because it did not necessarily oblige you to form a family. And the fact that it didn't take root doesn't make any difference.

"Of course, it couldn't work long for the simple reason that there were far more men than women in the camp. However, at first there was some kind of parity, since there was a backlog of prisoners of both sexes whose sentences had long expired. And they were let out one by one. Imagine a helpless penniless lonely woman dressed in an old shawl being freed. Where was she to go? She couldn't go to the outside world. She had nobody in Magadan. If there are two of you it's somehow easier to take the first step. It's easier to get to the city where nobody is expecting you. It's easier to escape from the constant gnawing hunger, from the bone-biting cold. With two of you there is a dialogue. There is philosophy. There's a hearth. The main thing is you can go together to look for some cellar. Alas, there are no cellars in our permafrost. Who knows how many such couples found happiness! Everything is relative, of course, including happiness. But, to rephrase Tolstoy, I would say that these couples were happy and unhappy exclusively in their own way.

"And there is one more thing one must not fail to mention – about the last few days before that moment when the gates open before you. You don't think about the cruelty of the authorities. Or that even the victory over fascism did nothing to soften the tyrant, did not wake in him a drop of kindness or humanity. The unfortunate woman, a widow, the mother of five little children got ten years just because she came under the absurd article on members of the families of enemies of the people. Now this mother is deprived of the chance to see her children till the end of her days. She doesn't even know whether or not they are alive. But in those very last days you

don't think about tyrants, violence or injustice, but about your so-called release, about strictly fulfilling the 'law of fate', about the realities of life opening up before you on the other side of the gate.

"Many afterwards admitted that they were not in the least concerned about the age of their future partner in life. And no wonder – after all we were all more or less the same age. Children of the twentieth century, that's what we were called. The older ones did not survive to the days of the 'law of fate' and the really young ones still had long sentences before them. Even so, we would have liked to know something about the appearance of the potential partner. Was he handsome or not? We comforted ourselves that actually we all here were like as two peas. And nothing can be changed until you have caught up on sleep, put on some weight and had a hot shower with a proper piece of soap, not the remnant of a bar of soap, thin as a piece of mica, that easily got lost in your thick wet hair. And as you slowly step away from the gate, like someone taking part in a duel, towards life or death, you approach the person chosen by Fate or Chance and you feel that you are psychologically prepared for any partner. You feel your closeness to him. It doesn't matter if he's old and ugly – on the other hand, he's probably talented and kind. And you are glad that at last somebody needs you. Realising this gives you strength and gives birth to the will to live.

"I don't know when our 'unwritten law' ceased to exist, but I know that in our slavery it enabled us not to be slaves. We were proud that this law was stronger than the official and secret decrees of Stalin. For us it was an incarnation of the truth that hope is the last thing to die. Such was our 'unwritten law' not only of Fate but also of Hope…"

Silence fell on us. Our host for the first time in the whole evening noisily poured vodka into all our glasses. My attention was caught by Victoria's hands – wiry, coarse and clumsy. They did not at all fit with her frail appearance and her beautiful and fine-featured face. Later, when I read the preface to the book "*Three Kolyma stories*" by the Magadan writer Yuri Vasilyev, I understood why. "She worked for many years in the enrichment plant at the tin mine. She knows how to pan gold and how to extract the tin ore – cassiterite. She knows that however sophisticated the technology the ore is extracted for the benefit of the country above all by people."

And these people for years on end panned gold and picked out the tin ore for the benefit of the country with their bare hands, even if, like Goldovskaya, they had a degree as a mining engineer. And these hands were covered with deep wrinkles and swollen veins much earlier than the face.

When I said goodbye to Victoria I kissed her hand. I think it was the first time in my life.

* * *

Some stories that Victoria Goldovskaya related were completely new to me, while others had common features with mum's stories and some things I had the opportunity to hear about much later from other survivors of the GULAG and even from official documents. However, more often than not the events are seen through the prism of the person telling the story – his views, his age, the particular features of his life-story and even the environment in which he happened to be placed. But however meticulously the crimes of Stalin and of the system that he nurtured were hidden, with time all his evil deeds and excesses became known. The death and suffering of millions of people can escape the notice only of someone who deliberately tries not to notice and considers it quite permissible not to notice. I would like to draw this to the attention of today's readers. After all it is understandable that over the years the past inevitably gets clouded and becomes ancient history. And if at first naivety and credulity could lead to a lack of awareness and a lack of certainty that everything that was happening affected totally innocent people, then later the

readiness to forgive and forget the monstrous repression can be explained only by some inhuman animosity or by direct or indirect personal involvement in these crimes.

When I was telling about Victoria Goldovskaya I mentioned Samson Gabrielyan. Like my father he was born in 1904. Like my father he was arrested in 1937. Of course, he knew my father. From the early thirties Samson had important party and government posts and he could not fail to be interested in the problems of Karabakh. He was a friend of Egishe Charents, of the great surgeon Harutyun Mirza-Avakyan and with well-known figures in science and the arts. Almost all of them, like Gabrielyan, were arrested. And few survived to the Twentieth Party Congress. I wrote about this in the documentary story "*The Heart is not Stone*" devoted to the tragic fate of Mirza-Avakyan, who was the first in Europe to carry out successful open-heart surgery.

Despite the difference in age, Samson Gabrielyan and I became real friends. He was a wonderful story-teller and I was ready to listen for hours to his stories about "those times". When he was freed from camp in 1954 he began gathering materials about the GULAG. He adored Alexander Solzhenistyn. He loved Nikita Khrushchev, was lenient towards his most serious mistakes and what could charitably be called his omissions. But he fought fearlessly against those who wanted to justify Stalin in any way by trying to shift his guilt to Beria and his ilk. It was he, who, after I had met Goldovskaya, told me in detail why suddenly from 1947 they halted the release from places of imprisonment, exile and camps of those whose sentences had at last come to an end.

Bearing in mind that it was in 1937 that there were the most executions and ten-year sentences, in 1947 one could expect a mass liberation of prisoners. It is well known that Stalin was always afraid of those who survived. He understood the situation perfectly and was ready to do whatever that was necessary. There wasn't long to wait.

… In 1947, after serving ten years, one of Stalin's former staff, Nazaretyan, was released. This name is well known to anyone who has taken an interest in the history of the so-called Karabakh conflict. Let me take a moment to explore this history. It's very important. In 1921 under pressure from Turkey – "the warm friend of the Soviets" (Solzhenitsyn's irony) – the Bolsheviks (i.e. Stalin) decided to provide a "legal" foundation for the transfer of Nakhichevan and Karabakh to the newly formed socialist republic of Azerbaijan as part of the Leninist policy of "exporting the revolution to the Moslem East". On 4 July 1921 the Caucasus bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party by a majority of votes approved a resolution joining Nagorny Karabakh to Soviet Armenia. However, within 24 hours Stalin insisted that the vote be taken again. Naturally, in these 24 hours the "leader of the nations" did an enormous amount of work. As the People's Commissar for Nationalities he found it easiest to deal with Nazaretyan, who voted "as required". His was the decisive vote. And instead of thirty pieces of silver Nazaretyan received from the Boss promotion up the Party ladder and for many years was the assistant to the "leader of the nations".

In 1937 he was arrested and he just couldn't understand why. Hadn't he met the leader more often than anyone else, was he not ready to support him always and in everything? He never realised that the monstrous tyrant was rather clever and knew very well that someone who has betrayed once can easily betray again. As soon as he returned from the GULAG he began strenuously to try to prove his innocence. He had access to the offices and dachas of the members of the Politburo. Using his old friendship with the Mikoyan family he finally managed to meet Anastas Mikoyan. He told his countryman at length how he had been a victim of all kinds of slanders. He begged him to arrange a meeting with Stalin. Mikoyan told him straight that the Boss categorically forbade them all without exception to have anything to do with "the so-called year of thirty seven".

Mikoyan eventually agreed to give Stalin a letter from Nazaretyan. After all, he had been the leader's assistant for a long time.

Samson told me that he had spent seventeen years in camp with someone who had been close to Stalin. Gradually they had become friends. And their friendship continued after they were released. He was called Nikolai. During one of their meetings in Moscow, Nikolai told Gabrielyan the story involving Nazaretyan. It was very close to the story that Victoria Goldovskaya had heard. Apparently, as he had promised, Mikoyan gave the letter to Stalin. The leader put the letter in his pocket without a word. An hour later he summoned a meeting of the Politburo. He opened the meeting himself with the words: "How long are we going to have to keep on dealing with thirty seven?" – the leader asked sombrely. After a pause he continued: "Write down the decision of the Politburo…"

The meeting lasted no more than ten minutes. The matter was not discussed. Nobody made a speech. The Politburo took the decision, which was never published, that prisoners who had completed their punishment should remain forever in the places where they had served their sentences. They continued to be forbidden to have any correspondence with their families.

* * *

On 10 February 1968 in my bachelor flat on Partizanskaya Street in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky there was the usual noisy party for my birthday. I was thirty-three. There was the usual celebratory food: stuffed partridge, kebabs of pork and squid intrepidly grilled in my "Karabakh" fireplace, red caviar in a soup tureen with wooden spoons, smoked sturgeon and my house speciality – roast potatoes. The guests were a real mixture: doctors, geologists, hunters, writers, journalists. The toasts were about everything and anything. The atheist generation felt duty bound to point out that thirty-three was the age of Christ. It goes without saying that their source for this information was not the Bible. Strange though it may be, all my friends, wherever they came from, knew the writings of Ilf and Petrov almost by heart. Following the example of the unforgettable Ostap Bender, millions of readers remembered that Christ lived on earth for exactly thirty-three years.

During the interminable toasts, I thought constantly of one person who will live for as long as I, my children and my grandchildren remember him. My father was exactly thirty-three when the "black raven" van took him away from his own house forever. I remembered this birthday for all my life. Even the toasts and the selection of snacks. And it made me very close to my father. At any rate, it was at this time that I began not only thinking about him but also talking with him. And above all I told him in detail what mum went through after he was taken away.

… I was two years old and Boris was six months. We didn't understand anything, we had no memory of that night and there was nothing we could do to help mum. But, as I told him about it, I was able to give my father a great number of details. They came to me at different times from the words of various people and remained in my consciousness, in my memory, as though I had myself been a witness of everything. My memories were not just of the family, but also of Karabakh and even the life of the whole country.

From my recollections my father was to learn how his four sisters – Nakhshun, Sofya, Zanazan and Ashkhen – would burst into tears at the mention of the name of their only brother, alternating tears with calls to punish our enemies for their unjust deeds. Certain expressions remain to this day in the memories of Boris and myself. "Our naïve brother – put his head on the line, and how!" "Guilty without guilt." "If only we could bury those who reviled him, informed on him and slandered him." "If only they had to pick up breadcrumbs out of the dust of the road."

My father, whom I imagined as in the photos with cheery eyes and a shock of thick black hair, often laughed at my stories and understood me very well. His sisters were brought up in a peasant family where strict Karabakh home-making was the order of the day. But their grandfather was a priest and the girls were familiar with the Christian commandments from earliest childhood. The sisters took a critical view of our very young mother because she wore lipstick, as was the fashion in her time, loved the "*Red Moscow*" perfume and tried to wear pretty dresses. It was as if I could see and hear my father lamenting in fun as he looked at his sisters: "What a bunch of sisters-in-law! What a fine lot you are! All ganging up together!" Father told me that even when he was present all his sisters liked to lecture mum for her failings. Then he would also make fun of his sisters, tenderly kissing them on the cheek and calling them puritans.

Of course, my dialogues with my father were not at all mystic. I had heard of particular episodes or specific words from mum and from my aunts. For example I was often told that when my aunts accused mum of loving to dress in fine clothes, father would say with some degree of pride: "My wife is not at all to blame that she is so pretty. Whatever she put on would look splendid on her!"

On my thirty-third birthday my father and I talked about one other topic – Norik, the elder brother to me and Boris. Lying on the settee I think I asked my father questions out loud, the answers to which I knew from childhood as I listened to the conversations among our numerous relatives.

"You know, dad, your wife – our mum – is an absolutely unique woman."

"I know, son, I know."

"Mum, for example, was very fond of Norik. She regarded your first wife Arevat warmly and with great respect. Women don't often manage that. When Arevat died, mum travelled from Andizhan to Baku for her funeral. Later she once confessed to me that she saw it as her duty not only to Arevat but to your memory. When she was asked how many children she had she always answered 'three'. And when she gave our names she always began with Norik."

"You know son, when I married your mum, Norik was already nine years old. A year later you were born and ten-year old Norik came to live with us in Stepanakert. Even then I could see how Gohar had a sensible and friendly relationship with him. And yet he was only eight years younger than his step-mother. My parents married me off to a girl from the next village when I was only eighteen. Arevat was four years older than me. I was the only son of my stonemason father. In the villages it was the custom to marry off an only son as early as possible. So, when Norik was born, I was barely twenty years old.

"Then everything changed at once. Our daily life, our plans, our worries. In my mind there was chaos and at the same time a clear sense of order. I studied in school in my native Agorti and in the two-year college in Shushi. I could only dream of university. I wrote articles for the newspaper. I studied Russian. I wrote bad poetry. I began to feel stifled in Agorti. But Arevat grew up in the tiny village of Ningidjan, where at that time there were five or six households, and that suited her. So, life itself gradually separated us. And Gohar, though she was young, was wiser than her years and she understood me almost intuitively. She herself wanted to study. Once I slapped Norik, who was eleven, for some prank. Then you were about a year old and mum was expecting Boris. You should have seen how she went for me!"

* * *

From then on conversation with father simply became a necessity. I became accustomed to sharing with him the things that I found particularly difficult. And all the time I tried to find out more about him. In my mind father was totally beyond reproach. When I came across some injustice I tried to imagine how he would have evaluated events or the people involved. After all, he was a statesman. In a time of

almost universal illiteracy he had finished both school and later higher education at university level, the Higher Party School in Moscow, also known as the University of the Labourers of the East.

I went to the Armenian school in Stepanakert in 1942 and a year later was transferred to the Russian school. On 1 September 1943 at the height of the war the whole country went over to separate schooling for boys and girls. When he heard about this granddad Markos was absolutely amazed, as he considered it to be totally unnatural. Someone told him that the only school that would not be affected was the Russian school named after Griboyedov, since there were lots of Russian children there whose parents were serving in the Stepanakert regiment. Grandfather immediately decided to transfer me to this school. So I found myself in the first grade again, this time in the Russian school, however not knowing a word of Russian.

I remember my teachers clearly. Well-educated and fair. An amazing kindness was combined in them with an ascetic strictness. From the first grade they trained us to go to the library. This was essential: in our homes there were very few books and even textbooks were worth their weight in gold. I often went to our little school library. I remember that in first grade I loved to leaf through the textbooks for the senior classes.

Aunty Siranush, the elderly librarian, allowed me to engage in “this strange pastime” as she called it. She always smiled at me. Everybody who loved and respected my father smiled at me in that way. And despite her goodwill towards me I never allowed myself to confess to aunty Siranush why I liked looking through the “grown up” textbooks. In these textbooks it was often possible to find portraits with the eyes poked out or with horns or moustaches drawn on them. Sometimes the portraits were simply blacked out or the page had been torn out of the book. I didn’t know what an “enemy of the people” was, but I understood that it was something terrible. Of course, I wanted to see a portrait of my father in a textbook and I was very disappointed when all I could find was the remains of a torn out page. Maybe that was where dad’s photo had been.

I never did find the name of Haik Balayan. Not in the Armenian textbooks published in Yerevan, nor in the Russian ones published in Moscow. And there was nothing at home, no letters, no documents, no books that might have contained father’s notes. And yet I cannot imagine that he did not make notes in the margins of books, or underlined particular paragraphs, just as I did, ignoring the injunctions of the teachers. Even now, when I’m twice as old as my father, I see nothing to be ashamed of if I read a book with a pencil in my hand. In my underlinings and comments there is nothing but respect and love for the wise authors.

Alas, it seems it is not always safe to express ones “respect and love”. In the meagre archives of the famous historian and publicist David Ananun, which were preserved by some miracle in the attic of his house in Mets-Shen in Mardakert district, I found a few pages of his correspondence with Haik Balayan. In one place there was a mention of Holbach, but without any comment. I published this correspondence in the anthology “*The Unwritten Law*” where my novel “*The Last Judgement*” was included. However, I omitted the reference to Holbach, as I could not understand why my father mentions the name of this French philosopher in his letter. Imagine my surprise when mum suddenly cited this name when telling me something about my father. Unfortunately she was also unable to explain my father’s connection with this philosopher.

After the Twentieth Party Congress, or rather after Nikita Khrushchev’s historic speech on ending the cult of Stalin’s personality, which he gave at a closed session of the congress in late February 1956, mum and our elder brother Norik wrote letters to Moscow and to Baku. Not long after mum was invited to Baku to see the investigator in the case of Mirjafar Bagirov, the former first secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party. The investigator congratulated mum on her husband’s rehabilitation and briefly told her that our father

was arrested in 1937 on the personal instructions of Bagirov. He said that in Haik Balayan's file there were many ridiculous and absurd things. As an example he named the philosopher Holbach, about whom the people's commissar for education of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region had given an inaccurate assessment. Of course, mum had no idea in what way father's assessment had been wrong. In fact she had no idea who Holbach was.

Much later in Stepanakert, ninety year old Tevan Djavadyan, who in the early thirties had worked in the education system in Karabakh with my father, was to tell me that "this Holbach" had been the "downfall" of many in the years of Stalinism. In his view, "the most terrible thing at that time was not so much the monstrous persecution of the church and the physical suppression of the clergy as the forcible inculcation into the mass consciousness of barbaric atheist ideas." At that time official propaganda did not publish the work of western philosophers in full, but just individual excerpts from their writings. Paul Holbach was quoted the most extensively. Old Djavadyan recalled a teachers' conference devoted to atheism, at which Haik Balayan said that one shouldn't have such a one-sided view of the philosophers. And he had given as an example Holbach, whose works he had read in Moscow during his studies at the University.

Maybe on that very day, or maybe after a bit of hesitation, someone had informed Baku that the minister of education had his own interpretation of the famous Holbach – and what's more he was the grandson of a priest.

* * *

In the late fifties in Andizhan library I read many books and booklets which mentioned the philosopher Holbach. Usually they were references to his works on atheism. In Ryazan in 1962 I saw an announcement in the newspaper that the Moscow publishing house "*Politizdat*" had produced Paul Holbach's book "*Saints' gallery*". The full title was mentioned: "*Saints' gallery (or an investigation of the thought patterns, behaviour, rules and achievements of the people Christianity proposes as examples)*".

The next morning as soon as it was light I set off in the stopping train and three hours later set off from Moscow's Kazan station to Miusskaya Square, where "*Politizdat*" was located. Having paid one rouble twenty-eight kopecks in "new money", as it was required to note at the time, I acquired two copies of Holbach's book.

I left one copy behind in Kamchatka, covered in marginal notes and frequent mentions of my father. Actually I gave away to my friends on the peninsula quite a rich library, including an old edition of the fifty-volume "*Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*". But I still can't forgive myself for mixing up the copies and leaving behind the one with all my notes in it.

I remember how in the train on the way back to Ryazan I leafed through the book and discovered that "*Saints' gallery*" had been published only once before in Russian – in 1934.

And one more important observation. We have focused so much on 1937 that we don't even recognise a certain danger in this. Sometimes people get the impression, especially young people, that in 1936, say, or 1938, in fact in any year starting from 1917 and right up to 1956, ordinary Soviet people breathed perfectly freely. As though nothing happened in 1918, when Stalin in Tsaristsyn eliminated his opponents and pronounced the historic phrase: "No person – no problem". And then he expanded the principle to "no nation – no problem".

Or as if in 1919 Lenin didn't send endless telegrams repeating like an invocation: "Not enough people being shot! Really and truly, not enough! Let's have more people shot!!!"

To focus only on the horrendous year of 1937 is as dangerous as for us Armenians to pick on 1915 out of the whole tragic period of our history from 1893 to 1923. Incidentally, we'll return to the topic of 1915. For the moment let's note our disagreement with the belief that the building of the new socialist society failed basically because of the "cult of personality" and in particular because of 1937. This monstrous year would not have come about were it not for the other years that were basically the same. Just take 1921, when in March Stalin, on Lenin's orders, sent the delegates of the Tenth Party Congress to Kronshtadt to carry out the resolution of that Party forum by personally shooting the mutineers, including the poet Nikolai Gumilyov. At this very time People's Commissar of Nationalities Stalin was receiving a Turkish delegation in Moscow to decide the fate not only of Karabakh and Nakhichevan but also of Gyulistan province and the whole of Gardmanq.

That same year in July, as we have already noted, Stalin falsified the party document handing over Karabakh to the newly created republic of Azerbaijan, while in October he removed Nakhichevan from the historic map of Armenia and transferred it to "Ataturk's Atlas". It was in that black year of 1921, with the silent consent of official Armenia, and of all of us, that the Armenian population centres of Shaumyan. Gardmanq and Kirovabad with all its surroundings: Kelbadjar, Lachin, Kubatly, Zangelan, Fizuli, Djebrail, Agdam, Barda, Mirbashir and other districts, were all handed over to the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, whose Constitution allowed it to do what it liked and how it liked with its "party territory". In this regard there was special constitutional terminology – the power of the local party organs extended on the territorial principle. This principle operated for the whole of the Soviet period. Not many people have given any thought to the fact that the whole evil in this so-called internationalism lay precisely in this "territorial principle", which was first put into practice in Azerbaijan in relation to the Armenians.

Could there have been 1937 without 1930 when Stalin, fulfilling Lenin's testament, destroyed more than one hundred thousand churches, places of worship and historic Christian buildings? He created the All-Union Society of the Godless, of which membership ticket number one was ceremonially handed to him. From that time atheist propaganda operated powerfully on one sixth of the planet. In universities and other educational institutions departments of scientific atheism were opened. The "*Knowledge*" Society flooded the Soviet Union with its lecturers who propagandised godlessness. They had to refer to someone and extract suitable quotations. They found Paul Holbach, whose wit was very much to the taste of the "leader of all times and nations".

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After meeting the investigator in Baku, mum became extremely interested in the "philosopher Holbach" whose writings were one of the reasons for the arrest and death of her husband. What's more, I should note that in the documents in his file this was not mentioned. Mum and I talked a lot about what I had managed to hear, learn and later read about this French scholar almost unknown in Armenia, let alone in Karabakh. Gradually mum came to the conclusion that the regime that ran the state used the writings of the philosopher to mock Christian morality and Jesus Christ himself along with the Biblical prophets, apostles and heroes. And then she felt very keenly the disturbing terrible premonitions that filled the mind of her Haik, an educated, moral man, grandson of a priest, the minister of education, forced to propagandise mocking godlessness larded with cynicism. She was glad that she was able to understand and discover again for herself her beloved husband from whom she had never been parted for a single day of her life, neither in the GULAG nor on her deathbed. Indeed, even after death she was not parted from him, for I brought a few handfuls of earth from the mass graves in the North and buried them in her grave.

From the passages in the correspondence between David Ananun and my father, from scraps of paper written on in pencil, I managed to establish that Holbach's articles bothered not only my father. In one of the letters, for example, Ananun wrote: "As for Holbach, I don't quite share your opinion, for it is my deep conviction that he's not devious but simply mistaken. And his mistake is a conceptual one. From the very beginning he confuses God and 'idol'." On the scrap of paper this is all that remained. No beginning, no end. But I would be really interested to know what point of view of Haik Balayan it was that the famous historian and publicist did not share. And I became utterly engrossed in the search.

* * *

Before I could seriously explain to mum the essence of the "Holbach puzzle", I had to get a thorough understanding of everything for myself and find out what it was in Holbach that so troubled my father. From his comments it was clear that on the one hand he considered the French philosopher a genius but on the other hand he had been accused of "incorrect interpretation" because he tried to justify this thinker whom he regarded very highly, but in his own way. Maybe he considered that the philosopher was devious in order to avoid falling foul of the authorities of his time? For example, researchers on Holbach wrote: "In order not to provoke the royal authority, Holbach pretends that he is a monarchist and a supporter of royalty. This was a device which writers of the Enlightenment often had recourse to in works which were to be published under censorship."

However, it is very probable that David Ananun was right in his belief that the French thinker was not being devious but was "simply mistaken" in confusing God with idols. The essence and primary purpose of his book "*Saints' gallery*" is revealed by the author in the first paragraphs of his own preface. I believe it is necessary to include an extensive quotation if only because not all of my contemporaries know how the Stalinist ideology prepared the ground for the justification of its crimes. We should recognise that the tyrant himself was not much interested in ordinary mortals. Who cares about the chips that fly when you chop wood?! Stalin was interested in writers who as atheists overthrew gods and apostles but at the same time protected monarchs from criticism from below. Holbach begins his book in this way:

> "All nations on earth display great respect to people to whom they owe some useful discoveries on a higher level by comparison with ordinary mortals, as favourites of heaven, as people whose genius speaks of something divine. Every unknown or unusual phenomenon was attributed by the crowd to the gods; in just the same way unusual people seemed to them to be divine. Rare qualities of body and mind: strength, courage, dexterity, skill, perceptiveness and abilities of genius, which always caused ordinary people to marvel, were attributed by nations who were devoid of knowledge and experience to invisible forces that ruled the world. We see that in any country the first warriors, the most ancient heroes, the inventors of the arts, priests, legislators, creators of religions, soothsayers (I think these are "prophets" – Z.B.) and magicians in their lifetimes hold sway over the gullibility of the nations, are honoured by their contemporaries as supernatural beings and after their death join the ranks of the gods and thus become objects of devotion and even of worship for those nations to whom in their lifetimes they brought some real or imagined benefit."

In general, it would seem, it is possible to argue in this way. But I don't understand why "the first warriors" and "prophets", "inventors of the arts" and "magicians" are all mentioned in one breath? Nor do I understand the desire (even ignoring the blatant tactlessness) of lumping together Osiris, Hermes, Abraham, Bacchus, Romulus and Jesus Christ.

Of course, Stalin, who had reached divine heights, probably needed not only to topple all idols known to history and even "subsidiary gods" but also to designate Christ as one of them. He had to justify the title of atheist number one. And just at this moment someone told him about a philosopher in whose writings Christ was placed on a par with Bacchus, who was defined in Soviet encyclopaedic dictionaries as "one of the names of Dionysius, the god of viniculture."

As a materialist and atheist Stalin strove to be not at all an "abstract god" but the concrete "father of all nations". As a former seminarian training to be a priest he, of course, knew that the people love saints because they are beloved of God. And suddenly in 1934 Holbach's book falls into his hands where he finds boldly expressed thoughts which immediately attract him. "In order to be convinced of the holiness of those people whom Christians revere," wrote Holbach, "we must first of all clarify for ourselves the conception that religion gives us of God. And you see, though religion sometimes portrays God as a crazy despot, more often than not it portrays him as an infinitely just, infinitely powerful lord and father filled with tenderness and kindness, a being possessing in the highest degree all imaginable features of perfection unadulterated by failings."

While working on this book I spent a lot of time examining and reading newspapers from 1934. It turns out that it was just at this time that many articles appeared placing Stalin among the host of the saints. In doing this the authors did not shy away from repeating general formulas which often looked much the same. "*Pravda*" wrote that Stalin "like a loving father proclaims his will in order that man should work for the good of the welfare of the nation". This probably gave rise to formulas of the type: "All in the name of mankind, all for the good of mankind!" And these sentiments are almost literally drawn from Holbach who wrote about God: "This being loves his creatures, grieves at the evil they cause and therefore hates violence, injustice, theft, murder and the discord of criminality. Being filled with kindness for people and providing them in abundance with the joys of life, this father as it were proclaims his will that man should work for his own welfare."

When my father accused Holbach of being devious he was thereby casting a shadow over the propagandistic intentions of the party in publishing the philosopher's books. It most probably never occurred to him that the idea of publishing emanated from Stalin himself. Those who implemented the idea were eliminated so that nobody could give away the secret.

It is no coincidence that after 1934 the book was not published again for several decades. It was only in 1962, almost ten years after Stalin's death, at the height of the new stage of the battle against religion, that the book was republished. This was made explicit in the editorial postscript: "Holbach's unmasking of Christian morality in '*Saints' gallery*' was of enormous benefit to atheist thinking. As we progress towards communism we must rid ourselves of the prejudices of the past. On our banner is the communist moral code."

Our many conversations about Holbach gradually helped mum to become more at peace. At least, she stopped thinking about revenge and curses against those who had betrayed her husband, orphaned her children and poisoned her life. She now knew that over twenty articles in the case against Haik Balayan were "child's play when compared with Holbach", whom her husband, she was told, had called devious. She did not share the view of people who did not know her Haik very well that he was naïve and therefore unable to make a realistic assessment of the situation in which he found himself. Not being naïve at that time meant accommodating oneself to what was happening. It meant being silent even when you understood very well that militant atheism and militant rejection of Christian morality would inevitably lead to the slow death of one's own people.

* * *

Strange as it may seem, a wide variety of people, with whom I discussed quite specific events and periods of time, played a role in creating and transforming my initial intentions into a book. It would happen that I suddenly saw things clearly and I became certain in my understanding of what really happened. More often than not these were contemporaries of my father, his friends and relatives. Sometimes I was able to talk directly with them. At other times clarity came through reading and reflection. Sometimes there were vigorous arguments and gradual enlightenment. Of course, it is difficult to overestimate the role of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who succeeded in grasping and analysing certain key events of Russian history. He revealed the picture from within and made accessible a whole previously invisible continent of humanity consisting of diverse fates and individual tragedies. Russian history, which had been studied by my generation from textbooks, was, as it were, restored to us and became events of our lives, became tragic, bloody and unjust. And at the same time heroic, courageous and full of nobility and goodness…

Sometimes help came from people who didn't know anything at all about my father or my intentions and struggles. Thus three days spent with Valentin Katayev helped me to decide the genre professionally, so to speak. The structure of the composition was established and the heroes and characters could take their places.

This was in Tbilisi in April 1974 at one of the traditional meetings of Soviet literary figures. The writers from every republic were accommodated in guest houses and by chance I found myself a neighbour of Valentin Katayev. From Armenia there was the wonderful front-line writer Bagish Hovsepyan. We had breakfast and dinner and went for walks together.

At that time Valentin was extremely famous. In the late sixties we devoured his wonderful stories "*The Holy Well*" and "*The Grass of Oblivion*". The genre of these works was unusual. They didn't fit the usual pattern of memoirs. They contained a mass of philosophical discourses, journalistic generalisations and caustic satire all woven into a stylistically stunning artistic canvas. At any rate, that's how it seemed to me.

I asked Valentin in the course of a long conversation how he decided on the genre of his next work. The seventy-seven year old writer gave me an amazingly youthful smile and, as though he had been expecting this question, enthusiastically began telling me about the essence and purpose of literary genres.

"You know, I have also thought a lot about this. And I have on more than one occasion had to recognise that for me genre is a relative concept. Everything is relative. Even the boundaries between genres. Between a short story and a novella, a short story and a tale. Between a tale and a novel. Even between poetry and prose. A novel, as everyone knows, is prose. But Pushkin named his '*Eugene Onegin*' a novel. Only later was the description modified to a 'novel in verse'. Gogol named his tale a poem.

"In practice, when I feel the need within me for a genre which is new to me, which has never been used, I simply invent it. I remember when I was finishing the first of my three books of memoirs '*The Holy Well*' this question of genre came into rather sharp focus for me. Then I thought up the 'lyrical-philosophical biographical tale'. Yet each of these words, so it would seem, is a completely independent genre. Alexander Chakovsky called his '*Blockade*' a 'political novel'. I think every author is free to define genre in his own way. Especially when works are created that don't fit the usual framework of any of the classical genres. After all, the most important thing is that the reader should find it interesting…"

Of course, my own search was troubling me. And so I asked the master how he would define the genre of a major prose work which was based on "pages from a diary".

"It would be good if you could tell me something more specific about your plans. I read your '*Pages from a diary*' in '*Young Communist Pravda*' and '*Literary Gazette*' and I can say that columns entitled 'pages from a diary' or simply 'a writer's

notes' or 'from a writer's notebook' were always a literary genre if they contained an idea, generalisations and philosophical reflections, if each of these 'pages' has an internal link with another 'page' and together they all solve some mutual task. Give me specific examples and I will try to define the genre for you."

Our conversation continued after dinner. Bagish Hovsepyan found our conversation interesting and remained at table with us and soon we were joined by Valentin's son Pavel.

"I knew a doctor in Kamchatka," I began my story, "who was quite unique. He was called Viktor Kazmin. We called him the king of propaedeutics. But many considered him the king of diagnostics and endocrinology. Well, this Viktor Kazmin began by studying his patient just like a dissertation topic. Then he combined every relevant symptom, syndrome, analysis and information on the history of the illness and from genetic anamnesis, that is information about parents and relatives etc. After that he made a possible differential diagnosis and gave his judgement on the prognosis. He conjectured not only the future course of the illness but made a prognosis of how long the patient would live."

"Gypsy fortune-telling?!" asked Valentin, not without some irony.

"Not at all! It wasn't a matter of fortune-telling, but of the thoughts that are awakened, shall we say, by the very idea of prophecy. Imagine that someone is living in this world knowing for sure that he has ten years left to live. Or let's say, exactly one year. Such people would set themselves various tasks, they would have various plans. Each would live in a different way from a person who has no idea about the time he has on earth. While I was still living on Kamchatka I decided to write a story at the centre of which would be a man who knew the exact date of his death. As time passed the number of heroes increased, with many of them coming directly from real life.

"That was six years ago. I was then thirty-three years old. I became older than my father who had been arrested and killed in 1937. On this day some kind of voice spoke inside me. I thought that in the life of my father there had been a moment when he knew the exact date of his death. I can't say that from that time I set aside everything else and engrossed myself in this theme. I continue to work in the hospital. I continue to engage in journalism. But the important thing for me now is this future book. Although I don't know when I will set aside everything else and start it. And I don't even know in what genre it will be written."

"While I was listening to you with my full attention, I was all the time thinking about genre. I don't know whether you will agree with me. I would define it as a 'commentary on a theme'…"

Valentin's son came into the dining room. He didn't want dinner and soon they set off on a walk. We discovered later that father and son were competing to describe in the most graphic and precise way the figure, or rather the form, of a dark-red cloud during the sunset.

I completed that work of mine ten years later and I called it "*The Last Judgement*". I took Valentin Katayev's advice: below the title in brackets I added "*Commentary on a theme*".

* * *

"*The Last Judgement*" was published in two issues of the journal "*Sovetakan Hayastan*" and in the anthologies of tales and short stories "*Avariya*" in Russian and "*Unwritten Law*" in Armenian. There are chapters on my father and David Ananun. There are quotations from their correspondence on the miraculously preserved scraps of paper. Mum usually read my books several times. She knew Armenian and Russian fluently. When I published "*The Last Judgement*" I didn't tell her there were pages on my father. I wanted it to be a surprise for her. She knew nothing of Ananun, who was over twenty years older than my father.

David and Haik met several times in Yerevan and quite often in the Karabakh village of Mets-Shen. A few letters were preserved in Mets-Shen by Movses Yeritsyan and Sarkis Gukasyan, whose wife was a niece of Ananun. One of the letters (to be precise part of a letter) was actually never sent to the addressee in the GULAG.

Mum appreciated this book very much. She read through many times the extensive quotations from Ananun, who valued her husband and corresponded with him despite the real danger of doing so. She underlined whole paragraphs of Ananun's preface to Gorki's anthology of Armenian literature. She found the thoughts and observations to be exceptionally important and true: "The Armenian nation really did consider itself in slavery and was completely depersonalised and the longing for freedom came only in the form of religious comfort on the threshold of life beyond the grave. The conquerors, however, did not restrict themselves to heartless exploitation: they made every effort to deprive the nation of its own defenders and leaders. And they began the systematic elimination of the Armenian elite, the Armenian aristocracy which in the middle ages had been the head of the nation and the only remaining militant element…"

Once after breakfast mum took the book from the shelf and found the page she wanted and said:

"You were right to include the words of David Ananun in your book in the part where you were writing about your father. I realised even in the camp that Stalin too destroyed above all the real defenders of the people, the leaders or, as they now say, the elite. Many women with whom I shared a cell or whom I simply met in camp were the wives of leaders, top officials or important specialists. I remember when we were transported from Shushi prison there were about twenty women in our group. By that time all our husbands had either been killed or sent to Siberia. But as well as political charges, hastily cobbled together criminal charges had been pinned on all of us. You see, David also says 'the nation was depersonalised', he's talking about the same thing."

"When David Ananun wrote his preface at Gorki's request," I remarked, "Stalin and his cult did not yet exist. Ananun could not have known of the tragedy of 24 April 1915. That was the day when the Turkish government took approximately eight hundred people on a previously prepared list who were, in Ananun's words, the Armenian 'defenders of the nation', 'leaders' and 'militant elements' and shot them all. Ananun was able to foresee this. That is the special value of his thinking."

Years later, when at the global level government after government passed laws or parliamentary resolutions recognising the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, I often remembered this conversation of ours in mum's apartment in Stepanakert. Of course, it was necessary to highlight as a tragic symbol one of the more than ten thousand days of uninterrupted genocide between 1893 and 1923. And without a doubt it was possible to highlight 24 April 1915, when in a few hours the whole of the Armenian elite of Constantinople was massacred. Writers, composers, lawyers, doctors, architects and journalists (incidentally all eight hundred on the black list were described as "publicists"). The only one to survive was the genius Komitas. However, he lost his mind and was plunged into an abyss of the torments of Tantalus for a whole twenty years.

There were not a few such black days in the history of our nation. In his preface to the "*Anthology of Armenian Literature*" Ananun cites some historical facts: "The Armenian elite found itself in a situation where it had to choose between renouncing its country and its faith, for which it was promised all kinds of material incentives, on the one hand, and death or banishment on the other. As an illustration of this, let us recall how in 706 the Arab ruler of Armenia lured eight hundred Armenian *nakharars* (as the Armenian feudal princes were known in antiquity and for part of the Middle Ages) to Nakhichevan (now Old Nakhichevan), locked them in a church and set fire to it."

It is possible to give a huge number of examples of monstrous evil deeds to which Armenian women, old men and children were subjected under both Abdul Hamid and the Young Turks. However, today's descendants of the Hamids and Talaats, noting that we have largely focussed on 1915, justify their ancestors on the grounds that in 1915 at the height of the First World War, when Turkey was fighting against Russia, they had to deport the Armenians from the theatre of war as long-standing Russian sympathisers.

I think that mum was the first person I convinced that while not forgetting 1915 we should always remember the genocide of Armenians that took place between 1893 and 1923. The Jews, who have had many tragic periods in their history and have an official Holocaust Day, have the wisdom when speaking of the genocide of the Jewish nation to remember the thirteen nightmare years from 1933 to 1945. And this is rightly enshrined in their Law. Mum was in total agreement with me on this too.

* * *

At about the beginning of the Karabakh movement mum asked me to bring her the photograph of David Ananun which I had hanging in the Yerevan correspondents' office of the "*Literary Gazette*" together with pictures of our national avengers Soghomon Tehliryan and Gurgen Yanikyan. However, from 1988, especially after the tragic earthquake in December and my election as a people's deputy of the USSR, I hardly ever went to my office there. Knowing this, one of my friends asked my permission to make use of this room for a while. He solemnly promised not to touch anything: manuscripts, folders, letters, photographs etc. Unfortunately it was only much later that I discovered that he took advantage of my chronic absence from the city and moved the entire contents of my office to some cellar where the rats promptly began to feast on them.

I could not keep my word. I think mum was upset. At first it was as if she forgot who Ananun was, but then she remembered and mustered some details in her mind. All the time, she was thinking how it was not by chance that David Ananun had written a letter at that terrible time to Haik Balayan, in which he expressed his disquiet about "white genocide" (ethnic cleansing) in Karabakh. It was just like some Biblical exodus. Ananun wrote about this in his last letter to Haik Balayan before they were arrested. Mum knew this letter by heart. With her wonderful memory this was not difficult. Especially as many phrases and quotations used by Ananun were well known to me.

> "Dear Haik! As ever I am concerned about the situation of our settlements and villages. They are dying out before our eyes. And the most amazing thing is that when we manage to move to the town the first thing we do is condemn those who remained in the village. Instead of honouring them we reproach them, pointing at the mud round the well. Or the bridge that got washed away last year that the village has not replaced. People leave the village for the town because they think that hens in the town lay ostrich eggs. But it is not just such naivety that is the cause of the devastation of the Armenian villages.
>
> "Recently my relative left Mets-Shen. He came to Yerevan and told how he had struggled for a year to get a water supply into our village. All on his own. There was just a little left to finish and someone wrote a letter to Baku. Anonymously, of course. The letter said that my relative was an egoist because he had an interest in getting the water supply to pass as close as possible to his own house. And what do you think? The village water supply remained unfinished.
>
> "And recently, dear Haik, at one meeting they tore a strip off me for my essay written in 1916 about mediaeval poetry. I came devastated

to my empty room which I rent from an old lady. I sat at my desk and thought about you. You are always making ironic remarks about my weakness for using all kinds of proverbs and sayings and you are not aware of how many there are in your letters. I'm planning to write an article about that meeting and I've decided to use as an epigraph the words of Heine which I discovered in your last letter: 'Calm down! I love the Fatherland no less than you do…' I don't know when I will next go to Mets-Shen. The fireplace that I was building in my father's house there is still unfinished. It's terrible when they won't even let you get on with building the hearth in your parental home…"

* * *

I spent June and July 1984 in Mets-Shen. It was an old dream of mine: to get away from everything to finish my novel "*The Last Judgement*", and at the same time eat mulberries till I burst. After all I had grown up on these honey-filled fruits that shone with sunshine. However, my life was such that after I left Karabakh I lived for a quarter of a century in places where people had not only never tried these divine berries, but had never even heard of them. And it was not at all by chance that I chose Mets-Shen.

From aunty Ashkhen Yeritsyan, the great niece of David Ananun, I learnt that the house where this outstanding Armenian publicist and historian had been born and brought up was lying empty. And I thought how wonderful it would be to live and work for a couple of months in the house where there roamed the spirit of such a great man, who furthermore not only knew my father, but was his friend. It seems that he and my father met in 1934 or 1935 when my father had already been appointed minister of education of Nagorny Karabakh.

Mum told me that immediately after my father took up this new position he at once became the centre of attention among the intelligentsia in Yerevan – and not only in Yerevan. Public figures from various districts of Armenia often came to see him. Naturally, David Ananun could not fail to be interested in the problems of education in Karabakh. Immediately after the establishment of the Soviet regime in Armenia, he had been appointed director of the Museum of the Revolution in Yerevan. He was exactly a quarter of a century older than my father. His political baptism had been in the Gnchak party (an underground independence movement), then in the Dashnaktsutyun (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a left-wing nationalist party). From 1905 he became the ideological leader of the social-democratic organisation whose members called themselves the "specific ones". One should say that there was a certain logic in this term which emphasised the specific nature both of the political tasks and of the solutions adopted in the conditions of Armenia at that time.

I saw that mum felt guilty that she did not at all remember a man who in the thirties, as we now knew, had a huge influence on her husband and at times discussed with him issues that were very important and interesting for both of them. The only thing which she could remember was that Haik more than once jokingly referred to the "Great man from the Great village". The name Mets-Shen does indeed translate as Big (Great) Village. And when in my book, on the basis of the letters that had survived, I began to surmise what David and Haik had talked about, mum treated what I had written with an excessive degree of seriousness.

I had at my disposal only a few quotations from incompletely preserved letters, but mum didn't need real details. The symbolic dialogue between David Ananun and the heroine of the novel "*The Last Judgement*" was treated by mum as though it was real and required comment. I gave mum an honest explanation that such a dialogue could not have taken place in real life if only because my heroine was born only in the mid-thirties. But the words that I had put into Ananun's mouth

had been taken without editing or cutting from the great man's writing. This had the advantage that I had thus managed to avoid awkward explanations to the Soviet censors. Which would not have been at all easy at that time. But I had been able to weave threads drawn from historical facts into the fabric of a work of literature.

In Stepanakert and Mets-Shen I often talked with relatives of Ananun. Many of them had no idea that among the miraculously preserved domestic archives some priceless historical documents had survived. Knowing my weakness for Mets-Shen (my mother-in-law Margarita Gukasyan is the daughter of the legendary Mamikon Gukasyan who was from this village), they once brought me three thick exercise books in which an unknown author had written down in calligraphic script the history of the village.

In these archive papers I found a sheet of lined paper. Picking it up and looking at what was written, even before I began to read it I could feel my heart beating more rapidly. A few letters from my father had survived. You couldn't really call them letters. Rather notes. But I could not mistake his handwriting. At first it was hard to make out the words. But after reading a line or two it got much easier. This letter (or note) had no beginning or end. However, it was not hard for me to guess that it was addressed to Ananun: "Thank you for Dolgorukov. I'm devouring it. Almost in every paragraph I am reminded of you. It even occurred to me that 'Truthful' died a year before your birth. I don't think there is anything mystical in this, but it is symbolic. I have the impression that you are continuing his life. Most likely we'll meet soon. We'll continue the conversation about 'Truthful', but not only about him…"

* * *

I remember, I hurried to Yerevan to find out everything I could about Dolgorukov. I was sure that in the Armenian Republican Library, rightly considered to have one of the richest collections in the USSR, I would find lots of materials about this publicist about whom David Ananun and Haik Balayan wrote so amazingly. But events developed in a totally unexpected direction.

I had only just arrived in Yerevan when in the evening my friend Pavel Ananikyan, the professor of surgery, called me. We often have long phone conversations to exchange news. Full of my impressions of my stay in Stepanakert and Mets-Shen, I told him that I was going to the library to read everything I could find on Dolgorukov.

"That's interesting," Pavel answered, clearly willing to have a conversation on the subject. "Why do you need to go to the library when you can talk about Dolgorukov with me?"

"I understand," I responded in the same humorous tone, "that you have far more information than the ancient library in Alexandria that was burnt to the ground, but I just need to find specific literature about Dolgorukov."

"Like the rest of mankind, you consider me just a great surgeon. But after all, I am also a great artist, a great essayist and a great philosopher. Not to mention my achievements in the field of Dolgorukov studies. By the way, tell me, do you at least know which Dolgorukov you are looking for?"

"To tell you the truth, Pavel, I need to read the publicist Dolgorukov. Recently it seems that he has been forgotten for some reason. He had the pseudonym 'Truthful'."

"So, that's Pyotr Vladimirovich Dolgorukov. 'Truthful' was not just a pseudonym. Living in emigration, he published a newspaper under that title. Incidentally he published other newspapers as well. For example I know '*Budushchnost*' and '*Listok*'. You don't need to go to the library. I got his book from my dad. My father was arrested under Stalin on account of Dolgorukov's pamphlets, which were works of genius."

"I'm on my way, Pavel," I said jumping up and without waiting for an answer put the phone down…

… Usually it takes me about ten minutes to get to Ananikyan's house. This time it seemed an age. On the way I kept thinking of mum. She was born in a happy, fairly well-off family with lots of children a year and a half after the October Revolution and two years before Soviet power was established in Armenia. Later she remembered her childhood as a time of paradise. She ran barefoot through the mountain meadows of Karabakh. She loved to watch the diamond drops of dew slipping to the ground down the long green blades of grass, while the blue sky over her head seemed so close you could touch it. Everything filled her with joy: the fresh wind that gently caressed her skin, the buzzing of the bees collecting pollen from the bright flowers, the enchanting music of the shepherd's reed pipe and the village of Kyatuk itself, high in the mountains and nestling in the thick cool greenery of its gardens. Little Gohar Yuzbashyan thought then that she would live forever in this paradise. Many decades later she would underline in my book "*Between hell and paradise*" the line from the Armenian poet Nahan Hovnatyan who wrote in the 19th century: "O why do you punish me by turning paradise into hell?"

Mum asked me then: "Who is Hovnatyan addressing?"

"I think Heaven, seeing there both God and Fate and maybe the Devil"

"And who should I address?"

"I don't know, mum. It's not just Stalin, it's the whole system which gives birth to tyrants. After all, Lenin was a tyrant too. And if Trotsky had come to power everything might have been even worse. But Stalin became the greatest villain. He was the one who created the technology of repression, using not only physical weapons but a whole philosophy. And everything was imbued with deceit. You were convinced for years after father's death that he was arrested for opposing the barbaric destruction of mulberry trees or for replacing pig-farming with sheep-farming in Karabakh with the aim of driving the Armenians out of Karabakh and attracting Azeris. Or for devising with Armenian scholars a methodology for teaching Armenian history in the schools in Karabakh. A huge list of articles of the criminal code in the prosecution case are simply lies and a pretence at legality. Father became a target because he was a personality, just like almost all other victims of Stalin. The wives of 'enemies of the people' whom you knew in prison and camp probably knew nothing about Holbach or prince Dolgorukov. At first the authorities arrested those who had read their books, especially those who had quoted them. And then their relatives, and not necessarily close relatives. That's how paradise was turned into hell – it was a whole villainous science…"

At Ananikyan's house we read Pyotr Dolgorukov aloud and were amazed at the clarity and freshness of his thinking. It was as if the Russian prince were writing his articles today. It was a happy evening. At that moment it could not possibly have occurred to me that a few years later (to be precise on 19 June 1998) I would phone Pavel Ananikyan from Stepanakert to ask him to fly urgently to his dying former student Valeri Marutyan.

Valeri died the next day and Pavel went to visit my mum. It was simply a visit for the sake of politeness and sympathy: mum was already terminally ill, she had not long to live. I reminded mum about prince Dolgorukov about whom dad had written to David Ananun. It turned out that she remembered it well.

"You know, mum, it was Pavel Ananikyan who introduced me to the books of this Russian prince. Most unfortunately, this prince became the unwitting cause of the death of Pavel's father."

Mum looked in the eyes of every new visitor, especially a doctor, for a clue not only to her diagnosis but also her prognosis. And all the same she smiled at everyone. And now, when she heard that the father of the professor was also a victim of Stalin, she asked Pavel to bend over her. She kissed his forehead, drew breath and said quietly:

“Latterly I have read a lot about the thirties. And also about Dolgorukov. The young generation needs to know about him. And about David Ananun. These people were intelligent and educated. And they wrote the truth, without which there will be no peace on earth.”

“I agree with you, madame Gohar,” Pavel smiled, clearly surprised by the topic of conversation. “Right now we seem to have peace. At any rate there is no war. But many of us have the feeling that there is no peace either. And I think that is because there isn’t really truth.”

* * *

I remember how, for the first time I suddenly felt, realised how my father read Paul Holbach. What did I experience, what was I thinking? For a few moments I was transformed into him and there was nothing mystical in this reincarnation. I can’t judge about the nature of this mystery. Maybe it is in the genes or maybe it is a result of my special concentration on the little that remains of my still young father, or maybe it is simply intuition. At any rate amazing maternal and paternal intuition is known to science. Why shouldn’t it happen with sons?

My reading of Dolgorukov was enriched by just such feelings. I have no information about what exactly my father read and what Ananun wrote to him in response to his enthusiasm about the Russian prince. It was possible only to guess. But I was boundlessly happy when mum, on reading the chapters about my father and Ananun, discovered for herself what it was that had happened with father at that time. Everything somehow fell into place for her. And it was a relief for her. She understood that my father could not drag his still very young wife into the complex knot of life’s stratagems, which he himself barely understood and in which he was not yet absolutely sure that he was right.

In reflecting on this I want to cite a few excerpts from “*The Last Judgement*” which may throw some light on that period when people, without disguising their surprise, indignantly asked along with the poet: “O why do you punish me?”

Imagine, dear reader, how before the Revolution and in the twenties and thirties the Armenian publicist, historian, public figure and educator David Ananun thoughtfully analysed what was happening in the world and tried to warn future generations of potential misfortune. You can’t not listen to him because he is so talented and honest beyond reproach. He is the author of a large number of academic books on the recent history of the Armenian nation, on issues of relations between different nationalities and, last but not least, of the multi-volume “*Social development of the Russian Armenians*” which examines the dynamics of the socio-political and cultural development of the Eastern Armenians. David Ananun put forward the idea of the necessity for the national consolidation of the Armenian people. For our time, rent by divisions especially among the newly emerged capitalists, his warning about the danger for society of the newly rich merchants is extraordinarily up to date: “the Armenian bourgeoisie never expressed the interests of the Armenian nation” and “it was always the peasantry who were the bearers of the interests of the nation among the Armenians”.

It was not a historian, public figure or sociologist, but the prophetic poet Amo Sagiyan who spoke with undisguised alarm about the danger for the country of an artificially created urban population. As someone knowing the history of his country well, the poet wrote: “… for thousands of years the Armenian was a peasant who in cultivating the land knew very well that the land cultivated him and made him part of the nation.” The outstanding Armenian publicist Mkrtych Portugalyan, who was highly regarded by Ananun, was worried and indignant that the Armenian *amira* (that is what the nouveau riche Armenians in Constantinople were called at the end of the 19th century) built rich mansions for themselves on the banks of the Bosphorus, were proud to belong to the “bourgeois elite” and “read and knew by heart Gladstone’s

speeches" – but didn't know their own history and their own geography. As a result they lost both.

Incidentally, as we move into the 21st century, it would not be at all bad for us to make some instructive parallels.

Today, when two thirds of the population is urban and village houses are sold for next to nothing, when it is not entrepreneurs who are building for themselves detached houses in Yerevan, which would be quite normal, but officials, and when endless queues of our countrymen trying to emigrate form outside foreign embassies, one can't help but remember David Ananun's wise words: "As soon as the bribe-taker and embezzler of the public purse have the right to be seen in high society, the whole system of public institutions begins to rot. Today they get their offspring into university, tomorrow they get them jobs as officials and the day after tomorrow their offspring will define fashion in social and even political life."

Do many of us even occasionally think about what will happen to the centre of Yerevan which is being bought up and built over by people who are in no way noble? For enormous amounts of money don't make a person noble. But a true patriot can only be a noble person. The millions which we generously and cheerfully throw at the expansion and extension of our cities would be better spent down to the last penny on the rural areas without which our capitals and major centres will wither and starve.

I would very much like to know what my father, foreseeing his inevitable imminent death, thought about the future of our country while he was in Shushi prison, on the lengthy transport to Siberia or cutting down timber in the Komi Republic – his last place of confinement. What was the influence on his world-view of all that he saw and experienced? Alas, alas, alas! I am sure of one thing, that not long before his tragic death he realised, understood that the system that had been built was going to collapse, like a colossus on feet of clay. Indirectly from the correspondence and what is known of the conversations with David Ananun, I can presume that he could not have failed to have seditious ideas much earlier and that the feeling of inevitable universal doom worried and saddened him just as much as it did many others who had a huge influence on Haik Balayan.

Ananun, quoting Pyotr Dolgorukov, made a direct parallel with Armenia, where the people are not likely to put up with the opposition of two poles for long. On the one hand the moneybags and embezzlers who had made their wealth through deceit and on the other hand the ordinary people who had been robbed and humiliated. Such situations usually lead to revolution. Ananun considered there was no need to fear honest entrepreneurs who save the nation by supporting scientists, philosophers and writers. Although in the transition period there are very few of them. And he quotes Dolgorukov: "Patience in suffering, what in antiquity was called stoicism, is embedded in the character of the Russian. And maybe more than is desirable for a feeling of national dignity. The Russian is capable of putting up with things for ever, of suffering for a long time without complaint and grumbling, but when the natural and inevitable reaction comes he takes the bit between his teeth and then it is almost impossible to control him…"

In the mid-nineteenth century, Pyotr Dolgorukov saw in this uncontrollability of the Russian a source, strength and weapon of the revolution, postulating "terrible eruptions of popular volcanoes". Dolgorukov also identified the causes of the tragedy: "The Mongol yoke left a deep imprint. It not only changed and shook the political and social structure of Russia but also corrupted the morals of our ancestors." And it is no chance that in this situation "the merchant class groaned under the yoke of arbitrary, lawless and capricious power, and as much as possible bought off shamelessly greedy petty officials through bribes. The merchants who grew rich hastened to enrol their sons in public service to secure them noble titles. From above there was the pressure of slavery, from below deception held sway. Fraud was combined with the highest ranks. And it is not surprising that in such a situation the merchants were also

mostly swindlers. The nobility (i.e. the intelligentsia – Z.B.) had things no better, its situation was terribly humiliating."

David Ananun, developing Dolgorukov's thinking, transferred it to Armenian soil and noted that after Eastern Armenia was joined to Russia the so-called ruling classes appeared, that is merchants, princes, noblemen, civil servants and petty officials. They all "managed to make a good study of the Russian system and began to argue to the government that they were no different from the Russian land-owning classes, that the land was their inherited possession and the peasants who lived on this land were serfs. Thus the bureaucracy that was transplanted to the provincial setting began to take on a new shape here, in the form of the feudal system."

Maxim Gorki in conversation with David Ananun noted that in this situation the "spearhead of the revolution would be directed at the bureaucracy". However, Gorki himself did not suspect that the October coup d'etat, which created a state with a one-party totalitarian system would give birth to such a terrible form of bureaucracy under which many future generations would suffer. The bureaucracy itself became a weapon in the hands of the party leaders under whom the whole of society groaned. And knowing for sure that the USSR, like any totalitarian state, would definitely collapse, Ananun warned: "Be afraid of the first part of the transitional period, for those who come to power will be active young people who have grown up on the bones of democratic centralism and for objective reasons were deprived of the opportunity to advance themselves under socialism."

Towards the end of her life mum read with interest many works of writers and philosophers relating to this period. It seems she was comforted by the great breadth of thinking of the people who strictly and justly judged this time, which for many years had seemed so incomprehensible to her. But, of course, there was no question of forgiveness for Stalin, Beria, Bagirov or those informers and scoundrels who had put behind bars a multitude of innocent people – as a rule the most honest and talented.

* * *

Working on "*The Last Judgement*" in David Ananun's house in Mets-Shen I often went to the village post office to phone my brother Boris in Yerevan. Mum was living in Andizhan at this time and came to visit us in Yerevan once every two or three years. We understood how difficult it was for her to leave this Uzbek town that had given refuge to tens of thousands of Armenians. Many of mum's relatives lived there, and already some of her family and friends were buried there. Taking it in turns, quite often Boris and I would go to visit mum there. That summer I was particularly impatient to see mum. Let me remind my readers of the end of Ananun's letter to Haik Balayan: "I don't know when I will next go to Mets-Shen. The fireplace that I was building in my father's house there is still unfinished. It's terrible when they won't even let you get on with building the hearth in your parental home…"

On the first day that I arrived in Ananun's house I noticed that in the corner of the large room about half a metre above the floor there was a rather large gaping hole with uneven edges. You could quite easily have put a basketball ball in it. I found no other traces of the construction of a fireplace in the house. As I already mentioned, only part of the letter had been preserved. So there was no date on it. By my calculations it was written in about 1933. After that David never visited his home village again. For fifty years his relatives had lived there. In a word, the hole was all that remained of his intentions.

I rolled up an old newspaper and held it up to the chimney opening. The draught was so powerful that the flame shot up almost pulling the paper out of my hand. I was overjoyed. Strange though it may seem, I remembered our month-long expeditions in home-made flat-bottomed boats called "*Volcano*" and "*Geyser*" with my close friends Anatoli Gavrilin and Anatoli Salnikov. It's strange because, what, one might ask, possible connection is there between a domestic fireplace and the

free flame of a bonfire in the forest or on the shore? But there is a connection. At least for me.

Once I was asked which I like better, travelling by sea or by river. I had already thought about this long before and so I answered immediately. On the sea the main thing is waiting for the sunrise. Frozen in anticipation you wait for the moment, when beyond the horizon, which is the line between abstract infinity and the reality of our own earth, the golden burning bow of the rim of the sun appears, quivering amidst the colours of the rainbow. For me this is a great mystery. And I realise that I am envious of myself.

On a river the main thing for me is waiting for the sunset, when in the East the sky and the earth have already merged in the twilight, while in the West the clouds are burning with the red and black fire of the evening light. Travellers pull their boats onto the bank and sit at the campfire, poke the fire with a knotty stick and think and think and think… And so both the heavenly and the earthly fires permit us not only with heart and mind but with every cell of our body to soar to some special heights of Life and Nature which we feel deeply and peacefully.

Returning from distant journeys, I used to feel uncomfortable confined in the walls of a room, deprived of the morning rainbow and the evening light and the crackle of the hot fire which not only speaks but listens. I think I found a way out that saved me: by making a hearth at home – something known to mankind since early paleolithic times, that is since the distant stone age, at the very least two million years ago. Even then in special places or by the wall they lit not just bonfires but fires in hearths formed from stones. Then they invented stoves against the wall with a separate direct chimney. The first hearths with designs and small architectural elements appeared in Greece and they were called fireplaces. Today there are thousands of variations. The master builders of fireplaces were valued, it is said, no less than violin makers. I made my first fireplace myself in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. It was called the "Karabakh". I've already mentioned it. And I'm repeating myself only because my seventh fireplace made me think about mum.

* * *

It seems that the whole of Mets-Shen came together to help me build the fireplace which was instantly named the "David Ananun". Actually, only a few old men knew the creative work of their famous countryman. Furthermore it turned out that even they, who had heard that immediately after the black days of 1915 Maxim Gorki had published the "*Anthology of Armenian Literature*", had no idea that the preface to this priceless book was written by someone from their village. The explanation for this was quite simple: it wasn't that the founders and apologists of the Leninist-Stalinist nationalities policy placed an official ban its publication – they didn't even think about publishing Gorky's anthology. What's more the preface criticised Lenin and Shaumyan, which would not have passed the censors. So it was that the people of Mets-Shen did not even know that everybody with the surnames Ter-Danielyan, Gukasyan or Yeritsyan were the direct relatives of this outstanding Armenian historian and publicist.

I also found a stove-builder. And although he had never built fireplaces and didn't have a clue about it, he knew all about the way a chimney works. Among the young guys there were some builders who from goodness knows where managed to acquire a whole bag of cement. Hearing of my venture, Samvel Mamunts, the chairman of the kolkhoz named after the XXII Party Congress and deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet, sent us a lorry-load of burnt bricks and in the evening organised a dinner in one of the guesthouses.

Almost the entire first day of work on the "David Ananun" fireplace went on a lecture which I gave to my helpers on the life and work of the great son of Mets-Shen. And soon they themselves began educating their fellow-villagers by retelling

parts of the "lecture" to the best of their abilities. The fireplace turned out really well. Although I do feel obliged to give my apologies to the Russian architect Alexander Shchusev: our fireplace did look rather like the Lenin mausoleum that he had built. But the main thing is that the draught, which is considered the heart and soul of any hearth, was excellent. The firewood burned vigorously and loudly. The crackling could be heard throughout the house. This was much helped by the grate which I installed at the bottom. The red tongues of flame chased each other upwards. I wrote the name "David Ananun" in oil paint directly above the fireplace, where the English hang a mirror.

As soon as the first fire testifying to the fulfilment of David Ananun's cherished dream had died down, I set off again to the post office to phone Boris. It turned out that mum had already arrived in Yerevan and the next day was to fly in a Yak-40 to Stepanakert. Mum would be met by Valeri Marutyan and Roma Yeritsyan, who were the sons of two sisters, Margarita and Ashkhen Gukasyan. And two days later Valeri and Roma would bring their mothers to Mets-Shen and give a lift to my mother too, for whom I had prepared a wonderful surprise. After all, she had read the letters from Ananun to her husband and knew how David was upset that he had not managed to finish the fireplace in his parental home. The Gukasyan sisters ought to like the surprise too since they were always proud of belonging, even if indirectly, to the family of the "great son of Mets-Shen".

* * *

Building the fireplace had well and truly distracted me from my work and I had to adopt a strict regime. Estimating the time that I had available, I decided to get up no later than six in the morning. On the very first day the regime got changed. In a neighbouring house lived a well-known local personality Nerses Bakhshyan, who admittedly had long ago honourably retired. In the past he had a reputation as a loud and difficult person, which he himself explained by his heightened inborn sense of justice. His cockerel took after his master, being the first of the Mets-Shen fraternity of fowls to crow at the top of his voice from four if not three in the morning.

I slept on Ananun's balcony, literally ten metres from Nerses' cockerel, whom I christened "Lachar", which means a creature of scandalous and hysterical temperament. Waking at Lachar's first cry, I for a long time would be unable to get back to sleep and would feel a keen desire to get rid of this loathsome alarm-clock. Later, realising that I would not be able to get back to sleep, I would get up, switch on the light and sit at my typewriter. After two months, when I had finished writing, I would remember Lachar not only amicably but even with undying gratitude. For every morning I would wake up of my own accord at four o'clock and get to work.

When they heard of the guests who were coming to see me, the people of Mets-Shen undertook to help me with a festive meal. Various dishes appeared: boiled and roasted green beans, a pot of *tanav* (soup from sour milk and dried mint) and a huge basin of pork prepared for kebabs with the traditional accompaniment of aubergines, tomatoes and peppers. They didn't forget home made dry wine and a jug of mulberry vodka. And the family of Nerses Bakhshyan sent a pan of chicken *adjapsandal* (hot-pot). In a word, when my mum, my mother-in-law Margarita and aunty Ashkhen sat down at the massive wooden table on which the food had been covered with a dozen sheets of newspaper and at the command "Allez – op!" Valeri and Roma threw back the newspapers the women gasped. The meal really was impressive. I was very proud and engaged in banter with my guests, especially my mother-in-law from Mets-Shen, boasting of my success with the local population.

At the height of the festive lunch mum, who had been unusually cheery, suddenly turned serious and asked:

"Why didn't you invite anyone to this royal feast?"

"I invited everybody who had visited me over these past weeks – and what's more had never come empty-handed. I invited them, although I thought they would not come. It seems it's not the done thing."

"Not at all, lots of them will come," aunty Ashkhen objected. "That is the custom. They knew that we were coming. But they also knew there were no women in the house. So, according to tradition, they brought what they could. I'm quite sure that this bread was baked in a stone oven this morning specially for our visit."

"And it's all so tasty!" Margarita praised her fellow villagers.

"Especially the cockerel *adjabsandsal*," mum chipped in.

"What do you mean, cockerel?" I exclaimed rather loudly.

"Why are you so surprised?" mum asked. "I can immediately tell the difference between cockerel and chicken by the appearance and the taste."

"Well, it seems that Bakhshyan after all killed his Lachar."

I was bombarded with questions and I told the story of the ill-fated cockerel. And how one day I had jokingly complained to Bakhshyan about the excessive vociferousness of his Lachar. Nerses cheerily announced that he was ready to kill his cockerel, but only on condition that we eat him together and have a good long chat together at the same time. I sighed loudly and confessed that I had a lot of work to do and had absolutely no time…

Everybody laughed, but mum's eyes turned sad and without wasting a moment she said to me that everything had turned out rather awkwardly and that we should definitely invite Nerses. Someone said it really wasn't necessary. And then mum said loudly and firmly:

"He invited you for a meal and you said you had no time. Then he killed his cockerel and sent us a dish which I gather was also prepared very tastily."

"You can't get away from this Bakhshyan," aunty Ashkhen interjected cheerily. "And what a subject for conversation: is it cockerel or chicken? Nerses should not take offence at anybody. People don't forget. He can't fail to notice it. He shouldn't have written denunciations in thirty-seven. He sent letters everywhere."

There was a silence, which was broken only by the crackling of the fire in the fireplace. Valeri and Roma were busy with the kebabs at the "David Ananun". The festive atmosphere had somehow gradually evaporated. And then Margarita and aunty Ashkhen began in turn remembering jolly Mets-Shen stories, to everybody's amusement.

"Gohar-*djan*, the cockerel *adjabsandal* really did taste good and you haven't tried it. And I know it's your favourite," aunty Ashkhen fussed. (The suffix *djan* appended to a name in Armenian, is a sign of affection – Translator.)

Mum, embarrassed that they suspected that she had acted deliberately, quietly replied:

"The kebabs that the lads have been preparing smell so good, I've been saving up my appetite."

* * *

For two days and two nights my relatives were invited out. The people of Mets-Shen welcomed the legendary Karabakh midwife and gynaecologist Margarita Gukasyan like a queen. And why not, after all tens of thousands of new-born babies had passed through her hands. Only on the third day, making substantial breaks in my work, did I begin my excursions to distant and near destinations. We visited the Mets-Shen cemetery, admiring the unique headstones, called *khachkars*, which were truly masterpieces of miniature architecture. Gradually the radius of our walks increased and our itineraries took us along forest paths and through meadows and gorges…

I managed to prepare one other surprise for mum. In one of the distant cemeteries I took her to a big plot, as big as a volleyball court, on which there were a

number of graves of the Yuzbashyans. Mum was taken aback to see the well cared-for graves, whose rich architecture bore witness to the fact that the deceased belonged to a princely or noble line, merchants or the officers' corps.

Mum had heard that somewhere here in the area of Mets-Shen was the last resting place of the souls of one of the ancient branches of her family-tree, the Yuzbashyans. I showed her the graves of the close relatives of Marius Yuzbashyan – lieutenant-general, professional intelligence officer and chairman of the Committee of State Security (KGB) of Armenia. Mum knew that Aram, Marius' father, was the great nephew of Agabek Yuzbashyan, her uncle.

"It's a pity we don't have a camera," mum sighed.

"Don't worry, I've arranged for a photographer from Mardakert, he'll be here soon."

"I'm very glad. It will help to preserve the memory."

"Of course, we will definitely take a picture to remember the occasion. But I also need photographs of the graves of the Yuzbashyans."

"*Tsavyt tanem* (I take your pain)", mum whispered to me barely audibly and snuggled up to me.

* * *

On 10 February 1968 in my bachelor flat on Partizanskaya Street in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky there was the usual noisy party for my birthday. I was thirty-three. There was the usual celebratory food: stuffed partridge, kebabs of pork and squid intrepidly grilled in my "Karabakh" fireplace, red caviar in a soup tureen with wooden spoons, smoked sturgeon and my house speciality – roast potatoes. The guests were a real mixture: doctors, geologists, hunters, writers, journalists. The toasts were about everything and anything. The atheist generation felt duty bound to point out that thirty-three was the age of Christ. It goes without saying that their source for this information was not the Bible. Strange though it may be, all my friends, wherever they came from, knew the writings of Ilf and Petrov almost by heart. Following the example of the unforgettable Ostap Bender, millions of readers remembered that Christ lived on earth for exactly thirty-three years.

During the interminable toasts, I thought constantly of one person who will live for as long as I, my children and my grandchildren remember him. My father was exactly thirty-three when the "black raven" van took him away from his own house forever. I remembered this birthday for all my life. Even the toasts and the selection of snacks. And it made me very close to my father. At any rate, it was at this time that I began not only thinking about him but also talking with him. And above all I told him in detail what mum went through after he was taken away.

… I was two years old and Boris was six months. We didn't understand anything, we had no memory of that night and there was nothing we could do to help mum. But, as I told him about it, I was able to give my father a great number of details. They came to me at different times from the words of various people and remained in my consciousness, in my memory, as though I had myself been a witness of everything. My memories were not just of the family, but also of Karabakh and even the life of the whole country.

From my recollections my father was to learn how his four sisters – Nakhshun, Sofya, Zanazan and Ashkhen – would burst into tears at the mention of the name of their only brother, alternating tears with calls to punish our enemies for their unjust deeds. Certain expressions remain to this day in the memories of Boris and myself. "Our naïve brother – put his head on the line, and how!" "Guilty without guilt." "If only we could bury those who reviled him, informed on him and slandered him." "If only they had to pick up breadcrumbs out of the dust of the road."

My father, whom I imagined as in the photos with cheery eyes and a shock of thick black hair, often laughed at my stories and understood me very well. His sisters

were brought up in a peasant family where strict Karabakh home-making was the order of the day. But their grandfather was a priest and the girls were familiar with the Christian commandments from earliest childhood. The sisters took a critical view of our very young mother because she wore lipstick, as was the fashion in her time, loved the "*Red Moscow*" perfume and tried to wear pretty dresses. It was as if I could see and hear my father lamenting in fun as he looked at his sisters: "What a bunch of sisters-in-law! What a fine lot you are! All ganging up together!" Father told me that even when he was present all his sisters liked to lecture mum for her failings. Then he would also make fun of his sisters, tenderly kissing them on the cheek and calling them puritans.

Of course, my dialogues with my father were not at all mystic. I had heard of particular episodes or specific words from mum and from my aunts. For example I was often told that when my aunts accused mum of loving to dress in fine clothes, father would say with some degree of pride: "My wife is not at all to blame that she is so pretty. Whatever she put on would look splendid on her!"

On my thirty-third birthday my father and I talked about one other topic – Norik, the elder brother to me and Boris. Lying on the settee I think I asked my father questions out loud, the answers to which I knew from childhood as I listened to the conversations among our numerous relatives.

"You know, dad, your wife – our mum – is an absolutely unique woman."

"I know, son, I know."

"Mum, for example, was very fond of Norik. She regarded your first wife Arevat warmly and with great respect. Women don't often manage that. When Arevat died, mum travelled from Andizhan to Baku for her funeral. Later she once confessed to me that she saw it as her duty not only to Arevat but to your memory. When she was asked how many children she had she always answered 'three'. And when she gave our names she always began with Norik."

"You know son, when I married your mum, Norik was already nine years old. A year later you were born and ten-year old Norik came to live with us in Stepanakert. Even then I could see how Gohar had a sensible and friendly relationship with him. And yet he was only eight years younger than his step-mother. My parents married me off to a girl from the next village when I was only eighteen. Arevat was four years older than me. I was the only son of my stonemason father. In the villages it was the custom to marry off an only son as early as possible. So, when Norik was born, I was barely twenty years old.

"Then everything changed at once. Our daily life, our plans, our worries. In my mind there was chaos and at the same time a clear sense of order. I studied in school in my native Agorti and in the two-year college in Shushi. I could only dream of university. I wrote articles for the newspaper. I studied Russian. I wrote bad poetry. I began to feel stifled in Agorti. But Arevat grew up in the tiny village of Ningidjan, where at that time there were five or six households, and that suited her. So, life itself gradually separated us. And Gohar, though she was young, was wiser than her years and she understood me almost intuitively. She herself wanted to study. Once I slapped Norik, who was eleven, for some prank. Then you were about a year old and mum was expecting Boris. You should have seen how she went for me!"

* * *

From then on conversation with father simply became a necessity. I became accustomed to sharing with him the things that I found particularly difficult. And all the time I tried to find out more about him. In my mind father was totally beyond reproach. When I came across some injustice I tried to imagine how he would have evaluated events or the people involved. After all, he was a statesman. In a time of almost universal illiteracy he had finished both school and later higher education at

university level, the Higher Party School in Moscow, also known as the University of the Labourers of the East.

I went to the Armenian school in Stepanakert in 1942 and a year later was transferred to the Russian school. On 1 September 1943 at the height of the war the whole country went over to separate schooling for boys and girls. When he heard about this granddad Markos was absolutely amazed, as he considered it to be totally unnatural. Someone told him that the only school that would not be affected was the Russian school named after Griboyedov, since there were lots of Russian children there whose parents were serving in the Stepanakert regiment. Grandfather immediately decided to transfer me to this school. So I found myself in the first grade again, this time in the Russian school, however not knowing a word of Russian.

I remember my teachers clearly. Well-educated and fair. An amazing kindness was combined in them with an ascetic strictness. From the first grade they trained us to go to the library. This was essential: in our homes there were very few books and even textbooks were worth their weight in gold. I often went to our little school library. I remember that in first grade I loved to leaf through the textbooks for the senior classes.

Aunty Siranush, the elderly librarian, allowed me to engage in “this strange pastime” as she called it. She always smiled at me. Everybody who loved and respected my father smiled at me in that way. And despite her goodwill towards me I never allowed myself to confess to aunty Siranush why I liked looking through the “grown up” textbooks. In these textbooks it was often possible to find portraits with the eyes poked out or with horns or moustaches drawn on them. Sometimes the portraits were simply blacked out or the page had been torn out of the book. I didn’t know what an “enemy of the people” was, but I understood that it was something terrible. Of course, I wanted to see a portrait of my father in a textbook and I was very disappointed when all I could find was the remains of a torn out page. Maybe that was where dad’s photo had been.

I never did find the name of Haik Balayan. Not in the Armenian textbooks published in Yerevan, nor in the Russian ones published in Moscow. And there was nothing at home, no letters, no documents, no books that might have contained father’s notes. And yet I cannot imagine that he did not make notes in the margins of books, or underlined particular paragraphs, just as I did, ignoring the injunctions of the teachers. Even now, when I’m twice as old as my father, I see nothing to be ashamed of if I read a book with a pencil in my hand. In my underlinings and comments there is nothing but respect and love for the wise authors.

Alas, it seems it is not always safe to express ones “respect and love”. In the meagre archives of the famous historian and publicist David Ananun, which were preserved by some miracle in the attic of his house in Mets-Shen in Mardakert district, I found a few pages of his correspondence with Haik Balayan. In one place there was a mention of Holbach, but without any comment. I published this correspondence in the anthology “*The Unwritten Law*” where my novel “*The Last Judgement*” was included. However, I omitted the reference to Holbach, as I could not understand why my father mentions the name of this French philosopher in his letter. Imagine my surprise when mum suddenly cited this name when telling me something about my father. Unfortunately she was also unable to explain my father’s connection with this philosopher.

After the Twentieth Party Congress, or rather after Nikita Khrushchev’s historic speech on ending the cult of Stalin’s personality, which he gave at a closed session of the congress in late February 1956, mum and our elder brother Norik wrote letters to Moscow and to Baku. Not long after mum was invited to Baku to see the investigator in the case of Mirjafar Bagirov, the former first secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party. The investigator congratulated mum on her husband’s rehabilitation and briefly told her that our father was arrested in 1937 on the personal instructions of Bagirov. He said that in Haik

Balayan's file there were many ridiculous and absurd things. As an example he named the philosopher Holbach, about whom the people's commissar for education of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region had given an inaccurate assessment. Of course, mum had no idea in what way father's assessment had been wrong. In fact she had no idea who Holbach was.

Much later in Stepanakert, ninety year old Tevan Djavadyan, who in the early thirties had worked in the education system in Karabakh with my father, was to tell me that "this Holbach" had been the "downfall" of many in the years of Stalinism. In his view, "the most terrible thing at that time was not so much the monstrous persecution of the church and the physical suppression of the clergy as the forcible inculcation into the mass consciousness of barbaric atheist ideas." At that time official propaganda did not publish the work of western philosophers in full, but just individual excerpts from their writings. Paul Holbach was quoted the most extensively. Old Djavadyan recalled a teachers' conference devoted to atheism, at which Haik Balayan said that one shouldn't have such a one-sided view of the philosophers. And he had given as an example Holbach, whose works he had read in Moscow during his studies at the University.

Maybe on that very day, or maybe after a bit of hesitation, someone had informed Baku that the minister of education had his own interpretation of the famous Holbach – and what's more he was the grandson of a priest.

* * *

In the late fifties in Andizhan library I read many books and booklets which mentioned the philosopher Holbach. Usually they were references to his works on atheism. In Ryazan in 1962 I saw an announcement in the newspaper that the Moscow publishing house "*Politizdat*" had produced Paul Holbach's book "*Saints' gallery*". The full title was mentioned: "*Saints' gallery (or an investigation of the thought patterns, behaviour, rules and achievements of the people Christianity proposes as examples)*".

The next morning as soon as it was light I set off in the stopping train and three hours later set off from Moscow's Kazan station to Miusskaya Square, where "*Politizdat*" was located. Having paid one rouble twenty-eight kopecks in "new money", as it was required to note at the time, I acquired two copies of Holbach's book.

I left one copy behind in Kamchatka, covered in marginal notes and frequent mentions of my father. Actually I gave away to my friends on the peninsula quite a rich library, including an old edition of the fifty-volume "*Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*". But I still can't forgive myself for mixing up the copies and leaving behind the one with all my notes in it.

I remember how in the train on the way back to Ryazan I leafed through the book and discovered that "*Saints' gallery*" had been published only once before in Russian – in 1934.

And one more important observation. We have focused so much on 1937 that we don't even recognise a certain danger in this. Sometimes people get the impression, especially young people, that in 1936, say, or 1938, in fact in any year starting from 1917 and right up to 1956, ordinary Soviet people breathed perfectly freely. As though nothing happened in 1918, when Stalin in Tsaristsyn eliminated his opponents and pronounced the historic phrase: "No person – no problem". And then he expanded the principle to "no nation – no problem".

Or as if in 1919 Lenin didn't send endless telegrams repeating like an invocation: "Not enough people being shot! Really and truly, not enough! Let's have more people shot!!!"

To focus only on the horrendous year of 1937 is as dangerous as for us Armenians to pick on 1915 out of the whole tragic period of our history from 1893 to

1923. Incidentally, we'll return to the topic of 1915. For the moment let's note our disagreement with the belief that the building of the new socialist society failed basically because of the "cult of personality" and in particular because of 1937. This monstrous year would not have come about were it not for the other years that were basically the same. Just take 1921, when in March Stalin, on Lenin's orders, sent the delegates of the Tenth Party Congress to Kronshtadt to carry out the resolution of that Party forum by personally shooting the mutineers, including the poet Nikolai Gumilyov. At this very time People's Commissar of Nationalities Stalin was receiving a Turkish delegation in Moscow to decide the fate not only of Karabakh and Nakhichevan but also of Gyulistan province and the whole of Gardmanq.

That same year in July, as we have already noted, Stalin falsified the party document handing over Karabakh to the newly created republic of Azerbaijan, while in October he removed Nakhichevan from the historic map of Armenia and transferred it to "Ataturk's Atlas". It was in that black year of 1921, with the silent consent of official Armenia, and of all of us, that the Armenian population centres of Shaumyan. Gardmanq and Kirovabad with all its surroundings: Kelbadjar, Lachin, Kubatly, Zangelan, Fizuli, Djebrail, Agdam, Barda, Mirbashir and other districts, were all handed over to the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, whose Constitution allowed it to do what it liked and how it liked with its "party territory". In this regard there was special constitutional terminology – the power of the local party organs extended on the territorial principle. This principle operated for the whole of the Soviet period. Not many people have given any thought to the fact that the whole evil in this so-called internationalism lay precisely in this "territorial principle", which was first put into practice in Azerbaijan in relation to the Armenians.

Could there have been 1937 without 1930 when Stalin, fulfilling Lenin's testament, destroyed more than one hundred thousand churches, places of worship and historic Christian buildings? He created the All-Union Society of the Godless, of which membership ticket number one was ceremonially handed to him. From that time atheist propaganda operated powerfully on one sixth of the planet. In universities and other educational institutions departments of scientific atheism were opened. The "*Knowledge*" Society flooded the Soviet Union with its lecturers who propagandised godlessness. They had to refer to someone and extract suitable quotations. They found Paul Holbach, whose wit was very much to the taste of the "leader of all times and nations".

* * *

After meeting the investigator in Baku, mum became extremely interested in the "philosopher Holbach" whose writings were one of the reasons for the arrest and death of her husband. What's more, I should note that in the documents in his file this was not mentioned. Mum and I talked a lot about what I had managed to hear, learn and later read about this French scholar almost unknown in Armenia, let alone in Karabakh. Gradually mum came to the conclusion that the regime that ran the state used the writings of the philosopher to mock Christian morality and Jesus Christ himself along with the Biblical prophets, apostles and heroes. And then she felt very keenly the disturbing terrible premonitions that filled the mind of her Haik, an educated, moral man, grandson of a priest, the minister of education, forced to propagandise mocking godlessness larded with cynicism. She was glad that she was able to understand and discover again for herself her beloved husband from whom she had never been parted for a single day of her life, neither in the GULAG nor on her deathbed. Indeed, even after death she was not parted from him, for I brought a few handfuls of earth from the mass graves in the North and buried them in her grave.

From the passages in the correspondence between David Ananun and my father, from scraps of paper written on in pencil, I managed to establish that

Holbach's articles bothered not only my father. In one of the letters, for example, Ananun wrote: "As for Holbach, I don't quite share your opinion, for it is my deep conviction that he's not devious but simply mistaken. And his mistake is a conceptual one. From the very beginning he confuses God and 'idol'." On the scrap of paper this is all that remained. No beginning, no end. But I would be really interested to know what point of view of Haik Balayan it was that the famous historian and publicist did not share. And I became utterly engrossed in the search.

* * *

Before I could seriously explain to mum the essence of the "Holbach puzzle", I had to get a thorough understanding of everything for myself and find out what it was in Holbach that so troubled my father. From his comments it was clear that on the one hand he considered the French philosopher a genius but on the other hand he had been accused of "incorrect interpretation" because he tried to justify this thinker whom he regarded very highly, but in his own way. Maybe he considered that the philosopher was devious in order to avoid falling foul of the authorities of his time? For example, researchers on Holbach wrote: "In order not to provoke the royal authority, Holbach pretends that he is a monarchist and a supporter of royalty. This was a device which writers of the Enlightenment often had recourse to in works which were to be published under censorship."

However, it is very probable that David Ananun was right in his belief that the French thinker was not being devious but was "simply mistaken" in confusing God with idols. The essence and primary purpose of his book "*Saints' gallery*" is revealed by the author in the first paragraphs of his own preface. I believe it is necessary to include an extensive quotation if only because not all of my contemporaries know how the Stalinist ideology prepared the ground for the justification of its crimes. We should recognise that the tyrant himself was not much interested in ordinary mortals. Who cares about the chips that fly when you chop wood?! Stalin was interested in writers who as atheists overthrew gods and apostles but at the same time protected monarchs from criticism from below. Holbach begins his book in this way:

> "All nations on earth display great respect to people to whom they owe some useful discoveries on a higher level by comparison with ordinary mortals, as favourites of heaven, as people whose genius speaks of something divine. Every unknown or unusual phenomenon was attributed by the crowd to the gods; in just the same way unusual people seemed to them to be divine. Rare qualities of body and mind: strength, courage, dexterity, skill, perceptiveness and abilities of genius, which always caused ordinary people to marvel, were attributed by nations who were devoid of knowledge and experience to invisible forces that ruled the world. We see that in any country the first warriors, the most ancient heroes, the inventors of the arts, priests, legislators, creators of religions, soothsayers (I think these are "prophets" – Z.B.) and magicians in their lifetimes hold sway over the gullibility of the nations, are honoured by their contemporaries as supernatural beings and after their death join the ranks of the gods and thus become objects of devotion and even of worship for those nations to whom in their lifetimes they brought some real or imagined benefit."

In general, it would seem, it is possible to argue in this way. But I don't understand why "the first warriors" and "prophets", "inventors of the arts" and "magicians" are all mentioned in one breath? Nor do I understand the desire (even ignoring the blatant tactlessness) of lumping together Osiris, Hermes, Abraham, Bacchus, Romulus and Jesus Christ.

Of course, Stalin, who had reached divine heights, probably needed not only to topple all idols known to history and even "subsidiary gods" but also to designate

Christ as one of them. He had to justify the title of atheist number one. And just at this moment someone told him about a philosopher in whose writings Christ was placed on a par with Bacchus, who was defined in Soviet encyclopaedic dictionaries as "one of the names of Dionysius, the god of viniculture."

As a materialist and atheist Stalin strove to be not at all an "abstract god" but the concrete "father of all nations". As a former seminarian training to be a priest he, of course, knew that the people love saints because they are beloved of God. And suddenly in 1934 Holbach's book falls into his hands where he finds boldly expressed thoughts which immediately attract him. "In order to be convinced of the holiness of those people whom Christians revere," wrote Holbach, "we must first of all clarify for ourselves the conception that religion gives us of God. And you see, though religion sometimes portrays God as a crazy despot, more often than not it portrays him as an infinitely just, infinitely powerful lord and father filled with tenderness and kindness, a being possessing in the highest degree all imaginable features of perfection unadulterated by failings."

While working on this book I spent a lot of time examining and reading newspapers from 1934. It turns out that it was just at this time that many articles appeared placing Stalin among the host of the saints. In doing this the authors did not shy away from repeating general formulas which often looked much the same. "*Pravda*" wrote that Stalin "like a loving father proclaims his will in order that man should work for the good of the welfare of the nation". This probably gave rise to formulas of the type: "All in the name of mankind, all for the good of mankind!" And these sentiments are almost literally drawn from Holbach who wrote about God: "This being loves his creatures, grieves at the evil they cause and therefore hates violence, injustice, theft, murder and the discord of criminality. Being filled with kindness for people and providing them in abundance with the joys of life, this father as it were proclaims his will that man should work for his own welfare."

When my father accused Holbach of being devious he was thereby casting a shadow over the propagandistic intentions of the party in publishing the philosopher's books. It most probably never occurred to him that the idea of publishing emanated from Stalin himself. Those who implemented the idea were eliminated so that nobody could give away the secret.

It is no coincidence that after 1934 the book was not published again for several decades. It was only in 1962, almost ten years after Stalin's death, at the height of the new stage of the battle against religion, that the book was republished. This was made explicit in the editorial postscript: "Holbach's unmasking of Christian morality in '*Saints' gallery*' was of enormous benefit to atheist thinking. As we progress towards communism we must rid ourselves of the prejudices of the past. On our banner is the communist moral code."

Our many conversations about Holbach gradually helped mum to become more at peace. At least, she stopped thinking about revenge and curses against those who had betrayed her husband, orphaned her children and poisoned her life. She now knew that over twenty articles in the case against Haik Balayan were "child's play when compared with Holbach", whom her husband, she was told, had called devious. She did not share the view of people who did not know her Haik very well that he was naïve and therefore unable to make a realistic assessment of the situation in which he found himself. Not being naïve at that time meant accommodating oneself to what was happening. It meant being silent even when you understood very well that militant atheism and militant rejection of Christian morality would inevitably lead to the slow death of one's own people.

* * *

Strange as it may seem, a wide variety of people, with whom I discussed quite specific events and periods of time, played a role in creating and transforming

my initial intentions into a book. It would happen that I suddenly saw things clearly and I became certain in my understanding of what really happened. More often than not these were contemporaries of my father, his friends and relatives. Sometimes I was able to talk directly with them. At other times clarity came through reading and reflection. Sometimes there were vigorous arguments and gradual enlightenment. Of course, it is difficult to overestimate the role of Alexander Solzhenitsyn who succeeded in grasping and analysing certain key events of Russian history. He revealed the picture from within and made accessible a whole previously invisible continent of humanity consisting of diverse fates and individual tragedies. Russian history, which had been studied by my generation from textbooks, was, as it were, restored to us and became events of our lives, became tragic, bloody and unjust. And at the same time heroic, courageous and full of nobility and goodness…

Sometimes help came from people who didn't know anything at all about my father or my intentions and struggles. Thus three days spent with Valentin Katayev helped me to decide the genre professionally, so to speak. The structure of the composition was established and the heroes and characters could take their places.

This was in Tbilisi in April 1974 at one of the traditional meetings of Soviet literary figures. The writers from every republic were accommodated in guest houses and by chance I found myself a neighbour of Valentin Katayev. From Armenia there was the wonderful front-line writer Bagish Hovsepyan. We had breakfast and dinner and went for walks together.

At that time Valentin was extremely famous. In the late sixties we devoured his wonderful stories "*The Holy Well*" and "*The Grass of Oblivion*". The genre of these works was unusual. They didn't fit the usual pattern of memoirs. They contained a mass of philosophical discourses, journalistic generalisations and caustic satire all woven into a stylistically stunning artistic canvas. At any rate, that's how it seemed to me.

I asked Valentin in the course of a long conversation how he decided on the genre of his next work. The seventy-seven year old writer gave me an amazingly youthful smile and, as though he had been expecting this question, enthusiastically began telling me about the essence and purpose of literary genres.

"You know, I have also thought a lot about this. And I have on more than one occasion had to recognise that for me genre is a relative concept. Everything is relative. Even the boundaries between genres. Between a short story and a novella, a short story and a tale. Between a tale and a novel. Even between poetry and prose. A novel, as everyone knows, is prose. But Pushkin named his '*Eugene Onegin*' a novel. Only later was the description modified to a 'novel in verse'. Gogol named his tale a poem.

"In practice, when I feel the need within me for a genre which is new to me, which has never been used, I simply invent it. I remember when I was finishing the first of my three books of memoirs '*The Holy Well*' this question of genre came into rather sharp focus for me. Then I thought up the 'lyrical-philosophical biographical tale'. Yet each of these words, so it would seem, is a completely independent genre. Alexander Chakovsky called his '*Blockade*' a 'political novel'. I think every author is free to define genre in his own way. Especially when works are created that don't fit the usual framework of any of the classical genres. After all, the most important thing is that the reader should find it interesting…"

Of course, my own search was troubling me. And so I asked the master how he would define the genre of a major prose work which was based on "pages from a diary".

"It would be good if you could tell me something more specific about your plans. I read your '*Pages from a diary*' in '*Young Communist Pravda*' and '*Literary Gazette*' and I can say that columns entitled 'pages from a diary' or simply 'a writer's notes' or 'from a writer's notebook' were always a literary genre if they contained an idea, generalisations and philosophical reflections, if each of these 'pages' has an

internal link with another ‘page’ and together they all solve some mutual task. Give me specific examples and I will try to define the genre for you.”

Our conversation continued after dinner. Bagish Hovsepyan found our conversation interesting and remained at table with us and soon we were joined by Valentin’s son Pavel.

“I knew a doctor in Kamchatka,” I began my story, “who was quite unique. He was called Viktor Kazmin. We called him the king of propaedeutics. But many considered him the king of diagnostics and endocrinology. Well, this Viktor Kazmin began by studying his patient just like a dissertation topic. Then he combined every relevant symptom, syndrome, analysis and information on the history of the illness and from genetic anamnesis, that is information about parents and relatives etc. After that he made a possible differential diagnosis and gave his judgement on the prognosis. He conjectured not only the future course of the illness but made a prognosis of how long the patient would live.”

“Gypsy fortune-telling?!” asked Valentin, not without some irony.

“Not at all! It wasn’t a matter of fortune-telling, but of the thoughts that are awakened, shall we say, by the very idea of prophecy. Imagine that someone is living in this world knowing for sure that he has ten years left to live. Or let’s say, exactly one year. Such people would set themselves various tasks, they would have various plans. Each would live in a different way from a person who has no idea about the time he has on earth. While I was still living on Kamchatka I decided to write a story at the centre of which would be a man who knew the exact date of his death. As time passed the number of heroes increased, with many of them coming directly from real life.

“That was six years ago. I was then thirty-three years old. I became older than my father who had been arrested and killed in 1937. On this day some kind of voice spoke inside me. I thought that in the life of my father there had been a moment when he knew the exact date of his death. I can’t say that from that time I set aside everything else and engrossed myself in this theme. I continue to work in the hospital. I continue to engage in journalism. But the important thing for me now is this future book. Although I don’t know when I will set aside everything else and start it. And I don’t even know in what genre it will be written.”

“While I was listening to you with my full attention, I was all the time thinking about genre. I don’t know whether you will agree with me. I would define it as a ‘commentary on a theme’…”

Valentin’s son came into the dining room. He didn’t want dinner and soon they set off on a walk. We discovered later that father and son were competing to describe in the most graphic and precise way the figure, or rather the form, of a dark-red cloud during the sunset.

I completed that work of mine ten years later and I called it “*The Last Judgement*”. I took Valentin Katayev’s advice: below the title in brackets I added “*Commentary on a theme*”.

* * *

“*The Last Judgement*” was published in two issues of the journal “*Sovetakan Hayastan*” and in the anthologies of tales and short stories “*Avariya*” in Russian and “*Unwritten Law*” in Armenian. There are chapters on my father and David Ananun. There are quotations from their correspondence on the miraculously preserved scraps of paper. Mum usually read my books several times. She knew Armenian and Russian fluently. When I published “*The Last Judgement*” I didn’t tell her there were pages on my father. I wanted it to be a surprise for her. She knew nothing of Ananun, who was over twenty years older than my father.

David and Haik met several times in Yerevan and quite often in the Karabakh village of Mets-Shen. A few letters were preserved in Mets-Shen by Movses

Yeritsyan and Sarkis Gukasyan, whose wife was a niece of Ananun. One of the letters (to be precise part of a letter) was actually never sent to the addressee in the GULAG.

Mum appreciated this book very much. She read through many times the extensive quotations from Ananun, who valued her husband and corresponded with him despite the real danger of doing so. She underlined whole paragraphs of Ananun's preface to Gorki's anthology of Armenian literature. She found the thoughts and observations to be exceptionally important and true: "The Armenian nation really did consider itself in slavery and was completely depersonalised and the longing for freedom came only in the form of religious comfort on the threshold of life beyond the grave. The conquerors, however, did not restrict themselves to heartless exploitation: they made every effort to deprive the nation of its own defenders and leaders. And they began the systematic elimination of the Armenian elite, the Armenian aristocracy which in the middle ages had been the head of the nation and the only remaining militant element…"

Once after breakfast mum took the book from the shelf and found the page she wanted and said:

"You were right to include the words of David Ananun in your book in the part where you were writing about your father. I realised even in the camp that Stalin too destroyed above all the real defenders of the people, the leaders or, as they now say, the elite. Many women with whom I shared a cell or whom I simply met in camp were the wives of leaders, top officials or important specialists. I remember when we were transported from Shushi prison there were about twenty women in our group. By that time all our husbands had either been killed or sent to Siberia. But as well as political charges, hastily cobbled together criminal charges had been pinned on all of us. You see, David also says 'the nation was depersonalised', he's talking about the same thing."

"When David Ananun wrote his preface at Gorki's request," I remarked, "Stalin and his cult did not yet exist. Ananun could not have known of the tragedy of 24 April 1915. That was the day when the Turkish government took approximately eight hundred people on a previously prepared list who were, in Ananun's words, the Armenian 'defenders of the nation', 'leaders' and 'militant elements' and shot them all. Ananun was able to foresee this. That is the special value of his thinking."

Years later, when at the global level government after government passed laws or parliamentary resolutions recognising the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, I often remembered this conversation of ours in mum's apartment in Stepanakert. Of course, it was necessary to highlight as a tragic symbol one of the more than ten thousand days of uninterrupted genocide between 1893 and 1923. And without a doubt it was possible to highlight 24 April 1915, when in a few hours the whole of the Armenian elite of Constantinople was massacred. Writers, composers, lawyers, doctors, architects and journalists (incidentally all eight hundred on the black list were described as "publicists"). The only one to survive was the genius Komitas. However, he lost his mind and was plunged into an abyss of the torments of Tantalus for a whole twenty years.

There were not a few such black days in the history of our nation. In his preface to the "*Anthology of Armenian Literature*" Ananun cites some historical facts: "The Armenian elite found itself in a situation where it had to choose between renouncing its country and its faith, for which it was promised all kinds of material incentives, on the one hand, and death or banishment on the other. As an illustration of this, let us recall how in 706 the Arab ruler of Armenia lured eight hundred Armenian *nakharars* (as the Armenian feudal princes were known in antiquity and for part of the Middle Ages) to Nakhichevan (now Old Nakhichevan), locked them in a church and set fire to it."

It is possible to give a huge number of examples of monstrous evil deeds to which Armenian women, old men and children were subjected under both Abdul

Hamid and the Young Turks. However, today's descendants of the Hamids and Talaats, noting that we have largely focussed on 1915, justify their ancestors on the grounds that in 1915 at the height of the First World War, when Turkey was fighting against Russia, they had to deport the Armenians from the theatre of war as long-standing Russian sympathisers.

I think that mum was the first person I convinced that while not forgetting 1915 we should always remember the genocide of Armenians that took place between 1893 and 1923. The Jews, who have had many tragic periods in their history and have an official Holocaust Day, have the wisdom when speaking of the genocide of the Jewish nation to remember the thirteen nightmare years from 1933 to 1945. And this is rightly enshrined in their Law. Mum was in total agreement with me on this too.

* * *

At about the beginning of the Karabakh movement mum asked me to bring her the photograph of David Ananun which I had hanging in the Yerevan correspondents' office of the "*Literary Gazette*" together with pictures of our national avengers Soghomon Tehliryan and Gurgen Yanikyan. However, from 1988, especially after the tragic earthquake in December and my election as a people's deputy of the USSR, I hardly ever went to my office there. Knowing this, one of my friends asked my permission to make use of this room for a while. He solemnly promised not to touch anything: manuscripts, folders, letters, photographs etc. Unfortunately it was only much later that I discovered that he took advantage of my chronic absence from the city and moved the entire contents of my office to some cellar where the rats promptly began to feast on them.

I could not keep my word. I think mum was upset. At first it was as if she forgot who Ananun was, but then she remembered and mustered some details in her mind. All the time, she was thinking how it was not by chance that David Ananun had written a letter at that terrible time to Haik Balayan, in which he expressed his disquiet about "white genocide" (ethnic cleansing) in Karabakh. It was just like some Biblical exodus. Ananun wrote about this in his last letter to Haik Balayan before they were arrested. Mum knew this letter by heart. With her wonderful memory this was not difficult. Especially as many phrases and quotations used by Ananun were well known to me.

> "Dear Haik! As ever I am concerned about the situation of our settlements and villages. They are dying out before our eyes. And the most amazing thing is that when we manage to move to the town the first thing we do is condemn those who remained in the village. Instead of honouring them we reproach them, pointing at the mud round the well. Or the bridge that got washed away last year that the village has not replaced. People leave the village for the town because they think that hens in the town lay ostrich eggs. But it is not just such naivety that is the cause of the devastation of the Armenian villages.
>
> "Recently my relative left Mets-Shen. He came to Yerevan and told how he had struggled for a year to get a water supply into our village. All on his own. There was just a little left to finish and someone wrote a letter to Baku. Anonymously, of course. The letter said that my relative was an egoist because he had an interest in getting the water supply to pass as close as possible to his own house. And what do you think? The village water supply remained unfinished.
>
> "And recently, dear Haik, at one meeting they tore a strip off me for my essay written in 1916 about mediaeval poetry. I came devastated to my empty room which I rent from an old lady. I sat at my desk and thought about you. You are always making ironic remarks about my

weakness for using all kinds of proverbs and sayings and you are not aware of how many there are in your letters. I'm planning to write an article about that meeting and I've decided to use as an epigraph the words of Heine which I discovered in your last letter: 'Calm down! I love the Fatherland no less than you do…' I don't know when I will next go to Mets-Shen. The fireplace that I was building in my father's house there is still unfinished. It's terrible when they won't even let you get on with building the hearth in your parental home…"

* * *

I spent June and July 1984 in Mets-Shen. It was an old dream of mine: to get away from everything to finish my novel "*The Last Judgement*", and at the same time eat mulberries till I burst. After all I had grown up on these honey-filled fruits that shone with sunshine. However, my life was such that after I left Karabakh I lived for a quarter of a century in places where people had not only never tried these divine berries, but had never even heard of them. And it was not at all by chance that I chose Mets-Shen.

From aunty Ashkhen Yeritsyan, the great niece of David Ananun, I learnt that the house where this outstanding Armenian publicist and historian had been born and brought up was lying empty. And I thought how wonderful it would be to live and work for a couple of months in the house where there roamed the spirit of such a great man, who furthermore not only knew my father, but was his friend. It seems that he and my father met in 1934 or 1935 when my father had already been appointed minister of education of Nagorny Karabakh.

Mum told me that immediately after my father took up this new position he at once became the centre of attention among the intelligentsia in Yerevan – and not only in Yerevan. Public figures from various districts of Armenia often came to see him. Naturally, David Ananun could not fail to be interested in the problems of education in Karabakh. Immediately after the establishment of the Soviet regime in Armenia, he had been appointed director of the Museum of the Revolution in Yerevan. He was exactly a quarter of a century older than my father. His political baptism had been in the Gnchak party (an underground independence movement), then in the Dashnaktsutyun (the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a left-wing nationalist party). From 1905 he became the ideological leader of the social-democratic organisation whose members called themselves the "specific ones". One should say that there was a certain logic in this term which emphasised the specific nature both of the political tasks and of the solutions adopted in the conditions of Armenia at that time.

I saw that mum felt guilty that she did not at all remember a man who in the thirties, as we now knew, had a huge influence on her husband and at times discussed with him issues that were very important and interesting for both of them. The only thing which she could remember was that Haik more than once jokingly referred to the "Great man from the Great village". The name Mets-Shen does indeed translate as Big (Great) Village. And when in my book, on the basis of the letters that had survived, I began to surmise what David and Haik had talked about, mum treated what I had written with an excessive degree of seriousness.

I had at my disposal only a few quotations from incompletely preserved letters, but mum didn't need real details. The symbolic dialogue between David Ananun and the heroine of the novel "*The Last Judgement*" was treated by mum as though it was real and required comment. I gave mum an honest explanation that such a dialogue could not have taken place in real life if only because my heroine was born only in the mid-thirties. But the words that I had put into Ananun's mouth had been taken without editing or cutting from the great man's writing. This had the advantage that I had thus managed to avoid awkward explanations to the Soviet

censors. Which would not have been at all easy at that time. But I had been able to weave threads drawn from historical facts into the fabric of a work of literature.

In Stepanakert and Mets-Shen I often talked with relatives of Ananun. Many of them had no idea that among the miraculously preserved domestic archives some priceless historical documents had survived. Knowing my weakness for Mets-Shen (my mother-in-law Margarita Gukasyan is the daughter of the legendary Mamikon Gukasyan who was from this village), they once brought me three thick exercise books in which an unknown author had written down in calligraphic script the history of the village.

In these archive papers I found a sheet of lined paper. Picking it up and looking at what was written, even before I began to read it I could feel my heart beating more rapidly. A few letters from my father had survived. You couldn't really call them letters. Rather notes. But I could not mistake his handwriting. At first it was hard to make out the words. But after reading a line or two it got much easier. This letter (or note) had no beginning or end. However, it was not hard for me to guess that it was addressed to Ananun: "Thank you for Dolgorukov. I'm devouring it. Almost in every paragraph I am reminded of you. It even occurred to me that 'Truthful' died a year before your birth. I don't think there is anything mystical in this, but it is symbolic. I have the impression that you are continuing his life. Most likely we'll meet soon. We'll continue the conversation about 'Truthful', but not only about him…"

* * *

I remember, I hurried to Yerevan to find out everything I could about Dolgorukov. I was sure that in the Armenian Republican Library, rightly considered to have one of the richest collections in the USSR, I would find lots of materials about this publicist about whom David Ananun and Haik Balayan wrote so amazingly. But events developed in a totally unexpected direction.

I had only just arrived in Yerevan when in the evening my friend Pavel Ananikyan, the professor of surgery, called me. We often have long phone conversations to exchange news. Full of my impressions of my stay in Stepanakert and Mets-Shen, I told him that I was going to the library to read everything I could find on Dolgorukov.

"That's interesting," Pavel answered, clearly willing to have a conversation on the subject. "Why do you need to go to the library when you can talk about Dolgorukov with me?"

"I understand," I responded in the same humorous tone, "that you have far more information than the ancient library in Alexandria that was burnt to the ground, but I just need to find specific literature about Dolgorukov."

"Like the rest of mankind, you consider me just a great surgeon. But after all, I am also a great artist, a great essayist and a great philosopher. Not to mention my achievements in the field of Dolgorukov studies. By the way, tell me, do you at least know which Dolgorukov you are looking for?"

"To tell you the truth, Pavel, I need to read the publicist Dolgorukov. Recently it seems that he has been forgotten for some reason. He had the pseudonym 'Truthful'."

"So, that's Pyotr Vladimirovich Dolgorukov. 'Truthful' was not just a pseudonym. Living in emigration, he published a newspaper under that title. Incidentally he published other newspapers as well. For example I know '*Budushchnost*' and '*Listok*'. You don't need to go to the library. I got his book from my dad. My father was arrested under Stalin on account of Dolgorukov's pamphlets, which were works of genius."

"I'm on my way, Pavel," I said jumping up and without waiting for an answer put the phone down…

… Usually it takes me about ten minutes to get to Ananikyan's house. This time it seemed an age. On the way I kept thinking of mum. She was born in a happy, fairly well-off family with lots of children a year and a half after the October Revolution and two years before Soviet power was established in Armenia. Later she remembered her childhood as a time of paradise. She ran barefoot through the mountain meadows of Karabakh. She loved to watch the diamond drops of dew slipping to the ground down the long green blades of grass, while the blue sky over her head seemed so close you could touch it. Everything filled her with joy: the fresh wind that gently caressed her skin, the buzzing of the bees collecting pollen from the bright flowers, the enchanting music of the shepherd's reed pipe and the village of Kyatuk itself, high in the mountains and nestling in the thick cool greenery of its gardens. Little Gohar Yuzbashyan thought then that she would live forever in this paradise. Many decades later she would underline in my book "*Between hell and paradise*" the line from the Armenian poet Nahan Hovnatyan who wrote in the 19th century: "O why do you punish me by turning paradise into hell?"

Mum asked me then: "Who is Hovnatyan addressing?"

"I think Heaven, seeing there both God and Fate and maybe the Devil"

"And who should I address?"

"I don't know, mum. It's not just Stalin, it's the whole system which gives birth to tyrants. After all, Lenin was a tyrant too. And if Trotsky had come to power everything might have been even worse. But Stalin became the greatest villain. He was the one who created the technology of repression, using not only physical weapons but a whole philosophy. And everything was imbued with deceit. You were convinced for years after father's death that he was arrested for opposing the barbaric destruction of mulberry trees or for replacing pig-farming with sheep-farming in Karabakh with the aim of driving the Armenians out of Karabakh and attracting Azeris. Or for devising with Armenian scholars a methodology for teaching Armenian history in the schools in Karabakh. A huge list of articles of the criminal code in the prosecution case are simply lies and a pretence at legality. Father became a target because he was a personality, just like almost all other victims of Stalin. The wives of 'enemies of the people' whom you knew in prison and camp probably knew nothing about Holbach or prince Dolgorukov. At first the authorities arrested those who had read their books, especially those who had quoted them. And then their relatives, and not necessarily close relatives. That's how paradise was turned into hell – it was a whole villainous science…"

At Ananikyan's house we read Pyotr Dolgorukov aloud and were amazed at the clarity and freshness of his thinking. It was as if the Russian prince were writing his articles today. It was a happy evening. At that moment it could not possibly have occurred to me that a few years later (to be precise on 19 June 1998) I would phone Pavel Ananikyan from Stepanakert to ask him to fly urgently to his dying former student Valeri Marutyan.

Valeri died the next day and Pavel went to visit my mum. It was simply a visit for the sake of politeness and sympathy: mum was already terminally ill, she had not long to live. I reminded mum about prince Dolgorukov about whom dad had written to David Ananun. It turned out that she remembered it well.

"You know, mum, it was Pavel Ananikyan who introduced me to the books of this Russian prince. Most unfortunately, this prince became the unwitting cause of the death of Pavel's father."

Mum looked in the eyes of every new visitor, especially a doctor, for a clue not only to her diagnosis but also her prognosis. And all the same she smiled at everyone. And now, when she heard that the father of the professor was also a victim of Stalin, she asked Pavel to bend over her. She kissed his forehead, drew breath and said quietly:

"Latterly I have read a lot about the thirties. And also about Dolgorukov. The young generation needs to know about him. And about David Ananun. These people

were intelligent and educated. And they wrote the truth, without which there will be no peace on earth."

"I agree with you, madame Gohar," Pavel smiled, clearly surprised by the topic of conversation. "Right now we seem to have peace. At any rate there is no war. But many of us have the feeling that there is no peace either. And I think that is because there isn't really truth."

* * *

I remember how, for the first time I suddenly felt, realised how my father read Paul Holbach. What did I experience, what was I thinking? For a few moments I was transformed into him and there was nothing mystical in this reincarnation. I can't judge about the nature of this mystery. Maybe it is in the genes or maybe it is a result of my special concentration on the little that remains of my still young father, or maybe it is simply intuition. At any rate amazing maternal and paternal intuition is known to science. Why shouldn't it happen with sons?

My reading of Dolgorukov was enriched by just such feelings. I have no information about what exactly my father read and what Ananun wrote to him in response to his enthusiasm about the Russian prince. It was possible only to guess. But I was boundlessly happy when mum, on reading the chapters about my father and Ananun, discovered for herself what it was that had happened with father at that time. Everything somehow fell into place for her. And it was a relief for her. She understood that my father could not drag his still very young wife into the complex knot of life's stratagems, which he himself barely understood and in which he was not yet absolutely sure that he was right.

In reflecting on this I want to cite a few excerpts from "*The Last Judgement*" which may throw some light on that period when people, without disguising their surprise, indignantly asked along with the poet: "O why do you punish me?"

Imagine, dear reader, how before the Revolution and in the twenties and thirties the Armenian publicist, historian, public figure and educator David Ananun thoughtfully analysed what was happening in the world and tried to warn future generations of potential misfortune. You can't not listen to him because he is so talented and honest beyond reproach. He is the author of a large number of academic books on the recent history of the Armenian nation, on issues of relations between different nationalities and, last but not least, of the multi-volume "*Social development of the Russian Armenians*" which examines the dynamics of the socio-political and cultural development of the Eastern Armenians. David Ananun put forward the idea of the necessity for the national consolidation of the Armenian people. For our time, rent by divisions especially among the newly emerged capitalists, his warning about the danger for society of the newly rich merchants is extraordinarily up to date: "the Armenian bourgeoisie never expressed the interests of the Armenian nation" and "it was always the peasantry who were the bearers of the interests of the nation among the Armenians".

It was not a historian, public figure or sociologist, but the prophetic poet Amo Sagiyan who spoke with undisguised alarm about the danger for the country of an artificially created urban population. As someone knowing the history of his country well, the poet wrote: "… for thousands of years the Armenian was a peasant who in cultivating the land knew very well that the land cultivated him and made him part of the nation." The outstanding Armenian publicist Mkrtych Portugalyan, who was highly regarded by Ananun, was worried and indignant that the Armenian *amira* (that is what the nouveau riche Armenians in Constantinople were called at the end of the 19th century) built rich mansions for themselves on the banks of the Bosphorus, were proud to belong to the "bourgeois elite" and "read and knew by heart Gladstone's speeches" – but didn't know their own history and their own geography. As a result they lost both.

Incidentally, as we move into the 21st century, it would not be at all bad for us to make some instructive parallels.

Today, when two thirds of the population is urban and village houses are sold for next to nothing, when it is not entrepreneurs who are building for themselves detached houses in Yerevan, which would be quite normal, but officials, and when endless queues of our countrymen trying to emigrate form outside foreign embassies, one can't help but remember David Ananun's wise words: "As soon as the bribe-taker and embezzler of the public purse have the right to be seen in high society, the whole system of public institutions begins to rot. Today they get their offspring into university, tomorrow they get them jobs as officials and the day after tomorrow their offspring will define fashion in social and even political life."

Do many of us even occasionally think about what will happen to the centre of Yerevan which is being bought up and built over by people who are in no way noble? For enormous amounts of money don't make a person noble. But a true patriot can only be a noble person. The millions which we generously and cheerfully throw at the expansion and extension of our cities would be better spent down to the last penny on the rural areas without which our capitals and major centres will wither and starve.

I would very much like to know what my father, foreseeing his inevitable imminent death, thought about the future of our country while he was in Shushi prison, on the lengthy transport to Siberia or cutting down timber in the Komi Republic – his last place of confinement. What was the influence on his world-view of all that he saw and experienced? Alas, alas, alas! I am sure of one thing, that not long before his tragic death he realised, understood that the system that had been built was going to collapse, like a colossus on feet of clay. Indirectly from the correspondence and what is known of the conversations with David Ananun, I can presume that he could not have failed to have seditious ideas much earlier and that the feeling of inevitable universal doom worried and saddened him just as much as it did many others who had a huge influence on Haik Balayan.

Ananun, quoting Pyotr Dolgorukov, made a direct parallel with Armenia, where the people are not likely to put up with the opposition of two poles for long. On the one hand the moneybags and embezzlers who had made their wealth through deceit and on the other hand the ordinary people who had been robbed and humiliated. Such situations usually lead to revolution. Ananun considered there was no need to fear honest entrepreneurs who save the nation by supporting scientists, philosophers and writers. Although in the transition period there are very few of them. And he quotes Dolgorukov: "Patience in suffering, what in antiquity was called stoicism, is embedded in the character of the Russian. And maybe more than is desirable for a feeling of national dignity. The Russian is capable of putting up with things for ever, of suffering for a long time without complaint and grumbling, but when the natural and inevitable reaction comes he takes the bit between his teeth and then it is almost impossible to control him…"

In the mid-nineteenth century, Pyotr Dolgorukov saw in this uncontrollability of the Russian a source, strength and weapon of the revolution, postulating "terrible eruptions of popular volcanoes". Dolgorukov also identified the causes of the tragedy: "The Mongol yoke left a deep imprint. It not only changed and shook the political and social structure of Russia but also corrupted the morals of our ancestors." And it is no chance that in this situation "the merchant class groaned under the yoke of arbitrary, lawless and capricious power, and as much as possible bought off shamelessly greedy petty officials through bribes. The merchants who grew rich hastened to enrol their sons in public service to secure them noble titles. From above there was the pressure of slavery, from below deception held sway. Fraud was combined with the highest ranks. And it is not surprising that in such a situation the merchants were also mostly swindlers. The nobility (i.e. the intelligentsia – Z.B.) had things no better, its situation was terribly humiliating."

David Ananun, developing Dolgorukov's thinking, transferred it to Armenian soil and noted that after Eastern Armenia was joined to Russia the so-called ruling classes appeared, that is merchants, princes, noblemen, civil servants and petty officials. They all "managed to make a good study of the Russian system and began to argue to the government that they were no different from the Russian land-owning classes, that the land was their inherited possession and the peasants who lived on this land were serfs. Thus the bureaucracy that was transplanted to the provincial setting began to take on a new shape here, in the form of the feudal system."

Maxim Gorki in conversation with David Ananun noted that in this situation the "spearhead of the revolution would be directed at the bureaucracy". However, Gorki himself did not suspect that the October coup d'etat, which created a state with a one-party totalitarian system would give birth to such a terrible form of bureaucracy under which many future generations would suffer. The bureaucracy itself became a weapon in the hands of the party leaders under whom the whole of society groaned. And knowing for sure that the USSR, like any totalitarian state, would definitely collapse, Ananun warned: "Be afraid of the first part of the transitional period, for those who come to power will be active young people who have grown up on the bones of democratic centralism and for objective reasons were deprived of the opportunity to advance themselves under socialism."

Towards the end of her life mum read with interest many works of writers and philosophers relating to this period. It seems she was comforted by the great breadth of thinking of the people who strictly and justly judged this time, which for many years had seemed so incomprehensible to her. But, of course, there was no question of forgiveness for Stalin, Beria, Bagirov or those informers and scoundrels who had put behind bars a multitude of innocent people – as a rule the most honest and talented.

* * *

Working on "*The Last Judgement*" in David Ananun's house in Mets-Shen I often went to the village post office to phone my brother Boris in Yerevan. Mum was living in Andizhan at this time and came to visit us in Yerevan once every two or three years. We understood how difficult it was for her to leave this Uzbek town that had given refuge to tens of thousands of Armenians. Many of mum's relatives lived there, and already some of her family and friends were buried there. Taking it in turns, quite often Boris and I would go to visit mum there. That summer I was particularly impatient to see mum. Let me remind my readers of the end of Ananun's letter to Haik Balayan: "I don't know when I will next go to Mets-Shen. The fireplace that I was building in my father's house there is still unfinished. It's terrible when they won't even let you get on with building the hearth in your parental home…"

On the first day that I arrived in Ananun's house I noticed that in the corner of the large room about half a metre above the floor there was a rather large gaping hole with uneven edges. You could quite easily have put a basketball ball in it. I found no other traces of the construction of a fireplace in the house. As I already mentioned, only part of the letter had been preserved. So there was no date on it. By my calculations it was written in about 1933. After that David never visited his home village again. For fifty years his relatives had lived there. In a word, the hole was all that remained of his intentions.

I rolled up an old newspaper and held it up to the chimney opening. The draught was so powerful that the flame shot up almost pulling the paper out of my hand. I was overjoyed. Strange though it may seem, I remembered our month-long expeditions in home-made flat-bottomed boats called "*Volcano*" and "*Geyser*" with my close friends Anatoli Gavrilin and Anatoli Salnikov. It's strange because, what, one might ask, possible connection is there between a domestic fireplace and the free flame of a bonfire in the forest or on the shore? But there is a connection. At least for me.

Once I was asked which I like better, travelling by sea or by river. I had already thought about this long before and so I answered immediately. On the sea the main thing is waiting for the sunrise. Frozen in anticipation you wait for the moment, when beyond the horizon, which is the line between abstract infinity and the reality of our own earth, the golden burning bow of the rim of the sun appears, quivering amidst the colours of the rainbow. For me this is a great mystery. And I realise that I am envious of myself.

On a river the main thing for me is waiting for the sunset, when in the East the sky and the earth have already merged in the twilight, while in the West the clouds are burning with the red and black fire of the evening light. Travellers pull their boats onto the bank and sit at the campfire, poke the fire with a knotty stick and think and think and think… And so both the heavenly and the earthly fires permit us not only with heart and mind but with every cell of our body to soar to some special heights of Life and Nature which we feel deeply and peacefully.

Returning from distant journeys, I used to feel uncomfortable confined in the walls of a room, deprived of the morning rainbow and the evening light and the crackle of the hot fire which not only speaks but listens. I think I found a way out that saved me: by making a hearth at home – something known to mankind since early paleolithic times, that is since the distant stone age, at the very least two million years ago. Even then in special places or by the wall they lit not just bonfires but fires in hearths formed from stones. Then they invented stoves against the wall with a separate direct chimney. The first hearths with designs and small architectural elements appeared in Greece and they were called fireplaces. Today there are thousands of variations. The master builders of fireplaces were valued, it is said, no less than violin makers. I made my first fireplace myself in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. It was called the “Karabakh”. I’ve already mentioned it. And I’m repeating myself only because my seventh fireplace made me think about mum.

* * *

It seems that the whole of Mets-Shen came together to help me build the fireplace which was instantly named the “David Ananun”. Actually, only a few old men knew the creative work of their famous countryman. Furthermore it turned out that even they, who had heard that immediately after the black days of 1915 Maxim Gorki had published the “*Anthology of Armenian Literature*”, had no idea that the preface to this priceless book was written by someone from their village. The explanation for this was quite simple: it wasn’t that the founders and apologists of the Leninist-Stalinist nationalities policy placed an official ban its publication – they didn’t even think about publishing Gorky’s anthology. What’s more the preface criticised Lenin and Shaumyan, which would not have passed the censors. So it was that the people of Mets-Shen did not even know that everybody with the surnames Ter-Danielyan, Gukasyan or Yeritsyan were the direct relatives of this outstanding Armenian historian and publicist.

I also found a stove-builder. And although he had never built fireplaces and didn’t have a clue about it, he knew all about the way a chimney works. Among the young guys there were some builders who from goodness knows where managed to acquire a whole bag of cement. Hearing of my venture, Samvel Mamunts, the chairman of the kolkhoz named after the XXII Party Congress and deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet, sent us a lorry-load of burnt bricks and in the evening organised a dinner in one of the guesthouses.

Almost the entire first day of work on the “David Ananun” fireplace went on a lecture which I gave to my helpers on the life and work of the great son of Mets-Shen. And soon they themselves began educating their fellow-villagers by retelling parts of the “lecture” to the best of their abilities. The fireplace turned out really well. Although I do feel obliged to give my apologies to the Russian architect Alexander

Shchusev: our fireplace did look rather like the Lenin mausoleum that he had built. But the main thing is that the draught, which is considered the heart and soul of any hearth, was excellent. The firewood burned vigorously and loudly. The crackling could be heard throughout the house. This was much helped by the grate which I installed at the bottom. The red tongues of flame chased each other upwards. I wrote the name "David Ananun" in oil paint directly above the fireplace, where the English hang a mirror.

As soon as the first fire testifying to the fulfilment of David Ananun's cherished dream had died down, I set off again to the post office to phone Boris. It turned out that mum had already arrived in Yerevan and the next day was to fly in a Yak-40 to Stepanakert. Mum would be met by Valeri Marutyan and Roma Yeritsyan, who were the sons of two sisters, Margarita and Ashkhen Gukasyan. And two days later Valeri and Roma would bring their mothers to Mets-Shen and give a lift to my mother too, for whom I had prepared a wonderful surprise. After all, she had read the letters from Ananun to her husband and knew how David was upset that he had not managed to finish the fireplace in his parental home. The Gukasyan sisters ought to like the surprise too since they were always proud of belonging, even if indirectly, to the family of the "great son of Mets-Shen".

* * *

Building the fireplace had well and truly distracted me from my work and I had to adopt a strict regime. Estimating the time that I had available, I decided to get up no later than six in the morning. On the very first day the regime got changed. In a neighbouring house lived a well-known local personality Nerses Bakhshyan, who admittedly had long ago honourably retired. In the past he had a reputation as a loud and difficult person, which he himself explained by his heightened inborn sense of justice. His cockerel took after his master, being the first of the Mets-Shen fraternity of fowls to crow at the top of his voice from four if not three in the morning.

I slept on Ananun's balcony, literally ten metres from Nerses' cockerel, whom I christened "Lachar", which means a creature of scandalous and hysterical temperament. Waking at Lachar's first cry, I for a long time would be unable to get back to sleep and would feel a keen desire to get rid of this loathsome alarm-clock. Later, realising that I would not be able to get back to sleep, I would get up, switch on the light and sit at my typewriter. After two months, when I had finished writing, I would remember Lachar not only amicably but even with undying gratitude. For every morning I would wake up of my own accord at four o'clock and get to work.

When they heard of the guests who were coming to see me, the people of Mets-Shen undertook to help me with a festive meal. Various dishes appeared: boiled and roasted green beans, a pot of *tanav* (soup from sour milk and dried mint) and a huge basin of pork prepared for kebabs with the traditional accompaniment of aubergines, tomatoes and peppers. They didn't forget home made dry wine and a jug of mulberry vodka. And the family of Nerses Bakhshyan sent a pan of chicken *adjapsandal* (hot-pot). In a word, when my mum, my mother-in-law Margarita and aunty Ashkhen sat down at the massive wooden table on which the food had been covered with a dozen sheets of newspaper and at the command "Allez – op!" Valeri and Roma threw back the newspapers the women gasped. The meal really was impressive. I was very proud and engaged in banter with my guests, especially my mother-in-law from Mets-Shen, boasting of my success with the local population.

At the height of the festive lunch mum, who had been unusually cheery, suddenly turned serious and asked:

"Why didn't you invite anyone to this royal feast?"

"I invited everybody who had visited me over these past weeks – and what's more had never come empty-handed. I invited them, although I thought they would not come. It seems it's not the done thing."

“Not at all, lots of them will come,” aunty Ashkhen objected. “That is the custom. They knew that we were coming. But they also knew there were no women in the house. So, according to tradition, they brought what they could. I’m quite sure that this bread was baked in a stone oven this morning specially for our visit.”

“And it’s all so tasty!” Margarita praised her fellow villagers.

“Especially the cockerel *adjabsandsal*,” mum chipped in.

“What do you mean, cockerel?” I exclaimed rather loudly.

“Why are you so surprised?” mum asked. “I can immediately tell the difference between cockerel and chicken by the appearance and the taste.”

“Well, it seems that Bakhshyan after all killed his Lachar.”

I was bombarded with questions and I told the story of the ill-fated cockerel. And how one day I had jokingly complained to Bakhshyan about the excessive vociferousness of his Lachar. Nerses cheerily announced that he was ready to kill his cockerel, but only on condition that we eat him together and have a good long chat together at the same time. I sighed loudly and confessed that I had a lot of work to do and had absolutely no time…

Everybody laughed, but mum’s eyes turned sad and without wasting a moment she said to me that everything had turned out rather awkwardly and that we should definitely invite Nerses. Someone said it really wasn’t necessary. And then mum said loudly and firmly:

“He invited you for a meal and you said you had no time. Then he killed his cockerel and sent us a dish which I gather was also prepared very tastily.”

“You can’t get away from this Bakhshyan,” aunty Ashkhen interjected cheerily. “And what a subject for conversation: is it cockerel or chicken? Nerses should not take offence at anybody. People don’t forget. He can’t fail to notice it. He shouldn’t have written denunciations in thirty-seven. He sent letters everywhere.”

There was a silence, which was broken only by the crackling of the fire in the fireplace. Valeri and Roma were busy with the kebabs at the “David Ananun”. The festive atmosphere had somehow gradually evaporated. And then Margarita and aunty Ashkhen began in turn remembering jolly Mets-Shen stories, to everybody’s amusement.

“Gohar-*djan*, the cockerel *adjabsandal* really did taste good and you haven’t tried it. And I know it’s your favourite,” aunty Ashkhen fussed. (The suffix *djan* appended to a name in Armenian, is a sign of affection – Translator.)

Mum, embarrassed that they suspected that she had acted deliberately, quietly replied:

“The kebabs that the lads have been preparing smell so good, I’ve been saving up my appetite.”

* * *

For two days and two nights my relatives were invited out. The people of Mets-Shen welcomed the legendary Karabakh midwife and gynaecologist Margarita Gukasyan like a queen. And why not, after all tens of thousands of new-born babies had passed through her hands. Only on the third day, making substantial breaks in my work, did I begin my excursions to distant and near destinations. We visited the Mets-Shen cemetery, admiring the unique headstones, called *khachkars*, which were truly masterpieces of miniature architecture. Gradually the radius of our walks increased and our itineraries took us along forest paths and through meadows and gorges…

I managed to prepare one other surprise for mum. In one of the distant cemeteries I took her to a big plot, as big as a volleyball court, on which there were a number of graves of the Yuzbashyans. Mum was taken aback to see the well cared-for graves, whose rich architecture bore witness to the fact that the deceased belonged to a princely or noble line, merchants or the officers’ corps.

Mum had heard that somewhere here in the area of Mets-Shen was the last resting place of the souls of one of the ancient branches of her family-tree, the Yuzbashyans. I showed her the graves of the close relatives of Marius Yuzbashyan – lieutenant-general, professional intelligence officer and chairman of the Committee of State Security (KGB) of Armenia. Mum knew that Aram, Marius' father, was the great nephew of Agabek Yuzbashyan, her uncle.

"It's a pity we don't have a camera," mum sighed.

"Don't worry, I've arranged for a photographer from Mardakert, he'll be here soon."

"I'm very glad. It will help to preserve the memory."

"Of course, we will definitely take a picture to remember the occasion. But I also need photographs of the graves of the Yuzbashyans."

"*Tsavyt tanem* (I take your pain)", mum whispered to me barely audibly and snuggled up to me.

* * *

Every evening I put away in a light-brown briefcase new pages of my manuscript about mum, about my father, about myself and about our times. Mum's letters were there also, father's letters and notes, old photographs along with a pile of notes that I had made at various times. I worked in a cottage in the exceptionally beautiful village of Karbi. I quickly got used to this house and to the modest and kind neighbours. I studied the history of the village and discovered it's heroic past, when the villagers in 1724 stopped a horde of Turkish cut-throats heading for Yerevan.

The only bad thing was that my wife and children and grandchildren didn't like to come to see me because they were petrified of the scorpions which are endemic in the village. To get them to come, every time I had to spend a long time persuading them. For me there were no happier moments than when in the morning one of the grandchildren would come to me in the summerhouse and we would have serious unhurried chats.

The summerhouse was a good place for my "Iron Lady", my "*Optima*" typewriter that had been through so much with me. Beside it were two ordinary bookcases. Every evening I covered my workplace against dust and wind with a colourful sheet and early in the morning looked forward with joy to set up my office again. If I had to go into the city even for a day, I put away my manuscripts and other materials in that self-same light brown briefcase, so that I could continue to work in Yerevan. In a word, as the saying goes, "not a day without writing a line".

I was getting on really well until in the hot August of 2002 there was a quite unexpected event. The editor-in-chief of "*Ayots Ashkhar*", Gagik Mkrtchyan, phoned me and asked me to call in urgently to see him in the basement on Tumanyan Street where the editorial office of his daily newspaper was located. I managed only to ask:

"Has something happened?"

"Yes," he replied, "something very serious has happened."

From his tone of voice I understood that whatever it was, it was not something so awful. All the same, in such a situation I had to set off for the city.

At first our conversation seemed long and convoluted and I will not reproduce it here. But the essence of Gagik's proposal to me was that he was offering me space in the newspaper to use as I saw fit. "One column a week. And if you have too much for one column, you can have two…"

I must admit, nobody had ever made me such an offer before.

"Let's agree to three months," Gagik continued, "that's twelve issues in a row. I repeat: in a row. You must publish one article focussing on a particular issue every Saturday. You can choose the topics. There is one condition, or at any rate request: in your articles you must share your experience as a publicist with young journalists. They should be able to see why you chose a particular topic and how you think it

should be developed and how you intend to attract the attention of the readers and force them to grapple with the issue, etc. And there's one more condition: if you don't manage to write anything for a particular Saturday, the column will be blank apart from a statement that you have broken your contract. Each time at the top will be the words 'A meeting with' and then your name and the number of each meeting. Do you agree?"

"The proposal is unexpected and the conditions very tough. At the moment I'm busy with a book about my parents which is very important for me. They had an absolutely tragic fate. And they lived though the most difficult times. My father was only thirty-three when he was arrested and torn away from his family for ever. We still don't know anything about his life after his arrest. And although I have written about two hundred typed pages, the end is not in sight. I've collected quite a lot of materials, but there is still a lot that I need to check out. And I don't even know where to look for what I need."

Gagik lowered his head, lit a new cigarette and blowing out a cloud of smoke held up his hands:

"What you are telling me about is sacred. I surrender."

"Don't be in a hurry to surrender. I have been writing this book that I'm working on now all of my life. And I don't think that your proposal will stop me from writing it. Of course, I shall have to put aside the manuscript for the time being. But I think that the topics and problems which I am now trying to get my head round will be needed in the book. It's not just about my mother and father, but also about our times, a whole era and about myself and my perspective on this era."

"So, you are accepting my offer?"

"Yes, I'm accepting. But I have my own conditions. My personal page should be page thirteen. I agree not to three months but to a whole year. That is not twelve Saturdays but fifty-two. I'll give you the first article…"

"I forgot to say one important thing: the text should be with us no later than Thursday. No later than Thursday every week."

"I agree to that. And the first issue will be next week, that is Saturday 24 August 2002. So that means that the last, the fifty-second, will be at the end of August 2003."

"I think most likely in September, for we skip one or two issues at New Year and also in the middle of August."

"That's your problem."

"I agree. Only are you not afraid that fifty-two issues in a row, fifty-two articles, each of them with it's own topic, it's own problem to tackle and each one with a specific presentation, is not too much for you as an author? Somehow, I am beginning to have doubts…"

"It's too late! The contract is as good as signed. And I shall make sure that in the course of the series the readers will know of our conditions."

"Very well then, all the better! Of course, we're interested to know what the first topic will be?"

"The village. This has been the number one problem for a long time. If the Armenian countryside is in terminal decline, then so is Armenia. It's not just the scandalous lack of foresight. There is an indifferent and stupid response to those people who ignore the vision and legacy of the great architect Alexander Tamanyan and are trying to expand Yerevan at the cost of the countryside. They've turned the country into a miserable tadpole. They rejoice that the capital of ancient Nairi grew to a million-strong city. And as if that was not enough, they've started building up the district centres at a mad pace, trying to turn them into 'mini capital cities'. As a result many villages have disappeared from the map. Isn't that genocide? After all, the grandmothers and mothers of the fresh-baked city dwellers had on average five or seven children. And in the cities they have at best two or three children. And there are strategic issues also. Million-strong Yerevan with its satellite housing areas is a

very convenient target for an external enemy. I wrote about this a lot in Soviet times. So, I've got masses of material."

"Then we've agreed?"

"Yes, we've agreed."

* * *

So began difficult times. Every week I had to write seven or fourteen pages, each time getting my head round a new and very complicated topic. I continued to write some topical materials for other papers. And all the while I had in mind my main book devoted to my mother and father. That meant that I continued to read a lot about the Stalinist repression, to write down quotations and to look though my notes made in a special notebook during the last months of mum's life.

Not long before her death mum began often repeating the name of her uncle Gigo Sagiyan – the brother of her mother and my grandmother Barishka. For a long time she had not dared to mention him. It was as though the Twentieth Party Congress had not taken place, as though the cult of Stalin had not been denounced and finally as though the USSR had not collapsed. The fear of everything that she had gone through was too deeply ingrained. She was afraid for Boris and me. I think she finally freed herself from this crushing fear only during the Karabakh movement.

A year before mum's death I was in Iran. This was an unusual trip, involving Alexander Lebed. I introduced mum to the general during his visit to Karabakh. I remember that he was very surprised that mum spoke Russian so well. When he discovered what school of the Russian language she had been forced to pass through, he gently embraced her against his broad chest as though it had been his fault.

A year later general Lebed sent a telegram of condolences from Krasnoyarsk on the occasion of the death of "aunty Gohar", who never knew that I went to Teheran with an official letter signed by Alexander Lebed, the secretary of the Russian Presidential Security Council. I never wrote about that. And it is only now that it is necessary to make public the materials about that time. Especially as it was the trip to Iran that helped me to find the last resting place of mum's uncle, Gigo Sagiyan, colonel in the Iranian army.

* * *

My friendship with general Lebed began spontaneously and rapidly. It was the eve of the presidential elections in Russia. I phoned him in the State Duma (in which he was then a deputy) and introduced myself. It turned out that he had read my articles in the "*Literary Gazette*". So, we met the same day. It was the snowy January of 1996. At that time Lebed was known mostly for his television broadcasts from the breakaway territory of Transnistria. The viewers saw him as some kind of martinet general, a downright opponent of democracy and of democrats and the intelligentsia who recognised only the language of force.

Two hours of conversation with the Russian veteran of the Afghan war completely changed my previous perceptions. Before me was a democrat in the best sense of the word, a true intellectual, subtle and educated and hating force as a goal in itself. I gave him a copy of my book "*Between Hell and Paradise*" which had just been published in Moscow. The general presented me with his book "*My Life and my Country*" which was hot off the presses. That January day was the beginning of a real friendship which lasted until the Russian general's tragic death.

Two days later we met again in the Moscow restaurant "*Serebryanny Vek*". We were welcomed by the owner, Arkadi Vartanyan, who at this time was very involved in the defence of the interests of Karabakh. Of course, we discussed acute and complex issues in which, for the first time that I can remember, wide sections of

the public had taken a warm and human interest. We had the feeling that we bore the responsibility for the decisions that would be made. For everything that was happening, for our behaviour and actions.

It was amazingly interesting talking with Alexander Lebed. And I confess that Arkadi Vartanyan and I were the first to visit him in his office when he became secretary of the Russian Security Council. It's true, we came to him to pass on a message that the Iranian ambassador in Russia, Mehti Safari, wanted to meet him. Lebed immediately announced that he would be delighted to meet the Iranian ambassador. Especially as there were things for them to discuss.

* * *

Mehti Safari is a professional diplomat. Before Moscow he was ambassador in the USA and Austria. He had been in Moscow for three years already. The ambassador came with an interpreter called Hasan, who was excellent at his job, as we were soon to discover. Out of respect for the guest there was no alcohol on the table, not even beer. The conversation began with recently published documents revealing certain plans by Turkey. In order to strike a blow against Armenia, Turkey intended to take advantage of the difficult situation in Moscow in October 1993 (the storming of the Russian parliament). Safari noted that actions like those of Turkey could mean the start of a war in the region and force Iran to take measures in response.

Suddenly general Lebed called a waiter and asked him to bring any newspaper, a clean sheet of paper and a marker pen. Arkadi and I exchanged glances – we had understood the direction the conversation was going to take. Lebed skillfully freed space on the table in front of him. Safari watched him with undisguised astonishment. The general folded the newspaper in four. Like a magician, he waved the sheet of paper and placed it on top of the newspaper. There began a kind of ritual, in which Lebed commented on every movement of his hand and every line drawn with the marker.

The general's horizontal line represented a vector with an orientation from West to East, the vector of pan-Turkism. It ran from Turkey to the Great Wall of China. The line cut across Russia's underbelly. It's a strategic line. Of course, directed against Russia … and Iran. An ominous Turkish horizontal line. As is well known, every horizontal line has only one opponent – a vertical line. Lebed commented on that in this way:

"First of all I want to enumerate the geographical points along the horizontal. Turkey, Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan, across the Caspian Sea, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizia and, of course, Kazakhstan, which in the 1920s was just an autonomous region, but which Stalin elevated in his Constitution to a veritable empire stretching from the Caspian Sea to China. Kazakhstan, by Stalin's decree, swallowed up a multitude of Russian regions, not only cutting through Russia's underbelly in a horizontal line, but depriving her of borders with Turkmenia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirgizia.

"And now let's return to the vertical, the natural geometrical opponent of the horizontal," – Lebed drew a fat line from the top to the bottom in the very centre of the paper. The result was a cross. And he indicated the geographical points of the vertical line: "At the top, Russia. In the centre, Armenia together with Karabakh. And to the south, of course, Iran. This vertical axis Russia-Armenia-Karabakh-Iran cuts across and splits the pan-Turkic vector. I just need to add that to the west of the pan-Turkic vector there is a combined anti-Turkish barrier comprising Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia."

* * *

We had happened to sit at the table as though we were following diplomatic protocol for talks between delegations of different countries. On one side, Lebed, Vartanyan and I, and on the other, the Iranian ambassador and his interpreter. This allowed me to observe with what attention Mehti Safari listened to general Lebed talking about his cross. However, he did not pursue the topic. “Who knows,” Lebed confessed afterwards, “maybe it was awkward for him to discuss openly in your presence such a difficult subject for Muslims as Karabakh.” Lebed immediately began to speak about what was greatly concerning him at that time:

“Three days ago at a conference with president Boris Yeltsin the subject again came up of one of our problems, I would say, speaking bluntly, Russia’s shame. It is already a year since the Taliban in Afghanistan, to be precise in Kandahar, have been holding seven Russian airmen who were taken hostage in August last year. The IL-76 aircraft they were flying was on a commercial charter flight from Tirana via Sharjah to Kabul. The aircraft was intercepted by Taliban military fighter planes and forced to land near Kandahar. As a result the seven Russian crew members became hostages of the Taliban. And they have been languishing in captivity for over a year now.”

Lebed knew that the issue he was raising was not at all a simple one. As he put it, it was a matter of conscience not only for Russia but for the whole international community, including the UN and the Islamic Congress. And since nobody had yet managed to make any progress in finding a solution, he wanted to ask the Islamic Republic of Iran to lend its high authority to the process.

* * *

Two days later Hasan, the interpreter for the ambassador of Iran, phoned me and said that the ambassador was flying urgently to Iran. “It would be good,” he added, if Arkadi Vartanyan and I could fly after Mr Mehti Safari and bring an official letter from general Lebed. Hasan was at pains to point out that this should remain confidential. And he informed us that the appropriate instructions had been made to process our documents and buy tickets.

The question of flying to Teheran was virtually decided. And I thought that for the first time I would have the opportunity to find the end of the thread that could lead my to mum’s favourite uncle, or, at any rate, to get some information about him. By the way, there will be more of this later. But for the moment I shall allow myself to tell about “*Action Lebed*”, as Arkadi Vartanyan dubbed our mission. Mum, of course, very much liked the Russian general and hung his portrait in her house. And furthermore, this “powerful man” (as mum called him) is no longer alive.

Before we left Vartanyan and I went to the Security Council. Lebed at once read us an extract from an article in a newspaper lying on his desk. “The Taliban are keen to humiliate Russia, for whom they have no warm feelings, as much as possible. And they simply don’t care a damn about the universal condemnation of world opinion.” Then he turned the page and read one more sentence: “It seems the last hope for the Russian airmen is an unofficial approach.”

For a whole year the world had followed their fate with great concern. Television, radio and newspapers reported on them almost every day. Their families and friends told of their pain and worry. Lebed felt all this especially keenly. In the tragedy of the seven airmen, the general felt the “pain and shame of the country”. He took a large envelope out of a coloured folder and passed it to us:

“The envelope is not sealed. Let Mehti Safari realise that I trust you completely. You can read it now, in my presence. But if you have any comments, alas it’s too late. It’s already been translated into Farsi.”

For our readers I will give the text of general Lebed’s letter in full:

TO MR MEHTI SAFARI

AMBASSADOR EXTRAORDINARY AND PLENIPOTENTIARY
OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Moscow, 17 August 1996
Dear Ambassador,

It is already the second year of the enforced detention by the Afghan opposition group the Taliban of seven Russian airmen: captain Vladimir Sharpatov, navigation officer Alexander Zdor, flight engineer Yuri Vshivtsev, engineers Sergei Butuzov and Viktor Ryazanov, co-pilot Gazinur Khayrullin and flight engineer Askhat Abyazov.

Numerous attempts to save them have ended unsuccessfully. Even the efforts of the UN, the Islamic Conference and countries with influence in the Islamic world were, alas, of no help. And we know that up till now the efforts undertaken by officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran have also been in vain. However, being extremely aware that it is a matter of life and death for seven completely innocent people, who have at home children and wives, mothers and fathers, relatives and friends who have lost all peace, whose fate is followed intensely not just by Russia but by the whole world, I believe that we should not lose hope of being able to save them.

I express to you, Mr Ambassador, my sincere gratitude that you responded so efficiently to my request to return once more to this vitally important matter and, using the high authority of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to persuade the Taliban to act in a humanitarian way and free the seven Russian citizens who are now in Kandahar.

Arkadi Vartanyan from Russia, the president of the Centre for Russian-Armenian Initiatives, and medical doctor Zori Balayan from Armenia, are public figures known to you who were the initiators of the renewed search for new contacts with the Taliban leadership. In connection with this I request you to offer them the necessary assistance in holding talks on this issue in the Islamic Republic of Iran at any level.
A. I. Lebed
Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation

As soon as our official business in Teheran was finished, Arkadi returned to Moscow and I decided to make a trip to Isfahan (Nor-Djukha) where meetings were arranged with the Armenian community. The staff at the Iranian Foreign Ministry warned me that they and they only would accompany me. I tried to refuse, as I had many friends, but the answer was unambiguous: “No, you are our official guest.” Apart from that, I had to wait for the answer to Lebed’s letter from the Iranian ambassador and for certain information to be given verbally.

In Djukha I visited dozens of Armenian homes in each of which there were meetings with numerous members of the Armenian community. In the *dashnak* newspaper “*Alik*” I placed an announcement requesting information about my relative Gigo Sagiyan, colonel in the Iranian army. Mum was in Yerevan at this time. And as soon as I had placed the announcement, I phoned her and told her that now we can wait for information about her favourite uncle. It was difficult to speak because she was almost sobbing into the phone. At the same time, as she said, she got a sense of peace. Now it would be easier for her to live. Later she confessed to me that she had immediately understood: I had gone secretly to Iran to find the place where Gigo was buried.

* * *

Early in the morning two staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came for me in an official Mercedes. They gave me an envelope from Mehti Safari addressed to general Lebed. The envelope was not sealed. When they saw that I had noticed this detail, they explained that the Iranian side had not sealed the envelope as an expression of their confidence in me, just as Lebed had. In the envelope were Mehti Safari's original letter and the translation into Russian. Then they gave me another envelope which contained a report written by their chiefs on our trip to Iran. It included material about the release of the Russian airmen. But it also expressed quite clearly their attitude to Lebed himself. Since I don't know whether this letter will ever be published, I don't think it will be a sin to quote one paragraph devoted to Lebed. "The reception given in Teheran and the content of the talks, in particular with the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran, the head of the section of the MFA of Iran responsible for the CIS countries and also with Iran's ambassador Safari testify to the importance attached by the Iranian leadership to establishing contact with L. (i.e. Lebed – Z.B.), in whom they clearly see a statesman capable of properly evaluating the prospects of Russian-Iranian relations in various areas. The intermediaries (Z.B. and A.V.) have been informed of the details of the action which led to the release of the Russian pilots."

Only in the plane, when the morning newspapers were distributed to the passengers, did I learn that the day before the Russian airmen had escaped in their own IL-76 plane. I don't think that any of the readers of the papers gave serious thought to how it was that these airmen, after more than a year in captivity, were able to fuel their aircraft without any problems and take off and fly not towards Russia, but to Iran. After all, you don't just end up in foreign airspace by accident. For all you know they might shoot you down…

Not having read the text of the report and the letter to Lebed in the presence of the Iranian friends and officials who were seeing me off, I didn't know about the sentence that read: "the intermediaries have been informed of the details of the action which led to the release of the Russian pilots."

In the plane I also read the letter of the ambassador addressed to Alexander Lebed.

"The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. By the will of Allah, the Highest. 31 August 1996. Your Excellency, Mr Alexander Lebed, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. I have the honour to inform your Excellency that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran made efforts to bring about the release of the Russian pilots seized and held by the Afghan Taliban. The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran conducted talks with the leaders of the government of Afghanistan and of the Taliban group about their release. The clear result of these efforts is seen in the co-ordination and permission for the flight of the Russian aircraft through Iranian airspace. A detailed explanation will be offered during a meeting with your Excellency. With great pleasure I strive to be of service to your Excellency. Mehti Safari, ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

With hindsight I can say that nobody knew anything about this and other documents or of the details of the action to release the Russian pilots. Alexander Lebed did not want to make them public, even at the height of the difficult election campaign for the governorship of Kranoyarsk province.

* * *

From the airport I went straight to Arkadi at "*Serebryanny Vek*" and together we set off for Old Square, where the office of the Security Council was. It is a great pleasure for me to note the failure of those who wanted to portray general Lebed as a rough, grey martinet, especially during his time in Transnistria. Gradually in Russia and the CIS countries people realised that the general's military bearing, his athletic

build and a certain severity in his behaviour and the absence of a permanent Hollywood smile were combined with a generous soul, a manly restraint, a tender heart, intelligence and a serious level of education.

I will never forget the beaming face which met us at the door of his office. Nobody in the country, including the airmen who had escaped from captivity and their families, knew how happy Alexander Lebed was at their release. We told him in great detail about our meetings in Iran and with what precision and responsibility the Iranian officials had fulfilled his request. Then Lebed asked me what I had been doing for the rest of the trip. I told him in detail about my meetings with the Armenian community in Teheran and Isfahan.

I found that Lebed knew the history of the Armenian nation quite well. I had understood this when I had read his book "*My Life and my Country*", which Armen Hovhanesyan translated into Armenian. He knew about the diaspora, the Armenian communities scattered over five continents. He knew that overseas Armenians had often become famous performers, doctors, lawyers and artists. But he just could not have imagined, he admitted now, that a refugee, an emigrant, could become a military commander in a foreign state, moreover the commander of a division or a brigade.

"You really must find the grave of your mother's uncle," he said supportively.

"I will definitely find it. I'm sure that people who knew colonel Gigo will read my announcement in the paper and respond."

"By the way, how did your mother's uncle end up in Iran?"

"Like millions of Russian emigrants after the revolution. After all, Gigo Sagiyan had graduated from a Russian military college. And he had been a professional officer in the Russian army. And, of course, Eastern Armenia, as you rightly said to the Iranian ambassador, was, together with Karabakh, part of Russia…"

I remember how Arkadi Vartanyan and I wanted to publish at least part of the materials about the release of our airmen. We several times raised this with Alexander Lebed. He always turned serious and repeated firmly that he did not consider it possible to advertise good deeds such as charity. After the tragic death of Alexander Lebed, it seems to me that a time has come when his ban no longer applies.

* * *

The phone rang slowly, a sign of a long-distance call. Someone unknown, not even a resident of Armenia. Judging by the accent, someone from Iran. His name was Hovsep Gukasyan. He complained that he had been trying to find me for half a year on the phone numbers given in the "*Alik*" newspaper, but without success. I apologised, because, indeed, I was hardly ever at home – either I was in Stepanakert or in Moscow.

It turned out that Hovsep's father knew Gigo Sagiyan well. And, although he was only about twelve or thirteen at the time, he also remembered well "brigadier Gigo, about whom songs were composed in Lorestan". But the main thing he was phoning to say was that Gigo's daughter named Shushanik was still alive. And she lived in Los Angeles, where she had emigrated after Khomeini's Islamic revolution.

I thought about mum, whom we had buried not long ago. When she realised that her days were numbered, she often repeated: "For a long time I was sure that I would live to be a hundred. Then I felt that there was something wrong with me and I began to dream of living to ninety. And now I'm dreaming of two years. Just two years and then I'd be happy to go." What did she mean?

Knowing mum, I was sure that what bothered her more than anything was that I did not yet have any grandchildren. If she had lived for another year and two months she would have been eternally happy, for on 6 August 1999 Susanna

(Shushanik) gave birth to a wonderful little girl. But for some reason I'm quite sure that up there, in heaven, mum knows all about this event. But what she never guessed for a moment was that somewhere far away, on the Western edge of the world, on the far shore of the Pacific Ocean in Los Angeles, there lived the daughter of her own beloved uncle Gigo. Her cousin was alive, who was called Shushanik after their grandmother – my great-grandmother Shushan.

From Hovsep Gukasyan I learned that madame Shushanik's daughter lives with her in Los Angeles. And her son (Gigo's great-grandson) had moved to London with his family. Maybe mum had a premonition of all this and therefore dreamed of "two last years"?

Soon Shushanik's grandson Alex came to Yerevan, and then her daughter. And we celebrated this meeting with my brother Boris, my son Haik and our relative Misha Danielyan.

A year later we welcomed Shushanik herself in Yerevan. She brought with her the manuscript of a book about her father Gigo himself. Shushanik was about eighty. We embraced. And I could not hold back the tears. She was very like our mum.

* * *

I read aunty Shushanik's manuscript in one sitting. It tells of several periods in her father Gigo's life. And it is written with an amazing touching love and great understanding of the inner life of this strong and very noble man, whose name, alas, is forgotten both in Iran and in Karabakh. Of course, there is nothing surprising in this. I thought that an extract from Shushanik Sagiyan's manuscript would be very appropriate in my book, especially where in the postscript she tells of her impressions of visiting her father's homeland and the relatives who, with a good deal of persistence, had been trying to find Gigo's family and to preserve his memory at least among his kinsfolk.

* * *

"I was finishing the manuscript of the book about my father," she wrote, "when friends from Teheran phoned me and told me that an announcement had been published in the "*Alik*" newspaper by Zori Balayan who was looking for people who had known Gigo Sagiyan. I had already heard a lot about Zori, read his articles and seen his television appearances here in Los Angeles, but it never occurred to me that he could be the son of Gohar, my father's niece and my cousin. After a while my daughter Anait and my grandson Alex travelled to Yerevan. And they met Zori Balayan, his brother Boris, his son Haik and Mikael Danielyan, who has the name of my grandfather, Gigo's father.

"A year later, despite my poor health, I went to Yerevan myself to meet my relatives. I was very touched that they remembered Gigo and at the first opportunity tried to find him or his family. It turned out that one son of Gigo's niece is a famous writer, the other a professor of medicine who is engaged in serious academic research. And they have wonderful families. And in Tashkent lives the last remaining of dad's sister Barishka's children, my cousin Aikanush. She and Gohar were from the Yuzbashyan family. Dad spoke a lot about the Yuzbashyans, who were from the Yuzbashi noble line. It was to them that the Russian tsars sent official missives in the 18th and 19th centuries. Mikael, whom everyone calls Misha, is a colonel. That is music to my ears. He took an active part in the Karabakh war.

"I very much regret that my poor health prevented me from visiting Karabakh. I so much wanted to climb the mountain that my father spoke about. 'God created paradise and called it Kyatuk,' he used to say, 'where my ancestors are buried.' And I am very sorry that I did not manage to meet another of my cousins Vitali Balasanyan.

I think father would have been very proud to know that his direct relative was a hero of the Karabakh war, a knight of the Order of the Golden Eagle, deputy minister of defence of Armenia and a general…

"I understood how right dad was when he said that the best balsam for the soul and the body is the memory of the past. I felt much better when I learnt that Zori has brought a handful of soil from the grave of Gigo and Shushan and scattered it in the cemetery in Kyatuk. I'm sure that it rejoiced the heart of my father, colonel Gigo, who in accord with his last rank was known in the Iranian army as 'brigadier-general'."

* * *

Aunty Shushanik was correct: I had taken from the grave of Gigo and his mother Shushan a handful of soil and brought it to the cemetery in Kyatuk. That was in May 2003. The Armenian community in Iran had invited me to take part in the celebrations of the eighty-fifth anniversary of the formation of the first independent Armenian republic.

On the day that we arrived I phoned the consul of the Republic of Armenia Gegam Garibdjanyan and asked him to find Hovsep Gukasyan, who knew where Gigo and my great-grandmother were buried. An hour later Gegam told me that the time and place had already been agreed for Hovsep and an Armenian priest to take us to the graves of our relatives in the Dulab cemetery in Teheran.

On 30 May 2003 at twelve o'clock my wife Nelly and I set off for this ancient cemetery. In Teheran they call it the Armenian cemetery. Although on the iron gates is written "Russian cemetery". Indeed, there are many Russian graves there with Orthodox crosses. But there are even more Armenian graves. Just inside the gates there was a small Armenian church. As well as Hovsep Gukasyan, Nelly and I were joined by Bersabe Avanesyan, a journalist from "*Alik*", by Vardan Vardanyan, a former member of the Iranian parliament, and the priest Vazgen Shmavonyan. We walked for about a kilometre along the wide avenue of the cemetery looking at the *khachkars* – the inscribed Armenian gravestones – on either side.

Suddenly Hovsep stopped and suggested we read the inscription on a white marble slab: "*Melik Asan-Djalalyan and Anna Asan-Djalalyan*", undoubtedly from the famous line of the Karabakh Asan-Djalalyans – who founded the unique church in Gandzasar.

"I think it is symbolic," Hovsep noted, "that your mother's uncle Gigo Sagiyan is buried next to the Asan-Djalalyans."

And it was only after this that I paid attention to white marble slabs right next-door surrounded by a little fence. At the very top in red letters was inscribed the word "*Sarkhang*", which means "commander of a regiment" in Farsi, i.e. colonel. Colonel Gigo Sagiyan was born on 9 June 1876 in Shushi, Karabakh. He died on 29 June 1962 in Teheran. And the inscription continued: his mother Shushan Sagiyan died in 1943 at the age of 108.

Fr Vazgen held a memorial service at the graves and I made a speech to colonel Gigo Sagiyan, which I had been composing all night.

"Dear Gigo! When you were forced to leave your homeland, the only members of the large Sagiyan family remaining in Karabakh were your sister Barishka (my grandmother) and her children Aram, Arevat, Anna, three-year old Gohar (my mum) and the very youngest Aikanush, who was born six months after you emigrated.

"You left your homeland after the sovietization of Transcaucasia in 1921. It's true that in your time the Azerbaijani republican formation was called Musavite. From the beginning of the 20th century you fought against the Azero-Turks (those same Musavites) and English mercenaries bought by Turkey. It was at their instigation that the Bolshevik authorities arrested you and sentenced you to death. You managed to

escape and found refuge in Iran where under the leadership of the legendary Eprem Bey you had taken an active part in the Iranian revolution of 1905-11. Soon you had secretly returned to Karabakh and fought first in Tevan's detachment and then joined the army of Garegin Nzhde. Only years later, back in Iran, were you perhaps to understand the most important thing in our history at that time: the creation by commander Nzhde and his colleagues of the Mountain Armenian Republic in essence decided the future of the whole of Armenia. For Zangezur was saved, including Megri, without which the existence of Soviet Armenia, and consequently today's Armenia, would not have been possible.

"It is no coincidence that the legends about Nzhde, Tevan and their colleagues are still popular today. Only after Stalin's death did we learn that in Iran 'a certain brigadier-general from Kyatuk' was very well known. That was what you were called because for many years you commanded divisions and a brigade of the Iranian regular army. They talked about your heroic deeds in the struggle against the wild hordes of Lorestan.

"Your relatives in Karabakh knew nothing about you. But you also did not know that your older brother Arshak and his wife Semiramida Pirumyan (the sister of Pogos bek Pirumov) and also your sister Barishka and all her children and grandchildren were exiled to the Altai province, from where they later made their way to Central Asia.

"After his exile Arshak moved to Tbilisi, where he was buried. Barishka is buried in Tashkent along with her son Aram and daughter Arevat. The third daughter, Anna, is buried in Stepanakert. Barishka's fourth daughter Gohar is your niece and my mother, who lived through all the hardships of the Stalinist camps. Even before mum's arrest, my father Haik Balayan was arrested and killed in the north of Russia (according to rumours in the Komi republic).

"Gohar died not long ago, in 1998. She is buried in Kyatuk next to her father, my grandfather and your brother-in-law David Yuzbashyan, whom you very much liked and valued. From the mass graves in the endless expanses of the GULAG I gathered handfuls of soil and buried them on mother's grave. This soil represents the mortal remains of all our family and fellow-countrymen whose graves are lost in Siberia.

"Dear Gigo! Your daughter Shushanik, who has your mother's name, has written a book about you. I have read the manuscript and I realised that she had put her whole heart into it. In it there is not just a feeling of infinite love for you, but also a realisation of the serious task she took upon herself.

"The manuscript is being prepared for publication. I think it will be appropriate to publish at once in Armenian, Russian, English and maybe Farsi. I am not in a hurry because I still need to gather some materials to write a preface to the book. And Shushanik wants to complete the book with the story of her meeting us in Yerevan.

"And I thought that before publishing the book I should definitely meet you. To tell you about what we have lived through. And here I stand before you and my great-grandmother. Next to me is my wife Nelly, the mother of the great-grandchildren of your sister. I want to tell you about the changes that have occurred in your homeland. To tell you that Karabakh, where you went to school and where you graduated for the first time in your life from the military college, after which you became a professional soldier, has been liberated. To tell you how we liberated Shushi that was so close to your heart. To tell you that the lands which were forcibly incorporated by Stalin in the Musavite republic have been liberated.

"Fate had it that it was to Iran that you and colleagues fled. I am proud and happy that you achieved such honour and glory in the Iranian army. And I am sure that it is no chance that in the fateful days of the times of trouble in Karabakh Armenia constantly felt the kind hand of help from Iran and the Iranian people.

“I confess, dear Gigo, I am happy that I fulfilled my promise to my mother, my sacred duty to her. Today I will take a handful of soil from the grave of you and great-grandmother and I will take it to Old Kyatuk and scatter it in the ancient cemetery of our forebears. I know that when the fresh grass grows next spring you will surely smell the tart fragrance of your native soil. And I think that you and your mother Shushan will feel better. And, of course, I will scatter a pinch of Iranian soil on mum’s grave.

“You know, Gigo, I’m sure that genuine happiness is the feeling of duty that has been fulfilled in relation to one’s children and one’s homeland. Mum often quoted to us, her sons, the words of our father, who loved to repeat that happiness is when you have good health and a poor memory. Mum did not perceive his words as ironic. She herself was dying, suffering terribly from an illness that tormented her. And she bore the torment without losing her clear mind and iron memory. And she often thought of you, dear Gigo, because you were her favourite uncle.”

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Trouble with mum’s health came unexpectedly. The diagnosis was immediate and terrible. We had got used to her never being particularly unwell, apart from her “bad legs” as she put it. It was vascular inflammation of both shins, the result of frostbite in the GULAG. She was treated both by qualified doctors and by folk healers. She herself became an expert in creams and compresses made from fermented mulberries. It never occurred to Boris and me that mum could get seriously ill. The difference in age between us was very small – she was sixteen years older than me and eighteen older than Boris. When in January 1998 she complained that there was “something wrong in the stomach”, I was quite taken aback. All her life she had been proud of her “iron stomach”. After all she was born in Kyatuk, where with a smile they eat the hottest pepper in the world which is simultaneously fire and gunpowder. What’s more her grandmother on her mother’s side lived to over a hundred, her mother to almost ninety and her brother Aram lived into his eighties.

I immediately took her to see Ara Minasyan, the head doctor at the city emergency hospital in the Nork district of Yerevan. The usual examinations and consultations began. The case notes grew thicker as we watched, with the most common remarks being “normal”, “within normal range”, “no complaints” – until we came to the X-ray department. During the ultrasound examination I could read in the doctor’s eyes a fully-fledged diagnosis.

He didn’t once say the word “cancer”. But what he said, as though emphasising the prospects, was: “It’s inoperable. That’s often the case. It appears that the patient has no particular complaints. The loss of appetite is attributed to general weakness or with a past bout of flu. Visiting the doctor is delayed. And in a month or two there are metastases all over the place.”

When I was a student I enjoyed reading the works of Hippocrates and Avicenna, in short the ancient doctors who were also philosophers. Four centuries before the birth of Christ, Hippocrates, the father of scientific medicine, devised a formula which will always be apt: “Old people have less ailments than young people, but the ailments of old people last all their lives.” Mum’s illness was indeed for the rest of her life. Both her sons, both doctors, knew roughly how long that would be. It was 20 March 1998. In Karabakh in such cases the old people say: “He/she will not manage to taste this year’s cherries or mulberries.”

* * *

Mum had a spacious light hospital room with windows to the East. The slanting rays of the sun brightly lit up the bed on which she slept, covered with a colourful blanket.

Boris and I sat at the window and silently watched the busy street. The cars' horns were particularly loud.

"Close the window," I said quietly, "or they'll wake mum up."

"But she doesn't hear very well…"

"What are we to do? Can't we try to find some way out? We're just accepting the diagnosis as something fatal."

Boris is a pathological anatomist. In the medical institute exams the most terrible test is the exam in pathological anatomy. As Nikolai Burdenko warned his colleagues: "Pathological anatomists are the people to be really afraid of, for they make their diagnosis not by listening and touching, as we simple mortals do, but by looking. So any experienced pathological anatomist will discover and define all our blemishes and faults with total accuracy." Doctors usually have a special respect for pathological anatomists for the accuracy and precision of their opinions. So now Boris immediately reacted to my concern:

"I think that above all we need to think about the method of precluding."

"What do you mean?"

"To preclude from the start any talk of operations and chemotherapy. Beyond that, everything should focus on maintaining mum's strength. We should give her treatment to defend her immune system. And do all that is necessary in such cases, apart from surgical intervention and chemotherapy. Actually, we're knocking on open doors. After all, that is the recommendation of the hospital doctors. It's not only a question of age, but also of the metastases."

"In other words, to ensure that mum, who has been through so much suffering in her life, should not experience physical pain as well. Moreover, pain cannot be justified by any hope. To be honest, our conversation evokes in me a feeling not only of discomfort but of shame."

"Of course, we are not ready for such talk," Boris replied barely audibly, looking at mum as she slept. "Everything happened so suddenly. And then don't forget that we are her sons. And although we are in shock, our medical experience comes into play. And there is nothing to be ashamed of in not wanting mum to be in pain. You don't know what pain there can be in such cases…"

"Stop, for God's sake!"

Boris stood up, buttoned up his white coat (he worked in the same hospital where mum was being treated and always came in his hospital coat) and said quietly:

"I'll go to my office. I'll be back in an hour."

And then mum's clear and quite loud voice rang out:

"Was I asleep?" mum asked and then continued: "Boris-*djan*, bring me my cup, plate, fork and knife. I want to have only my own things. And give me some water please, only make sure it's been boiled."

I wasn't in the least surprised at her words. She often told how in the camp she always had her own spoon (there were no knives and forks in camp!). And I also knew that mother never drank water that had not been boiled.

Boris poured water into a glass, which he had demonstratively wiped with a towel brought from home. I took the glass from him and handed it to mum myself. We remained alone, just the two of us. I was sure she would not ask me any direct questions. And that is how it was. She began obliquely.

"Our Ara is a good man. A professor, the head doctor. And always so modest and kind. And when he speaks it's as if he is shy. But the staff are afraid of him, I can see."

"You always notice everything, I know."

"Well, what did you expect! Usually one glance is enough for me to understand the whole situation. Look at how poor Armenia is today, and here he has

everything in good shape: it's light and clean. But the main thing is that he has selected good people: kind and smiling. Usually all that depends on one person – the boss."

"But mum, after all he's my friend. And he treats you as the mother of a friend."

"Nothing of the kind! What I'm talking about is something quite different. He has order and cleanliness everywhere. The other morning I was taken to lots of consulting rooms. I saw everything. And the ultrasound room, where our Arsen works, is good as well. By the way, what did they say there?"

"Nothing in particular!" I answered, immediately feeling the need for caution.

"Don't you worry. I'm absolutely sure I've got nothing like that."

"You're absolutely right to be sure…"

"I want to ask about something else. During the examination you were looking at the doctor's eyes, and your eyes were afraid."

"Why are you making things up, mum?"

"Once your father and I were declaring our love for each other," mum smiled, screwing up her narrow eyes and her pale cheeks went slightly pink.

"That's interesting," I said animatedly, "I'd love to know how my parents declared their love in the thirties."

"We swore to be faithful to the grave. At the time it was what was expected. And dad said: 'There's an old saying, that everybody is afraid of death, but nobody is afraid of being dead. I don't agree with that at all. I am not afraid of death. I much more fear being dead.' I immediately changed the subject. I thought, death is nonsense. The main thing is to live to a hundred and die together."

"Do you remember when you had that conversation?"

"I know exactly. It was July 1934. We were in Agorti. We were sitting under the big mulberry tree. Dad pulled down the branches which were thick with mulberries and I picked them off and ate them. I remember, exactly a week later I discovered that I was expecting you."

* * *

Wherever I was, I constantly felt that I wanted to be with mum. I wanted to listen and listen. Once she complained to me that we just couldn't find the time to talk to our heart's content. "It's easier for me," she admitted, "I regularly read your articles and books. When you are away for a long time, neighbours or relatives bring them to me. But you lose a lot because I don't have the opportunity to tell you my observations about my life, and I remember so much."

I joked it off and called her a philosopher and yet I wholeheartedly believed it every time when I promised to her that we would still manage to speak everything that was on our minds and talk to our heart's content: "as soon as my term as deputy ends", "when we take Shushi", "after I've travelled the world with Lady Cox's group to tell people about Karabakh" or "we'll come to visit you with Nelly and the children for a whole month and you'll get so fed up with us…"

I have already written several times that I was always struck by her wonderful memory. And now, seeing her every day, during long conversations time and again I was amazed at how well her memory retained the smallest details over decades.

On the third or fourth day of mum's stay in hospital we took her to the oncology clinic on Tumanyan Street. The chief doctor, a second-generation oncologist, our old friend Gagik Bazikyan, checked the state of various organs on a special apparatus. The apparatus really was unique. It's called a bio-resonance machine. As he scanned, Gagik commented aloud to me what he was seeing. He used abstruse terminology like "biofields", "biofrequencies" and "electromagnetic field", noting both significant and unimportant changes in various organs. When he came to the head, he said clearly and loudly (obviously so that mum would hear):

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with the head!” To which mum instantly responded: “You know, Gagik-*djan*, if your machine comes to such conclusions, since my head really is fine, then it is a very worthwhile machine.”

All of us in the little bio-resonance room laughed loud and long. And mum could not disguise her joy.

That same day she got me to bring a notebook, which was to stay in her hospital room. She would have the opportunity to check how I make notes in particular instances. She was absolutely right. Many times she had gone through the names of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers on father’s side of the family. With time names that had not been written down got forgotten and the lines of the family tree got crossed. Mum insisted that on the first page I wrote down the names of all the branches of dad’s family tree. Even when she was engaged, she considered it her duty to study her future husband’s genealogy.

* * *

My great-great-grandfather on my father’s side was called Bala. His name Bala was given to his grandson. His son, Sarkis, had five sons: Tevos, Khachatur, Abram, Gerasim and Gevond. And they all had the surname Balayan. Abram Balayan had four daughters – Nakhshun, Sofya, Zanazan and Akhshen – and a son Haik. And he was my father. On my father’s mother’s side there was a definite religious bent. His mother Shogakat (at home she was called Salati) was the daughter of the priest of the church in Amaras and Agorti, Ter Hovhanes, who had been several times to Jerusalem. Two of her brothers graduated from the higher seminary in Echmiadzin and the third brother was an economist at academic level.

It is just amazing that with such a genealogy father could be recommended to the Stalin University. It’s true in 1928 things weren’t as strict as they were after the death of Kirov. And seminary student Djugashvili had not yet become the owner of membership ticket number one in the all-union society of atheists. Although by that time they had already razed to the ground a multitude of churches and killed quite a few priests.

Mum’s maiden name was Yuzbashyan. Her mother belonged to the Sagiyan family. And here mum could list up to a hundred names. But I shall mention only the names of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother: Agabek and Djavi Yuzbashyan, whose sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles were scattered throughout Karabakh – and not just Karabakh, as I already related at the grave of colonel Gigo in Teheran.

* * *

Towards the end it was no longer possible to have long conversations with mum, although she herself was ready to talk endlessly. But I began to notice that her strength was gradually leaving her. My energetic mum who was always active, who was proud for the whole of her life that the could always simply run away from anyone, and, of course, catch up with anyone she needed to, was beginning to tire.

I took breaks, realising that mum had a real need not just to talk with me, but to have her say, to tell everything that was on her heart. I even got the distinct feeling that she was afraid that she would not manage to tell what she thought was very important. Of course, more often than not, these were memories of father, alternating with dreams of meeting him again soon. And there were also specific cases where mum forgot about her long-standing taboo and told of what she had herself seen in the GULAG.

I didn’t write anything down, although I was rarely without my note book. In the hospital room it felt a bit awkward getting out notebook and pen. Ten years ago, or even one year ago it would have been seen as absolutely normal. But now, when

we constantly deceive one another, saying we'll live forever, it was tricky. But all the same, when I had the chance I managed to make notes of particular phrases, signs and even drawings. And each of these notes could form the subject of a story, a novel or a thematic commentary.

Here's a typical note: "In about 1947 or 48 when there was a famine everywhere that was worse than during the war, I noticed that the guards and even the camp chiefs preferred to have sick prisoners than healthy ones. The healthy ones had ravenous appetites and were ready to start a fight over a piece of bread. The more sick ones there were, the easier it was to steal their bread and other foodstuffs."

And another note: "Important figures from the chief administration of camps (from where the acronym GULAG was derived) used to visit frequently under the guise of a tour of inspection. But everybody knew that these scum were interested in something totally different. They were 'spotting' the wives of 'enemies of the people' who were well known throughout the country – party leaders, army marshals, famous writers."

And one more: "A lot of fuss is made about male friendship. But people don't know much about female friendship, especially when it is born in hell. My friend was called Maria Levitina. We were born in the same year. Her two little daughters were in a children's home. She envied me when she heard that my sons were being brought up by their aunts, their father's sisters, because she knew that in a Soviet children's home her daughters were being brought up to hate their parents. But she always remained fair and proud. When we thought of our children we all sighed and moaned. She simply explained to us that there was nothing you could do to help these children. You'd just make things worse for yourselves. You just needed to learn to hate evil. This fragile Jewish woman responded to the bullying by the guards with a disdainful silence. She more than once said to me that bullying is the philosophy of the slave and the groveller. And I still remember and love this woman," mum confessed.

* * *

Despite mum's serious condition, I sometimes risked leaving Yerevan for the most essential business. Mum well understood this. Well, for example, how could I not accompany another of the missions led by Lady Cox, the deputy speaker of the British House of Lords, who used to come to Karabakh to carry out the programme that we had devised together. Mum would herself never have allowed me to leave Caroline Cox without logistical support. Beginning in 1991 Lady Cox regularly came to Karabakh with new groups of people, which meant new plans and new tasks. And she would always visit mum in her one-roomed apartment. They became friends and even chatted without an interpreter, apparently understanding each other well.

Lady Cox was familiar with the repression in our country in the thirties and forties. She knew that above all those affected were educated people, specialists, people who knew how to wield a pen and the most talented figures from the world of culture and the arts. She also knew that the leaders in Baku fulfilled their quota of repression mostly at the expense of the Armenian population of Nagorny Karabakh, Baku, Kirovabad and Gardmanq, which was basically Shaumyan district. She knew that the wives of those who had been repressed were also arrested, and then more distant relatives of "enemies of the people".

I can't say whether from outside it was realised that Stalin did all this out of a sense of fear – fear for his own future. It is no coincidence that the "leader of all nations" first of all liquidated his own friends, colleagues, acquaintances, fellow party members. These people knew the truth about him, and that contained the seeds of potential danger. And he expelled and destroyed the relatives of "enemies of the people" who had been shot, because he was afraid of those who would be able to

remember everything that had happened and tell the truth about what they had been through and even take revenge.

* * *

Caroline Cox visited Karabakh more than sixty times with her teams. Usually she was accompanied by journalists. She travelled the world to the Armenian diaspora and reminded everybody that at stake in Karabakh was the fate not only of Karabakh and Armenia, not just of the diaspora and the whole Armenian nation, but the future of world civilisation. I tried to tell of this in my book "*Between Hell and Paradise*". Of course, her mission was in the name of universal humanity and universal Christianity. It's enough to recall that she is one of the most active and effective promoters of the idea of Christian solidarity.

During one of her visits, Lady Cox asked mum to give an interview to a BBC television reporter. This visit coincided with a tragedy in Stepanakert. In the hot summer of 1992 the town and the surrounding area were being bombed every day. And every day there were funerals, weeping, inconsolable human grief…

One of the 500-kilogram cluster bombs landed on house no. 50 on Mkhitar Sparapet Street. It was a two-storey house built by hand by brothers Suren and Samvel Avakyan. The family of Samvel, who was at this time on the front line, lived in the house. As usual, word was sent to his unit asking for Samvel to return urgently to Stepanakert. That was how it was put: not "home" but "to Stepanakert". I knew Samvel and wrote a first hand report.

"A quiet man. Jack of all trades. His wife Nelly often used to say that when she was with Samvel she couldn't be better protected by a solid stone wall. She bore him two children. A son Grigor and daughter Lilit. Their son was twelve, their daughter eight. And she was expecting a third child…

"The soldier came back to his home town. In his heart he had a premonition of something bad. He hurried and at the same time was afraid to get there more quickly. He walked along Mkhitar Sparapet Street and caught the sorrowful looks of his neighbours… He walked past house no. 46. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath. He approached the half-destroyed house no. 48 and suddenly, unable to understand anything, felt an emptiness inside. For a fraction of a second he hoped that he had got lost, that he'd come to the wrong house. Because next-door there was absolutely nothing. The house, which in Karabakh dialect sounds like 'celebration', had literally vanished into thin air. Samvel had been in Spitak after the earthquake. He had seen how a pile of rubble was all that was left of a building. But here there was nothing, as if there had never been a house here. Only later, when he came to his senses, did he realise that the walls, the floors, the ceilings and the contents of two storeys, of lots of rooms and of a garage containing two cars had in a fraction of a second all been compressed and then scattered in all directions by the shock wave. Instead of a house all that was left was a crater full of debris.

"Samvel was surrounded by people. He remained silent, listening to the quiet conversations which reached his ears. Everybody had died. Grigor, and Lilit and his pregnant wife Nelly…"

I wrote this in my notebook and two years later included it in a book. At the time when this happened, Caroline Cox was with us in Stepanakert with all the members of her group. They met Samvel Avakyan and chatted with him. They filmed him. Now we needed to record the interview with mum and translate it into English, then put it all together for showing on European television channels.

When mum heard of Samvel Avakyan's tragedy, she felt sick. You would have thought that over the years of the Karabakh war she would have seen much sorrow. Once before her very eyes eight children died at once from missiles from a "*Grad*" launcher. Among those who were killed at the front were her relatives and friends. But the story of poor Samvel was especially painful for her. Mum spoke very

quietly and took no notice at all of the camera. The interpreter whispered mum's words into Lady Cox's ear.

"Just imagine, someone is summoned from the frontline, he comes home, he was missing his children and his pregnant wife and was worried about them, and the house is not there. There's simply nothing left where the house stood. They say he sat on a rock and sat there hunched up and motionless for several hours. I can imagine what he was thinking in this time…

"In 1938 I left my two young children with their aunt on their father's side and set off for Moscow. I went to Kalinin and Molotov. Many wives did the same, they wanted to stand up for their husbands, to find justice in the Kremlin. Justice turned out for me that I was thrown into a cell. I was kept there several days without bread or water. They reminded me of a few facts: after all I was not just the mother of two children who didn't yet understand what was happening, but I was a family member of an enemy of the people, moreover the wife of an enemy of the people. So my whole family, even my whole extended family ought to be dispossessed. And true justice demanded that if I refuse to acknowledge this and insist on complaining, then I would never see my sons again.

"I remembered all this when I heard about Samvel's tragedy. When I returned from Moscow, our house was empty. According to the law of those in power, everything had been confiscated in my absence. They left nothing. I know that this cannot be compared with the sorrow of Samvel. It's just that I understand what it is like when you come home and your home is gone. A war is on. Bombs are falling from the sky. But then in 1938 I came home in peace-time. My husband was gone. Many of my relatives had already been exiled to the Altai province and to Siberia. The house was empty, absolutely bare. No children's clothing, none of our dresses and suits, no underwear, not even a scarf to tie round my head. There was not one book left of my husband's rich library. After all, he had been the head of the regional education department. Wherever he went he came home with books. We had lots of books signed by the authors. Armenian writers seldom came to Stepanakert, but they would often send letters and books with their autographs. For example, there was a book signed by Charents.

"Personally, I regretted the lost letters most of all. After all, they included letters addressed to me. I am still tormented by the thought that some dirty-handed curs seized Haik's letters, read them aloud and merrily laughed at them. I was then quite young and my husband wrote tender words to me. I forgot at once about the dresses, presents and dress patterns, which at the time were considered a sign of wealth. But to this day I remember the books and the letters. And I feel hurt and cheated.

"I wouldn't want to inflict on any enemy what Samvel went through: he came home and it wasn't there…

"First of all you want God to punish the person who did this, the one who denounced my husband and slandered him. That those who came to our house on 10 February 1937 and then on 4 July took away my husband to Shushi prison should get their just desserts.

"I always knew that the person who sent my husband, as rumour has it, to the Arctic Ocean and then me to the Siberian forests cannot be happy, the one who obeyed orders and broke down the door of our house and robbed us. In the end, they were all punished. All of them. I mean not just the miserable local activists, Beria and Bagirov, but Stalin himself who is now universally cursed.

"When I heard about the dreadful misfortune of Samvel Avakyan, it was as though I had been struck a physical blow. I think about him all the time and once more my own experiences flash before me. I don't doubt that God and Allah will punish those who drop bombs on a peaceful town. You'll see."

* * *

Mum's hospital case notes grew as you watched. One day she asked to look at the folder.

"Why," I asked cautiously.

"I want to check my memory. I think I told one nurse that I'm called Gohar and another Galina. After all, that's what I've been called all my life outside Karabakh."

"What difference does it make to you?"

"Does it never happen to you that you are not sure about something and you desperately want simply to check?"

I gave in. They brought in the case notes. Mum casually glanced at the first page "Medical card No. 1415 of inpatient" and immediately returned it to the nurse.

"Well then?" I asked.

"It's all correct."

"What's correct?"

"Everywhere it says Gohar except in one place where it says Galina."

"But it was only the first page you looked at."

Mum smiled. She looked at me playfully. And suddenly she winked at me, as if to say: look at these two grown adults in all seriousness carrying on some stupid dialogue about whether Gohar or Galina is written in the file.

Incidentally, I really hadn't immediately realised what mum wanted to see. Of course, she wanted to read what the final verdict was – the "conclusive clinical diagnosis".

"Well, what did you find out?"

"Nothing. I was just glad to see that our bureaucrats in copying my name from my passport took the right approach to the matter. Since my passport says Goharik they concluded they should write Gohar. After all Goharik is the affectionate form of Gohar. And I know exactly how it happened. I was born in Shushi. Your granddad David told the midwife that he had long ago decided that if a daughter was born he would name her Goharik. Although my mother wanted to name me Shushan. And she often called me that, after my grandmother. But the Shushi midwife, Siranush, who incidentally was a relative of ours, wrote down on the confirmation of the birth exactly what granddad David had said – Goharik and not Gohar.

The desire to know the definitive diagnosis is quite natural for a sick person. But mum understood that family and friends try to protect the sick person from terrible information. Just as she understood that we should not only play our own roles, but even pretend to each other.

To be honest, I don't know whether it was easier for either party as a result of this game. After all, mum was an experienced medical assistant. In camp she had often taken the place of the doctor. She read specialist literature. She knew a host of medical terms. She kept abreast of new medicines that became available in Armenia. But when she read in the case notes "infiltrative stomach ulcer", she was deeply puzzled, as we later found out.

* * *

Professor Suren Avdalbekyan is rightly considered a leading light of Armenian medicine. He is highly valued as a specialist in pulmonary surgery, and as a creator of the healthcare system, and as a teacher and as the rector of the institute for doctors' professional development.

In the Stalinist camps his father Khachatur got renamed Christopher. Even today most of Suren's colleagues are convinced that his father was called Christopher. When every morning after his round Suren sat for a long time at my sick mother's bedside, I couldn't help thinking about their difficult lives, about our complicated times. After one of his visits I asked mum:

"Well, how do you like our professor?"

“And why did you decide that I like him? What can you tell me about him?”

“How come you’re answering my question with a question? It’s just that I know you well. And you notice that he is a wise, handsome, grey-haired and very clever man.”

“That’s all correct. But you didn’t mention the most important thing. You can see a lot in his eyes: sadness and pride and strength and bitter disappointments and even huge successes.”

Mum really had a talent as a physiognomist, a psychologist and an analyst. But mum didn’t know about our longstanding close friendship… Once again I had been lucky – Suren was the first doctor I met in Armenia. My medical career had not worked out at all as I had initially imagined. I wanted only to be a surgeon. After my fourth year studies, when I was on a practical placement in the village of Durnovo in Ryazan region, I performed an appendectomy and a herniotomy on my own. I wrote about it and I told about the first patient that I saved.

It’s true, I dreamed no less about a career as a writer, and of successfully combining both careers. After all, we have wonderful examples… Now that I am in my seventies I well understand my humble place. But then, in my youth, we were all maximalists and potential geniuses, nothing less.

Fortunately in the first months on Kamchatka, with its harsh conditions that leave no room for self-deception, I quickly took a sober and realistic view of the circumstances in which I was going to have to live. I understood that I couldn’t not write, especially short stories. And that I was also attracted to journalism, which meant travelling, meeting lots of people, serious trials and so on. And therefore, out of over one hundred and fifty medical specialisations, I needed to choose one which would not only not hinder my writing, but even complement it. I chose therapeutic exercise – a unique speciality. In making this choice I was influenced by my own long-standing interest in sport and my title of “master of sport”. I completed the whole course for professional development in therapeutic exercise in Moscow.

Years later, when I was writing a lot about the problems not just of health-care but also about health issues, above all the aggregate health of the nation, I decided to take a specialist course in physiotherapy. And I took additional work as a therapist in the hospital for water-transport workers in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. At the same time I asked the regional health board to send me on the most up-to-date course in physiotherapy. Soon a letter arrived from the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation inviting me to Baku for a professional development course in physiotherapy.

A lively correspondence with Moscow ensued, as a result of which my invitation was transferred to Yerevan. On my arrival in Armenia’s capital, my first visit was to the rector of the All-Union Institute for doctors’ professional development, professor Avdalbekyan. This was in early February 1969. By then I already had many articles published in the “*Literary Gazette*”, the “*Medical Gazette*”, “*Communist Youth Pravda*”, “*Soviet Sport*” and other periodicals. So it turned out that Suren already knew of me. He was to sign some papers and allocate me to a hostel, where at that time, as I subsequently learned, my future wife was living. That should have been all that our meeting was for. However, our conversation lasted for three hours. It was then that I learned about the tragedy of the whole Avdalbekyan family.

Mum, as I have already written, even before father’s arrest had worked out that the “black raven” vans and the men in leather jackets mostly came for active, intelligent and talented people. As I listened that day to the story of Suren Avdalbekyan’s family, his grandmother Mariam was impressed on my memory for the rest of my life. After the family moved from Iran to Yerevan her two sons, Tadevos and Khachatur, studied at the legendary Echmiadzin seminary. I told about them in my documentary story “*The Heart is not Stone*”. This is the dramatic story of the outstanding Armenian surgeon Harutyun Mirza-Avakyan who in 1927 in Yerevan was the first in Europe to perform open-heart surgery successfully.

Poets, prose writers, linguists, economists, statesman, artists, architects and translators – an unending list of outstanding names of Mirza-Avakyan's friends and acquaintances – were all arrested. And many of them were shot in 1937. Among the surgeon's friends were the Avdalbekyan brothers. They were not saved even by their first-class translations of Karl Marx's "*Das Kapital*" and numerous other classic Marxist-Leninist works. Incidentally, most of them, including "*Das Kapital*", were translated into Armenian for the first time. You can imagine the situation of Mariam whose two sons were arrested simultaneously and before whose eyes the world turned black. After the war, before she died she expressed this memorably: "In the black year of thirty seven one black night men in black leather jackets arrived in "black ravens" and broke into my house, and black storm clouds closed over me forever."

And only Mariam's grandson was able to disperse the black clouds over the Avdalbekyan family. Even during his lifetime, grateful students (first and foremost Professor Derenik Dumanyan) and the authorities named the Institute of Public Health after Suren Avdalbekyan. It's true they always refer to him as the son of Christopher Avdalbekyan. But the roots of these names – Khachatur and Christopher – are not so far removed from each other. The root of the first means "to carry the cross", of the second "to bear the ideas of Christ".

Each morning in her bright hospital room, mum settled herself comfortably waiting for Suren on his round. They had long conversations. One can only guess what they were about…

* * *

In the hospital mum was often visited by her grandchildren: my children, my daughters Susanna and Lusine and my son Haik, and Boris' two sons Arsen and Artur and daughter Anush. Each time when they left, mum would be silent for a long time, then would repeat the same words, as if by tradition: "I ask God for just two years. Only two. No more." Sometimes she added: "If God doesn't give me two years I won't be upset with him. He often came to my rescue and saved me from seemingly hopeless situations." But she never spoke of why she needed these two years.

I think I guessed what mum had in mind. Her younger son already had two grandchildren, but her elder had none. My elder daughter was by then married. But, as mum put it, she was busy with all sorts of silly things: internship, specialisation, professional development and so on. There's still time, she said. And knowing that all things have their limit, even such "silly things", she reckoned that within the next two years Susanna would definitely have a child, my grandchild and her great-grandchild.

Mum spoke also with professor Avdalbekyan about the "silly things" that fresh graduates got up to. Suren's attitude to the problem was more indulgent and jocular, blaming everything on the times in general and the emancipation of medicine and healthcare in particular. However, during his last conversation with mum there was one more topic of conversation. First of all she boasted of her extensive knowledge of medical terms, then she threw out with studied casualness:

"But, would you believe it, I'm beginning to forget the meaning of the roots of particular words. For example, what's the exact translation of infiltrate?"

"I have the same problem myself," the professor said helpfully. "I forget the simplest words. You've come across the word 'filter' often enough in normal life, haven't you?"

"Of course, it means to purify or to sieve."

"That's right! As for the medical term 'infiltrate' it is something quite specific. It means the thickening and expansion of tissue as a result of the accumulation of blood in it…" The professor didn't go into further detail, otherwise he would have had to continue that as a result of this filtering it is not just blood that accumulates, but

more often than not also tumour cells. That is why such an infiltrate is called tumourous.

Avdalbekyan said nothing of this. But mum had guessed it all at the very moment when she read her diagnosis. She had guessed it also because she had given a lot of thought to what was happening to her. I think that she also learnt a lot from the mirror, before which in her youth she had been ready to spend so much time, but which now she was simply afraid to look in.

Mum was literally fading before our eyes. Cancer is indeed a dreadful disease. It's hopelessness and finality is frightening.

* * *

In September 1990 a group of USSR people's deputies declared a political hunger strike in protest at Gorbachev's abolition of the legally elected authorities in Karabakh. On the twenty-first day the Catholicos of All Armenians, Vazgen I, came to Moscow.

When he came into the hotel room I was simply awe-struck. In the high doorway stood Solomon himself all dressed in black with a massive gilded staff in his hand. A high forehead, radiant paternal eyes… He didn't say didactically that it was time to give up the hunger strike, for he shared our concern for the fate of our country. He said that he had decided to join us. That he would lie on the bed on which the great scientist Viktor Ambartsumyan had fasted for a week. He had been taken by ambulance to hospital in a critical condition. One should note that both of them, Catholicos Vazgen I and academician Ambartsumyan, were eighty-two years old.

The proposal of the Catholicos of All Armenians was not the cunning of Solomon, but the wisdom of Solomon, for he fully intended that if we didn't agree to end our indefinite hunger strike he would join us… Of course, we submitted. He announced that he would not return to Echmiadzin without us. To do anything else would have been shameful for us, his sons. We gave in…

Both before and after this we met fairly frequently with the Catholicos. Soon the war began and we saw each other still more often. For I brought many guests and His Holiness received almost all of them in his residence.

Once I asked him to receive my mum, having told him briefly about her difficult life. He answered that if his health were better he would come himself to visit her in Stepanakert. In late December 1992 I took mum to see the Catholicos. It was very cold in his office. There was no heating in the building. He was sitting in his robes, wrapped up against the chill in a lilac woolen blanket. Mum went up to him, bent down and kissed his right hand.

Usually a very active and chatty person, mum just looked the Catholicos closely in the eyes and said nothing. The Catholicos asked me about the situation on the front-line in Karabakh. I told him how this very modern war was continuing, how rocket and aerial attacks were destroying the lives of peaceful settlements.

Waiting for an appropriate moment, mum said what she had been dreaming of saying for the previous two years. In deliberately pure literary Armenian, she confessed to the Catholicos that she had asked God for the chance to meet him, in order to thank him for saving the lives of her son and his comrades, who were intent on continuing their hunger strike, as they say, to the bitter end.

In response, smiling and sipping his coffee, he said:

"We don't yet know who saved whom."

Mum didn't utter another word. Only after we got home did she admit that after the Catholicos' words it was as though she was transfixed. And then for the whole evening she spoke about the unusually expressive face of the Catholicos and how much kindness and intelligence shone in his eyes.

* * *

Mum read Solzhenitsyn's "*The GULAG Archipelago*" and "*Cancer Ward*" when they were still banned. At that time she rarely shared her thoughts about politics. Now she frequently mentioned the books of the great writer and often said: "Nobody really knows how many people were shot, how many disappeared without trace, how many went through an unprecedented hell and after it survived for only a short time. And if each one of the living and the dead decided to write a book, they would all have their own examples and stories." She was convinced that these "examples and stories", like the Biblical parables, would be remembered well, while the ideas, thoughts, reflections and conversations with oneself would with time pass into oblivion. Even the person who has lived through hell forgets his reflections as the years and decades pass. Nobody knows how many fates like that of Ivan Denisovich never even emerged and have simply been lost…

Once I took the opportunity to ask mum:

"So, what out of all the things that are almost forgotten most often comes to mind?"

"You put that very well. Not everything that is forgotten is completely wiped from the memory. Sometimes it comes back to you, like someone knocking at your door. More often than not it is the things that particularly tormented you…"

"For example?"

"I think I've already spoken about it: thoughts of death. I thought about it a great deal and for a long time. I just can't find the precise words. The main thing is that these thoughts were constantly with me…"

In our conversations mum never repeated anything. Especially when the subject was death. What was particularly terrible for her was constantly, day and night, seeing people die. How the guards, after the morning wake-up signal, would punch those who were still lying down, and continue to punch by inertia even when they were quite sure that the prisoner was dead. Every morning one or more women were carried out feet first. Mum used to remember how after a particularly tough day, as they settled onto the hard cold bed-planks, someone would invariably say: "I wonder which of us will be the happy person who doesn't wake up in the morning?"

When she heard this for the first time mum was really filled with terror. Often before she fell asleep she would have the horrible thought, what if it was her who didn't wake up in the morning. She lost any sense of peace. She often jumped up in her sleep. She was afraid that she would die and never again see her sons and would not be able help them get on in life…

I, of course, realised that the inevitable was getting closer every day. As I had done for the whole of my life, I knew that you have to reconcile yourself to the inevitable. But I cannot accept that you can discuss things soberly and remain serene when what you are experiencing is a person close to you dying. Just imagine how awful it is that you will never see them again! That their life has finished for ever. Now that mum knew that the end could come at any moment, she took on board the very idea of death in a quite particular way.

I remember the occasion, after I first began working in the water-transport workers' hospital on Kamchatka, when I recorded in the case notes the first death of a patient in my medical career. He was called Alexei. His diagnosis was "exertional angina" and more generally "coronary heart disease". I became friends with Alexei. He was a sailor on a large freezer trawler and dabbled in writing poetry.

I discharged Alexei on the eve of New Year 1964. At home his wife and two little children were waiting for him eagerly. A week later he came back to hospital in an ambulance. His wife told me that he had spent all of Christmas Day (7 January in the Russian church calendar) chopping firewood. I asked Yelena, the head of the therapy department, to examine my patient. Later in her office she told me: "Colleague, your patient will die tonight…"

Yelena was a grey-haired sixty year old woman who was very highly respected by everyone in our hospital. She was the wife of a trawler captain. And held a candidate's degree in medical science. She was a unique diagnostician. From the very first day, knowing that I was fresh out of the medical institute, she used quite deliberately to address me respectfully as "colleague".

"What do you mean he'll die?" I objected. "In that case we need to do something!"

"In the case notes you have written a whole page of prescriptions. Absolutely sensible and professional." She was sitting calmly at her desk and writing something in a thick exercise book, as though the conversation was not about someone's life and death. I was simply amazed.

"But in your words there was not a trace of doubt. You didn't say 'might die' or 'I think'. You said…"

"I said that tonight he will die. I told you as a colleague, based on my experience. By chopping a cubic metre of firewood with blocked coronary arteries and weak cardiac muscle he was signing his own death sentence. All our medicines to a greater or lesser extent merely temporarily widen the heart vessels. It was the patient himself who dealt the final blow to the cardiac muscle. In such cases they die either with the axe in their hands or their heart stops within seventy-two hours. As far as one can judge, while Alexei was chopping the firewood he got second wind. That's fine for a young sportsman, but not for a heart patient."

"All the same, it's terrible to know that a person you are treating has no time left to live…"

"You chose a profession in which you have to get used to death. It's just that everything is still ahead of you."

"All the same, I imagine that death will always remain specific for me, like any other truth. In this case, if your prognosis is confirmed, in the morning two little children will become orphans."

"And you have to get used to that too," said Yelena and got up from her desk.

"I shall try to help his family. At least when the kids are sick they can call me. There was a Spanish doctor, Jose de Letamendi who had an amazing dictum: 'A doctor who knows only medicine, doesn't even know medicine.' This wise man once said that if it is true that we die with each patient, then it is also true that in every death the doctor is at fault, even if it is absolutely not his fault."

"Well, in that case you can blame the Lord God. He's most likely immortal himself but he created people as mortals."

The reply seemed amusing: we smiled, forgetting for a moment the man who was lying in one of our hospital beds and might die in a few hours.

Alas, Yelena was right. My patient died in the night. For some reason people mostly die at night. In the first century BC, Horace wrote a very apt line of poetry: "One and the same night will come to us all."

* * *

I guessed that mum had several times seriously thought about suicide. In childhood she was amazingly fearless. Everybody in her home village of Kyatuk knew it. She was afraid of neither dogs nor wolves. And only her mother, my grandmother Barishka, knew how much her intrepid daughter was vulnerable to pain and cold.

Three times she was moved to a different camp, and each time it was further from the Urals and closer to Magadan. That meant it got more and more cold and more and more painful. And the pain was not just mental. In the summer one would dream about winter because of the mosquitoes and other blood-sucking insects. And in winter the dreams were of summer because of the cruel frosts, against which the patched padded jackets were no help at all.

But Gohar nicknamed Diamond faced one other misfortune. And I think she was not the only one who faced it. In her native Kyatuk from childhood she was called Djrashun (Water Rat). In Karabakh that is what they called those who could spend hours in the water and dive without fear of getting their hair wet. In the camp the bathhouse was always cold even in the hardest frost. If a wooden shed with a concrete floor deserves the name bathhouse at all. To the penetrating cold was added the constant bullying, swearing and hunger. There was just one escape – to take one's own life. But it is not so easy to overcome the instinct of self-preservation and throw oneself into the abyss from a prison railway carriage.

Mum avoided talking about the subject. I remember her only once say a sentence that seemed to me to be terrifying in its matter of fact tone: "Everything there was problematic, even trying to kill yourself." Then she added "by the way" and changed the subject. And only before her death did she suddenly begin to mention specific details.

"… If they had sent me to yet another camp, I definitely could not have stood it," mum said. "When you came to a new place the camp bosses and the guards took it out especially on the newcomers, making it clear that there would be no concessions. And the mistreatment (punishment cell, punches in the stomach and chest, having to wash the floors and the slop buckets) continued until the next party of newcomers arrived. Many were surprised at why some of these hefty women in police uniform aimed to punch in the chest. After all, they were women themselves, and one would have thought they ought to know that it is not only very painful but also dangerous.

"But the whole point was that from time to time various commissions travelled around the camps – sometimes, admittedly very rarely, even representatives of the Red Cross. And so, of course, they had to punch in such a way that it left no trace. The GULAG officials were sure that nobody would dare to complain and that the members of the commissions would not make a special point of inspecting the prisoners' breasts. The NKVD psychologists knew what they were doing when it came to 're-educating' the wives of enemies of the people. To punch someone in the face, especially in the eye would be bound to cause trouble. But in the chest or the stomach, nobody would notice. You just need to try to ensure that the victim is at that moment not expecting to be hit. That she was relaxed."

Admittedly, after six months or a year in each new place mum not only adapted to the situation but even knew how to stand up for herself. Most of all she was helped by her profession of medical assistant. But, all the same, thoughts of suicide came more than once. She even chose the most convenient method – a razor. You slash your veins and that's it. Weakness and unconsciousness come very quickly.

And once she decided to do it. She found a place in the corner of the shed with the concrete floor. She put down the aluminium wash basin of warm water on a stool. Without looking, she slashed her wrist and thrust her hand into the warm water, covering it with a towel and pretending that she was washing her underwear. When a fog began to come over her eyes, mum felt that her legs were weak and that she was about to fall on the concrete floor. And then she cried out. Only later did mum realise that in the noisy hubbub of the bathhouse nobody heard her cry.

… What happened was that at the very last moment she saw her two sons before her crying loudly. Boris and I were then nine and eleven years old. But mum had had no news of us for the previous three years. She immediately pulled her hand out of the basin and tightly bound the wound. The fog before her eyes cleared instantly. She felt saving strength in her legs.

To stop the blood she pressed her hand tightly against her stomach. She somehow managed to squeeze the water out of the towel. She wrapped the towel twice round her hand and again pressed it to her stomach. All that was left to do was

to tip the basin off the stool. The brick-red water ran across the rough concrete floor of the shed.

I asked her why it was there and then (it was at the end of 1946 not far from Chita) that she took such a decision. Mum said:

"Among the guards in Chita there was one bony hulk of a girl with a narrow forehead and a nose that stuck out like a potato. For her cruelty and constant bullying, she was hated not only by the prisoners but even by her own camp colleagues."

"Why her colleagues? Were they really any better?"

"Of course not. They also hit us and tried to do it without leaving a mark. But when they saw how pitilessly this bitch deployed her fist it was as if they themselves softened. Later we heard that Potato Nose (this nickname was applied to her immediately, though sometimes she was called Potato or simply Nose) was related to some central official in the GULAG. She was exceptionally malicious and it was therefore hard to compare her with the rest.

"Potato was frequently transferred from one camp to another, as the camp bosses valued her for the particular zeal with which she carried out her work. And she was also a rabid anti-Semite. At the time, as I recall, we didn't know that term. People said: 'This person doesn't like Jews – and not only Jews.' Admittedly, over the years of my life in camp I discovered an incontrovertible rule: the person who hates Jews, hates Armenians, the one who hates Armenians hates Russians and the one who hates Russians hates everybody. The first thing that Potato did when she arrived in our camp was to acquaint herself with the files of the 'enemies of the people' and 'family members of traitors'. She determined nationality not just by the official record but simply by their names and their fathers' names."

"How did she do that? After all both Armenian names and Slavonic names are often taken from the Bible."

"Well, she decided herself. Seeing that I spent almost all my free time with my Jewish friend, she remarked quite openly: 'What are you whispering about, you lousy Jews?' I answered with my own question: 'And how did you decide that I'm Jewish?' Potato grinned and said loudly: 'You're Jewish from your father. It's not for nothing he's called David.' I continued this preposterous dialogue: 'Then I must be doubly Jewish. After all my husband's father was called Abraham.' She slowly approached me. As she walked she was smiling. Afterwards I discovered that she did that specially, so that I wouldn't tense up. The closer she got, the broader her smile became, as though she was hypnotising me. When she got really close she struck me such a strong blow in the stomach that I instantly bent double. I was winded. Before I could recover I was dealt another even stronger blow from below – straight into my left breast. Everything went black from the terrible pain. And I collapsed on the ground…"

Noticing the way that the expression on my face changed, mum sighed deeply and said:

"And why I am mentioning all this? I can see the effect it's having on you."

"Now you've got to tell me what happened next between you and this fascist bitch."

"I was groaning for a long time from the pain. The bruises remained on my breast and stomach. It was impossible to touch them. And this vile creature kept on trying to punch me again, sometimes in the breast, sometimes in the stomach. Several times I lost consciousness from the pain. That was when I decided to kill myself. But after I had won my inner victory over this, I decided to liberate myself from everything at once. I noticed that since this incident the whole camp hated Potato still more. But at the same time neither the butchers nor their victims disguised their fear. And one day, after surgeon Sofiya Levina had stitched my vein and the wound had quickly begun to heal, I thought that the situation was absurd. On the one hand, for the sake of my children I had overcome myself and realised that for

me death would be a betrayal of my sons. On the other hand, by my silence I was consenting to die of the pain which this real monster was inflicting on me every day…"

"So what did you do?"

"Usually I tried to keep out of Potato's way. Every time she would catch me unawares when I wasn't expecting it. I would creep about as quietly as a cat. Then one day, catching sight of her on our waste-ground, I went up to her myself. The camp inmates watched what was happening transfixed. Remembering how she had come up to me with a smile on her face, I looked at Potato with merry eyes, beaming like the sun at midday. She looked at me with undisguised amazement.

"I flew at her with outstretched hands, recalling how the day before she had used her usual method on a newcomer who had just arrived in camp. A well-aimed sharp blow to the stomach, the victim bent double, writhing with pain, and then a powerful blow to the breast. Incidentally the victim was a beautiful Russian woman. She was called Tanya. Afterwards we became like sisters.

"I had so clearly seen this whole horror, this unfortunate woman, that I felt the pain in my own stomach and breast. To cut a long story short, I was right in front of Potato. I reached out both hands to her. She leaned slightly towards me. I took hold of the collar of her tunic by both sides and sharply pulled her towards me. With my forehead, or maybe the crown of my head, I struck her in the face with all my strength. I thought I heard the loud sound of the blow, which caught her right on the nose. The prisoners gasped. Lanky Potato collapsed onto the ground like yesterday's newcomer and as I had done a few weeks back."

"My God!" I exclaimed. "And what happened to this monster?"

"You won't believe it. The main thing is that nothing happened to me. Nobody raised a finger against me. I realised that all the guards on that day experienced something like happiness, not to mention my poor friends. It seems that Potato's nose was broken in several places. She needed to have an operation. And at that time the only doctor in camp was Sofiya Levina."

"Was Potato conscious?"

"It took Levina a long time to bring her round. Her nose had been turned into a pulp. Just a bulky piece of meat stuck on her face. When she came round from her concussion, Dr Levina told her she needed an urgent operation, otherwise she would be disfigured forever. And she added that without nurse Diamond she could not carry out the operation."

"And did Potato agree?"

"She not only agreed, but she said that when she was working in the central leadership of the GULAG she had heard about me."

"And that was enough for her?"

"I don't know. She agreed because she had no choice."

"And where did you learn to fight with your noddle? That's what as children we used to call it."

Mum laughed. She was surprised, not so much that in the Stepanakert of my childhood this form of street fighting was known, as at the very term "noddle".

"And I thought that my friend in an earlier camp, Roza Sharafutdinova, who was an expert in forms of unarmed combat, had imported this term from her native Tatar language."

"Well, and how was the operation?"

"I have to say that Sofiya Levina was a very good surgeon. Her husband had a different surname. I can't remember it. I know that he was a famous therapist and he was accused of causing Maxim Gorki's death. She also had two sons, but they were much older than you and Boris. As for the operation it was completely successful. But we never found out how Potato looked with her restored nose. We heard that her relative high up in the GULAG had been removed from his post, and she was transferred somewhere else. And soon we all forgot about her.

"All that remained in my memory was the pain in my breast and stomach, a pain which lasted for a long time. I even think that my illness is a result of those blows. I can say that after I punished her, my hatred of her passed. I even began to feel sorry for her. What's more, I'm grateful to her that after this it became easier for me and I didn't think about death any more. I realised that you can have the right to die only when nobody depends on you. I also understood that I needed not just to survive, but to live without any right to die. I knew that I must return to my sons. But what was really terrible was that none of us camp wives believed that we would ever see our husbands. For we knew that if any of them had survived after 1947 they were forbidden to go home. I told you about that."

"Yes, mum, I remember."

* * *

There is no escape from the vicissitudes and laws of nature and of life. The older a person gets, the more often he goes to funerals, which are invariably preceded by visits to hospitals where family and friends are patients. But what happened to our family from New Year 1998 cannot be compared with anything that went before. Simultaneously two of the people dearest and nearest to my heart fell seriously ill: mum and Valeri Marutyan – my friend, my wife's brother, founder of the military medical service and of military field surgery in Karabakh and author of the book "*War has long consequences*", a heroic chronicle of the Karabakh movement and an account of the moral heroism of the front-line medics. Both were struck by the same fatal illness: cancer.

Valeri was well known not just in Karabakh and Armenia, but also in Russia and the Armenian diaspora throughout the world. News of his illness brought many offers from various countries to send Valeri to them for treatment. It was agreed to send him to the Pasteur Clinic in Paris. They stubbornly fought for his life. He truly suffered the torments of Tantalus. As a result of radiotherapy and chemotherapy he wasted away – he was in a state of total exhaustion. He was nothing but skin and bones and the pain in all his limbs did not cease for a moment.

Valeri was dying in Stepanakert and mum in Yerevan. From the very start mum had given Boris and me an ultimatum: no radio or chemotherapy or "I'll kill myself and you will suffer for it all your lives." To be honest, her insidious disease was already at such a stage that radiotherapy and especially chemotherapy would not only have been useless, but would have increased her suffering. The doctors themselves, including the famous cancer specialist Airo Galstyan, had no intention of resorting to such methods of treatment, which are capable of saving patients' lives if there is an early diagnosis.

Nobody was to blame that mum's disease was so far advanced – neither us her sons, nor mum herself. Up till the time when mum felt pain in the abdomen she had not felt any unpleasant sensations and there had been no stomach problems. Of course, in such cases one must blame the state for the absence of any civilised principles, that is regular medical check-ups and examinations for the early diagnosis of particular diseases. But in the wartime conditions in Armenia all this was totally unrealistic.

With Valeri things were a bit different. All of us, family and friends, agreed unequivocally with the recommendations of the French doctors. The only hope lay in the straw that the drowning person catches hold of. We understood the importance and seriousness of the principle that the famous Dale Carnegie enunciated. He called it "accepting the inevitable". Without going against this principle, I swung like a pendulum between Yerevan and Stepanakert. Between mum and Valeri.

* * *

The worse mum's condition became, the more she mentioned father. She didn't say directly that the time was not far off when she would at last meet her husband again, with whom she had lived for only four years and had loved faithfully for the remaining sixty-one years of her life. We could see that she seriously came to a faith that they would meet soon, very soon. The only thing that bothered her was not knowing where he had died. She didn't believe the reports that he died in a logging camp when a tree fell on his head, just as she didn't believe that this accident had taken place in the Komi republic. Knowing of these doubts that tormented her I risked asking:

"Why do you so stubbornly refuse to accept the official papers which were sent to you even before the war?"

"You see, at that time I thought that the authorities were just mocking us. Five of the sixteen or eighteen people who shared the same misfortune were told that their husbands had been killed by falling trees. Yet these people were all in different geographical zones. What kind of universal logging camp was it? What kind of strange coincidences! And it was madame Arusyak, the wife of the chairman of the regional executive committee, the most experienced and clever of us, who once said that she didn't believe all these tales. Such coincidences don't happen, she said. And since then I also stopped believing them. And at the same time I stopped believing the place where it was said to have happened – the wretched Komi republic."

"Mum, if you had even once shown me all these papers, I would have started searching long ago."

"All the time I was afraid for you and Boris. And I'm still afraid."

"What is there to be afraid of now? That country no longer even exists."

"Of course, that's true. But the past leaves deep wounds. And my comrades in misfortune and I had our own view on everything. What's more, two people who were held in the Bailov prison and in Shushi at the same time as Haik told me that they had seen your father in Siberia. So, Haik could be buried anywhere in the huge territory of the GULAG."

"I think these two people saw father for the last time in prison in Azerbaijan and not in Siberia. From prison they were all transported to different destinations and none of them knew exactly where anyone was being sent."

"I don't know, son, I know nothing at all. Sometimes I think of my uncle Gigo, sometimes I see Haik in a dream – so radiant and young. And sometimes, I'm ashamed to admit, I dream of Stalin himself. I wake up and I'm cross because I didn't say to him all that I should have. Then for a long time I can't get back to sleep and I think how unjust it is that the graves of millions of people are totally unknown and the chief executioner is lying in the centre of Moscow in the place of greatest honour. And people walk past, as if that's where he ought to be.

"I understand that one mustn't insult the feelings of citizens of the older generation who believed in Stalin and have managed to preserve that faith. I think that we can wait before doing anything decisive. But there should be a sense of justice too, shouldn't there? Do you remember, about half a year ago you told me that you had seen old Bolsheviks receiving children into the pioneers below a portrait of Stalin (and sometimes with a bust of Lenin in the background). Isn't that simply dangerous?"

I had never before heard anything of the kind from mum. I noticed that during her monologue she didn't get breathless and didn't even look tired. She obviously wanted to continue the conversation. It was as if she felt that she would not manage to speak everything on her mind and tell of the things that previously had been subject to a self-imposed taboo, a strict ban.

Mum was unrecognisable. At the height of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and especially during the session of the First Congress of USSR People's Deputies, she was glued to the television. This was the time when *glasnost* and the ending of censorship opened the door to state archives and personal manuscripts which had

languished for decades on closed shelves and in desk drawers. Everything at once poured onto the pages of the newspapers and took over the television screens.

The three-million print run of the "*Literary Gazette*" became six million. The "*Spark*" magazine stopped printing glossy photographs of party leaders and in every issue tried to convince its readers that there would be no exceptions to the formula "sooner or later everything secret will come into the open". New terms like "popular democracy" appeared. New names immediately became idols. Among them was my friend Andrei Nuikin, whom mum was very fond of.

She was never far from the television and on her desk there were always fresh newspapers and magazines. This was a time when for hours every day on television there were Brazilian soap-operas that were something Soviet viewers were not at all used to and seances by latter-day psychics and all kinds of charlatans and practitioners of magic. Mum watched them too. But she had a pretty critical attitude to them.

As for the October Revolution, Lenin, Stalin, Beria, the GULAG, Khrushchev, the trial of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Belovezhye agreement on the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States and suchlike, all these things attracted her. After the denunciation and execution of Beria, after Khrushchev's secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, after she had given evidence at the trial of Bagirov in 1957, mum believed that only a few people were responsible for everything. After all, it was after Stalin's death and especially after the Twentieth Congress that the authority of Lenin and the revolution grew. Mum told me about the celebrations in Uzbekistan in 1967 for the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution and in 1970 for the Lenin centenary. At the time I was living on Kamchatka, and I remember well what it was like. It was some kind of shamanism.

But mum was always afraid of shamanism. And she couldn't help reflecting on what was happening. How could three monsters, even with the help of a whole host of cut-throats, destroy millions of people? And it was under Lenin that it all started. Which way was he looking? Portrayed as such a wise, brilliant, honest and kind man, a universal granddad, did he really not know anything or see anything?

And one day she said to me: "You know, I wasn't actually at all surprised. I don't believe that *perestroika* opened my eyes. After all, I knew all this very well. And I decided that the whole truth must definitely be made public. Admittedly, one must take care not to offend those who don't want to believe the facts. People don't like to think that they have been deceived. They are not guilty. They are victims too. But when they receive children into the pioneers under Stalin's portrait, that's awful. Because it is not just a question of tomorrow, but of the tragedy possibly continuing."

That night I couldn't get to sleep. I was tormented by thoughts about what we had discussed with mum. A month later I wrote an article in the "*Independent Gazette*". And after mum died I included it in the book "*The Abyss*". In the book the article was called "*Executioner and Victim*". Without mum this article would not have been written. I discussed with her the events, quotations and examples which were used in it. Therefore I want to return to it now in an abbreviated form.

The reader can find this material in the appendix to this book.

* * *

Early one morning I went to mum's hospital room with the chief doctor Ara Minasyan. Ara was about to reach for the door handle when the door opened and a nurse appeared in the doorway. Seeing us she was embarrassed and said quietly: "Aunty Gohar is sleeping." We went in on tip-toe. On the white pillow mum's face with the carefully combed shock of red hair was clearly visible. Ara said almost inaudibly:

"I'll go just now. I'll be back soon."

Noticing a book at the head of mum's bed I went and picked up the volume. There was a pen tucked inside. It was my book "*Between Hell and Paradise*". There's a lot about mum in it. It had happened automatically, quite naturally. It was a documentary book, about the Karabakh movement and the war. I wrote what I had seen. I copied it from my notebooks. I had a tradition of going to see mum with all my visitors. I've already mentioned this often. But I had an idea: to go through all the parts that were about mum, to make sure I didn't miss anything out of the book that was devoted to mum. I opened the book where mum had been reading.

"In Karabakh there was a bitter war. Villages in Armenia itself were under constant bombardment. There were endless raids against the Armenian villages in Karabakh. Thousands of new refugees, whose pain was added to the tragic fate of hundreds of thousands of unfortunates after the earthquake in Armenia, the cynical juggling with facts, misleading information in the media and especially on central television, all this was a weight on the social psychology of the nation. Our hope was in the legendary free spirit of the Karabakh people and their incredible determination. My mum's brother died in Tashkent. She was going to go to the funeral, but she sat down on her old suitcase and said quietly: 'The neighbours will think that I have left, that I have run away from all the worry and fear. And you, my son, will also be anxious about me. Aram will understand and forgive.' No, the people of Karabakh will not give up, I thought as I looked at mum taking her things out of the suitcase."

While mum was asleep I leafed through the book, indeed coming across episodes involving her. "In 1991-92 mum's legs often hurt. Or as she put it, the 'damned legs' were a reminder of the camps. Once or twice a week I flew to Yerevan and back by helicopter. One day I suggested to mum that she come with me to see a specialist. 'You can get treatment and come back,' I said. 'But you don't know,' she began softly, setting the table for tea, 'that all kinds of people frequently phone me. They need to make sure that I'm home, in Stepanakert. I get rest from the phone calls only at night when we take refuge in the cellars. No, there's no way I can go away now. People will say, if your mum has left that means that the situation is hopeless. And it's terrible when people lose hope. In fact you should know for yourself: there is nothing more terrible than the feeling of being doomed…'."

Suddenly my wretched mobile phone rang. These magical communication devices had only just come into fashion and we had not yet got used to the fact that they can ring at the most awkward time in the most inconvenient places.

Mum opened her eyes. Seeing me, she beamed.

"Have you been here long?"

"Not very long. I came with Ara. He'll be back soon. And I picked up my book and was reading it. Where did you get the Russian edition from?"

"Our orderly brought it. She's a refugee from Sumgait. She asked me to get you to sign it. And then I began reading through it, and continually found episodes involving me. I read one such place. I sobbed. I put the book aside. And fell asleep. I don't even know how long I was asleep for. But I remember well what I dreamed about."

"Did you dream of Stalin again?"

"I'd love to bury him."

"He's already been buried twice."

"A hundred times wouldn't be enough. But I don't want to talk about him. I dreamed about Kyatuk. It seems, during the night I wanted to drink, and I dreamed that I was leaning over the spring in Kyatuk. I drank and drank and just couldn't drink my fill. It tasted so good that I wanted more and more…"

I immediately had an idea and so as not to give myself away, I decided to quickly change the subject. I smiled at mum, then looked at the book with which our conversation had begun and said:

"You could well have signed the book yourself. So much is written about you in it. I think it would be well within your rights. And I know what you were reading today."

"Then tell me."

"About uncle Aram."

"You really do have telepathy!"

"Not at all, it's just that there was a pen tucked in at that page."

"I was crying."

"I know."

"Can you see it from my face?"

"No."

"Then how did you realise?"

"It's just that I know you a little bit. By the way, it turns out that in this book the same subject comes up twice. How you refused to leave Stepanakert."

"You have to agree that the reason for that was very serious. You are a People's Deputy of the USSR, with one foot in Moscow and the other in Stepanakert. Everyone knows that you are fully in the picture about events. And, of course, if you get your mum out of there on the quiet, it means that something has happened. People would expect the worst. You need to understand how people think. Everybody has children, everybody has elderly mothers. And on top of that crowds of refugees from the villages converge on Stepanakert – even though the town is being shelled from Shushi. You can't help wondering what tomorrow holds for you. And in that case people need not just hope but information. Why, do you think, did I need to look with my own eyes at the cover sheet of my case notes?"

"To be informed."

"Exactly. And it's the same with everything. Uncertainty frightens people."

"You always notice everything, mum. By the way, I have inherited this gift or failing. So you can be proud."

"And you can be glad!" she responded.

There was a quiet knock at the door and Sergei Vantsyan and Grisha Mirzoyan appeared. The legendary pilot and the deputy mayor of Yerevan.

"The hunted comes to the hunter," I said embracing Sergei, Armenia's number one helicopter pilot. With hindsight I must note how vital our helicopter pilots were during the war and how, alas, they have been forgotten today.

"Ready to fly at once!" smiled Sergei Vantsyan.

"I wouldn't mind flying with you," Grisha joined the conversation. "I have a few things to do in Stepanakert and at the same time I could visit Valeri Marutyan."

Mum suddenly lifted herself in bed and blurted out loudly:

"Grisha-*djan*, you didn't put it very well. Valeri is not someone you go to see 'at the same time'. You need to make a special trip to see Valeri specially."

Grisha immediately raised both hands and came close to mum.

"You're right, aunty Gohar, I didn't say it the right way. He's not just anybody. I know Valeri well. We've been friends since kindergarten.

He and mum continued a lengthy conversation and I took the opportunity standing at the window to reveal my secret quietly to Sergei.

"You know, I do need to fly to Stepanakert urgently."

"Is Valeri in a bad way?"

"Valeri is very unwell. Two close people at once are on the verge of leaving us. They're literally competing, who will go first. If only I could take their pain on myself. This morning mum said that she had dreamed of Kyatuk. That's where all her ancestors are buried. And I understand why recently she has been mentioning Kyatuk a lot. She's been dreaming of her relatives buried there. Quite recently she confessed to me that earlier she didn't give any thought to the fact that her mother, brother, sisters and nephews are all buried on foreign soil, mostly in the Altai and in Central Asia. Now it bothers her – she says if it were possible she would move them

all home. And today she dreamed of drinking water from Kyatuk. She says it tasted very good. And I had the idea, what about flying straight to Kyatuk, filling a bottle with water and getting back by evening…"

"Let's do it. I'll fly too. By the way, take off is in one hour. Once more we're taking a delegation from the OSCE. They flew in from Baku yesterday. And a flight is booked for them at eleven zero zero. They're coming back this evening. So, we can all fly together."

"That's good that we'll have time to spare. I returned from Stepanakert only the day before yesterday. I visited Valeri. I have a premonition…"

Ara Minasyan come into the room and I told him of our unexpected plans, asking him to phone me in Stepanakert if anything happened.

* * *

I didn't tell even Boris about my plans to make an urgent trip to Karabakh, or rather to Kyatuk, just in case he gave the game away. There was no need for mum to know about this operation which I code-named for myself "dream in hand".

The OSCE staff turned out to be very punctual people. They were at the airport at eleven precisely. To be honest I wasn't that interested in them any more. They changed often. And no sooner had one lot grasped the situation than they were quickly replaced with new people. As a rule, these people had only a vague idea about what had happened just a few years before. Most of them had heard of Baku and Sumgait, but they presumed that it had happened a long time ago, in Soviet times. And if that was the case, then these events could be safely forgotten.

A pretty young woman with sad eyes travelled with us. Her son was sitting beside her with a wooden leg stretched out stiffly in front of him. Sergei and I tried our best to get them to talk, struggling to make ourselves heard above the noise of the helicopter. The young man had lost his leg in spring 1996 during an exchange of fire with the Azeris. The lad was happy because in Yerevan he had been promised a new artificial leg in a month's time that would be three times lighter than the wooden one.

I had an idea of what might cheer up the distressed woman and I leaned towards her and said:

"You know, when you got into the helicopter, I thought you were this lad's sister."

The woman indeed gave a broad smile. And her eyes became wide and bright. Sergei immediately noticed the happy face of the young mother and simply wept from happiness. At the end of our conversation she told us that they would soon celebrate her son's wedding and invited us to the festivities. We learned that the son intended to dance the whole evening with his bride.

When we landed, she asked me about mum's health. And then she turned to Sergei and thanked him that the helicopter pilots had saved her son. If they had not arrived in time the doctors would hardly have been able to save his life. "So, every day I pray for your helicopter pilots," she said, "and my husband considers Sergei Vantsyan to be a guardian angel."

Several cars pulled up by the helicopter. The young men who were now officials of the government and ministry of foreign affairs of the Nagorny Karabakh republic got out of them. They greeted the guests, sat them in the cars and set off at speed. That meant that everything was well prepared for the talks. I knew from experience that when the visitors needed to fly back the same day all the work had to be completed especially efficiently so that they could be back at the airport at least two hours before sunset. Those were the instructions for flying in the mountains, although, to be honest our pilots had flown at night and in snowstorms and even in fog. Sergei and I climbed back on board and in five minutes we were in Kyatuk.

* * *

We were expected in Kyatuk. A few people had gathered at the village spring (if the feeble trickle could be called a spring). Among them I recognised at once Misha Danielyan and Valeri Mirzoyan, both of them, by the way, among the defenders of Karabakh who had carried out many heroic feats and honestly fulfilled their duty.

We were in a hurry. We wanted to get to visit Valeri as well. Having filled two bottles with Kyatuk water, we headed to the cemetery, picking wild flowers along the way. I chased away the thought that mum's fate was sealed and that soon we would be coming back to this cemetery. But I could not leave Kyatuk without visiting the grave of my grandfather David.

… Sergei was very fond of Valeri Marutyan. Actually, everybody liked Valeri. He wasn't just the chief surgeon of the army, not just the creator of the public health system, who had built forty hospitals across the country, not just a doctor, who with his team had performed in those years over ten thousand operations – and about eighty percent of the wounded had returned to the battlefield – but he was also an upright, sociable and very jolly person. He wrote poetry and articles. He published a wonderful book about the heroic military medics and dedicated it to the memory of the fallen doctors and nurses. Realising that he would have to treat his patients for many years after the end of the fighting, he philosophically called his book "*War has long consequences*".

Valeri had got so thin that Sergei did not recognise him immediately. And Valeri straight away drew attention to it. Smiling with difficulty he said:

"Don't worry, Sergei-*djan*. I recognised you OK. What's more, this morning I was thinking of you and your lads. And lo and behold, you come in…"

"I couldn't not come to see you, Valeri-*djan*…"

"Well, this morning I was thinking that if it was not for you and your lads half of our wounded would not have survived. In my mind I began to calculate and had a horrible thought. About two or three divisions would not have returned to the front line – or to their families."

"Valeri," I said, "you cannot imagine what a brilliant idea you have just given me."

"I'm sure it's not the first," he nodded sagely. "I just don't understand why you always doubt my brilliance?"

"Ever since I married your sister, I have never doubted the special talent of all the Marutyans. But there's only one genius…"

"Your mother-in-law, Margarita Marutyan!" – Sergei interrupted.

It was a joy to see the smiling faces of my friends. Such happy moments are rare these days. We still faced a not so happy conversation about Valeri's health. But he knew all about it better than any of us.

… The helicopter landed at Yerevan's Erebuni airport at seven thirty. It was the middle of June 1998. There was still time before sunset, but the meetings of the OSCE staff with officials in Yerevan were to continue late into the evening.

We hurried in Sergei Vantsyan's car to the hospital, carrying in a red plastic bag our two bottles of water from Kyatuk, a mulberry twig with yellowish berries that were not yet quite ripe, a handful of Cornelian cherries, pinecones and hawthorn berries. Ara Minasyan was waiting for us at the entrance.

* * *

In the lift Sergei asked:

"How are you going to begin this ceremony?"

"To be honest, I don't know."

Of course, mum had no idea that Sergei and I had managed to fly to Kyatuk and back. Although during the war she had often seen the pilots flying up to three times a day between Yerevan and Stepanakert. And just as often when flying helicopters, especially after the YaK planes stopped flying from June 1992. So, after the liberation of Shushi all military and medical flights were made in the MI-8 workhorses. Admittedly, I had not phoned her once during the day and that could have prompted her to imagine that something was up. All the same, I think it would have been impossible for her to guess…

Mum was not asleep. She was waiting for us.

"Guess what we've brought you," I said as soon as I entered the room.

She smiled slyly and said quietly:

"Water…"

I looked at Sergei and saw the amazement in his eyes. We both thought that someone had given us away. We both looked at Ara. Poor Ara shrugged his shoulders and began to justify himself: "After you left I didn't see aunty Gohar."

"And where have we brought you water from?" I asked.

"From Kuchak," mum answered confidently, "it's the coldest and best tasting water in Armenia. I know."

We all three breathed a sigh of relief. So, she had felt that we would bring her water, but the thought that we could bring it from Kyatuk had not entered her head. I took the plastic bag from Sergei, got out the bottles of water, put them on the bedside unit, sat down beside mum and began briskly: "Now I shall take a few things out of this bag and show them to you, and you guess where the water has come from."

I took out the tiny twig with the still unripe greeny-yellow mulberries. She took it in her dry hands. The smile went from her face, replaced by a look of great concentration. Clearly she had expected anything but mulberries. In the total silence of the hospital room, I took out five or six Cornelian cherries. They were still quite green and tiny, like humming bird's eggs. I dropped them onto her outstretched palm. Mum was still silent. But I was sure that she had guessed where our bottles of water had come from – she just hadn't yet made up her mind to say something definite. For her it would have been a defeat if she got it wrong. I got out of the bag the tiny hawthorn beads. The serious look left mum's face and she smiled broadly. I thought I had not felt so happy for a long time. I knew that I would never forget this smile on mum's sunken face with the protruding cheekbones and the dark rings under her eyes. But, to tell the truth, I didn't notice any of that at this moment. I saw the happy and beautiful mum that she had become for these few minutes.

Boris came into the room and not suspecting anything began loudly telling us something or other. Seeing her younger son, mum smiled even more and said loudly, very loudly:

"Of course, the water is from Kyatuk."

The room filled with noise, shrieks and laughter. Ara offered her a glass and I opened a bottle and poured some water. Mum took a sip, unable to hide her tears. The room again filled with noise. Everyone was talking at once. Mum drank thirstily. Then she looked intently at Sergei and said:

"I was wondering why Vantsyan was here again. Wasn't he here this morning? Didn't they leave together? So, they flew by helicopter…"

Then she looked at Ara and sighed barely audibly:

"Now that I have drunk this water from Kyatuk, God himself tells me you should discharge me. I need to go home. I'll drink up all this water and you will discharge me, my dear friend. Enough is enough. From here, straight to Kyatuk, if only for a couple of nights. I'll sleep under the stars." She took a few more sips and looked at me, as though she had a lot to tell me. She was happy and there was no hiding it. And why should one hide it? I often remembered her words that a person can feel happiness even in the bitterest moments of life, even on the way to the grave.

* * *

That evening I sat with mum till late. She kept on asking me about Kyatuk and informed me with a sense of pride that that everywhere in Karabakh in the middle of June the mulberry groves smell of the ripe berries, but in Kyatuk and Shushi this amber season comes later. Admittedly, I guessed that mum was detaining me not just to talk about Kyatuk. And I wasn't mistaken. Mum took from under her pillow a typed sheet of paper folded in four and slowly unfolded it.

"What, has your iron memory begun to fade?"

"It's nothing to do with my memory. It's just that everything needs to be in order. I have a few questions, and maybe suggestions. First of all I wrote the word God. That is to say that I am very grateful to God that I still don't have any particularly severe pain. That's because in the vicinity of this abomination there are no nerve stems or bundles. And I'm grateful to God for that because otherwise I would have disgraced myself. I couldn't have stood the pain. And I can imagine the problems and worries that I would have caused you all."

"Well, mum, let's thank God together that you are not suffering severe pains. What you experienced in Siberia is enough."

"That's exactly what my second point is about. You used to bring me the '*Spark*' magazine where they often wrote about Stalin. I read it all. And I understood a lot of things. Or clarified them for myself afresh. But there is one question which still torments me: why did Stalin need to continue to destroy innocent people when he had already made himself god? I can understand that rulers kill people in their entourage in order to have a firmer grip on power. But surely he realised that he had absolute power. And it all happened on the eve of the war which he must have been expecting. Let's suppose that he was looking for a way to appease Hitler. But then why was he such a monster after the victory? After all, there was nobody who could possibly even come near to ousting him."

I listened to my dying mum and my heart was breaking. My God, what was it that she was she thinking about in her last days? What was it that was troubling her? And yet probably she wasn't alone in struggling with these accursed questions: why, oh why, shouldn't there be some change in our attitude to the past? How? Is it possible for every person, regardless of their own life-history and view of the world, to allow themselves to evaluate long-distant events and personalities and finally to live their lives relying on their own principles and today's realities? And how could I, her son, answer mum's complex questions?

"You know, mum, I think that all this is not a matter of concern just for you. And not just for those who were victims of Stalin and his repression. These questions can probably be considered of concern to academics. Historians, psychologists and philosophers are examining them. When it is announced that the great terror of 1937 was started by Stalin in order to strengthen his monopoly on power in face of the inevitability of war or because of his psychiatric state, it seems to me that these are primitive answers. After all, by 1937 his power was many times greater than that of all the Caesars and Pharaohs put together. Any opponents who had any weight or popularity, beginning with Trotsky and ending with Bukharin, had already been rendered harmless.

"As for paranoia or manic-depressive psychosis, to a greater or lesser extent they occur in many people who, though without talent in any particular area of activity, nevertheless stop at nothing to achieve power. And they are capable of considerable success. I think Stalin had his own logic for the mass destruction of people, especially at the end of the thirties. But you are tired now and we won't talk about it today."

"No, I want to talk…"

"I'll say just one thing. Stalin's whole logic boiled down to the fact that if by now he had become god, he had to liquidate those who had previously known him well: the people who had had the opportunity to observe him closely and had noticed his innate cowardice, which is considered to be the mother of cruelty.

"And one more thing: Stalin realised that it was not just the people he met at work and in his daily life who knew him. All ordinary literate, educated and observant people must have known the truth about him. Not to mention philosophers and analysts, who, even if they did not speak their mind out loud, could nevertheless not be forbidden by anyone to think for themselves. He understood very well that the whole of Marxist-Leninist theory boiled down to seizure of power by the force of arms. Life showed that anything else led to hunger and dissatisfaction. He couldn't renounce Marxism-Leninism, to which I should like to add Stalinism. That meant that to stay on the throne he needed dogmas that enlightened people don't believe in. And if they don't believe in them, they have to be either destroyed or isolated. That's the maths… Right, mum, I'm going. You really are tired. Get some sleep. I'll come tomorrow and you can reveal your other notes. Probably the day after tomorrow I'll fly to Karabakh. Valeri is in a bad way."

"Wouldn't it be great if I could be discharged the day after tomorrow."

"Be patient just a little longer. I need to do a few things there. You can't just head off to a village where nobody lives apart from a few people in their summer cottages."

"*Tsavyt tanem*!"

* * *

That night I could not shut my eyes for a long time. I thought about my lack of common sense in supplying mum with such quantities of literature about the GULAG. Admittedly, it never occurred to me that she would study all these materials as though she was writing a dissertation. Before I went to bed I rummaged in my notebooks for a long time until at last I found what I was looking for – an article not by a professional historian, but by doctor of applied mathematics Sergei Dzyuba. In my view, he has defined better than anyone the logic of the mass destruction of Stalin's own citizens, his own friends and even his direct relatives. In the article I had underlined one sentence: "Stalin's logic is reminiscent of the logic of a criminal who is forced to destroy everyone who knows about his crime."

It seems as though everything is clear and logical. However, for decades we considered this logic to be absurd. Remember, after the Twentieth Party Congress – or rather after Party and Communist Youth League members listened to the text of Khrushchev's report at their local party meetings – people were surprised, apart from everything else, at how Stalin had put forward the absurd thesis that the class struggle would intensify the more socialism was built. Of course, it was absurd. But you need to understand the man who knew very well that if he didn't set the classes against each other he would not be able to hold onto power. For example, would it really have been possible to achieve collectivisation (creating collective farms) without setting the poorest elements (more often than not idlers and drunkards) against the rich peasants (the "*kulaks*", i.e. as a rule those who had been landowners for more than one generation and thanks to whom Russia was not only self-sufficient in grain but sold it abroad).

… All this had to come out: for all her life mum had kept her silence. She had hidden from her sons what was tormenting her soul year in year out, day in day out. Above all she was afraid to talk about our father. Obviously, she had become a victim of Stalinism because of our father. If she had not been the wife of an "enemy of the people", if her sixteen best friends had not been the wives of "enemies of the people", she would hardly have ended up in the camps. Without exception, all sixteen of these women were sentenced for some criminal offence and the label "family member of a

traitor" was an aggravating circumstance. Among these sixteen women were three nurses, four teachers, one head of a kindergarten and two were sales assistants in bread shops. I couldn't find any information on the others. But they all had "double sentences", "plus article 58", as it was said.

The two sales assistants were arrested on the same day, almost at the same hour. Bread was rationed. The loaves were weighed, because they were not of a standard weight. (I remember coming home with loaves with an extra piece to make up the weight. And none of us dared to eat the extra piece on the way.) This is how it happened: unexpectedly a man in the queue demanded that the bread be weighed again. Nobody in the queue dared to protest, even though maybe someone had seen him putting the extra piece in his pocket. Both women had four children – by the way, this is why the head of the town's commerce department had decided to give them jobs. Undoubtedly he too suffered as a result.

The hygiene nurse, Knarik Meliksetyan, wife of the arrested regional party committee lecturer Movses Meliksetyan, was sentenced because a number of children in the kindergarten got dysentery. The kindergarten teacher Farandzem Ovagimyan, also the wife of an enemy of the people, was put on trial with her.

Mum, a young and inexperienced nurse, was the assistant of gynaecologist Astghik Hakopyan who had come from Baku. The decree banning abortion had just been issued. But there were still circumstances when pregnancies needed to be terminated, though, of course, only in people's homes. A woman died. Mum was arrested and sent to Shushi prison. By a tragic coincidence she was housed in the same cell number eight where father had been held in 1937.

… In May 1992, immediately after the liberation of Shushi, I headed to the prison and, of course, went into that very same cell. Apparently, when the numbers being arrested were growing every day, it was decided to expand the premises of the prison. It was at this time that cell number eight became part of the women's section. Together with Caroline Cox, the deputy speaker of the British House of Lords, we laid flowers in the cell…

… For a long time our relatives knew no details about mum's arrest. But even then we knew that in the course of three weeks almost all the wives of "enemies of the people" who had occupied high positions were arrested. And all this happened in a huge country at the height of a war that would change the destiny of the world – in 1943.

In the summer of 1966 I spent my long summer holidays from Kamchatka in Stepanakert. I was told by S. Sarkisyan, the husband of the woman who had died after the abortion, how the issue of the defendant's two sons had been raised even before the court reached its decision. Apparently, according to both written and unwritten laws, in such cases the children were usually sent to children's homes.

The "father of the nations" had thought it all out: children who were orphaned should be brought up under the supervision of the state. This was presented as an especially noble act, as the concern of the "best friend of children". But in fact it was a matter of caution: barely audibly, secretly behind closed doors, relatives were from time to time bound to tell the children about their parents who had been found guilty in spite of being innocent. Stalin could not fail to be afraid of the sons of enemies of the people. And it was not by chance that he devised for their comfort the cunning slogan: "The son does not answer for the deeds of the father." He was simply creating loyal citizens.

My conversation with S. Sarkisyan took place under a mulberry tree. My readers should not be surprised that my heroes are so often found beneath mulberry trees. In Karabakh I don't think you could find a single village where a fine mulberry tree is not growing at the entrance to every house. It's a long tradition. The mulberry tree is a symbol of life and guardian of health. It's not just the honey-sweet berries, not just the *chamich* (dried berries) which in winter fill the pockets of the old women in Karabakh in their national costume. They always treated their grandsons to these

divine candies. The mulberry tree is also a source of work for local people. For decades the key enterprise in Stepanakert was the famous silk factory. And finally the mulberry is a pharmacy with its legendary mulberry vodka and *doshab* mulberry jam.

Now beneath a mulberry tree there was a conversation with a man on whom once hung the fate of the young sons of an "enemy of the people". He knew very well that mum would definitely be sent to Siberia together with the other wives of enemies of the people. Apparently, deliberately or otherwise, he also managed to save the doctor, who wasn't a relative of an "enemy of the people". The judges also realised that while mum was doomed to an inevitable "double" sentence, there was absolutely no need to drag the doctor into it as well (there were such humane judges). Mum just needed to keep quiet. To save her sons from the awful children's home she was prepared not just to keep quiet but even to cut off her tongue. The man who so nobly confessed to me under the mulberry tree did all that he could do at that time. And, although he was, so to speak, from the side of the victim, he tried not to cause anyone any unnecessary grief. I shall never forget the heroism of this noble man. I often put flowers on the grave of this truly noble man, the son of an Armenian priest, who saved me and my younger brother.

Once, already after mum's death, I told Boris this story. And then Boris remembered that once in Andizhan mum and her sister Anna had mentioned this same midwife named either Astghik or Hasmik who had lived in Stepanakert for another year or two. Then she moved to her relatives in Baku. Boris recalled that after she was released from camp mum visited her more than once. The last time was in 1955.

From the many conversations of my father's sisters, I picked up snippets about how mum had behaved at the trial. Aunt Zanazan and aunt Ashkhen used to come to Stepanakert from father's home village of Agorti and, of course, they stayed overnight with us, that is with their elder sister Sofya. Granddad Markos slept on the balcony even in winter. They rented out one room to the family of an officer from the Stepanakert regiment. In the other room I slept on the ottoman. While I was falling asleep all kinds of whispered information reached me. That's how I became firmly aware that in the first days of the trial mum was very morose and silent. And suddenly, towards the end, it was as though a different person had been substituted for her. Nobody could understand what had happened. Father's sisters even went so far as to think that their sister-in-law had gone out of her mind. No wonder, they said: the fate of her children was in the balance. And I remember thinking: mum is where it is very cold and on top of that she's gone mad. At that time we didn't know the word camp, let alone the GULAG, just Siberia, where it was very cold.

And now, already with my beard gone grey, collecting materials about mum, I understood what had happened to her then at the end of the trial. It really was enough to drive you to madness. They told her that her children could be left in the care of her husband's sisters only if all the required conditions were fulfilled. The court had the right to do that. They researched what was feasible and the living conditions and the upbringing that relatives could offer and made their decision. It was wartime, those who were killed were considered heroes. That was what they said: "Died a hero's death." At the very beginning of the war Ashkhen's eldest son Ashot had been killed and a year later two more brothers, Artashes and Artavazd. Zanazan's son Akbar had been killed and her other son Mamikon was serving at the front. So our relatives should not have been surprised that mum stopped seeming morose in court. She even cheered up in a way. And why not, when it was going to work out that her children could stay with relatives and not be taken off to some distant place. The family then did not even suspect what was going on in her mind.

* * *

Mum insisted that I should take her directly from the hospital to Karabakh. Once she even said that I should not force her to speak about death. I understood what thoughts were going round in her head. It was time, at last, to leave the hospital and go to Stepanakert or even to Kyatuk, in order to save her sons the problems involved in transporting her body from the one city to the other along the bad and long road. And another thing: she so wanted before she died to breathe "the air of childhood" (her own words).

"Mum, I'll go to Stepanakert and in two or three days I'll come back for you," I told her early in the morning on 14 June 1998. "Valeri is in a bad way."

"*Es ira tsavyt tanem* – if only I could take on his pain," mum whispered barely audibly.

"Nelly will go with me."

"That's the right thing to do, my son."

… Mum, of course, didn't know what pain Valeri was experiencing. In pronouncing the traditional Armenian "*tsavyt tanem*" she could not imagine Valeri's agonies. All that was left of him were skin and bone and half-bent limbs which hurt day and night. Over the past few years he had often spoken with pride of his team carrying out about ten thousand operations during the Karabakh war and that none of the wounded experienced pain, even those who were fated not to survive. "It is so just, when before his death a man feels no pain," he wrote. And suddenly it was as though he was totally enveloped in pain.

All his life, while enormously loving his father, my father-in-law Yervand, whom I greatly respected, Valeri was especially fond of his mother Margarita Gukasyan, a person who had lived a long and difficult life. Tens of thousands of new-born babies had literally passed through her hands. Valeri never disguised the fact that it was his mother's hands, which were the sensitive and simultaneously talented hands of a surgeon and gynaecologist, that he loved more than anything else in the world. Inheriting his mother's skill, he took the road that led him to suffering people. It was a long and successful road, though not always easy and simple. He graduated from the Krasnoyarsk Medical Institute where he became a real surgeon and gathered materials for a doctoral dissertation. And even then, in the early seventies, his main interest was military field surgery. He invented an apparatus to stop bleeding and received his doctorate on the basis of this discovery.

There was nothing surprising in Valeri being professionally prepared for the war that began. A proper army had not yet been created, but thanks to Valeri there was a military medical service, field hospitals and most importantly a valiant team of surgeons and nurses. During the war, as has already been mentioned, about ten thousand operations were performed and eighty percent of wounded soldiers were able to return to the battlefield.

Now Valeri, all hunched up, could not move. It was as though he was glued to the wide bed. Only his hands, with their shrivelled long fingers, moved. I cursed the day when I gave permission for radio and chemotherapy. His friends who visited him, and his family too, constantly asked, as if speaking with one voice: "Can really nothing be done?" – even though everybody knew his liver was affected. At just this moment Ara Minasyan phoned and told me that mum was very unwell and asked me to fly urgently to Yerevan…

* * *

I'll never forget that day – 16 June. The heat was unbearable. There was not a cloud in the sky. Sometimes I would hold out my hand against the breath of air and it felt as though a fire was blazing somewhere close. How would mum stand up to six hours of travelling in that heat, not to mention the dozens of kilometres with practically no proper road?

As we went over the Sisian pass I remembered the day early in 1993 when we were travelling in a large bus from Yerevan to Stepanakert. We were taking one of Lady Cox's teams: twelve people from different countries. Mum was with us. Immediately after the village of Saravan, high up on the approach to the Sisian pass, we found ourselves in a traffic jam. The snowstorm had already covered the road surface and enveloped in snow several cars that had stopped on the side sheltered from the wind. At once a queue of cars of various makes formed behind our bus. Evening was coming on. I remember it was Christmas Eve in the Orthodox calendar, so it was one of the shortest days.

Subsequently Lady Cox told Armenian and non-Armenian audiences in many countries about what happened then on the pass with its infamous history. It all began when she and our other guests began fetching freezing children from the snow-bound cars into our Ikarus bus. The bus was pretty well heated and the children warmed up quickly.

At first, mum, sitting with a brightly coloured woolen rug over her winter coat, calmly watched what was happening. But when there was already quite a crowd of kids in the bus she threw aside her rug and got busy. She settled the small children as comfortably as she could, joked with them affectionately and treated them to sweets. She nodded towards Caroline Cox and whispered to me: "You know, it turns out we are quite alike. I always lived my life according to the principle that I won't let tiredness get the better of me. Better death than tiredness!"

… After the Sisian pass, the road got more even and easier. I was in a hurry to reach mum who didn't like herself when she was tired. I thought that I too don't like to feel tired, tiredness gets in the way. Perhaps that's why I always remembered the words of granddad Markos: "During the day a man can lie down only in his coffin!" I was hurrying to mum, who, it seemed, for the first time in her life was beginning to get tired.

* * *

As I approached the door of mum's room in Minasyan's clinic, I was thinking of Valeri. If only the terrible moment when the inevitable happens will not come when I am not there. That would have been completely unfair. I remember mum speaking about this too: "I don't matter. Everything is in the past for me. But Valeri is needed for people in the future. What's happening to him is unfair." Mum had a gift for finding the right words.

As ever, I carefully opened the door of the room a little way. Boris was sitting at the head of the bed in a white coat. He was giving her tea to drink. Seeing me, mum asked loudly: "How's Valeri?" I found myself thinking that I didn't know how to answer. I couldn't say that things were very bad. If I said things were fine she wouldn't believe me. And I think I found the words to save the situation: "So-so, mum." I knew very well that she would not demand any further explanation.

"When are we going?" she asked and added immediately: "I'd like it to be tomorrow. Today would be even better, but my head doesn't feel right. And it doesn't matter if there is no helicopter. I can take the car journey alright."

"Actually, there is a helicopter. The problem is the weather. At any rate, Goris and Sisian are enveloped in fog. Admittedly, elsewhere it's clear."

"Find out what the forecast is and then everything will be fine. At any rate, if the forecast is bad, we'll have to go by car first thing in the morning."

"Please don't worry. Your sons have some expertise, especially Boris. After all, he's almost finished his doctoral dissertation."

Mum looked at me, then at Boris and laughed quietly:

"The main stress for someone writing a dissertation doesn't affect the head but the part of the body sitting on the chair."

For a couple of minutes mum's hospital room was filled with mirth. We all laughed together. We felt good, as though we had suddenly forgotten our sorrow.

The phone rang. I looked at the number showing on my little mobile phone and said cheerfully: "Talk of the devil. Guess who it is."

"It must be Vantsyan," mum said confidently.

Sergei was hastening to bring the good news that the forecast for tomorrow was more than promising. I informed mum and saw on her thin sallow face signs of undisguised happiness.

How relative happiness is, as mum so often said. She would recall how she was totally happy in line on the camp parade ground when she had been able to save a diminutive Tatar girl from a terrible fever, or how she felt a deep joy from particular events even when she was in that real hell. I have written about this often and I will always remember it. It's not for nothing that the wise Leo Tolstoy noted that "the need to be happy is fundamental to man, so it is legitimate".

* * *

While we were still in Erebuni airport I told mum that we would be landing right in Kyatuk.

"Do you think you are doing a good turn for me?" she asked very calmly.

"Of course, it's your dream."

"I am a woman. And I'll remain a woman, come what may. I need to tidy myself up. And I need to take a few things from Stepanakert with me. Apart from anything else I need to wash my hair."

"Alright mum, I surrender!"

"That's a real man's answer."

… When we were driving up to the airport Sergei had phoned. He said that under the helicopter was a stretcher covered in a blanket. We needed to lift mum up into the cabin on the stretcher. He said he would be there in half an hour, as that was when the meteorologists had promised him the weather report. Five or six people were crowding round the helicopter with their things. It wasn't difficult to guess that these were passengers who, like us, had heard that there was a flight to bring back the wounded and had decided to take the opportunity to fly to Karabakh.

We hadn't even reached the helicopter when three pilots rushed up to help to lift mum on board. The helicopter captain Rafik Nikogosyan, whose flying uniform always looked as if he was on parade, quietly said to me that we would put the stretcher on the floor between the rows of seats. I expressed my doubts, as I couldn't imagine that mum would agree.

"Nonsense," objected Rafik, "of course she'll agree. It will be very comfortable for her."

As soon as we began laying out the stretcher on the ground, mum protested:

"What are you doing?"

"You'll be very comfortable, aunty Gohar," Rafik hastened to reassure her.

"I understand that during the war that was how they transported the wounded, Rafik-*djan*. But I am not wounded. And it will be awkward for the passengers to step over me. And the main thing is that I am quite capable of flying seated…"

I stood behind Rafik and leaning over to him said:

"Say to her: 'I surrender, aunty Gohar'."

Rafik raised both hands and announced loudly:

"I surrender, aunty Gohar!"

"Well, of course, you've conspired to sing from the same song-sheet, you rogues…"

I'll never forget those moments. I just felt so good inside. We cheerfully settled mum onto the bench seat. We waited for Sergei.

Pressing her cheek against the porthole, mum silently looked at the buildings that could be seen in the distance. It seemed to me that she was saying goodbye to Yerevan.

But after a few minutes mum started to speak with me about something totally different.

“I would like Stepanakert to grow and that its inhabitants won’t move away. I got to love the place when I was young, when I moved there to my relatives to finish off secondary school and enter the medical college. At that time there were only three Azerbaijanis living there: a woman called Amara, I think, her brother, who worked in the Regional Party Committee, and a trader called Rashid. After 1936, that is, after the USSR Constitution was adopted, Azerbaijanis started moving to Stepanakert to work in the Regional Party Committee, in the Regional Executive Committee, in the Communist Youth League, in the police and in the pharmacy. Their wives and children came with them. And after a few years they opened an Azerbaijani school.”

“Why are you remembering that now?”

“I don’t know… Sergei seems to be late…”

“If the weather’s OK then it’s not a problem. He just needs to get clearance. He’ll be here soon. Don’t you want to answer the question?”

“It used to happen to me often. During the day I would try to find the meaning of what I had been dreaming. And recently I have been remembering all my dreams.”

“Has your memory got better? Or are the dreams more memorable?”

“No, it’s not that. Now I sleep on and off. And when I wake up I think about what I have seen in my dreams. It’s like a serial dream with a number of topics.”

“You were dreaming of Stepanakert?”

“Yes, I was. It’s quite natural. I knew we’d be flying there in the morning. But I also dreamed of Haik – your father. And I also dreamed of Valentina Miroshkina.”

“Who’s that?”

“Did I never tell you about her?”

“At any rate, I don’t remember.”

“Her husband was called Mark.”

“Was it a Jewish family?”

“I think so.”

“And why did you suddenly dream of this woman? What’s the relevance of father’s Jewish friends?”

“When Haik was studying in Moscow he lived for almost five years with them on 4th Tverskaya Street, number four, apartment twenty one. I can still remember that seven-storey house.”

“What a memory…”

“Not at all, my memory isn’t what it was. Now I’m not sure whether it was number two or four.”

The pilots prepared for take-off. The fuel tanker drove off and the lorry with electrical test equipment drove up. The passengers were waiting for permission to board. I thought that mum was unlikely to return to the story of the Jewish family that took father in for five years while he was studying from 1927 to 1932 at the Academy of the Peoples of the East. But I wanted her to finish the story. I was sure it was not a matter of chance that she had dreamed of Valentina Miroshkina. Admittedly, nobody can explain the rules that govern the content and subjects of dreams, but all the same there is something that allows you to say that it’s not just chance. Probably the day before or sometime recently mum had remembered this woman. And I also understood that the time for such reminiscences, to be blunt, was limited. And it was a quite unsuitable place, on board a helicopter preparing for take-off. All the same, I asked:

“Why do you think you suddenly dreamed of this woman?”

“I often dream of her, very often. I have been tormented by a sense of guilt towards this family all my life.”

“Why?”

“When I went to Moscow in thirty-eight in the whole of this huge city I knew only this family, this address. When he was studying in the Academy, Haik sent letters to his sisters. The return address was always written on the envelope – to the Miroshkins for Haik Balayan. So I found their house from the address that I remembered. Admittedly, the street was known under two names…”

“Tverskaya-Yamskaya…”

“That’s it! How was I to know that these kind people who got to love Haik would suffer because of me?”

“I don’t understand…”

“I was held for several days in the KGB cellars and then deported from Moscow. I didn’t hear anything about the Miroshkins. And then in the fifties, after I was released, out of gratitude I decided to visit Valentina. And I learnt that they were arrested at just the time that I was being held in the cellars. In my bag there were two letters with the address of Valentina and Mark. I think my investigators could not resist the temptation to find and render harmless this family that had once been in contact with an enemy of the people, a Trotskyite. In the Lubianka they asked me about them, but I didn’t guess what would happen. They lost all interest in me when they discovered that when Haik was in Moscow I was just a girl who didn’t yet even know the future ‘enemy of the people’. But in any case, it was me, by having the envelopes in my bag, that caused their arrest.”

“And you have been thinking about this for sixty one years? Did it never occur to you that they could have been arrested just because of the Jewish nationality that was written in their papers?”

“What’s that got to do with it? Wherever I was imprisoned almost ninety percent of the prisoners were Russians. I realise that you want to reassure me. But try to understand me. At first I hated everybody who might be involved in father’s arrest. Among the accusations against him was the fact that some of the leaders of the region who were arrested before Haik had visited our house in Hadrut or in Stepanakert. Yet they were also victims and father’s arrest wasn’t their fault. It’s just that in such situations you tend to suspect everybody who even unwittingly might have been involved.”

“No, mum, you can’t do that. Everything in life is pretty complex. And if you think like that you can blame everybody including those who are not to blame at all.”

“I’m sorry that you can’t understand. What I’m talking about is my own feeling of guilt. Everyone should have that feeling, it’s simply indispensable. Without it you cannot remain fair.”

At last, Sergei Vantsyan climbed on board. Smiling, he came up to mum and kissed her.

“Flying conditions are good in the whole of Armenia and the whole of Karabakh. The skies are clear.”

“The skies are clear, that’s good,” mum said thoughtfully.

* * *

Mum climbed the stairs up to the first floor of the house in Stepanakert without assistance, although it was clear that every step was difficult for her. On the first floor landing her faithful helpers were waiting for her: her niece Alina Danielyan and her neighbour Amaliya. We realised that they had thoroughly prepared for aunty Gohar’s arrival. That meant that everything in the house was washed, tidied and polished till it shone. There was nothing for me to worry about here, so I immediately went to see Valeri.

I could see at once that the past two and a half days had been especially hard for him and his family. Valeri's mum was hunched and had literally shrunk and my Nelly had sunken cheeks and had grown thinner. Valeri was conscious but, as before, writhing with pain. The painkillers were no longer any help. The only organ of his which was still doggedly fighting to live was his heart. I remember looking at the time. It was three in the afternoon on 17 June 1998. Valeri didn't say anything, but we felt that he knew very well what was happening.

Suddenly one of our friends Samvel Karapetyan, a hero of the Karabakh war, said with a note of despair:

"Is there really nothing that anyone can think of? Is there nobody who can come from Yerevan? Why don't we summon professor Ananikyan, who brought me back from death during the war?"

Everyone heard these words, including Valeri. There was only one way out of the psychological situation that had arisen: to phone at once and ask professor Pavel Ananikyan, one of Valeri's teachers, to come. I knew that the next day there should be a helicopter. I phoned Pavel and met him the next day at the airport by the monument to Papik-Tatik.

However, I needed to spend the rest of that day with mum. It was time for me to check that she had arrived safely in Kyatuk.

Following a difficult drive along the dirt track on the steep slopes of Mount Kyatuk, we arrived in mum's village, where Misha and Alina Danielyan and Valeri Mirzoyan and his wife Tamara were already waiting for us.

… Under the mulberry tree in the garden of Hrachik Harutyunyan (one of our relatives on mum's side of the family) a bed was already made up for mum on a wide trestle-bed. The only thing that didn't suit mum was the pillow. She liked big high pillows and this one was small and very soft. Tamara at once thought up a rather witty solution – to bring a thick volume of Karl Marx' "*Das Kapital*" and put it under the pillow.

Mum's unexpectedly aggressive reaction surprised us all.

"To hell with your Karl Marx!" mum exploded. "It's he who ruined my life and destroyed our family! My Haik once sadly commented that this fellow with the beard was to blame for most of what was happening around us… Tamara-*djan*, please take that blanket and fold it in four and put it under the pillow."

My God, how I laughed! And my laughter infected everybody who was there. Mum's sparky monologue was actually quite serious. But there was so much deliberate pathos and irony! And at the height of this merriment I suddenly remembered Valeri suffering and it was as though a sharp pain went through me…

* * *

We headed off to our two-storey Kyatuk house, which after mum's family had been driven out of it served as the village school for many years. It was the second half of June. Spring had come early. It promised to be a hot and arid year. The famous Karabakh mulberry trees, even high up in the mountains in Kyatuk, were already covered in sun-drenched berries.

I remember how I hurried back to mum carrying a small saucepan covered in mulberry leaves. Alina tipped some of the fantastic berries smelling of honey into a plate and brought it to mum. Mum carefully looked at the plate. She smiled. She turned her gaze to me and whispered softly:

"*Tsavyt tanem*!"

"They are from your tree, mum. I dare say, when you were a child you were always climbing in it."

Mum took two ripe yellow berries with her fingertips and lifted them to her mouth. However, from the look on her face and in her eyes it was obvious that her expectations had been disappointed. I realised what was happening. Her stomach

juices were practically absent and as a result any food took on a peculiar distorted taste, especially sweet things. She had expected something totally different from the mulberries.

Mum gave the plate back to Alina and said to me:

“Your father loved mulberries more than anything else. He could eat them by the hundredweight. And he would often say as he put a fistful of berries in his mouth: ‘Our grandfathers used to say that if you feel you cannot eat one more berry, then you must be seriously ill.’ When we discovered that I was pregnant with you – it was early summer 1934 – the first thing he did was to make me eat as many mulberries as possible. After two or three weeks the mulberry season was over and then he asked his friends who lived in villages high in the mountains, including in Shushi and Kyatuk where the berries stayed on the trees till the end of August, to bring them to us. And they brought us the over-ripe mulberries in wicker baskets…”

Mum suddenly fell silent. Then in a hardly audible whisper she said: “Your dad…” and sighed deeply. It was obvious that she could barely hold back the tears. She closed her eyes to indicate that the conversation was over. I had often seen her do that. I even understood that at that moment she wanted to be left alone and speak with her husband. Once she even admitted it to me herself.

Misha said: “Let her sleep a bit…” and we moved away from mum’s bed. He looked carefully at the sky and said as if to reassure me:

“It’s not going to rain: the swallows are flying high and there’s not a cloud in the sky.”

… The women remained to keep an eye on mum and I went to see Valeri, knowing very well that when I was there that night I would be thinking of mum. And mum would be thinking of my father, she would be talking with him, sharing her thoughts. And endlessly reminding him that they would soon be meeting. That night all my thoughts were about father and about their meeting in heaven, without me.

I believe in God and in the Biblical parables and in the importance of following the commandments that Christ gave us. I believe because I want to believe. Because this faith so to speak regulates the sphere of spirituality, the sphere of morality, because when there is faith things become purer in the world, in the nation, in the country and in the family. Because I want God to be in my soul. Because my mum believed. Because I am the great-grandson of a priest who did nothing to disgrace his calling. Because my wise nation was the first to accept Christianity as the state religion, without which the essence of being Armenian would hardly have been preserved among the Armenians – and that means all that is close to me: my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather and my great-grandfather’s great-grandfather. That’s why I want God to exist, and not just within me. All my life I have been in agreement with Dostoevsky, who gave this advice in such instances to everyone who has doubts: if you want to see the living God, don’t look in the empty firmament of your own reason, but in human love.

However, I always try to resolve all my problems that involve complex contradictions. Of course, it’s good that mum will meet father in heaven. But for me it would be better and more honest if they met on earth, on the earth from which our ancestors emerged. I saw and understood that she was thinking about this. And as long as her heart was beating, I should not only think but take some action. And the fact that there are millions, tens of millions of people like me is real, but also in essence terrible, because the situation is practically hopeless – at any rate, for the moment…

* * *

Now, as I write these lines, I am disturbed most of all not by my grandchildren but by my mobile phone. Admittedly, I can’t permit myself to turn it off. You never know – there might be something important. Then, in ninety-eight, it didn’t work in

Karabakh. And as a result I was terribly worried. I was going to see Valeri and I had left mum – in good hands but on the top of a mountain. If anything happened they wouldn't be able to tell me at once. And so every minute, like it or not, I would keep thinking: "How's mum getting on?" or "How's Valeri?"

On 20 June 1998 I came to mum in Kyatuk early in the morning. There were already quite a few people under the mulberry tree. Practically all the people of Kyatuk at various times had moved to Khodjalu or to the district centre of Askeran. For a long time the old houses had served for many as summer homes, with their gardens and vegetable patches supplementing their income. Knowing that Gohar was in their home village, her relatives made a big effort to come to see her there. Alina told me that many of them simply came to say hello and then slipped away, so as not to disturb her.

Seeing me, mum first of all asked after Valeri and then said in a particularly serious tone:

"You don't need to come to see me so often. I know that while you are here your thoughts are there with Valeri. Don't leave him. You are specially needed there, for Nelly and the other members of the family. Now you've seen me, you don't need to stay. Come over to me…"

Smiling I went up to her. I don't remember now what I said to her. But I will never forget how she looked at me. And she insisted again that I should immediately go back to Valeri, whom she loved as if he was one of her own family. I leant over to her.

"Go at once. Right now."

… Only as I was on the way and thinking how insistently mum had sent me away, did I realise that she must have had a feeling that something was wrong. That meant that Valeri was in a really bad way.

Mum was not mistaken. When I arrived, Valeri was already unconscious, his breathing rapid and feverish. Margarita sat stiffly beside him, looking tensely into his face.

A little further away on a divan Valeri's wife Lyudmila and son Artur were sitting silently. For them the hardest moment had come. Valeri's Russian wife, whom he had brought with their baby son to Stepanakert from Kranoyarsk, was going to be much more lonely than any of us. Their son also had his own family and children, and his own problems. And not so long ago, during the cruel troubled times, Lyudmila had shared with us all the hardships and worries of wartime. Almost every day she received guests who came to Karabakh to be able to tell the world the truth about what was happening in this God-forsaken country, this living hell. And her son Artur, still a young surgeon, spent all the war years alongside his father in the hospitals, helping him to save the wounded. And now they were sitting, mother and son, with sagging shoulders, tormented by their own helplessness. There was nothing they could do to help this man who was their dearest and nearest.

Nelly, with her knees bent, was lying on the carpet, rocking slightly back and forward and almost inaudibly moaning. Suddenly Margarita exclaimed loudly: "No! No! No!" I went up to her. She was saying something, almost screaming. But I couldn't make out her words. For a moment Margarita fell silent and gave her daughter a frightened look. Nelly, lying on the carpet, wailed loudly. I knew what it meant. Even as a child I had discovered the phenomenon of the love between a brother and a sister. My father's four sisters, after they got the news of his death, never could get over their grief. I wrote about this in my book about Valeri, "*Doctor Marutyan*".

With my fingertips I closed Valeri's eyes. I phoned Yerevan. I gave the necessary instructions to family and friends. I phoned bishop Pargev in Shushi and asked him to come to Valeri's house at six in the evening. I myself set off for Kyatuk – with Boris and our sons Haik and Artur.

* * *

It was midday, the day before the longest day of the year. It was hot and close. In a nimble "*Niva*" jeep we were driving to Kyatuk along the bank of the river Karkar that was still in flood. As we approached the gates of Askeran fortress I thought how in all the years since the war I had not been so frequently in mum's village as in the past few days. I have already written that all of our family – and that's about a quarter of the population of Kyatuk – had been exiled to the Altai province, so there simply wasn't anyone there to visit. And now I was on my way to mum herself. To her home village which had been depopulated like hundreds of other villages. Today was hot and the sun was very bright. No wonder: there was not a cloud in the blue sky. But there were black clouds in my soul. It was impossible to believe that Valeri was no longer with us.

How was mum? My incurably ill, dying mother. And her sons not only cannot save her, but they are even powerless to keep her from the pain and suffering to which this especially cruel disease condemns its victims. Even without this, life had been cruel to her, taking her nearest and dearest away from her, forcing her to live in fear and humiliation. It's true, towards the end of her life mum had her own house and a big family and she read a lot and enjoyed the love and respect not only of her family but also of many famous and wonderful contemporaries.

I thought about how I was afraid every day that she would leave us forever, as in my early childhood her father and mother had left us. And there was no hope that they would return. And yet mum lived with us for a good number of happy years. And it was a totally different life than it would have been without her. And now, when we were already mature adults with our own children and even grandchildren, it was such a great grief for us to be without our mum. And she realised it too.

… Alina was standing near mum, Tamara and Amaliya were a little way off sitting on little stools peeling potatoes. Seeing me, they all fell silent. Then someone spoke my name and mum called me over at once.

In those three or four hours it seemed she had weakened even more. She had got thinner and more sunken faced. And I noticed that she had caught in my eyes the worry that I tried so much to hide. Mum knew very well about "*habitus*". Doctors often use this term when talking about a patient's appearance. Most often they use it in cases of general decline of the body. It was not by chance that I recalled these details. When Boris and I as students would use medical terms, mum often joined us in showing off her knowledge of abstruse words. She knew masses of them. Once she even corrected Boris when he said "Hippocratic face" instead of "Hippocratic mask". Mum got obvious pleasure from this. I thought that now mum would want to say some term understandable only to insiders, but instead she asked me quietly:

"Was he conscious?"

Of course, I understood that she was talking about Valeri.

"No," I replied, not expressing any surprise that she already knew he was dead.

"Why did you leave them?" – and not waiting for an answer she added: "Don't delay here. Go back at once."

"I'll go…"

"Go right now. You are needed there – by Nelly and Margarita and Lyudmila and Artur, by the whole family. Don't be afraid for me. I won't let you down. Go, *tsavyt tanem*."

* * *

Mum indeed did not let me down. Her heart continued to beat for a month longer than Valeri's. It was an amazing month in my life. Recently mum had surprised

me by seeming to appear to me in a new aspect. But in these thirty days I made an unusual discovery. I discovered a whole new world, the world of my mother. That really was something: she decided to teach me a thing or two when she was in her eighties and her son was well into his sixties.

On the day of Valeri's funeral she insisted that we brought her to Stepanakert. She explained this wish of hers by telling us that at the time when Valeri was committed to the earth she had to be in the town, closer to him.

Boris and I organised a surprise for her. An hour after mum arrived at her apartment there was a long ring at the door.

"Why ever did you shut the door?" mum called out in a strict voice to Amaliya and Alina.

They smiled in reply. Apart from mum, everybody knew that we had asked our aunt Aikanush, mum's younger sister, the last survivor of the huge family, to come from Tashkent. Mum recognised her at once. Aikanush rushed to her sister and bent over her. And suddenly mum, mustering all her strength, threw her arms round her and embraced her. They were both silent for a long time. We were all silent. Then mum asked cheerfully and loudly:

"How did you get here? Are there now really ways of getting to Tashkent?"

I think I guessed what mum was thinking of at this moment. She was remembering her brother, uncle Aram. Some years earlier mum had not been able to travel to Tashkent to his funeral. Since then she had remembered this, not doubting for a minute that uncle Aram had understood everything well and forgiven her.

In any case I will remind my readers that aunt Aikanush was the youngest child in the family. She was twenty six years younger than our late uncle Aram and eight years younger than mum. She spoke Russian like most people from Karabakh who had been exiled to the Altai province in their youth and then made their way to Central Asia. But now with mum, without even thinking about it, she began to speak in the language of her childhood, in the Karabakh dialect of Armenian. I asked everybody to leave the two sisters alone for half an hour or an hour. Later aunt Aikanush told me that they had talked about members of the family, both living and dead, for whom Uzbekistan had become their second homeland. At any rate, most of those who had departed for the other world are buried in Tashkent or Andizhan, in Samarkand or Kokand.

Soon we all returned home and it was clear that the sisters had managed to talk to their hearts' content. Aunt Aikanush told me later that during their conversation after so many years of separation, mum several times changed the subject and talked of me. She didn't know that mum had decided to devote her last strength and breath to tell me in yet greater detail what she had kept to herself all her life.

For a month after Valeri's death, I was not myself. Every minute I longed to be with mum. I slept, as had often happened during the war and after, at Valeri's house. And now aunt Aikanush was sleeping on the divan. But every morning I hurried to mum. I knew that she was expecting me. She often asked the women who were visiting her to go to the kitchen, as though she was telling me secrets. And for those days I was never parted from my notebook. Usually I wrote up my notes at night. I knew that there was a lot which I would definitely remember to the end of my days – yet I might forget something. And mum left me lessons and advice, her testament.

Here are some of my notes from that time:

… During our secret conversations I often mentioned Samson Gabrielyan (my readers will probably remember that he was the father of my friend, the former minister of health of Armenia, Emil Gabrielyan). Just before his death he told me that in his thoughts day and night – and especially in his dreams – he was constantly in the GULAG. He not only remembered details, but he philosophised at the same time. Something similar happened with mum.

"You know," mum would say, "I am remembering even those trivial details which I thought I had long ago forgotten. I think about things, and it turns out that I

have forgotten absolutely nothing. I lived with these things in my consciousness. There in Siberia I established for myself that the most important thing is to preserve one's feeling of self-respect. For I suffered not from the physical pain which that animal Potato-nose inflicted on me, but from the humiliation. Can you imagine, today, over half a century later, I remember not how they beat me but how they humiliated me. I think I won the fight with Potato-nose because I felt myself proud and wise. I was helped by being aware of my superiority. Since then I have never humiliated anyone. I realised for ever that when you humiliate someone, even if you don't notice it, you are first and foremost humiliating yourself."

"Well, you've only now thought about this," I interrupted.

"No, the last few days. I don't know why or how, but it's at this time that these thoughts have been coming to me. What's more, remembering how horribly they humiliated us then, I realise that there is only one means of fighting humiliation. It's respect, perhaps self-respect. Every morning Margarita comes to see me before she goes to work, and she visits me after work. I look at her and I think that she is worthy of true respect. Margarita does not have the pride that the Bible condemns. She has something else. She has dignity. It wasn't even three days since the death of her son (and what a son!), yet she found the inner strength to come to me, because she knew I was bed-bound. She had evolved her own rule: to respect her neighbour and respect herself. That was her merit. Don't you be surprised that I turned the conversation this way. I bet you can't guess why."

"Probably you decided to express your respect for Margarita? To say that to fail to respect such a woman is to humiliate oneself. For you began the conversation with talk of humiliation."

"You guessed, but not entirely. I want to express my thought in a more specific way. After Valeri's death and after everything that has happened and will happen, you must treat this woman as a mother. She doesn't need it – you need it. Otherwise you will not even notice how you humiliate yourself. Don't be afraid of someone else humiliating you. Be afraid of doing it yourself. You won't believe me, but I forgave even that animal Potato-nose. After all, in the last resort it was herself she humiliated, not me."

"I don't think I ever gave cause to doubt my respect for Margarita."

"I hope you won't ever give cause. I'm talking about something else. I'm talking about you."

* * *

Mum tried to hide from Boris and me the unbearable pain which had begun in the last few days. Since childhood she had been so afraid of injections that she would not allow anyone to give her an injection even when she was in great pain. She tried to suppress the pain with pills. During our long conversations, from time to time I would notice that she was in pain. She tried not to show it, but her eyes gave her away. Often when that happened I would try to take a break from our conversation, but she never agreed. I could understand her. I had long ago become convinced that mum was a philosopher rather than just a wise woman. For example, in a totally desperate situation mum usually did not at all despair, being aware on the philosophical level that if there was no hope there was no point despairing either. Overcoming pain she talked, argued and told stories, trying her hardest to make time pass quickly. It was as though she was afraid of missing anything out.

A few times mum began a conversation about our father's sisters, our aunts. For Boris and me they were saints. But as a child, or rather after mum's arrest, I could feel that their relationship with mum was not that easy. I remembered that they could not forgive their young sister-in-law for buying a bottle of "*Red Moscow*" perfume in Moscow. During all those years that were so terrible for mum they never wrote her a single letter. The atmosphere at home with them was such that the idea

of writing a letter simply could not occur to us little kids. On her deathbed mum began to speak about this.

"None of Haik's sisters, one could say, had a happy day in their lives, especially after 1937. I knew they didn't like me very much, but I don't blame them. They thought that I could have saved Haik in Moscow. And I didn't once tell them how I was treated in the KGB dungeons. It was only when I was in camp that I began to think of these unhappy women with a sense of gratitude for saving my sons. A friend of mine, who got news of you at school, used to write to me. I had no news of Boris because he was living in Agorti.

"But once this friend went too far, when she decided to get information not from the sisters but from other relatives of Haik. She told me in a letter that some photographs where Haik and I were together had been cut in half. That was how they separated me from your father. That was the first time I really felt my heart. I didn't sleep for several nights. Then one evening I wrote a letter to my friend informing her that my address had changed and so she shouldn't write any more. I don't think she should have told me such a cruel truth: for me cruel truth is as bad as a lie."

"And after you were released did you meet your friend?"

"Yes, I met her, but I didn't say anything. Of course, she felt that I was cool towards her. Three years ago she died. I visited her several times before her death. About a week before she died she told me that she had understood very well that she should not have written me 'that letter'. I pretended that I didn't understand what she was talking about. But then when I got home, I thought about it and realised that I had behaved wrongly towards her all those years. After all, she had not been afraid to write to me when almost everybody else had been afraid, including those closer to me. And, when all is said and done, she had wanted to tell me the truth and nothing else. It doesn't make any difference that I would never have acted like that. I think it's a sin to give someone bad news, however accurate it may be."

"I know. I was aware of that from childhood. Maybe I learnt it from you."

"You might also have learnt it from granddad Markos, who was very dear to my heart. Of course, I shouldn't have treated my friend so coolly for such a long time. But people are all different. And the times were different…"

* * *

In fact, mum had a pretty well developed sense of being willing to forgive, especially after camp, it seems. And it was not just because she was always reading the Bible. By the way, Boris and I learnt about that only during *perestroika*. I think her love for solitude, even isolation, was also connected with her passion for reading Scripture. She read the Bible in Armenian. In conversation she preferred to use Russian. That's understandable, since she spent most of her life in a Russian-speaking environment. But she found it easier to read and write in Armenian. Her schooling, the medical college, her first books and newspapers and her conversation in childhood were all in Armenian. However, the genuine lessons of forgiveness were given to her by Haik.

"It wasn't because he was fourteen years older than me. It wasn't a question of exhortations, moralising or preaching. It was how Haik himself behaved in life."

"What do you mean?" I asked, not disguising my wish to learn more about my father.

"I've often seen you and Nelly arguing. In a roundabout way I managed to find out the reasons and I was just amazed. It was about trifles that are simply not worthy of the attention of a serious person."

"Well, it's said that details are important to God."

"It depends which side you look at it from. Sometimes you find the devil in the detail and in all kinds of trivial things. But that's not the point. I never once permitted

myself to meddle in your affairs. For me it would be demeaning. I know that Margarita behaves in the same way. She doesn't interfere."

"You make it sound as if Nelly and I are always arguing."

"It doesn't matter how much, what matters is that you argue at all. Your father believed that the important thing was not arguing, but forgiving. For as long as a person loves, he is able to forgive. And every time, Haik himself was quick to find the key and open the door. He even had a saying: 'To err is very human, but to forgive is divine!' With his whole demeanour he showed that forgiving means being victorious. He had no love at all for revenge. I don't mean in the case of war and external enemies. But if you take revenge in daily life or at work, then sooner or later you will definitely regret it. But if you can learn to forgive you will always be contented.

"I remembered your father's lessons all my life. I knew that if I said something bad about somebody when they didn't deserve it, I would be obliged to remember it all my life in order to try to justify myself at every opportunity. By the way, you know, one of the accusations against your father was even that at a teachers' conference he said that teachers should teach children not revenge but forgiveness. And he added that it is especially important to learn to forgive previous generations and to forgive talent. But he noted that this does not at all mean that you shouldn't point out their mistakes."

"So, Stalin should be forgiven too?"

"Well, that's a totally different matter. Stalin should be judged. I'm talking about something else – about human relationships and not about crime and punishment. That's why I started this conversation."

"At last. You never do anything without a reason…"

"You'll remember that I was already in Minasyan's clinic when the presidential elections took place. Robert took the presidential oath. For eight years from morning to evening on radio and television I heard and saw everything that was somehow connected with Levon Ter-Petrosyan. He left office. And it was if he had sunk into oblivion."

"It's always been like that. The king is dead – long live the king…"

"That's not my point. You don't always understand me straight away. Now we're talking about forgiveness. I know you didn't have an at all easy relationship with Levon."

"Indeed, I didn't have an easy relationship with Levon before he was elected president. And afterwards I had no relationship with him at all. I felt obliged to respect him as the president who had been elected by the people. And I got on with my own business. There was the war. And you saw it all."

"Again, you're missing the point…"

"Mum, you're tired. I can see it and I feel that I'm to blame. You're ill and we're talking so much."

"Don't interrupt me! I have to explain it to you. I'm not talking about Levon, but about you. The president is now history…"

"The first president…"

"All the more so. I don't want to know what the problem was between you. Let me repeat, I'm talking about something else. For me it doesn't matter which of you was in the right and which in the wrong. You should forgive. After all, it doesn't bring any obligations with it. At the end of the day, it's not me that is saying so. It was what your father said. He even said that among many powers there is also the power to forgive. And the person who has this power becomes stronger and more noble."

* * *

I could chat with mum for hours, although I was constantly aware of how quickly she tired and how her clear, melodious voice was becoming more and more toneless. And I was surprised, since she had always been so sensitive and attentive,

that she didn't feel my concern, anxiety and discomfort. On this occasion, as though she could read my mind, mum calmly asked me:

"Maybe you don't know why I am so insistent in refusing any chemo or radio-therapy. Just don't you pretend that you don't understand what I'm talking about."

"Alright, mum."

"Thank God! I read in one of your articles, or maybe in a book, that we live in such crazy times that people aren't even allowed to die in peace. The dying person is hidden away in a room from which friends and relatives are excluded, surrounded by a plethora of apparatus and clever equipment. Every minute various drugs are administered through a drip. Of course, the patient is in a permanent unconscious state. From time to time a doctor emerges from the intensive care unit and tells the relatives what they need to know. And then one of the hospital staff tells the family with a long face that alas medicine was unable to help."

"You've quoted me more or less word for word."

"I haven't finished yet."

"Maybe you don't need to…"

"Why not? I can assess the situation quite soberly. Maybe in the distant or not so distant future the situation will be considered critical. But we are living in our own time. So, don't let my wanting to talk so much surprise you. I kept my silence for a very long time. For all the time I was in the camps it was not only in order to have the right to a natural death at my appointed time that I wanted to survive. I told you that now I have been asking God for a small favour: to have just two more years. I wanted to wait till your first grandson. But I have no doubt that you will have many grandsons."

"And you will have great-grandsons."

"I don't doubt it. But I have made my peace, and I am not asking anything more of God. When you remember me, I want you always to be aware that this world perishes not from the fire or the sword but from indifference. I felt this myself. When your father was arrested and sent to Shushi prison, I thought that our many friends would not abandon me. But it turned out that even the closest friends simply stopped noticing me."

"They were probably afraid, afraid for their own families."

"That was the terrible thing, they were all afraid. And when I was already in the camp I discovered that much the same thing happened throughout the country. There was universal indifference that gave birth to cowardice, and cowardice itself gave birth to indifference. Take note, the people who were the most afraid were the once who were still free. I was amazed that many of those who were imprisoned managed to overcome indifference and cowardice.

"You would have thought that there in the camps it would be easiest of all to lose the face of humanity. But not at all! We ourselves did not remain indifferent. What was it that they managed to do not just with particular individuals but with the whole nation?! Your dad hated indifferent people. He considered indifference to be a form of cruelty and treachery. When we met, he was twice as old as I was. Well, almost twice as old. He was twenty-nine and I was fifteen. He seemed to me to be an omniscient philosopher. Only later did I realise that that this wasn't at all surprising. At that time the majority of literate and educated people were really young. There was just a handful of people with higher education. And he had even studied in an academy in Moscow, for five whole years. There weren't many people who were fluent in three languages. And, of course, I was completely smitten when I felt that such a man loved a girl whose village school did not even give her a full secondary education. And the first thing that he did was to take a personal interest in my education.

"I immediately realised that, love or no love, study and self-improvement had to take pride of place in my life. Your dad himself chose books for me to read. He would set the deadline for me to finish reading them. And then he examined me

thoroughly. If you knew how much I tried! And how proud I was that he expected so much of me. He immersed me not only in reading. He would tell me about scientists, writers and philosophers. It was from him that I first heard of the dangers of indifference and cowardice. I still remember his saying that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who remain neutral in times of national tragedy. (I remembered these words in Dante. He put it a bit differently, but I didn't want to say anything to mum – Z. B.) And so it happened in my life that I was always afraid of remaining indifferent. After all, ultimately, all of us, Haik's generation, my generation and the Soviet people as a whole, became victims of indifference…"

It was difficult for mum to speak. She went pale. And I was alarmed. I decided to create a diversion and called loudly for aunt Aikanush, who was busy in the kitchen with Amaliya. "I'm coming," she responded loudly. "Please make tea for mum and me," I asked.

My diversion didn't work. Mum didn't refuse the tea, but she didn't stop talking. For the umpteenth time she returned to the story of the visit by the leader of the Azerbaijan party central committee, Mirjafar Bagirov, to Hadrut where father was the head of the local government executive committee. This time she recalled how her naïve Haik complained about the officials who sent out to the districts instructions which basically not only insulted the dignity of the Armenians but also did direct economic harm. He cited examples of the malicious destruction of mulberry trees, of resources being directed to sheep farming while wilfully reducing the budget for pig farming. I knew about this, not just from mum but also from the official indictments.

This time mum cited an example that was new to me. It happened that when Bagirov and his retinue left our house in Hadrut, mum rounded on her husband shaking: why did he have to say such dangerous things to this good-for-nothing to his face?

Father at first laughed loudly. Then he began to comfort her. And as a comforting factor he quoted Bagirov himself, who had praised him for his level of education and organisational talent. "And he believed that butcher," mum said to conclude the story and then began telling how dad with great erudition told her that the first empires to fall are always the ones in which there reigns hatred for the aboriginal people.

Mum remembered well that the Roman empire survived longer than all the others exclusively because the victor treated the vanquished with respect. Immediately after victory, Rome declared the residents of the conquered territory to be her fully-fledged citizens, enjoying all rights and privileges. Even slaves became citizens and received equal protection of the law. And, of course, the contented citizens, especially those whose rights had previously been trampled on, had no intention of rebelling or revolting. Mum told all this as though to demonstrate how well she understood the importance and seriousness of such a wise state policy.

It had also recently become clear to me why father decided to make such a thorough study of the subject of the fall of empires. Tevan Djavadyan recalled to me that on several occasions in a very small circle of friends father had openly objected to what was happening: churches were being destroyed, the state was stealing church property and the clergy were being terrorised (shot, exiled or imprisoned). A victim of this barbaric policy was his grandfather (his mother's father Ter Hovhanes). However, Djavadyan, who had been director of the school in Gishi, noted that father had not only "expressed his outrage at these terrible crimes" but also foreseen the misfortune that was to befall the whole country.

In Tevan Djavadyan's last years I often visited him. He loved to reminisce about conversations with dad and admired him for being a prophet. The wise old man had in mind the collapse of the USSR.

* * *

Early on the morning of 18 July as usual I went up to mum's open door and froze, rooted to the spot. I couldn't believe my ears: from her room I could hear laughter, even boisterous laughter. Jolly women's voices. Had they gone mad? Usually our women talk in a half-whisper. And this was as noisy as a wedding. I went into the room and they all fell silent.

"Do share with me the reason for your mirth," I asked.

"There's nothing to tell!" mum answered cheerfully. "It's private women's talk."

What a happy moment this was for me. I didn't at all notice how thin mum was. I saw only her young radiant eyes. Just the evening before, when she was telling me about the incident in Hadrut, my attention had been drawn to her sad swollen eyes and I remember thinking that at any moment things could get worse. That same evening I once more marvelled at her memory. I even wrote in my notebook: "Mum is an amazingly vivid embodiment of a powerful memory in which the philosophy of the horrors of her time is permanently etched. And it will be my just desserts if God punishes me for being so late to appreciate the true value of mum's genuine gift from God."

Still full of impressions of the previous day's conversation, I had come to mum fully expecting that she would want to continue her monologue. And now I saw a totally different mum, just as she used to be, cheerful, with shining eyes. Today, as far as I could tell, she was in no way ready to continue the previous day's serious conversation. I never did find out anything about the cause of the mirth of her hen-party. Clearly it was not for male ears. And, of course, I didn't insist. On the other hand I did not disguise my happiness at such a jolly gathering.

The phone rang. Amaliya picked up the handset and immediately passed it to me. It was Silva Kaputikyan. Mum knew that we were friends. Whenever she came to Karabakh, Silva always came to see mum. And mum would proudly show all her guests the two volumes of her works that Silva had given her. This time our conversation was very short.

"Has something happened," mum asked quietly.

"Probably."

"What do you mean by that?" mum asked in surprise.

"Probably something has happened. Silva just said: 'If you can, come and see me.' She obviously doesn't know that I'm not in Yerevan. She probably asked someone to call me for her and didn't realise that I am in Stepanakert. The last time I saw her was two weeks ago at Sero Khanzadyan's funeral."

There was an awkward silence, which didn't last particularly long. It was mum who spoke:

"Well, why are you standing there? Get on with it."

"What are you talking about, mum? Get on with what?"

"If she didn't say anything else, then something very serious must have happened. So, off you go as soon as possible, otherwise you'll regret it."

"I can't leave you in your present condition."

"What condition? You saw yourself this morning how we were having a good laugh. Nothing will happen to me. And after all, Silva is Silva."

I reached for the phone, but mum interjected strictly:

"Surely you're not going to phone her? Of course, if she learns of your situation she'll tell you not to come. She'll even apologise for troubling you. But what if she needs your help?"

It was impossible to dissuade mum. It was useless to try. It was always the case when she was sure she was right. Finally, like a true psychoanalyst she came up with a final proof: "The fact that Silva just said a few words filled with anxiety and then hung up immediately shows that she was in a really emotional state. It means that things are so bad that she couldn't say anything else…"

An hour later I set off for Yerevan by car. The two saintly ladies who never left mum for a moment calmed me as much as they could. All the way I was thinking that

mum's cheerfulness had misled me into making a bad decision, although looking at her that day probably nobody would say that she was terminally ill. But I knew very well that such things occur frequently. Just before death people have a definite sensation of relief. They and their loved ones even have illusions about possible recovery. I think that God specially permits a dying person to think sensibly about their last testament and to say farewell to their loved ones. There's a certain wisdom in this, while the whole civilised world sedates the dying person with drugs that deprive them of consciousness, in practice bringing forward their death by a day, an hour or a moment too soon. Praise God, mum was stuffed full only with non-narcotic pain-killers.

On the way to Yerevan I was overcome by anxiety. I was afraid to believe the thoughts that came into my mind. One day Silva told me that if anything happened to her son Ara she would not be able to bear it. Ara was the only son, the only child of my feisty friend. And he was also the son of the great Shiraz. Ara was an outstanding sculptor. We've been friends for more than twenty years.

I remember visiting his workshop with William Saroyan. The famous writer stood for a whole hour in front of the still damp clay statue of Andranik Ozanian. The legendary commander was riding skilfully balanced on two horses. Saroyan asked: "Why two horses?" There was a long pause. The most awkward thing was that the sculptor himself was silent. Finally, shrugging his shoulders, Ara answered vaguely: "That was how I saw him."

And then I had all sorts of suppositions – I'm not sure whether they were in jest or serious. Two horses galloping into battle could symbolise the two peaks of Mount Ararat, or Armenia – the mother country and the diaspora, without which the Armenian people does not have a complete united soul. I was dreaming up further symbolic meanings when suddenly Saroyan exclaimed loudly (he was deaf in one ear and therefore always spoke very loudly): "*Akhvor!* Splendid!" Then he repeated a few times this his favourite word.

Ever since, Ara and I persistently and stubbornly cherished the idea of erecting this statue in Yerevan. Everyone told me there were already plenty of statues with horses in Yerevan. And now we wanted to add two more horses at once! Well, in the year that Armenia celebrated the 1700th anniversary of the acceptance of Christianity as the state religion, work began on casting the bronze statue, and two years later the statue of Andranik was erected in front of the new cathedral of St Gregory the Enlightener. Serge Sarkisyan, then the minister of defence, found a sponsor who took on the whole project.

Like many talented people, Ara had a tendency towards alcohol abuse. His drinking bouts were hard and long. At these times his foolhardy obstinacy and unquenchable pride would not allow him to let in his mother or the doctor. Once it happened that he answered my incessant phone calls and by some miracle I managed to get him out of his stupor. Then I persuaded him to go with me to see a cardiologist who told him that his heart would simply not withstand another bout. Since then Silva was in a constant state of anxiety over her son.

I hadn't said anything to mum about my suspicions. But she knew that on one occasion Silva had flown to Moscow at my request without asking for any explanation. Indeed, I had not been able to track her down myself. I had asked Nelly to find Silva and tell her that I needed her to fly to Moscow as soon as possible. That was at the very start of the Karabakh movement when the unprecedented demonstrations in Stepanakert and Yerevan were just beginning. A few hours later my friends had picked up Silva from the airport.

On the evening of that same day Silva and I had visited the Politburo member and Central Committee secretary Alexander Yakovlev, and the next day the General Secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev. From that time mum loved Silva Kaputikyan still more. Mum was slightly older than her. And if I had said to mum that most likely Ara's state was the reason for Silva's phone call, she would have

insisted even more strongly that I should go to Yerevan. After all, it was a matter of the life or death of her only son.

I remember how in Kyatuk, when mum heard of Valeri's death, after a long silence (that was her way of crying), she said barely audibly: "Margarita, *tsavyt tanem!*" Then, after a slight pause, she added: "Thank God, she has a daughter. Thank God!"

Alas, I was not mistaken. I realised it as soon as Silva opened the door and I saw her eyes…

I love and respect Ara, so I cannot reveal the details of our meeting. Of course, he was very ill. And we don't have a choice in what illness we face. I sat by his bed for four hours. During this time I twice phoned Stepanakert and spoke with mum. She asked after Silva and assured me that she was feeling fine. During this time Ara didn't drink a drop, but I knew that after I went he would not be able to resist. I confessed to him that I had come from Stepanakert leaving mum in a very serious state. He asked me to give greetings to mum – to my mum.

It was a good thing that Silva lived one floor up from Ara. At midnight I went back to her. We drank tea together. As the last time, I told her that in three days Ara would be up and about and would come up to her. I didn't say anything to her about mum.

Early the next morning my old friend Levon Airapetyan phoned. The day before my article about him had appeared in the weekly "*Urartu*". Levon is a successful businessman. The way his life unfolded, he spent his time either in Moscow or in Washington. And from the very beginning of the Karabakh movement he had helped his little homeland and its people who were having a particularly hard time. One day at table he admitted to me that if he were ever bankrupted he would blame me since it was on my advice that he had dedicated all his business and all his profit to Karabakh. And he had added prophetically: "First of all I will restore the churches that were built by my forebears and then I shall become a slave of Karabakh." And that is more or less how things turned out. His father is from the legendary Karabakh family the Asan-Djalyans and his mother is a niece of Garegin Nzhdeh, the great military commander and philosopher from Nakhichevan. And as soon as the ceasefire came into effect in Karabakh, Levon undertook the restoration of two churches at once, at Gandzasar monastery and the Ghanzachetsots Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Shushi.

It turned out that Levon was due to fly to Moscow in two hours and he wanted to meet with me urgently. We went to the airport together. On the way he told me enthusiastically about the restoration work on the churches. I tried several times to phone Stepanakert, but without success. Admittedly, at that time mobile phones worked even worse than now. But a torrent of terrible premonitions poured through my mind. I felt a pang in my heart and there was a rushing sound in my ears. Levon realised that something was the matter.

"Tell me, what's happened?" he asked.

At that moment the phone rang. It was aunt Aikanush. Levon and I were standing at the door of the VIP lounge. Saying nothing to him, I went to one side and stood facing the wall. I don't remember what happened next, or what I said. I remember only that Levon decided on the spot to cancel his ticket to Moscow and fly with me to Stepanakert. I refused to let him. He was flying to Moscow on important business. I phoned Sergei Vantsyan and an hour later we were in the air.

* * *

Mum, our mum… You always knew everything and felt everything. And you always thought of us. You even asked God for just two years so that you could see your elder son as a grandfather. In the event, you could have asked for less. My elder daughter Susanna, with whose birth this book began, was due to give birth to a

daughter on the anniversary of the death of her grandmother and therefore could not attend the memorial gathering. Her baby girl was born exactly two weeks later.

Of course, mum, you remember the famous Russian general Alexander Lebed visiting you. You had very warm feelings towards him. Well, the general was soon elected as governor of Krasnoyarsk province. And I asked him to appeal to his fellow-governors in Siberia, the Far North and the Far East, to ask them to instruct good people to collect a handful of earth from the mass graves of the endless GULAG, including the Komi republic, and to send them to me in Yerevan.

The general very quickly responded to my request. He sent me more than a kilogram of soil of different colours. At my request the villagers in Agorti brought us a handful of soil from the graves of our ancestors the Balayans. We mixed this soil together, put it in a pottery jar and buried it in mum's grave. On one side of the headstone was a portrait of mum with her dates of birth and death. And on the other a portrait of mother and father with their dates and an inscription telling that in this grave there was buried a pot of earth brought from the depths of Siberia, the last resting place of our father, Haik Balayan from the village of Agorti, the people's commissar for education for Karabakh. This earth symbolises the memory of all those who were victims of Stalinism and whose graves are scattered over the endless expanse of the GULAG.

On the evening of 22 July 1998 Karabakh television showed a report on mum's funeral. The next morning, when we, the close family, came to mum in the cemetery there were quite a lot of people there. The faces seemed familiar, although I didn't know – or had forgotten – their names. I had met some of them in town, others in a helicopter. People told excitedly how they had seen the television news the previous evening and then phoned their friends and agreed to come in the morning to the grave to lay flowers in memory of the many victims of totalitarianism who had found a symbolic resting place in the old cemetery in Kyatuk. Many of them also had relatives who had not come home and were buried north of the Arctic Circle or somewhere in distant Siberia. And now they would regularly come here, to this grave, to lay their flowers.

The women stood for a long time at the fresh grave covered in flowers, bouquets and wreaths. There is a custom – in fact it is a law of the church – that women should leave the funeral service before the interment in the ground. They should not see the process of committing the body to the earth. There is a certain logic in this: a mother cannot see the moment of the great mystery of the birth of her child. So she should also not see how a person born of a woman returns to the earth. The next day, at one hour before midday, the closest relatives come to the grave – only the women. The men should stand at a distance. Let's not discuss the meaning and significance of such customs and rituals that have come to us down the ages. Let's just follow them strictly and without comment.

* * *

… It was on Thursday 16 May 2003. I even remember the time: two o'clock in the afternoon. I had spent a long time sitting in Misha Bagdasarov's office. I don't know how best to introduce him. He's a former Soviet officer, a modern businessman, a banker, a chess fan, a person who is the first to stand shoulder to shoulder with his neighbour at a difficult time. He was one of the first to develop the principle: for a patriot business is first and foremost a strategy for one's homeland. Before I left, he asked me as usual: "Do you have a car?" This question was very welcome, as I didn't have a car. Misha arranged for someone to take me home.

The driver of the powerful jeep was of a build to match the vehicle. I knew Misha's drivers, in fact all his staff. But this man was totally new to me.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"James."

“One only needs to add Bond.”

“It’s my real name – it’s written in my passport.”

“Quite so. And what was your sport?”

“I was a national boxing champion. Admittedly, in the ‘*Dynamo*’ championships.”

“So you were a policeman?”

“That’s right. I studied in the higher police academy with many present-day Russian leading figures, for example the present minister of internal affairs, Rushailo. Our course-mates are working in different regions of Russia. For example, in the Komi republic my friend Vladimir Osipov is the head of the government administration.

James continued speaking, but I didn’t take in anything more. The Komi republic had for a long time been the object of my special interest and attention. I’ve already mentioned that mum hid from Boris and me many details concerning our father. But we had got used to pricking up our ears at any mention of the Komi republic. Most likely that was where our father died, although we had no exact information. For some reason I suddenly had a feeling that I had never before got so close to the secret of the last years (or months?) of life of my dad, who was at once completely unknown to me, yet my nearest and dearest. I didn’t fully understand what was happening to me.

“Tell me, James, do you think you could put me in touch with your friend Vladimir Osipov?”

There was obviously something out of the ordinary in my voice or intonation because James stopped the car on Spendiaryan Street, just a few metres from my home. He took out his mobile phone and began carefully dialling a number. For some reason I was absolutely sure that the person he was phoning would not be there and that the call would be taken by some uninterested secretary. But it turned out quite differently. James spoke with Osipov, trying to explain to him what was wanted. I realised that it was best for me to speak with him. I hadn’t even managed to suggest this when James told his friend:

“You know, Vladimir, Zori can tell you himself.” And he handed me the phone.

The head of the administration of the Komi republic greeted me and immediately asked me to tell him my father’s full name. “Haik Abramovich Balayan,” I told him and that was the end of our conversation.

A minute or so later James and I said goodbye. Left on my own, I thought that it was time to get a grip on myself and calm down. After all, what had happened when I discovered unexpectedly that a person I hardly knew has a course-mate and friend working in the Komi republic? This had led to crazy illusions that I was about to discover my father’s past, that Boris and I would discover the true story of his short and terrible life – and death.

We had had so many empty hopes and fantasies! Over the past thirty years we had sent off dozens of letters to various addresses. We wanted to find out where our father had died. We wanted to know where and how. We had no hope that anyone would tell us any details or let us see his file. Every time, instead of an answer we received a facile response using general uncaring phrases which told us nothing about our father.

* * *

I needed to make progress with my manuscript and I worked from morning till late at night. The days flew by. And literally a few days after meeting James and speaking with Vladimir Osipov, late at night the phone rang. Cursing under my breath, I picked up the phone and barely disguising my annoyance answered “Yes!”

I didn't recognise the voice. No wonder – it was James. I'd never spoken with him by phone, so it was hardly surprising, even though I have a good memory for voices.

"I don't know what I should do," I heard this voice telling me, "whether to congratulate you or something else."

At first I couldn't work out what he was talking about. My fruitless correspondence with official agencies and the bitter taste left by their dry replies had, it seemed, killed off all hope. I remember that once I even asked my father for forgiveness for failing till now to find his grave, although I didn't know anybody who had succeeded in doing so. I even said that to dad in self-justification…

Let me recap: my first conversation with James had been on 16 May 2003. It turned out that Vladimir Osipov had that same day sent an enquiry about my father to the Ukhta archive of the Russian Ministry of Justice. Five days later Osipov received an answer from the archive. It was on 21 May at midnight that he had phoned James, who immediately dictated to me the information he had received.

… I don't really remember what happened then. I cannot recall any details. I was alone in the big room of our cottage in Karbi. It was two o'clock at night. For a long time I walked around the silent empty house. Then I talked out loud with my father. Up till then I had never spoken with him aloud. Then I phoned Boris. Together we wept in silence, exchanging just the occasional word or phrase. And remembered mum, how she had all her life dreamed of this day…

* * *

Boris and I had been orphaned twice. And this time it was forever. If only mum knew how often we now remembered her. Boris had lived with her longer than I, but for the last ten years we had been together a lot and had endless long conversations discussing the most important and acute issues. After mum's death, thinking about and recalling our discussions, I suddenly came to the unexpected conclusion that mother's fate, and especially her happiness, depended not so much on her own personal welfare and the happiness of her children as on the fate and happiness of her country, her nation. My loved and respected Chingiz Aitmatov once pronounced a short but rich formula: "There is no maternal fate apart from the fate of the nation."

Mum's actual life indeed reflected, just as in a mirror, the fate of the whole of Karabakh, the whole of Armenia, the whole of the former Soviet Union. All of mum's expressions of concern and advice were directed to peace, harmony, concord and order in the home. I think that applies to all mothers on whose fate rests the fate of the planet. If I had my way, I would legislate that all heads of state when taking the most important decisions should definitely consult their mothers, even if they are no longer alive…

Children never think about this. Mine, as adults, probably would never guess that their father's strictness was woven from the threads of advice from their own grandmother. And a special place in this inheritance is taken by forgiveness, which in no way diminishes the idea that good needs to be forceful. Mum, by the way, never used physical force. She didn't need to.

I knew, I was sure, that mum would not have been angry with me if I had stopped looking for father's grave. She understood very well that finding it was almost impossible in present circumstances. She herself was a witness of the futility of our many attempts. But after mum's death I had not stopped thinking about it. And now a year before the start of the project "the sailing vessel '*Kilikia*': sailing the seven seas", which delayed the work on this book for another three years, I was lucky enough to meet a wonderful person about whom one can say that he was sent by God. My new friend James Kobelyan knew many regions of Russia very well, but the

place he felt most drawn to was the Komi republic. He often travelled there. And, as we know, his friend Vladimir Osipov lived there.

I remember I didn't quite catch exactly what Vladimir's position was, either the deputy head of the Komi republic or head of the republic's government administration. The important thing was that Osipov had a wonderful grasp of his rights and duties. He did not avoid doing what was perhaps not at all easy and quite out of the ordinary – he did what he could. He had a good understanding of the importance and true significance of his work.

So, when he got the request from James and me, he at once officially approached the head of the archives department of the Komi Ministry of Internal Affairs V. G. Ulyanova. In response to his letter numbered 689-03-33 of 16 May 2003, the head of the archive wrote in her letter number 351 of 21 May 2003 briefly and succinctly: "I hereby inform you that Haik Abramovich Balayan, born 1904, a native of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region, who was held in the Ukhtizhem camp of the NKVD, died on 13 February 1939. His body was buried in the infirmary cemetery, now in the settlement of Shudayag in Ukhta district."

And so it was that I learnt the most important fact. I discovered the exact geographical location which mum and I had been searching for all our lives. Let's recall that many others from Karabakh who had been with father in Shushi and Bailov prisons, in their letters home and after their release from the camps, had talked about a totally different geographical location of Haik Balayan. Almost all of them had been in the Far East or Siberia and they decided that their fellow-countryman must have been there too.

There had been one other complicating factor that had hindered tracing him. Father wrote almost all his letters in Armenian. Such letters were simply not forwarded to their addressees, if only because all correspondence had to be censored. Nobody advised father to write only in Russian – after all the censorship was secret. But the amazing thing is that some letters, although confiscated, were neither thrown away nor burnt. At any rate, I have held some of them in my hands, written to uncle Andranik, to mum, to aunt Sofya. But these letters were not from the Komi republic. I'll write about dad's file later. But now, about our trip to the Komi republic.

* * *

I prepared for the trip to the Komi republic quite thoroughly. First of all I studied literature about the region itself. I learned that before the Revolution the territory that now makes up the Komi republic was divided between three provinces of Tsarist Russia – Vologda, Arkhangelsk and Vyatka. I'm not going to cite lots of reference materials, which anyone can find, but there are some things which I found quite incomprehensible.

I am curious, for example, as to why in August 1921 – four months before the formation of the USSR – it was necessary for the government of Soviet Russia to take a special decision to designate this harsh northern territory as an autonomous region with the name Komi (in brackets Zyryan – the obsolete name for Komi)? At that time on an area of 420,000 square kilometres there was a population of only 130,000.

In the book "*Special settlements in the Komi region*" (an anthology of documents) I found information like this: "A terrible picture of the life of the expropriated rich peasants in the first months of their exile is given in reports by officials. In a letter to V. V. Lebed, the deputy head of the Soviet Russian government, I. Tolmachev wrote: 'People are accommodated in 750 barracks that have been cobbled together out of poles. The barracks were built for 150 people on the basis of two people per square metre in bunk beds. Then they added a third level of bunks, but increased the number accommodated to 230. Even this quota was

sometimes exceeded. There are no floors in the barracks. The roof is made out of poles sprinkled with thawing and crumbling earth. The indoor temperature is no higher than four degrees. People suffer from lice and awful food – and many from a total absence of food. With the coming of spring (in April-May) the earth in the barracks thaws (many barracks are built on boggy ground) and the inhabitants turn into a living rotting mass.'"

I was struck by the formulation "Ukhtizhem camp of the NKVD" (the Ukhta-Izhma camp). A long time ago I had encountered something similar in mum's papers. I phoned my friend Viktor Krivopuskov in Moscow. I asked him to find me a book about the Komi republic, adding "preferably dealing with the time of the Stalinist repression". Viktor is special. He's on fire, genetically laced with adrenaline, always in motion. He phoned me back the same evening. "I've found the book for you. Fresh from the press. It's called '*The Komi province*'. It contains everything that has happened there over ten centuries. I'll send it to you by express post in the morning. I think I'll find an express courier at the airport." What a friend! We met in 1990 in Karabakh, when Stepanakert was a living hell.

The next day the book was delivered to me. On page 306 I read: "As early as 1936 the Ukhtpech camp (abbreviation for Ukhta-Pechora camp – Z. B.) had 100,000 prisoners. One should note that the Ukhta expedition of the OGPU (United Chief Political Administration – the predecessor of the NKVD security ministry – Z. B.) which arrived in Chibyu in 1929, comprised only 125 prisoners. In the second half of the thirties separate sections of the Ukhtpech camp were formed: in Ukhta, Pechora, Vorkuta, Inta and Usa. In 1938 the Ukhtpech camp was divided into three separate camps: Ukhtizhem camp, Vorkuta-Pechora camp and the Northern Railway camp."

So, the decision was made. We were flying to Ukhta.

* * *

Our mission to the shores of the Arctic Ocean was organised by the businessman and patron of the arts Misha Bagdasarov. Admittedly, I am not sure that patronage of the arts is the right description. His great-grandfather on his father's side, Avetis Bagdasaryan, was the priest of the Church of the Resurrection in Hadrut. Along with the rest of the clergy in Karabakh he was sucked into the maelstrom of repression, which was particularly cruel in these parts. There is no doubt that the chairman of the Dizak (Hadrut) district executive committee Haik Balayan could not have been unacquainted with Father Avetis. Sixty years later the priest's great-grandson – Misha Bagdasarov – renovated the church and created around it an extensive residential and cultural complex with all the infrastructure to go with it. Not only did he organise our mission to the Komi republic with precision and skill, but he plans to erect a *khachkar* (an Armenian stone cross) in Ukhta in memory of the innocent victims of totalitarianism.

One more point: my family odyssey that began with James Kobelyan turned into something that was not only mine and not only about my family. This 130-kilogram athlete, the former "*Dynamo*" national boxing champion, planned and carried out a "trial" trip to Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi republic where he visited his friend and course-mate V. Osipov in the government administration and talked through many details of importance for all of us.

We were accompanied on our trip by the head of the Holy Armenian Apostolic Church in Russia, the bishop of Russia and Novo-Nakhichevan Ezras Nersisyan. This meant that a Christian ritual would be conducted at the place of father's death – a service of prayer for the peace of the soul of the departed. Without stopping over in Moscow our small group flew to Ukhta – bishop Ezras, James, Boris and I and my son, who bears his grandfather's name Haik Balayan.

We landed at Ukhta airport at ten o'clock at night. James had warned us that we would be met. But none of us had expected that we would be greeted with flowers

and with bread and salt, the traditional symbol of welcome, presented by girls in national costume. It was only later that I learnt that the people of Ukhta welcome in this way all who come with a mission connected with the victims of the GULAG. Among those meeting us were the mayor of Ukhta, Antonina Karalina, her deputy for social issues Tamara Averina and the head doctor of the "*Kokhal*" sanatorium Vladimir Bibikov.

From the airport we went to the city to the "*Kokhal*" sanatorium, a pleasant two-storey wooden house, where we were accommodated. The evening was somehow joyful and happy. And yet, although I am not at all shy by nature and I've been pretty well trained for this sort of occasion by my journalistic work, I felt constantly unsettled and awkward, clearly as a result of the difficult nature of our mission. And that evening I never managed to talk with father, although I couldn't sleep a wink all night.

Even at the airport, looking at the tall, slim girls in their colourful costumes, I had felt that my soul was overflowing with complex, even contradictory, emotions. With my fingertips I had broken off a tiny piece of the loaf, dipped it in the salt and, lifting the sweet-smelling bit of bread to my lips, suddenly realised that I would not be able to swallow it. A spasm froze my throat. I realised that I was standing in the place where my father had lived, walked, slept, thought, felled trees and finally died. I think that the lively, noisy crowd and the twilight prevented me from noticing what was happening to me. What's more, I made a speech in reply, realising that I simply did not have the right to remain silent. I should not in any way offend or upset these people who could not and should not be held responsible for the terrible period of the cult of Stalin – all the more since they were trying to help us all as much as they could and thus, if possible, to come to terms with the terrible past. They were glad to acquaint us with their severe land and to reveal its goodness, generosity and beauty.

I understood all that. As I was speaking I caught myself thinking about my father. I very much wanted to be on my own, to think through my first impressions and to ask my father some important things. But even the questions didn't come to me. Father didn't know anything of these people who were now surrounding us, nor anything about the republic and what it is like today. And from the few letters of his that were preserved there wasn't anything that required explanation or interpretation. He asked how his sons were growing, why his sister Sofya wasn't answering his many letters. He knew nothing, nothing at all about us. And he couldn't say anything about himself.

* * *

In the morning we were to visit the local history museum, and the settlement where prison barracks were preserved along with the bath-house, the ruins of the camp infirmary and the cemetery. About a week earlier I had phoned Vladimir Osipov and asked him to pass on to me copies of all surviving archive documents about my father. He had said that it was a bureaucratic nightmare and that first of all it was necessary to get permission from the Ministry of Justice. Admittedly, he had added: "I'll try to do it as soon as possible."

To be honest, I had no doubts that there would be a positive outcome. After all, almost seventy years had passed. We really are living in a different country – actually now in different countries. Many materials about Lenin, Stalin, the Communist Party, the October Revolution and the Second World War were no longer secret. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's books had been published in huge editions – "*The GULAG Archipelago*" alone is worth its weight in gold! And why not now open up all the archives of the GULAG, so that the children and grandchildren of the victims of Stalinist repression (indeed everybody who wants to!) could get to know the tragic history of their own country? It's not idle curiosity – it's our duty. And it's our history. And the state is obliged to allow it, in the name of truth, justice and scholarship.

I am very grateful to Vladimir Osipov, a man true to his word. After visiting the local history museum where we saw ten centuries of life and culture and of survival and tragedy in this harsh but rich region, our new friends and guides took us to the city hall.

… In a spacious office at the head of a long table sat a quiet lady, with a strict look, yet with a broad smile and very kind eyes. This was Antonina Karalina, the mayor of Ukhta. Television journalists, who it emerged had come specially from the capital Syktyvkar, moved about the table in a businesslike manner. On the table was a pile of books with brightly coloured covers. On the navy-blue spine of the fattest book at the bottom of the pile was written in stark white letters: "*Repentance*". A young cameraman carefully turned over the books so they could be seen better and started filming.

Antonina Karalina said some appropriate words about our mission. She understood very well the delicate task that was laid upon her and so she spoke very seriously:

"A short memory has a habit of taking revenge on us. You have probably noticed the books lying on my desk. In one of them there are some very succinct words which I would like to quote: 'Forgetting one's history – especially its dark pages – cowardice and fear of the historical truth all lead to the repetition of tragedies that have already been lived through, to the repetition of past tragedies…'"

The phone rang. Karalina picked up the receiver and at once stood up. Excusing herself she started towards the door, but a man in a dark suit was already entering. This was Vladimir Osipov, the man whom I wanted to meet more than anyone else. He had come to the city hall directly from the airport. James introduced me and my companions to him. We hugged, slapping each other on the back.

"I'm sorry I'm late, please continue," Osipov said to Antonina Karalina and sat down on an empty chair.

"You have come at just the right moment," smiled Karalina. "Right now I have a to fulfil a task which is a great pleasure for me and for all of us."

She stood and picked up a weighty grey folder. Now she turned directly to me. She hurried over to me and handed me this grey folder containing the file of prisoner Haik Balayan. I don't doubt that at this happy moment the soul of my father was alongside us, his sons and his young namesake Haik Balayan. Probably there is nothing worse there in heaven than to feel that one has been lost and forgotten.

* * *

At home we had a dozen or so photographs of father. There were three photos with mum, a few group photos and the rest were portraits. In all of them he had a head of thick black hair. On the cover page of the "file of a person deprived of liberty" were two unexpected photographs, in profile and face on. His hair was short and his face unshaven. I could not look calmly into his sad eyes. Who can say what he was thinking of at that moment? On his chest the number 32273 was printed at an angle. Beside it his previous number 131460 had been crossed out. Boris was sitting to my right and Haik to my left. Leaning towards me, both looked attentively at the face of their father and grandfather.

It occurred to me that this was the first time I had encountered the combination of words "person deprived of liberty". We were much more used to the terms "prisoner" or "convict". I also noticed the date – 1957 – which seemed out of place on the file of someone detained in 1937. On a second look all became clear. "Sentence begun 4 June 1937. End of sentence 4 June 1957." So, my father should have been released when I was twenty-two.

Of course, I realised that it would not be the done thing to spend a long time leafing through the file in front of everybody present. And I think I found a good way out. Before thanking the head of the government of the Komi republic, the mayor of

the city of Ukhta and all the others who had helped us, I decided to read out one document. The lengthy court verdict in the file was written in Armenian, but a short summary in Russian was appended. It can be cited without cuts: "… is accused of carrying out propaganda containing a call to subvert state industry with counter-revolutionary aims. To be deprived of liberty for twenty years… The sentence is not subject to appeal."

It was not a matter of chance that I read out this text in the Ukhta mayor's office. As I leafed through the file and the three of us quietly glanced through page after page, I felt a deep silence come over the room. We could not but realise that our emotion was felt by everyone present. And I was sure that reading aloud the text of the sentence would definitely defuse the tension. And I was not mistaken. Many smiled, some even laughed out loud. I looked at Vladimir Osipov. In response he raised his hand with his fist clenched. Antonina Karalina's big kind eyes smiled at me. I looked at the photos of my father and thought that he was now happy along with us. His closest family, his sons and the grandson who bore his name, had come to him. And the office was full of people who had helped us to find him.

It also occurred to me that my father would soon have been ninety-nine. And probably even at this age his hair would have remained black. Father's sisters told how their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had kept their hair without a trace of grey. And my aunt Sofya did not allow herself to go out without her head covered, afraid of people's condemnation. It seemed that there was nothing but grief in her home, her family and in her soul. It's no joke after losing her elder daughter and her own brother to receive three death notices from the front-line within two years. Her three young sons were killed. Three captains. And yet her hair did not turn grey. But there is a firm popular belief that grief turns people's hair grey.

Before then I had not thought much about father's age. But here in his file there was constant mention of his year of birth, 1904. The next year he would have been a centenarian. All my life I have loved talking with old people, especially those over a hundred. I have even talked with a record holder – Takui Arustamyan from the Karabakh village of Seidishen, who was a hundred and thirty. And why should I not now talk to my heart's content with my father, who had a lot to tell me and whom I had a lot to ask about things that had been especially interesting all my life. Lord, at long last!

* * *

"Father, I wanted first of all to go to all the places where you were in the course of those ten months and where you died, and then to talk with you when I had an idea of the situation in which you lived and died. Above all I want to tell you that mum, all your sisters and uncle Andranik were for some reason absolutely sure that your heart stopped here in Ukhta and not in the depths of Siberia. Admittedly, from time to time different information about your whereabouts reached us, but that's now all behind us. They all loved you very much and so, most importantly, they felt when something happened to you, although I cannot give a common-sense explanation of it.

"They also loved Boris and me very much and protected us in their own way by trying not to give us any details. So, for a long time we knew very little about you. They made sure of that in school too. Once the school director Amazasp Vartanovich let me off the last class of the day and sent me home without explaining anything. Afterwards I discovered that our class had been enrolled into the Pioneers and a photographer came from the "*Soviet Karabakh*" newspaper and took pictures of the children putting on their Pioneer scarves. The next morning the senior Pioneer leader met me at the school gate and dragged me to the director's office. In the presence of Amazasp Vartanovich the Pioneer leader put my scarf on. At that time they didn't tie the scarves…"

"I know, I know," my father interrupted me, "in those days the ends of the scarf were threaded through a special clasp and then it was tightened almost up to the neck. Incidentally, at that time I was the head of the education department and I was against the clasp because it tore the fabric of the scarf with its sharp teeth."

"You know, mum told me that you had raised this matter a number of times. I think in about 1946 they forbade us to use these clasps and taught us to tie the scarf. However, I remembered this incident for another reason. After Amazasp Vartanovich was arrested and exiled to the Altai province, our wonderful maths teacher Sofiya Ambartsumovna told me that for a while the children of enemies of the people were not allowed to take part in the solemn ceremony to join the Pioneers and the Young Communists. This deviation, as they put it, did not last long.

"At that time mum was in Siberia and simply didn't know anything about these deviations. They hid a lot from us because we were still very young. I want to tell you that mum got really confused about your whereabouts. Lots of people swore to her that the whole group from Bailov prison were sent to different regions of Siberia and Kolyma. Why I am telling you all this? Before her death, mum…"

"When did she die? How old was she?"

"She died on 20 July 1998 in Stepanakert. She was eighty. You would then have been ninety-four."

"What was her life like before she died?"

"Before she died she talked especially much about you. She dreamed of meeting you. She was sad that she didn't know where you were. And she comforted herself and Boris and me by saying that your souls would definitely meet. She was tormented by not knowing where you were buried. And we regarded finding you as her last will and testament. So our friends sent us handfuls of soil from the mass graves of the GULAG, including from the Komi republic – actually from Vorkuta – and we buried this soil in a pottery jar in mum's grave."

"And where is she buried?"

"In Kyatuk. But we also sprinkled some soil from the graves of your ancestors in Agorti… On mum's gravestone is a photo of both of you together. And it is written that you died in 1937. But I think we'll not correct that. We'll leave it as it is. And now Boris and I and your grandson Haik and the friends who have come with us are going to begin visiting the places where you were."

* * *

"Now we are travelling through the land where our father and grandfather is buried, through the land where hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people are buried. Their average age was thirty-five. Our father was thirty-four. He probably found out where he was being taken after about two weeks of prison transport. They would have learnt that the train was going to Kotlas on the Gorki railway line. Here he was given a paper indicating that the GULAG instruction was to send him to the Ukhtpech camp of the NKVD. On 29 May 1938 Haik Balayan, together with a large group of prisoners accompanied by a detachment of ordinary guards, walked to the barracks along the same road that we, having got out of the car, are now walking along." This is an entry from my notebook.

I'm sure that father was unlikely to have known anything about the territory where he was fated to live the last 275 days of his life. Meanwhile we already had in our hands rich published material about the history of the transformation of a wonderful and rich territory into a veritable hell for those who unexpectedly ended up here.

First of all I should mention the volume of over a thousand pages named "*Repentance*". Most likely this is going to become a multi-volume work. It has a sub-title "*Martyrology*". Till now I had met this term only in church literature: the story of martyrs and saints. Apart from the research and analytical material, the volume

contains information about the victims and the persecution and suffering they endured. The publication was prepared by a large editorial group, including academics, writers, publishers and public figures. The group is headed by the leader of the Komi republic.

The population of this harsh territory began to settle over a thousand years ago. As they tilled and cultivated the land by hand, the inhabitants knew that this labour was enriching and ennobling them also. I heard something similar not only from the great poet Amo Sagiyan but also from my grandfather Markos: cultivating the grapevine people don't always notice that they become noble themselves. Many Armenian poets and philosophers wrote about this.

Like most northern nations, the Komi population was pagan. Christianity introduced to the territory new rituals and traditions and literacy and culture. In 1478 the Komi territory was incorporated into the Russian state. In 1921 the Komi (Ziryan) Autonomous Region was created within the Soviet Russian Republic. In 1936 it was reconstituted as the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The Zyryans together with the other nations of the mighty state experienced happy years of peace and the nightmares of internecine wars. For many years the population had no inkling that there were rich deposits under their feet. "The whole Mendeleyev table lies buried in the land of the Zyryans." Not to mention oil, gas, titanium and the fact that more than ninety percent of the territory of the Komi republic is covered with unique forest, four hundred thousand square kilometres, no less.

As long ago as 1601, four hundred years ago, the first person to be exiled arrived here. Having heard of the severe frosts and gale-force winds in this territory, Tsar Boris Godunov banished to the Komi territory the disgraced nobleman Vasili Romanov. Incidentally, twelve years later his nephew Mikhail became the founder of the Romanov dynasty.

It is not by chance that I have highlighted this dramatic episode in Russian history. The fact is, in Russia banishment initially was an isolated instance. To banish someone was a way of getting rid of a headache, a radical solution to the problem. The tsar sent Vasili Romanov away accompanied by a servant and by police officer Nekrasov, who had very strict instructions lest the "enemy of the people" Vasili Romanov by chance "leave the road and harm himself, that nobody should come up to him to talk to him about anything at the encampments and that he should not refer to his credentials." As the authors of the book "*The Komi province*" I.L. Zherebtsov and F. Smetanin write, in Chrensek it was instructed that the nobleman should be housed "as far as possible from the church, the seat of administration and residential houses". The tsar specified two things: if necessary to build a special homestead (of course, at state cost – Z. B.) and that "there should be a fence around the homestead".

One should note that Romanov met a tragic end, which is what usually happened. Those guarding exiles were as a rule very angry since to some extent they too ended up as exiles themselves. Naturally, their anger was directed at the person responsible who by now was totally powerless. The policeman Nekrasov tortured Vasili Romanov and held him in shackles. After a year Romanov became seriously ill and soon died.

Thus it was that one of the Romanov royal family was the first to blaze the trail to the Komi territory. Soon, having come to power, the Romanovs themselves were sending their enemies, opponents and rebels into exile here. Among the exiles were famous statesmen, diplomats and tsarist high officials. Nevertheless, these were still isolated instances.

It's sufficient to cite the figures from the "*Repentance*" book, which records that on the eve of the first Russian revolution in 1905 there were only two hundred exiles in the whole of Arkhangelsk province, which included the Komi territory. In 1909 there were about eighteen hundred. After the February revolution of 1917 one of the first decrees abolished exile as a method of administrative punishment.

The Bolsheviks introduced the term banishment (as a form of repression). It meant banishing "alien elements" as far as possible from their place of residence. Up till the middle of 1918, evidently before the assassination attempt on Lenin, the tsarist tradition was maintained – people were sent to their place of banishment without an armed guard. What's more, exiles were paid a small allowance. Furthermore, exiles were not required to work. The main thing was to get them out of the way! Gradually Stalin tightened things up. "*Repentance*" traces the changes very precisely. "The Criminal Code of 1926 made a distinction between banishment and exile as basic and supplementary punishments. As a primary form of punishment the term was three to ten years, as a supplementary punishment up to five years, but following the period of primary punishment." For example, the political prisoners of the Solovki special camp were sent to the Komi region after they had completed their camp sentences.

Stalin was carefully and thoroughly preparing the legislative basis for future mass repression. It is said that when he learnt that at first the Bolsheviks had given exiles an allowance and not forced them to work, Stalin laughed out loud. He probably also laughed at the meagre number of exiles in the northern districts. Alexander Solzhenitsyn cites figures that in 1923 there were three thousand prisoners in the Solovki camps, while six years later there were already fifteen thousand and another thirty thousand in the Komi region.

Of course, dad knew none of this. He was not a witness of the number of prisoners in this harsh territory rising to over a quarter of a million – far more than the indigenous Komi population. And although almost every day transports would arrive with new victims, the overall Komi camp population would barely increase. The living would temporarily take the place of those who died. Father did not manage to find out about this. And he was sure that Stalin knew nothing about it and wrote a letter to the "dear beloved leader". We'll definitely talk about that.

* * *

Having visited the places connected with the prisoners' daily lives, we set off for oilfield no. 3, where he worked in the logging camp. I kept my notebook with me all the time. "The oil here is special, heavy and viscous. It was considered very important strategically. The prospecting and extraction were also very specific, basically by hand. So there were problems with the quantity extracted. And if not much was extracted it had to be the fault of the Trotskyites."

Today at this historic site there is a unique museum. There I discovered that in the autumn of 1938 hysteria took hold in the Kremlin because in the GULAG and especially in the Komi camps "the saboteurs do not give up even in the camps. They obstruct exploration and waste energy and resources." A national conference of geologists was summoned urgently, at which the main topic was the fight against sabotage. In a book about Strizhkov, one of the founders of oil and gas geology, who became a victim of the sensational "case of the Industrial Party", A. I. Galkin writes, quoting the journal "*Soviet Geology*" no. 11: "In his speech at this conference comrade Kaganovich unmasked with exceptional force the enemies of the people – Trotskyite-Bukharinite spies and saboteurs – and outlined specific means of liquidating the effects of this sabotage and the priorities of Soviet geologists for a number of years ahead."

In his book Galkin also notes that immediately after this essentially Jesuitical geologists' conference a commission arrived in Chibyu (one of Haik Balayan's addresses at this time), one of the members being G. P. Hovhanesyan, the young deputy chief geologist of the "Kergez Oil Administration" – part of "Azerbaijan Oil".

I was familiar with this name. In the file of GULAG materials that I had collected, my personal archive, the name of Hovhanesyan crops up time and time again as a member of various commissions monitoring the work of the oil and gas

industry. He was from Karabakh. I don't know what happened to him. I think that my father not only saw him but talked with him. The commission came with a resolution decided in advance, which was most likely equivalent to a court sentence. Usually the bosses were shot and ordinary mortals were scattered around other exploration sites or transferred to the logging camps of the "*Komi Forestry Camp*". Actually, it was all one and the same institution, with the same administration and even a shared bath-house and laundry and a common camp infirmary.

* * *

On the front of the postcard was written the return address: Komi Autonomous Republic, Chibyu, Forestry Camp no. 3. This was the last message from father. It was dated 21 January 1939. The censors kept it for twenty days. The postmark is quite clear – 10 February 1939. That was my birthday – I was four years old. Three days later, father was dead.

The card was addressed to his sister Sofya. On the little grey card twenty-four lines were written in a neat hand – in Russian. Dad wrote: "Forgive me for writing in Russian. I'm writing in Russian so that you will receive this sooner." So, father already was aware that if he wrote in Armenian the letter would simply not get sent. Reading this one missive to his family, I could guess why he was asking his sister to send particular food items – even specifying the quantities required: 5 kg of garlic, 5 kg of onions, 4 kg of green beans, 3 kg of mulberry jam, Borjomi mineral water in bottles, 3-4 kg of peas and finally envelopes and postcards. This message reached the addressee.

Of course, father knew very well that even if his sister sent him everything on the list he would not receive any of it. The guards always took everything for themselves. And he knew perfectly well that Borjomi was never sold in Stepanakert and was always sold only in bottles. As for the other foodstuffs, it's clear that what they needed to have sent here to the North was what helps to ward off scurvy. So, the camp guards, who needed all the things listed, would definitely send off dad's postcard. In fact, who knows, maybe after this message Sofya really did send off to the camp whatever she could. I just don't know. I do know that father used the occasion to express a few thoughts which he definitely wanted to pass on to his family. This is what he wrote on his last postcard:

"Dear sister Sofya! It's almost a year since we last saw each other. Since then I have not received a single letter from you, even though I have written to you more than ten times. I received letters from Gohar and Nakhshun, but not from you. Gohar wrote to me that you have taken in young Zori. I'm very grateful to you. But write to your older sister Nakhshun to tell her to take Boris in, so that Gohar can work and help you at least a bit financially…" Then he advises his sisters to co-ordinate their efforts and to take it in turns to send him parcels. And so that the censors would definitely send on his letter, he writes as if from a health spa: "I am fit and feel well. I'm doing ordinary manual labour." This was a formula, terminology imposed on the prisoners. In his file on his medical card, in the column for illnesses, this man who was "fit and well" is recorded as having "chronic bronchitis".

In one of the letters which was not sent on, prisoner no. 32273 writes to his sister that he was "plagued by pleurisy". On the same medical card in his file there is a column "fitness for work in a corrective labour camp" with four options: "heavy work", "light work", "unfit" and "temporarily unfit". "Light work" was underlined. Admittedly in the column "Prior to dispatch to the corrective labour camp" there are no diagnoses or underlined words. Father also knew that in letters he needed to write "ordinary manual labour". That would cause less problems. The important thing was to be able to conclude his message with the words: "Write about everybody's health. Write about Zori and Boris. Is Gohar working? 21 January 1939." These were dad's last words. Maybe he wrote something else, but I'm not likely ever to find out.

However, judging by the fact that he asked for envelopes and postcards, he most likely had nothing to write on.

* * *

“You know, dad, when I was in Ukhta, which has now swallowed up Chibyu, Yaret and Shodoyag that you were familiar with – and many other places – I got your grandson Haik to film on a video camera everything that happened to us there. It was simply essential, so that I didn’t have to take my notebook out of my pocket so often. I felt awkward making notes in front of the people around me, although at that time I talked quite freely with you. You understood what I was saying at once. Admittedly, I don’t know if I can put it that way, because after all our conversations were in the mind.”

“You were quite right, and not just as a matter of etiquette. It was very important for me that my grandson, who bears my name, came from afar and walked where his grandfather had walked and all this time thought about his grandfather and how he lived.”

“Of course, dad. He saw with his own eyes a lot of what I didn’t manage to see. For I was constantly surrounded by people who had something to tell me about the day to day life of prisoners. Meanwhile my Haik was filming the barracks, climbing inside, touching the walls and doors. He couldn’t disguise his own emotions and fail to comment on what he was seeing as he imagined his future audience who would find out from him about the life of his grandfather.”

In a year or two these crumbling buildings will be demolished. And in their place will be built new houses, maybe even mansions. It really is a corner of paradise. I remember how we went out in the morning straight into the forest and had long conversations with our hosts. And now, three years later, looking at Haik’s videos, I saw a fairy-tale scene. Above the tips of the huge ancient firs there was a cloudless blue sky across which some great artist had drawn a white stripe as though with a magic ruler. The plane itself was invisible. In the slanting rays of the morning sun the steely coloured body of the jet merged with the vapour trail that pointed to infinity. And the sky was a fantastic blue. I’ve never seen anything like it anywhere else.

From time to time I looked at my son’s face and understood the emotions that were churning inside him: sadness and joy, perplexity and delight, distancing himself from what he saw, yet taking an intense interest in what was happening around him. Sometimes he had an expression which might have been both elation that he was connecting with a past that was serious and significant and a real sensation of a future that was long-awaited and joyful. What do our still young sons dream of and what do they want to receive from God? He would say something along these lines to the local journalists who asked about our impressions when we finally found the last resting-place of our father and grandfather. He began by thanking God that our search had ended so successfully and that he had been able to experience these happy moments in the midst of sad thoughts…

I think that Haik was absolutely right to film bishop Ezras Nersisyan a lot. He immediately appreciated that in recording the clergyman he was capturing a moment not just of our family story but also of the history of our nation. He reminds us of the symbolism attached to the mission of the head of the Armenian flock in Russia in taking part in this journey.

I watched Haik carefully also because I realised that I needed to tell my father as much as possible about him, since his grandson was also a representative of a new and unknown generation. I loved to tell father things in the evenings, when the day was already over and it was possible to talk without needing to hurry off somewhere.

“You know, dad, your grandson is not much like you. But his granny Gohar often said that he reminded her of you a lot. He’s shy and diffident. He knows how to listen. He’s not excessively stubborn, but quite stubborn enough. And he is interested in everything. Mum was right. Now that he has graduated he acts independently. His teachers also noticed his ability to concentrate, his special curiosity and his inner feeling for his field of action. For a doctor all this is very important.

“The scenes that he filmed have acquired a special value as time passes. For example, you know we spent a long time at the cemetery at the grave of Doctor Eizenbraun, the surgeon who operated on you. I was writing down in my notebook information about the surgeon and his wife. And I wasn’t paying attention whether there was anybody nearby. I didn’t notice someone talking behind me. And suddenly on Haik’s video I hear the voice of the man standing by me: ‘Your father was born in 1904 and mine in 1902. So, they probably knew one another. It’s quite possible that they talked together.’ The recording stopped there, but I remember that this man and I hugged each other and stood there a long time in a silent embrace.”

“In camp there were lots of people of my age or a year or two older or younger.”

“Yes, father, I noticed that when I studied the GULAG statistics. They mostly used men aged thirty to forty for heavy work. Naturally, most of all there were thirty-five year olds. The younger ones couldn’t cope with the heavy work because they didn’t have the experience and skills and the older ones were not strong enough.”

“I know, son. When we heard that a transport would soon arrive with tens of thousands of new prisoners, we realised the weakest would go to the wall. They didn’t necessarily shoot us. There were other methods. The simple fact was that there were not enough beds for the new prisoners. They had to get rid of those least capable of working. In the forest trees fell right on your head. People often suffocated in the mines. Not to mention explosions and fires.”

* * *

Thanks to the video that Haik filmed now I can visit the Ukhta cemetery whenever I like. When the staff of the local history museum showed us the spot where father’s grave might be, it emerged that it was exactly 500 metres from the infirmary, what’s more “to the North”. I told father that the documents about his death and funeral were compiled with great attention to detail. It seemed to me that he was not in the least surprised. Millions of people perished there, in various ways. And for each one an official record was made, signed by at least three people, sometimes five.

I don’t think father ever saw his file. Most likely he was not even aware that such files were kept on each person. And he wouldn’t have known that in his file there were a few pages headed medical card, which was filled in already in Bailov prison in Baku. And then the information was simply copied out. I was told that from time to time special commissions checked these files. So the local administrations made sure that the documents were always in perfect order.

I mention this because it could not have been a matter of chance that the distance from the infirmary to the grave was recorded. The GULAG officials were extremely afraid of their own institution, to which their colleagues often returned as prisoners. Naturally, they all tried to get things right. And they were all afraid of inspections.

We still have to visit the infirmary where father died. But before that I want to cite the text of the record of his burial:

“Medical compound record of 22 February 1939. We the undersigned, head of the medical compound Klyavin, the commandant of the medical compound Istomin and armed guard Astashin record the following: on this day we conducted the burial of the body of Haik Abramovich Balayan, who died in the surgical centre of the

infirmary. Year of birth 1904. Article 58 paragraphs 7 and 10. Sentenced to 20 years. The corpse was dressed in underwear, a string with the name-tag around the neck. Lowered into a grave 2.5 metres deep. The distance of the grave from the medical compound is 500 metres to the north. We confirm the present record." And the signatures followed.

* * *

Exactly four years passed after our trip to Ukhta. The reason was that my plans changed because I spent three years on the sailing vessel "*Kilikia*" navigating the seven seas around Europe. During this expedition I wrote three weighty volumes: "*My Kilikia*", "*Kilikia – the way to the ocean*" and "*Kilikia – the return journey*". They were published quite quickly. It seems to me they were done tastefully and professionally, at least as far as publishing and printing are concerned. And they immediately sold out.

I once again set to work on the book devoted to the memory of my parents. And once more I felt gratitude for the work that my son Haik had done. His video cassettes reminded me of conversations, circumstances and people that, so it seemed, I had forgotten. One of these episodes came to life again as soon as I saw the clip with bishop Ezras when he asked at the cemetery whether the figure of two and a half metres depth given in the record could be relied upon. The issue was the depth of the grave.

One of the guides who were with us all the time answered confidently: "This issue was always treated with great seriousness. Two and a half metres was a kind of law and if you transgressed it you faced punishment. It should be noted that throughout the GULAG and in the Komi republic in particular there was a real battle with all kinds of epidemics. More than anything else they were afraid of the putrefaction of corpses, especially as wolves and other wild animals roam here. Digging graves was not a problem. As they say, there were plenty of people, praise God, who could wield a spade."

When Boris, Haik and I gathered earth from the grave mounds into plastic bags we were filmed by a television crew from the Komi capital. They also filmed the memorial service conducted by bishop Ezras right in the operating theatre. In the building of the old infirmary it was not at all difficult to find the operating theatre. Even though the building was without a roof and many of the partition walls were missing it was easy to determine the places where the operating theatre, the X-ray room and some of the wards had been.

Bishop Ezras was wearing his church robes. He gave everyone a candle. He had brought a three-branched candlestick, which he put on what had been the windowsill – there were no windows left. The weather was very still and there was not the slightest draught in the former operating theatre. So, not a single candle went out. It was a traditional memorial service, as is usually held as part of a funeral. The bishop began with the Lord's Prayer. Boris, Haik and I stood holding our lit candles. A little to the side there was quite a big group of people from Ukhta, also holding candles. The service was conducted in Armenian. But when we crossed ourselves, all the other participants did so with us.

When the formal part of the church funeral mass was over, the bishop turned to our hosts and addressed them in Russian:

"Dear brothers and sisters! It is said: holy is the place where the life of one of God's servants was cut short. But I would say that the place where the hearts of hundreds and hundreds of thousands of God's children stopped beating is doubly holy. The place where we are standing is sacred. And we now feel here that tragic fact of history which took place in our lives, in our common family story. This event happened at a time when God was rejected, when places of worship were destroyed, when faith was taken from us and our hearths were destroyed and hundreds and

hundreds of thousands of lives were cut short. All this has remained in the memory of the nation. And we are bearers of this memory, based on faith and love, which are immortal.

"It is faith and love which brought here the sons who found the place where their father's heart stopped beating. And in this sacred place we remember the words of the Gospel: 'He who seeks shall find.' This was God's mercy. This was the truth, confirming that the memory of the fathers lives in the hearts of the sons. The truth which testifies to the fact that the soul of the father is alive, that the souls of the fathers are alive, that the souls of millions of victims are immortal.

"We prayed and asked the Almighty that they should all find their rest in the Kingdom of God where there is no place for the evil that was among us. And today we are met here to be convinced of one thing: we must base our lives on those values which are constructive, on that everlasting value which is faith in God. If we believe in God we must love one another. For only love and goodness are constructive while hatred and evil are destructive.

"Peace and goodwill to you! I want to express my appreciation and thanks to you and though you to all who today worthily continue the divine act of preserving the memory of fathers and grandfathers. May the Lord keep you all!"

* * *

By the former infirmary on a level piece of ground a table had been laid with sandwiches, fruit, salads and disposable plates. The memorial feast was blessed by the bishop. We drank to the eternal rest of the soul of the child of God Haik Balayan and to the millions of victims of the GULAG.

I couldn't help noticing how Haik junior was growing more mature before my eyes. When we were getting ready to go after the service for father, he went up to the windowsill where the candlestick had been placed, stopped and with a sudden embarrassment spoke to the bishop: "Your grace, could we leave the candlestick with the candles here?"

"Of course we can! Indeed we should. Of course, Haik-*djan*!"

You cannot imagine how I felt at this moment! I wasn't just proud of my son. At last he had grown up to feel responsible for even his most simple actions. After all, not long before he had not been like that. And now he was. And I also thought to myself that my father, his grandfather, would definitely have noticed this tiny detail. And also been glad at it. God is often present in seemingly insignificant details…

* * *

I constantly felt father's presence when we explored the city of Ukhta and its surroundings with our new friends. And Haik's camera helped us not just to record but to recall details. Our volunteer guides told us about their city comprehensively and lovingly as they showed us monuments and historic places. And I couldn't help thinking that father most likely met or saw one of their grandfathers or great grandfathers, because most of them are descendants of former prisoners. And I spoke to father:

"Mum told me that you were always very happy when you managed to identify the root of some word or other. So probably in the summer of thirty-eight you heard from local people that Ukhta means bad-tasting water. I have to tell you that the water here tastes very good. And you've probably noticed that the city is now nothing like the small settlement that you came to. And you would probably have been surprised if you had been told then that the day would come when the wooden houses would be replaced by brick houses and then by glass and concrete buildings, that tower blocks would spring up, that the state bank would house a masterpiece – the golden bird which is the Komi emblem – that a monument would be erected to

Pushkin as a victim of repression and that there would not only be a university here but even a casino.

"And what you certainly wouldn't believe is that in place of the barracks where people's lives were turned into a daily torment, the rich would build detached houses and mansions and in the former settlement there would be built a monument to you and your comrades, to the millions of your contemporaries and fellow camp inmates…"

Yet in the midst of these wonderful kind people, in the midst of the joys which followed finding father's grave and performing Christian rituals there, when, so it seemed, everything had been fulfilled which only a short time ago had been inconceivable – father had been reunited with his sons and grandsons – there were bitter hours and minutes when my soul ached terribly. We were reliving the tragedy in all its awful detail, maybe so that we would not forget what had happened to our dear ones and remember them for ever, so that someone's cruelty, or maybe their mental illness, should never again cause the destruction of millions of innocent people. Not only that, but there was the abominable fear that gripped his family and friends for many years.

Reading the pages of file no. 32273, I noticed one detail. In the record of the burial it says that it took place "on the 22nd day of February 1939" (a strangely old-fashioned way of writing the date), while the record of death signed by the doctors reads "on the 13th day of February 1939 we the undersigned, head of the surgical department of the central infirmary of Ukhtizhem NKVD camp, Dr Eizenbraun, nurse Radugina and duty orderly Pogorely, compiled the present record that while undergoing treatment in the surgical department prisoner Haik Abramovich Balayan died on 13 February 1939 at 15 hours and 10 minutes. Death was caused by a haemorrhage in the brain."

So, he died on 13 February, but he was buried on 22 February… That means my father's body was lying around somewhere for almost ten days. Maybe there were too many patients at that time. Or maybe too many corpses. Maybe there was a blizzard, after all it was February, and what's more not far from the Arctic Ocean. All the same, reading this and thinking about it was very painful. He had had so much sorrow in his short life and on top of everything they didn't manage to bury him in a decent time. He was lying somewhere and people were going about their business. And nobody could be bothered with him. Maybe he even got in the way and they had to move him…

At first I thought they had brought him straight from the logging site. In the reception room they took off his clothing, which was described in detail five days later. This was the third record, signed by four people. But reading this document carefully I realised that they had taken father not to the medical compound but to the barracks. Otherwise under the heading state property "blanket and bedding" would not have appeared. They had taken off his prison jacket, his work clothes, his hat with ear-flaps and the sweater that appeared in the column "personal property". For ten days the soul could not leave the unburied body.

Those are the thoughts, hurriedly written in my notebook, that were going round my head as Boris, Haik, bishop Ezras, James and I, together with our new friends drove to that monument to father and all the other victims of the GULAG.

* * *

On the outskirts of Ukhta the stream of traffic roared by at a tremendous speed. To one side there was a green field stretching to the horizon, to another the edge of the taiga fearlessly resisting the march of new construction, and alongside there was the main road flowing into the city like a mighty river. And at the point where the highway entered the city it became amazingly picturesque. Trees

alternated with neat lawns and on both sides of the avenue stretched long pavements.

A little to the side of this canvas on a wide field there stood the historic monument – constructed not of stone or marble but of concrete, to be precise, reinforced concrete. It was not the classic material of sculptors and sculptures. Such a monument cannot be sculpted with a chisel. It can't be created by just one person. I would say that it had to be the combined effort of a team of sculptors who were at the same time construction workers.

The idea had been conceived in Ukhta long before. On this little plot of land in our vast country, a quarter of a million victims of political repression, representing about a hundred nationalities, are recorded by name. The Ukhta city architect and his team courageously took on the responsibility for realising this project. But to put the idea into practice was possible only in the year that the USSR collapsed.

I asked our friends and guides about the essential meaning of the idea embodied in the monument. And as though with one voice they all said the same thing: "A cross. An Orthodox cross."

On a huge reinforced concrete truncated pyramid stands a massive tombstone in the centre of which a gaping hole in the shape of an Orthodox cross has been cut out. Most likely the monument makes an impression on each person who sees it for the first time depending on his mindset, taste and even mood. I can speak only for myself. The supreme simplicity of an ordinary wooden cross in a churchyard has a strong impact on me, magic and almost always the same. I forget about all trifles, idle talk and cares of life and something significant and deep comes over me at different times in quite different ways. The cross before you concentrates your mind on the one who rests beneath it. For a short time you are lost in thought, maybe even about a totally unknown person. And everything else literally recedes into the distance.

This concrete cross soaring into the sky is in some different dimension. You are aware of a profound human tragedy: not just of the millions who perished but the broken lives of their closest relatives – children, parents, wives, fiancées – all of them. And this airy cross is the reservoir of their souls, their shared monument, for everyone and on behalf of everyone.

On the rough grey concrete base there is a square iron plate inscribed with a message addressed to passers-by: "To those innocent people who died in the years of political repression. Passer-by, bow your head to those whose mortal remains are buried in this ground." And we bowed our heads...

We didn't know that we would visit this sacred place. And we didn't have any flowers with us. We gathered a bouquet of wild flowers from the meadow alongside. Haik took out of his plastic bag a rowan twig with green leaves and red berries that he had broken from the tree enveloped in legend that stood by the place where father had died, added it to the bouquet and placed it in the long concrete trough built into the side of the base.

That was the end of our excursion. We got into our bus and were specially driven back by a different route. But I didn't see anything through the window. Thinking about my father, I tried to write down my impressions in my notebook. The monument had a depressing effect on me. I named it at once "the monument to the soul". Maybe for other people it brought other associations. Maybe the city architect and his colleagues and the workers who erected the sculpture will not agree with me. Probably they won't. But I think I have a right to my own perception, my own vision of the concept.

From a distance, looking at the monument, I felt its soul. And so in my perception it was not at all a cross cut out of heavy concrete. It was concrete that had solidified around the cross. The great Hippocrates noted that the soul develops and lives right up to a person's death. However, it was not outstanding medics but poets

who specified the precise location of the soul. It is where it hurts. Or to be more precise: "I am where the pain is."

"The chief executioner, who used the state system to kill millions of innocent people, failed to take into account one important rule: when the souls of the fathers ascend to heaven their sons and grandsons remain here on earth. We know that you agree with us, father!"

* * *

"Not wanting to lose time, we hurried to mum in Karabakh. We took soil for her from your grave, father. When she was alive she dreamed of knowing where you were buried. And sharing a grave with you was impossible even to imagine.

"For the whole journey Haik did not put down the jug-shaped pottery urn we had bought in Syktyvkar. It contained sacred soil. We were still travelling when the material filmed by the Komi television reporters was shown on channel one of Yerevan TV.

"Just imagine, father, how our nation would receive the news that the grave of one more victim of the GULAG had been found, when about a quarter of a million Armenians were shot, exiled and put to death in the camps, when to this day we cannot find the burial places of such giants as the poet Egishe Charents, novelist Axel Bakunts, surgeon Harutyun Mirza-Avakyan and thousands of others of our fellow-countrymen.

"We could not stop in Yerevan because your Gohar was waiting for you, Karabakh was waiting for you. And we were expecting relatives and friends from Moscow who were to join us in travelling to Karabakh to your funeral in Kyatuk. Your grandsons Haik and Arsen (Boris' son) filmed everything that happened at your funeral, which was organised by the Karabakh government.

"For some reason, dad, I'm sure that you already know that we have an independent state of Karabakh. From the first days of independence we thought seriously about the future and made sure we did not forget the past. Your portrait was carried at the funeral, as was right and proper, by a Karabakh soldier in dress uniform. At the grave your colleague, the Minister of Education Armen Sarkisyan, made a speech. One of the most courageous members of the Russian intelligentsia, the philosopher and writer Andrei Nuikin, spoke:

> *'Funerals are usually very intimate occasions. Traditionally the closest relatives and friends take part. At such moments you want to shut yourself off from the whole world to be alone with the one to whom you are saying farewell, so that you will feel the unity of the close family.*
>
> *'But the sons of Haik Balayan have given this family event a great public resonance which we all now feel. Today's sad and solemn act is important not only for them. Let's remember that our dismembered country and our common civilisation are going through a deep crisis and today it is not yet possible to predict what loss and misfortune will be caused to the whole of humanity. We Russians often say that we have a lofty culture. The Armenians know that they have a lofty and ancient culture. All that is true, but is should not be an excuse for complacency and self-satisfaction.*
>
> 'There have been many rich cultures of which only lifeless stones remain. When the soul goes out of a culture, the culture itself goes out because we are not talking about a physical culture but a spiritual one. Now for many countries and nations being rich and economically and industrially developed has become an end in itself. But we know from history that all this cannot compensate for the loss of that spiritual culture which is the main achievement of human civilisation. For no heights of intelligence, logic or technology can make up for the degradation of the soul and the spirit. For the soul, apart from anything else, is the place

where we are at one with the world, with the whole of mankind in goodness and beauty. And whoever does not do this simply has no soul, or has a maimed soul.

'And now, taking part in this sacred act that truly unites our souls, we are acutely aware that the loss of culture above all leads to the loss of international friendship which rests on the meeting of cultures and allows the nations to breathe freely. That is why I want to emphasise the special value of today's intimate family event. It forces us to mobilise our souls and devote them to achieving what our common sense tells us. And as we commit to the earth the remains of one political prisoner, Haik Balayan, in our hearts we are aware that this funeral symbolises the eternal memory of millions of victims of the GULAG. And it is very important, as we take part in such acts of union with past generations, that we should not allow ourselves to forget what has happened to our country, to our peoples and our individual countries…'

"I want to tell you, father, that Andrei and his wife Galina, along with other Russian writers, at the most difficult time for our nation, stood shoulder to shoulder with us and wrote about what they saw. Now they have come to Karabakh in part because they wanted to share our joy that after sixty years of separation you and mum have finally been reunited – now forever. But also to tell your grandsons about the great role of Soul and Spirit in the struggle against evil. And to make a promise to you never to forget the lessons of the past.

"I have no doubt that you knew not only the famous writers and poets, but also the especially talented new young shoots. I know how you tirelessly worked to ensure that not only new books regularly reached Karabakh, but newspapers and magazines. That means you must have read the young Silva Kaputikyan, whose wonderful verses were already being published in the early thirties. Later she became a famous poet and one of the active campaigners for the liberation of Karabakh. That day Silva Kaputikyan was at home in Yerevan, bed-bound. She sent her message to Kyatuk which was read out by her friend and famous poetry reader Svetlana Khanumyan.

"Reading the text she could barely conceal her emotion. Silva had lost her father even before she was born. Barunak Kaputikyan, a member of the Dashnak party, fell victim to the Bolshevik terror in 1918. I have often heard Svetlana Khanumyan – in Silva's home and on the stage. But here, at the Kyatuk cemetery, there was something quite different. The voice was painfully familiar, so similar to Silva's, but it seemed to come from some heavenly depths:

'Today from the depths of time and space one of the martyrs of the times of trouble we have been through, Haik Balayan, is coming home. He is coming home, having returned to dust and ashes, having become a bitter memory. This is the dust and ashes of countless victims who were tormented in the bloody year known to history as thirty-seven. This is a handful of ashes, all that remains of the people who were thrown onto the bonfire that engulfed our country.

'Today's sad ceremony has meaning and sense at many levels. It is not only a testimony of filial devotion to Haik Balayan, but it is also a manifestation of the tradition of our nation to maintain an inextinguishable memory of its best sons – a tradition which fortunately has not been lost and remains unsullied.

'Today's ceremony is also to remind us of how selflessly these people served their nation, despite their varying views, and at the price of what cruel trials they achieved what we have won today, a victory that we should cherish, remaining always faithful to the values of our fathers, to the ideas of freedom and justice.'

* * *

“You know, father, I spent the whole night watching the report filmed by Karabakh TV of the burial of soil from your grave in your homeland. There were lots of people there, but, unfortunately, not all appear in the film. I would like to tell you about my impressions and to introduce to you members of the family whom you never knew because they were born after you were taken from us. Three granddaughters of your sister Sofya came: Ludmila, Karine and Nune. I should clarify – they are the daughters of your niece Nazik.

“In your letters addressed to Sofan (as you always called her) you often asked about the health of her older daughter Arshaluis and her sons Ashot, Artashes and Artavazd and little Nazik. Two years after your death the war started. At this time I was living with the family of your sister Sofya and her husband Markos, whom I called granddad. He was a really wonderful person, wise and noble. And for half a century I have been writing about him in all my books.

“Well, this is what I want to remind you of. It’s very important. In the first two years of the war all three sons of Sofya and Markos were killed. ‘*Three captains*’ – that was the title of an article about them published in ‘*Soviet Karabakh*’. And in 1939, the year of your death, their daughter Arshaluis died during an operation in Baku. So in your sister’s house there remained only Nazik, who was eight years older than me. I grew up in a family where for many years nobody laughed. Gradually this chronic mourning subsided. But it ended completely only after Nazik had three delightful daughters. They came to Gohar’s grave and rejoiced, as Silva Kaputikyan said, that you had at last come home.”

* * *

“I remember, father, that when I had fulfilled mum’s chief dream I could not settle down, on the contrary I was tormented by not knowing what to do next. I could no longer busy myself with trivia, but nothing significant came to mind. Most of all I thought of the fate of those unfortunate young women, to whose homes the black vans came at night to take away the fathers of their children, leaving them in fear and dread in the face of an uncertain and miserable future, alone with babies, young children and helpless old people. The old folk could not suggest what needed to be done as a priority and how to continue their lives. The children grew quickly and needed to be fed and sent to school, while their situation got worse and worse.”

As a twelve-year old boy, I knew very well that it was not just my Stepanakert, my Karabakh that was starving, but the whole Soviet Union. For us 1947 was even more terrible than the war years, when we still had some old supplies in reserve.

I remember aunt Aikanush, with her critical attitude to my mum, coming from Agorti to her sisters in Stepankert and saying with a deep sigh: “It’s terrible. Even in the war it wasn’t like this. And how can things be for our Gohar in prison in Siberia?” To which, after a pause, granddad Markos quietly replied: “I think in prison they now have a bit more to eat than we who are free.” Granddad Markos was right. It was not easy to live, even for those mothers who somehow managed to return home. Their lives were neither happy nor peaceful. They continued to be hungry and in addition were constantly afraid for themselves and their families. If they had been cracked down on once, who would prevent it happening a second time? However, they already knew what the camps were like.

While I was studying at the Ryazan Medical Institute mum sent me a postal transfer of 400 roubles every month. From January 1961 after the currency reform, it was 40 new roubles. In the summer of that year, at the end of our fourth year of study, all of our group were on a practical placement in the village of Durnovo. The

time of the month to receive money came and I headed off to Ryazan. At the post office I looked closely at the sender's address: "Hadrut district, Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous region". That was strange. Usually the money came from Andizhan. Without fail, 400 old roubles or 40 new roubles. At that time we always specified. And suddenly, instead of the usual 40 new roubles I received a whole 100 new roubles.

I thought to myself at once that just half a year ago this would have sounded like a banker's salary – 1000 roubles. As ever, the money was sent as a telegraphic transfer and mum had written: "Buy shoes and whatever you want." All my life I have remembered mum's expression "whatever you want" – and my invariable response: "*Tsavyt tanem*, mum."

At the beginning of August I went home to Andizhan for the holidays. The first thing I did was ask mum about the money:

"Did you send me for two months at once?" I asked.

"If that's the way you want to calculate, then it's not two but two and a half months," mum laughed warmly.

She went to the cupboard, took a paper from the drawer and handed it to me. I studied it long and carefully.

"Read it aloud," mum said to me quietly and sadly.

"I'm trying to read what is says on the official stamp, but it's not very clear…"

"Don't bother – look at the top right corner," she suggested – and I understood that she had already thoroughly read this document. "It's written there – Hadrut Executive Committee."

It was an official notification. It read: "Given to Gohar Balayan, wife of Haik Balayan, now rehabilitated, in confirmation that in accordance with documents submitted she was paid 3800 roubles (in old money) for her husband's enforced absence from work."

It was impossible not to notice those words: "her husband's enforced absence from work". Imagine thinking up such a phrase! Enforced absence from work! I don't want to be ironic! Rather, we should just be grateful to Khrushchev. But there was another irony, an irony of fate. That notification was signed not just by anybody, but by the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Soviet of People's Deputies of Hadrut district, N. A. Abramyan. I'm sure that in such a poor agricultural district as Hadrut in the past twenty-three years they would hardly have built new council offices. So, N. A. Abramyan signed this notification about compensating for Haik Balayan's financial loss "for enforced absence from work", sitting in the same office, at the same desk and on the same chair as my father had once sat. His salary had been 1900 roubles a month. So, a quarter of a century later, mum received her husband's salary for two months.

* * *

I have already mentioned that in connection with the voyage on the sailing vessel "*Kilikia*" I had to postpone work on this book for a while. But that doesn't mean that I abandoned it completely. For example, I took with me on the voyage a copy of father's file. Whenever it was convenient I read and re-read particular pages with a pencil in my hand. I wrote whole sections of text or commentaries. When I had finished notes relating to "*Kilikia*" I would move on to conversation with father.

Typing up my notes, I would grab the relevant materials from the GULAG. And carried away by this work, despite the sea swell, I would begin another conversation with father, discussing with him what I had read or written. Before I went to bed, I would try to jot down in my notebook short phrases, comments and dialogues, dreaming of the day when I would be able to include it all in the book.

"You know, dad, I spoke with you so much about the past and I have listened to so many clever and well-educated people who went through the Golgotha of the

GULAG, that it sometimes seems to me that I know as well as you do what happened to you there."

"Maybe, son. After all, I really didn't know anything. On the other hand I had a blind belief. That was typical of the times. All the time I was thinking that I had to save you and mum. To do so, I needed to find a way out. Maybe I had said something or acted in a way that I shouldn't have. Although, to be honest, sometimes truth and logic took over and then I saw things differently."

"I think it was just impossible for them to have left you free. Look at how it all happened. You graduated from the Moscow Communist University of Labourers of the East. You returned to Karabakh with an excellent reference and high marks. I was not even a month old when you were appointed as head of the local education department. You threw yourself into the work at once. Within three months you had visited all the schools in the region. You began writing to Yerevan and Baku demanding text books and visual aids. Tevan Djavadyan, your friend and colleague from Gishi told me that speaking at Party conferences you insisted on the need to increase the education budget and tried to get them to send teachers of literature and history from Armenia. You asked the Armenian Minister of Education to send Armenian writers to Karabakh. You met David Ananun from Mets-Shen, became friends with him and corresponded with him, even though you knew that before the Revolution he had opposed Lenin and had been a representative of the definitely non-Marxist 'Specific' Party."

"David was a genius."

"But, of course. That's why he was arrested."

"But even Maxim Gorki had a high regard for David, who had even asked him to write the preface to his '*Anthology of Armenian poetry and prose*'."

"You know that Gorki was hounded to death. And you even showed everybody your book of Charents' poetry, which he sent to you by special delivery. But you didn't know that the great poet had been arrested. From 4 June you were in Shushi prison and Egishe Charents was arrested in August the same year. You knew nothing about it – they didn't let you read the newspapers. Maybe you were even glad when they moved you from head of the regional education department to be chairman of the executive committee for the whole of Dizak."

"I was congratulated on this promotion at the regional party committee – even on behalf of Bagirov."

"Well, they always did that. It was Bagirov who knew very well that it would be easier to arrest you if you were in the executive committee post. Then there would be no talk of your campaigning for textbooks, for teaching Armenian in the Russian-language schools and the lack of teachers of Armenian literature and history."

"You mean, there is no mention in the prison documents of my work in the education department?!"

"Nowhere. Only in the column for 'profession' it says 'teacher'. That's all. So, it was right that you didn't try to make excuses. I liked that very much. There was one other provocation that you knew nothing about. Ervand Hambaryan from Yerevan studied with you in Moscow. You knew that, at one time, as it says in your file, 'he voted for Trotsky's policies'. And after you had been moved to the executive committee, out of the blue your classmate Ervand Hambaryan phones and asks to come to see you. Of course, you received him. He came to see you at home. Mum put a meal on the table. Hambaryan asked you to help him to find work. On your recommendation he was appointed temporarily as an instructor in the education department in Stepanakert and then appointed permanently to the Shushi Pedagogical College as Party organiser and teacher of social sciences."

"He was an able person. And I knew that he had once been a Trotskyite."

"How I love you, father! I read that in your testimony. Pretty soon everyone found out about his past and he was arrested immediately. And you were removed from your post and expelled from the Party. Not a week had passed before the Baku

paper '*The Communist*' had described you in Armenian as 'an implacable enemy of the Party and a Trotskyite bastard'. The article was reprinted in the regional newspaper."

"To be honest, at first I was calm as I thought that the case against me was too absurd, and that it would be enough for Stalin or Bagirov to see the total absurdity and preposterousness of these accusations and justice would triumph. What's more it was constantly claimed that a true communist was not afraid of lies, that there had not been a single case of an innocent person being convicted. You just need to speak the truth at all times and you should listen to logic and not put forward absurd schemes. But nobody wanted to listen to me or see how precise my logic was, for example when I said that Hambaryan voted for Trotsky in the twenties and everybody knew about it. And that means that he was trusted both in Armenia and in the University."

"That's what you wrote to Stalin, that it was absurd to accuse you of 'shielding the Trotskyite Hambaryan' when everyone knew perfectly well that he had been a Trotskyite. You objected to the mendacious wording of the resolution of the meeting accusing you of 'harbouring Trotskyites' in the plural, 'of connections with alien elements, of disrupting the meeting on the trial of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite counter-revolutionaries and of using Trotskyite methods'. You wanted Stalin to make these abstractly worded accusations specific. When Boris read words like these in your file his response was 'My poor naïve father' – and I agree with him, although I think that there was much more irony than naivety in your letters."

"Maybe Boris is right. After all, your mother, my sisters and my friends often called me naïve."

"I shall quote the arguments from your letter to Bagirov and Stalin and we'll decide which is the most appropriate description. You were accused of 'harbouring the Trotskyite Hambaryan and giving him financial assistance for carrying out Trotskyite activity". This wording from the resolution of the Bureau of the Karabakh Region Party Committee was adopted unchanged in the resolution of the Central Committee's Party Control Commission."

"I sent a letter to the Party Control Commission in September 1936 but never got an answer. How do you know about it?"

"There was no way you were going to get an answer. I think that at the very least hundreds of thousands of such letters piled up in the Party Control Commission. But copies of the letters were sent to the Party Central Committees of the republics. So, in response the Central Committee in Azerbaijan sent the wording of the resolution of the Regional Bureau to the Party Control Commission. But there is something else that is of interest. The Party Control Commission in this instance not only confirmed the local decision but added its own special judgement, officially naming you as an 'enemy of the Party' and an 'enemy of the people'. That put an end to the matter. The resolution of the Party Control Commission was adopted when you were already in Ukhta. This document arrived in Baku from where it was sent to the Far North, since you, the addressee, were in the Komi republic. They didn't even show you this document, but they took on board the wording 'enemy of the people'."

"I know. When someone was called an 'enemy of the people' in official documents it meant that the prisoner was never to return home."

"It's all perfectly logical, father. In the state system that had come about at that time terminology had special importance, every single word. And in your letter addressed to the leaders you didn't write what they wanted to read. What they needed was for you to denounce your student friend. But you wrote that not only the students at the Stalin University but you yourself formed an opinion of Hambaryan 'as a good communist'. Without disguising that you knew about Hambaryan's past links with the Trotskyites, you wrote openly that he was an old comrade and that you were glad to see him. Here is what you wrote: 'I was even encouraged by it. I thought,

here's a party member with higher education who has come to work with me and I'll find him a job somewhere…'

"No, you were not at all naïve. You were a realist. And with what wonderful irony you write about the terminology 'alien element'. During the discussion of your case at the meeting of the bureau of the regional party committee you were accused of staying in the village of Tog at the home of teacher Artashes Vartapetyan when you were the director of education. 'Is it possible to call this person alien?' you ask. 'Yes, he is the son of a priest, but he is the brother of several communist party members. The same is true of his Russian wife. When I was appointed as head of the regional education department, he was already the director of studies of the workers' pedagogical faculty in Shushi. After I left the education department he was appointed school director in Tog. So, we almost simultaneously moved to Hadrut district. I find it surprising that if the powers that be knew him to be an alien element, why are they speaking about it only now?'

"In the appendix to your letter to Stalin you write openly: 'The people who were mentioned in connection with my expulsion from the party were far from alien'. And there are two amazingly worthwhile sentences written to different bodies. You make an important generalisation when you express your view that Trotskyism had been turned into a plague, which in the old days had been used as a justification for any and every permissible or impermissible means to combat it. And you ask the leader in your letter: 'Is it really possible to stick the label of contemptible Trotskyism on a person in this way?' And what irony there is in your letter to Bagirov: 'Nobody at the meeting of the bureau of the regional party committee could answer my question what they had in mind in the wording of the accusation "Trotskyite methods in his work". Are we not turning Trotskyism into an outbreak of plague?'

"No, father, this is not at all naivety. This is honesty and courage.

"As for the elevated style, which is particularly noticeable in your letter to Stalin, I can understand you very well. I've already mentioned one of the main factors in such behaviour. For millions of people it was a matter of faith – faith in the deified man. In the course of human history this is found quite often – from the time of the Pharaohs and Caesars to the time of the Führer and General Secretary. We have seen in practice that crowds are more easily subjected to hypnotism than isolated individuals. And it's clear that it's useless to try to teach people common sense when they are in a state of hypnosis.

"It was a matter of a monstrous phenomenon – the crowd which was a whole nation. This was not a crowd at a meeting. This was a whole nation which would be made to hate its healers, its prophets and its poets. A nation in a state of mass hypnosis is able to worship only an idol. In the time of Aristotle, long before the appearance of Holy Scripture, everyone was afraid of a nation that was infected with idolatry. That's why the great philosopher devised the strict formula: 'If a nation can allow itself to be turned into a crowd, it deserves to die before it is born.'

"Whether you all believed or not was not especially important. Because what we are looking at is a specific repressive state system in which all its institutions operated against the thinking person.

"The true meaning of your letters, of Charents' letters (I often mention his name because I had the chance to read all his letters to Stalin) and of the letters of hundreds of thousands of other people is explained not by physical fear of death but by the desire to save your families and children.

"Yet, if you all believed, you believed sincerely. I think it is unfair to blame everything on fear. When I was a child and a teenager I had no fear when I regarded Stalin as god. I simply didn't know that in the ugly covered lorry labelled '*Bread*' people like Charents were being taken away at night, or that in a truck labelled '*Meat*' people like academician Vavilov were spending the last minutes of their lives.

"In the proud victory year of forty-five, as a ten-year-old boy, there was something quite different in my head. How could there be fear? Every film was not

just a documentary but a revelation. And after each film, which featured all ten of Stalin's punches (as the victories on the various battle fronts were called), I didn't dream of my father or mother, but of the 'great leader and father of the nations'. We grew up believing that each day we would be living witnesses of the process taking place before our very eyes which turned the handsome, kind eyed generalissimo (the 'Victor of Berlin') in his white tunic into a tangible god. We children wrote awful poetry, odes to Stalin, not at all out of fear but as a result of faith in incontrovertible facts, the realities of life.

"Alright, my generation was then totally ignorant. And yet a lot of honest and intelligent people believed that the leader was a genius, among them the talented and courageous Leonid Hurunts who in 1937 at the age of twenty three renounced his father – and then spent the rest of his life writing books under the burden of his own words: 'Forgive me, father'."

* * *

"Dad, I want to tell you about an episode in the life of your family. It was in Andizhan on 4 June 1957. I had only just finished my military service, leaving my life in the navy to settle in Uzbekistan where there were several dozen families of your and mum's relatives. They were all exiles. I immediately started work as a trainer in heavy athletics in the department of physical education at the Andizhan Medical Institute and at the same time for two groups at the Committee for Physical Education and Sport. With my first salaries I bought a wonder of modern technology – a small '*Saratov*' fridge, which was then very popular.

"It cost about two thousand roubles in old money. Of three months' salary a few hundred were left and Boris, who was then in grade ten at school, and I decided to buy mum that same '*Red Moscow*' perfume because of which your sisters had treated mum so unfairly, as we then thought. We scoured all the shops we knew in Andizhan, but we could not find such a perfume. But the idea of buying perfume had taken firm root and so we bought some rather expensive perfume in a pretty opaque bottle. I removed the label and painted in its place the Spassky tower at the Kremlin and '*Red Moscow*' in bold letters.

"In our tiny shack with its earth floor we decided to organise a celebration for mum. What a surprise it was when we carried the fridge into the house and saw a table laid with a feast. Mum gasped. Since then I love organising surprises at home and I get greater pleasure out of them than anyone else.

"When we presented mum with the '*Red Moscow*' she simply beamed. Oh, how beautiful she was at that moment. What as shame that you didn't see her, father! But we still hadn't solved the mystery of the feast. Maybe you too felt something that day, 4 June 1957, up in heaven.

"It turned out that mum remembered this date and had waited twenty years for the day to come. Even in camp she didn't forget it. In many of the documents in your file this date was mentioned – there was even a special column for it: 'Beginning of sentence 4 June 1937. End of sentence 4 June 1957.'

"So we celebrated what would have been the day of your return home from camp. At the time our home was in Andizhan, where our address was 16 Lermontov Street, shack no. 4.

"The day was one of the happiest for our family. You followed events from two photos hanging on the wall. In one you are shown in a tie and with your luxuriant head of hair. In the other you and mum are pictured together, leaning your heads against each other.

"I'm sure that you also thought many, many times about this date, the end of your sentence. By that time you would have been fifty-three years old."

* * *

"Father, you didn't know that a very lengthy letter to Stalin was preserved in your file. You were already in Ukhta. It was the end of summer 1938. When I read it, I realised that neither you nor your comrades had any idea of what was really going on in the structures of state. And I want to tell you about it.

"Five years earlier there had been mass arrests at the peak of the campaign to liquidate the rich peasants as a class. In this connection the vague, artificially created phenomenon of Trotskyism continued to raise its head along with saboteurs and spies who appeared from goodness knows where. Many people were just imprisoned without any reason at all. At the end of the twenties and in the early thirties people got ridiculously mild sentences – say five years. But by thirty-eight the country was suddenly facing an unbelievably difficult situation. On the one hand, by thirty-eight the whole of industry was based on cheap, if not free, labour by prisoners. On the other hand the GULAG had in essence became a kind of universal ministry of industry for the whole country.

"Suffice to say, by thirty-eight former ministers and their deputies had been appointed by special decree to head the GULAG as a whole and its multiple local branches of industry. The fact was that various departments and administrations of ministries and state agencies had gradually been absorbed into the system of the GULAG. They had been transformed imperceptibly into a sort of enormous machine, which automatically and even logically took on itself the functions of the state.

"To back this up, father, I'll give you a short summary of just one decree on the GULAG. It was on 9 June 1938. You had only just arrived in Ukhta. It was the start of summer. You thought that the worst thing in this exotic area were the vicious mosquitoes. You didn't know that there were still many terrible things to come: fierce gales, harsh frosts. Not to mention evil incarnate, which (though you didn't know it) was not in the Komi region, but in Moscow, where on 9 June by decree no. 00863 within the GULAG there was created the structure of the Chief Administration of Construction for the Far North, which included the Komi Autonomous Republic.

"I've studied all this and I would like to tell you that in the decree it says not just 'the Far North', but 'the Far North of the NKVD'. Everything was named that way. Your Ukhta-Pechersk Trust was called the 'Ukhta-Pechersk Trust of the NKVD'. And so, the institution called the Far North of the NKVD (known as 'Far Construction'), totally separate from any ministries, had its own headquarters, secretariat, scientific-technical centre, political department, civil administration department, personnel department, special (!) department, logistics department, geological prospecting department, a squadron of aircraft and a vast network of other departments and administrations related to the enormous geography of the huge country.

"This machine, in accordance with socialist political economy and political science, rested on two pillars: production relations and production forces. Here everything was ultra simple. Production relations in the GULAG boiled down to the well-known formula: 'one step to the left or one step to the right and you'll have nine grams of lead in your back'. Production forces were slaves, slave labour. After all, Stalin called all of you, all his enemies, criminals, who (in the words of the leader of the nations himself) were capable of getting pally only with other criminals. There was a certain logic. After all it's much easier to turn criminals into recidivists.

"The whole of the GULAG was based on the slave labour of criminals. It was possible for the entire industry of a country preparing for war to be profitable provided millions of slaves received no salary. But time and time again the Kremlin received reports and proposals that massive prisoner releases needed to be organised as sentences expired. The issue was even raised that those who worked well should be rewarded. Equal treatment hindered the fulfilment of the plan, it was as simple as that. And everyone sought guidance from Stalin."

"And what did Stalin do? He understood it very well. After all, we had read his works, studied them and distributed them. At the end of the twenties and the

beginning of the thirties in the university that was named after him we studied his works on economics. We studied the classics. He couldn't have failed to understand…"

"He understood everything very well, father. And I want to quote an extract from his speech of 25 August at a session of the USSR Supreme Soviet where there was discussion about the release of those who had completed their sentences and even the early release of those who worked well. This is what was said by Stalin, to whom you wrote about your innocence and how you could be useful to the country if you were freed: 'Is it correct that you have proposed putting forward a list of prisoners for release? But they are leaving their work. Is it not possible to think up some other form of recognising their work: awards etc.? It's bad to disrupt the work of the camps…'

"You just listen how this man's next sentence sounds, think about the essence of what he says. This was said by the man in whom you believed, in whom we both believed. I believed in him straight after the war, from the age of ten to fourteen…"

"Why to fourteen? What happened to you when you were fourteen?"

"Nothing special. I just learnt to read the truth in granddad Markos' eyes. As for fourteen, it was the day I joined the Communist Youth League, when I wanted to make granddad Markos happy, and I read in his eyes not joy but irony. And I have to say that I really could read a lot in granddad's eyes. Anyway, listen to what Stalin said next: 'Of course, these people need to be freed. But from the point of view of the interests of the state and of the state economy, it is not a good thing…' And listen how he continues: 'So what is the result? The best workers will be freed and the worst will remain…' Pay attention, father, to how the brains of this evil genius work. What horrendous logic: 'Can't we do it in another way, so that these people remain at their work – give them rewards, medals maybe? Otherwise, we'll release them, they'll return home, get pally with criminals and continue in their old ways.'

"It never entered his head that these people might return to their families, to their children and wives. And to keep them from their old ways he finds a justification for his proposal: 'In the camp there is a different atmosphere, it's not easy to go off the rails there. Maybe free them from their punishment in such a way that they stay at work as civilians? But the old solution doesn't suit us. Let's not approve this draft today, but task the ministry with devising a new scheme which would force people to stay where they are, so that they are not tempted, so they don't have a stimulus to leave. Maybe adjust their status a bit and consider them civilians. Just like we oblige people to make voluntary investments in government bond issues, here we could have obligatory voluntary remaining in camp.'

"It just remains to add that less than a year later, in June 1939, this horrendous proposal by Stalin was definitively formulated and enshrined in law by several decrees of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet abolishing all forms of conditional early release, not only from corrective labour camps, but also from corrective labour colonies and prisons, i.e. from any form of imprisonment, wherever you happened to be. Once you had got into their hands they needed to suck the last drop out of you. And if you had lost the capacity to work, then Stalin needed you only dead.

"In determining the diagnosis and symptoms of tyrants, experts have differing views. Some consider that these inquisitors, führers, Stalins and their like have clear symptoms of manic depression. Others speak convincingly of signs of paranoia, which is accompanied by stable and systematic delusions – of persecution, of jealousy, of genius and so on. I think that all these people became tyrants only in specific circumstances of absolute impunity, when lust for power became all-consuming…

"I realise, father, that it is not easy for you to understand what is happening to me as I read your documents. But knowing the subsequent course of Soviet history, I

understand you very well as I read your letters. That's why I drew particular attention to the elevated style of your letter to the leader. You did it, I realise, for our sakes, hoping for justice from the addressee. I noticed that you never addressed him by name and patronymic, but only as comrade Stalin. Of course, you knew that he didn't like being called Iosif Vissarionovich. For him this evidently sounded too familiar. That's also an element of the clinical diagnosis."

* * *

"And nevertheless, it seems to me, father, despite everything, despite the universal fear and despite the seeming pointlessness of all veiled protests, of analytical well-founded letters sent to the leader and even individual words and sentences that were apparently unknown, all this had a purpose. The authors themselves gained nothing, it all passed them by. But there in the Kremlin someone in the ruling elite must have been given cause to think that something needed to be done to change the situation, that things couldn't go on in the same way for ever. Their own fear dictated the need for change.

"And you too, it seems to me, understood this. Hence, I think, your mockery of the demonising of Trotskyism. You wrote: 'By adding the ending -ism to someone's name we unwittingly create a scientific term. Neither at the meeting of the bureau of the Karabakh regional party committee, nor at the trial, was anybody able to explain what was meant by attributing to me propaganda of Trotskyism.' Did you really think, father, that anyone could answer that kind of question?"

"To be honest, already at the regional committee bureau meeting in Stepanakert when my former friends and colleagues put forward this nonsense, I realised that it was no good defending myself."

"You know, uncle Andranik told me that at that meeting you made fun of one of the key workers on whom your fate depended. How was that? And who was it?"

"I don't want to name him. He spoke in broken Russian. There was one Russian and one Azerbaijani who were members of the bureau. The working language at the session was Armenian. Those who didn't speak Armenian were whispered a translation. The person about whom you are asking reported on my case in Russian. Time and time again he got a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe his brow. He was tormenting himself speaking that way, and was making a real mess of the Russian language. I saw that many of those present were wincing or grinning maliciously and whispering to one another. I was just sorry for him. And I suggested that he should make his report in his native language. Let them translate, I said."

"And what did he answer?"

"He spoke a sentence which the next day was all over Stepanakert. He said that 'Trostkyites should be unmasked in Russian, just as the great Stalin does it'."

"And what was your response?"

"I laughed, shrugged my shoulders and said quietly: 'What's it got to do with comrade Stalin?' "

"And what about the members of the regional committee?"

"The members of the regional committee thought that I was being ironic about the great Stalin and that I had thus openly shown my Trotskyite-Zinovievite face and that I was obviously a nationalist, since I didn't want communists to speak Russian even at the bureau of the party regional committee, and that I was altogether opposed to the Russian language.

"Then the first secretary realised that they had diverged from the agenda and were on a dangerous track. So he gave the instruction not to mention the 'language question' in the minutes. He even added that I had wanted to provoke the members of the regional committee into starting a discussion about the Russian language. He realised very well that if they allowed the language issue and Stalin to encroach on the agenda there would be no end of trouble. He even admitted that he would have

had to arrest me on the spot. But he couldn't do that because there was no instruction to that effect…"

* * *

Reading father's letters in Russian, I was always amazed: where did he get such richness of vocabulary, such expressive use of the language? I realised that studying in Moscow would have been a real help. But on the other hand four years of learning party slogans by rote could not have been enough to enable a twenty-nine year old man who didn't know the language before to speak without an accent and to write so well. I didn't really know much about my father and his childhood. And it was only in his autobiographical accounts, of which there were several in his file, that I discovered the true source of his knowledge of Russian.

In 1916 at the age of twelve he moved to Baku with his father. Grandfather's action was understandable. Two of his daughters were already married, but two remained to be married off. His only son had completed the three years of the parish school. The most sensible thing he could do was to take little Haik to Baku, where during the day he went to school and in the evenings worked as an errand boy in the private draper's shop of G. Nazaryan, which also gave him the opportunity to learn a lot.

My grandfather Abram was a stonemason with God-given talent. He built houses in Karabakh. His two-storey house in Agorti is still standing to this day. But the work of a stonemason did not bring in much income. He thought that his orchard and animals would not pay for his daughters' weddings, so he headed off for the big city. He could try to give his son an education and at the same time find out what skills he had. After all, the lad seemed to have a brain in his head. In the big city it would be easy to find a school and to decide on a profession.

The working language in Baku was Russian. So for two years little Haik spoke his native language only when he paid visits to home.

After two years there was a tragedy – another of the pogroms against the Armenians in Baku. Father wrote in his account of his life: "After the events in Baku in 1918 father and I moved to Grozny where my sister Sofan and her husband Markos lived…" This was the same Markos that I considered my grandfather.

In Grozny father managed to work and continue studying. He did well at everything. He always had books with him. He experimented with writing poetry. He learnt to speak Chechen as well. He read the press regularly. "I couldn't not read," he told mum, "since I delivered the local newspapers to the kiosks and subscribers. I did that to earn a bit extra." In his letters to uncle Andranik he wrote that he not only spoke Russian but sometimes even thought in Russian, without always immediately being aware of it. Even at home with his father, his sister and Markos he would time and time again unintentionally go over to speaking Russian.

In one of his autobiographical accounts he writes that after "the Sovietisation of Baku and Karabakh" he and his father returned home, where his fluent Russian immediately came to the attention of party and communist youth officials. Mum often reminisced that when she first met him she was impressed by his self-confident Russian, though as the years passed she was no longer so glad of what she had only recently been so proud.

After one of my many conversations with mum in Ara Minasyan's clinic I made notes on a conversation my parents had after my father had been expelled from the Party. They had even given him a job as a building worker at the Karabakh winery. Knowing what was going on in the country they were expecting at any minute what in fact happened. At this time I was about a year and a half old and Boris was a new-born baby.

"Haik, you know, I can't help thinking that if it wasn't for your excellent Russian they would hardly have sent you to Moscow to study, especially not to a university."

"What makes you say that?"

"They needed to send two people to fill their quota and they found you and your fellow-student, whose name I've forgotten…"

"Bagdasarov from Hadrut…" (I saw this name in the documents in father's file – Z. B.)

"I'm sure this Bagdasarov also spoke Russian well."

"Well, what are you getting at? After all, it's pretty logical to send those who speak Russian well to study in Moscow, so that it would be easier to get hold of the philosophy. After all they often said our university was about philosophy."

"I'm not talking about logic, I'm talking about fate. If you hadn't known the language so well, they wouldn't have sent you. And if they hadn't sent you, you wouldn't have met the Trotskyite Hambaryan. If you hadn't met him in Moscow, if you hadn't become friends with him, he wouldn't have come here. You wouldn't have fixed him up with a job. You wouldn't have helped him and we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now."

"My dear, what are you saying? If you follow that line of thought, you could reach the conclusion that if I hadn't spoken Russian well, then we wouldn't have got married."

"God forbid! What are you saying? Our love was predestined not here on earth but in heaven."

"Don't forget that my education is not just in politics but in philosophy. And I know that history can't stand conditional constructions."

"Whatever are those?"

"It means that you must never speculate starting with the word 'if'. Do you remember, last year our neighbour Hrant left his house in the morning and was knocked down by a car on our street and broke his leg? Do you know how he explained this accident?"

"How?"

"I visited him in hospital and he told me entirely seriously that if he had left his house a minute earlier or later it wouldn't have happened."

"And what answer did you give him?" mum asked laughing.

"I told him that if he had left a minute earlier he would have fallen down the steps and broken both legs. And if he'd left a minute later a brick would have fallen on his head and he would have snuffed it."

"And what did Hrant say?"

"Nothing! He laughed and a minute later said that thanks to my joke the pain had gone from his leg. But I hadn't even been joking."

"However much you philosophise, I still can't get away from my thoughts. I can't help looking for reasons for what has happened. I saw how you worked day and night. You gave your all to the job. I saw and heard how they praised you and appreciated you. We had so many guests I didn't have time to feed them all. And now it's as if everybody has forgotten our address. And it's all because you helped a man who turned out to be a Trotskyite. And now you're a Trotskyite too. What kind of infectious disease is it that can be passed from one person to another?"

… I've already mentioned often that mum rarely shared her thoughts about the past with us. But this episode, about how father was expelled from the Party, about the reasons he was under investigation, about his subsequent arrest and about father's interpretation of what Trotskyism was all about, was something that she talked about often. Neither I nor Boris ever interrupted her, we never asked her questions or said that we remembered it all very well. We realised that she needed to talk about it. Evidently on that day mum understood a lot and things became clearer for her. Most likely, father himself needed to explain to her – his beloved young wife

and mother of his young children – the true reason for everything that was happening not only in Karabakh but throughout our whole huge country.

"You were right to note that it is a question of an infection. Only never speak with anyone about it. And now listen carefully to what I have to say. You must be prepared for the worst. It's always particularly alarming when misfortune strikes unexpectedly. You need to foresee misfortune. When black storm clouds fill the sky, even the mother hen covers her chicks with her wings before the first drop of rain. There is no such thing as Trotskyism. There is the enmity between Stalin and Trotsky. There is an enormous wide-eyed fear, but not just that. Fear is a constant disquiet experienced by the soul when it believes evil is always inevitable." (The last sentence is from a letter father wrote to uncle Andranik – Z. B.)

"What happened between Stalin and Trotsky?"

"Of course, I don't know exactly. I can only make suppositions. At that time, after the Revolution, I was only fourteen. Father and I lived in Grozny and I earned a bit extra delivering the newspapers to kiosks and houses. First of all it was '*Izvestiya*', then, after Denikin's forces captured the town, it was '*Gorsky province*'. The papers wrote mostly about Trotsky, very little about Lenin and not a word about Stalin.

"Soon Trotsky became the idol of the youth. We couldn't read enough of his speeches, especially after he became head of the Red Army. And, of course, those with political ambitions dreamed of meeting Trotsky. In 1924 I joined the Communist Youth. At that time you had in effect to pass an exam to get in. That was after Lenin's death. The candidate for Communist Youth membership had tell the biographies of the leaders. Trotsky came first. Admittedly, by that time people were beginning to speak more and more about Stalin. But the millions of young people who admired Trotsky and wrote poems about him and wrote laudatory articles in the papers had no idea what would happen to them very soon.

"After Lenin's death, of course, the question arose about who would be the new leader. We were all sure it would be Trotsky, because during the Revolution he had been the most popular. Stalin had to do everything in his power to dispel the myths about Trotsky and replace them with myths about himself. I think that was the main cause of the rift. And in this situation it meant that my generation had to be destroyed. So really, there is nothing to blame poor Ervand Hamburyan for…

"I'm sure that all the people who expelled me from the Party and those who tomorrow will imprison me, will themselves be expelled and arrested. They are all witnesses of the Revolution. Those who have known Stalin for a long time, those who know recent history, all of them have to be destroyed. A new generation will be brought up who have no idea about all this."

"Haik-*djan*, that's terrible! It means we are all doomed…"

"No, we need to fight. We will profess that we are devoted to the Party and to Stalin. If you want to know, I really am devoted to them. I really do have nothing in common with Trotsky and I never considered Trotskyism to be a doctrine. I simply wanted you to know what I think about the unfolding tragedy. And I'm quite sure that you will never tell anyone about our conversation."

"My God, Haik, how I love you!"

* * *

When mum first told Boris and me about this conversation with father, I recalled one of my meetings with uncle Andranik.

It was in autumn 1956 after the end of my military service. Uncle Andranik invited us to his house for a barbecue to mark my homecoming. His house was right opposite the silk factory where he was the chief engineer. At table he told me how on 2 September 1936 he and my father had been recalling events of the previous year.

It had been on 2 September 1935 that the new school year had opened throughout the region. That was because 1 September was a Sunday. So, school had to begin on the Monday.

"I'll never forget that day," uncle Andranik admitted. "For Haik it was the happiest day in his life. That was easy to understand. His job was the head teacher for the whole of Karabakh. It was the start of the school year. Haik had managed to get round all the schools. For the whole of July and August he had visited villages near and far. And he got his way. The repairs in the schools were completed on time. There were desks freshly painted in various colours in all the classrooms. The traditional blackboards were all in place. Who could have known that this peaceful happy life would soon come to an end…"

… At that time, in 1956 – in February of that year the Twentieth Party Congress had taken place, at which the personality cult of Stalin had been exposed and people were able to talk more freely – I was not yet aware of all the details of the situation in our country and in our family, so I didn't understand terribly well what uncle Andranik was talking about. But I remember the conversation itself very well…

"Early in the morning Haik came to me and told me hurriedly that he had very little time. He had to get to Hadrut where the district party committee was to approve the resolution of the bureau of the regional party committee expelling him from the party…"

"So, the resolution of the regional party was passed on 1 September and already on 2 September the district committee was to give its approval?"

"Yes, that was the efficiency with which such issues were dealt with. I asked Haik about how the meeting of the regional committee had gone. Of course, I knew about the resolution, but I wanted to know the details because the previous evening Haik had not wanted to see anyone. But he waved away my question and said that he was concerned about something else. He was worried about Gohar. After all, Boris was not even a month old."

"What did he say about mum?"

"He said what Karabakh men don't usually say aloud – that he loved her. That was something quite unusual. After all, I knew Haik well. Like a prophet he would have a premonition of what was going to happen in the near future. 'Last night I was trying to open Gohar's eyes to the changes that are about to come. She needs to understand that among us there is no specific individual who is to blame for what has happened not only to me, but to all of us,' Haik told me."

"Why did he need to do that? Isn't such truth too cruel?" I asked.

"I could understand him very well. He had to explain to Gohar the reasons for what was beginning to happen around us all, that is, about Trotskyism. Previously he had told me many times that he was not going to allow himself to be accused of all of Hambaryan's mortal sins. He said he would write to Stalin and to Bagirov and to the Party Control Commission. And he would always point out the most important thing: that when Hambaryan entered the university he didn't make a secret of the fact that he had been close to the Trotskyites. And if he had been accepted, then everything must have been alright. But Haik didn't think about the fact that they entered the university in 1928 when Trotsky was still in the USSR – in Almaty – and was no real threat to Stalin. However, in 1936 everything was completely different. We were forced to learn by heart whole statements like: 'Trotskyism is an ideological-political petty-bourgeois trend in the working class movement which is hostile to Leninism and disguises its opportunistic nature with left-wing radical phrases…' and so on. And can you imagine that it was enough to learn all this off by heart and when required energetically declaim it in order to earn yourself a Party indulgence…"

* * *

“There’s one more interesting thing I want to tell you about, father. You should know that we managed to find your university file. Boris and I and all our family had some really happy moments reading it. Apart from official information and documents we found several dozen pages that you had written by hand. How did we manage to get hold of materials from a Russian archive? Once again we were helped by good friends, this time an old friend from my own ‘*Literary Gazette*’.

“This friend of mine was born in 1937. And his surname is Bonch-Bruyevich. I’m sure that at the cinema you saw shots filmed in the Kremlin after the assassination attempt on Lenin. The people were anxious about the leader and so it was decided to show him at the cinema. Organising the filming was entrusted to the business manager of the Council of People’s Commissars, Vladimir Bonch-Bruyevich. Soon these film clips went down in history. The smiling leader of the Revolution was marching energetically about the Kremlin with his hand bandaged accompanied by the waddling figure of Bonch-Bruyevich with his official briefcase under his arm.”

“I knew Bonch-Bruyevich, son. At the university classes to train workers’ correspondents the lecturers mentioned the names of the Party’s journalistic classics, among them Bonch-Bruyevich. Even before the Revolution he had worked as a correspondent on the papers ‘*The Spark*’, ‘*Forwards*’ and ‘*Pravda*’. But the main thing was that Bonch-Bruyevich was one of the organisers of the new Bolshevik newspapers and publishing houses. His name was very popular among the students.”

“Well, this man who took part in three revolutions and was the author of memoirs about Lenin and academic works on the history of the revolution and about religious-social movements, in time also became a victim of Stalin. Admittedly, Stalin was for a long time afraid to touch him because of his especial popularity and his well-known close connections with Lenin. However, biding his time he found a way of punishing him in a special Stalin manner. Bonch-Bruyevich’s son Iosif, a career army officer, who by that time had his own son named Vladimir in honour of his grandfather, was arrested at about the same time as you. I was then two. Vladimir was still in his cradle. He was adopted by his sixty-four year old grandfather, who understood very well that Stalin’s words that sons are not responsible for their fathers’ deeds was simply a cynical lie. He decided to save his grandson by adopting him.

“Vladimir and I were fated to become friends. Our families became friends. And for many years we worked together on the ‘*Literary Gazette*’. After the collapse of the Soviet Union we met much less often, but we continued to be friends. When he heard that I had found the place where you died and got hold of documents that I had been searching for all my life, he shared in my rejoicing. That was when I told him that the ageing and yellowing pages of yet one more file are lying somewhere in Russia’s archives – I was referring to your file from the party university which you graduated from. Vladimir asked for your details and the time that you studied.”

* * *

Vladimir is one of a kind. He phoned me almost every day enquiring about details. In Moscow he talked with dozens of archive guys. Nobody could say anything of any use. I tried to reassure him, presuming that it was hardly likely that any documents would have been preserved from an educational institution that was wound up so long ago. With the energy of a true research scientist Vladimir stubbornly, step by step, got closer to the goal. It emerged that many archives of this type had long ago been moved to the distant provinces, to Siberia for example. It seemed that Novosibirsk was a possibility. To be honest I didn’t believe that anything could be achieved. But at the same time I could do nothing to stop Vladimir. And then the no less energetic Viktor Krivopuskov, whom my mum was very fond of, joined the

search. In a particularly hard time for Armenia, Viktor had helped us a lot and even saved me and many of our lads from certain death.

He wrote about this in his book.

And one day... A familiar feeling. I remembered how Misha Bagdasarov had phoned me in the middle of the night. And then James Kobelyan when the good news arrived from the Komi republic...

Vladimir tried to hold back his emotions but was not very successful.

"I found it," he told me over the phone.

I was silent for a long time. Finally swallowing hard I said:

"*Tsavyt tanem*, Vladimir-*djan*."

He didn't ask me what that meant. Maybe he knew. Or maybe he guessed.

"Now, father, I am holding in my hands your '*Personal file*' as a student of the Stalin Communist University of Labourers of the East. You left Stepanakert on 11 August 1928 with an identity document listing the names and ages of your dependants: father, mother and son. It also notes that the family had a vineyard (400 vines) and a mulberry grove (600 trees) and also one cow, one donkey and two goats. And all this was actually written on the identity document, not on some appended certificate."

"And does the '*Personal file*' contain a document about my practical placement?"

"It does. It's called '*CULE student Party-academic reference, 1931-33 academic year graduate*'. There is a record of where and when you had work placements outside the university. And at the end there is a reference in which it is noted that 'comrade Balayan is mature and steadfast in Party and ideological matters' and that you always had a good attitude to the fulfilment of the academic-production plan. It also says that you had 'good comradely attitudes', that you studied well and that you were a 'shock worker' and even received awards (evidently for this)."

"And who signed it? Was it Mikhail Aronovich? He was our rector."

"There are no initials, just the surname Raiter."

"That's him. Our wise Raiter."

"In your letters to Andranik as early as the beginning of the thirties you mention this name. You wrote that Mikhail Raiter knew the history of Armenia better than any Armenian..."

"He was a Jew. When I was expelled from the Party I sent him copies of my letters to Stalin. But he was no longer there. They had probably arrested him too."

"I don't know, dad, what happened to your 'wise and highly respected Raiter', but all your letters, including the letter to the Party Control Commission, were not torn up or thrown out by the leaders of the university but carefully added to your '*Personal file*'. And we are incredibly grateful to them that they preserved the documents you had written. Both you and mum were amazingly lucky with your Jewish friends."

"I had Jewish friends in Ukhta also."

"In one of the letters to your sister Sofya you wrote that in camp you became friends with someone called Yakov. He was a Jew, but an amazing likeness of her son Ashot."

"Yes, Yakov Kosman really did look like our Ashot. He had the same big eyes, and a small aquiline nose. You could talk with Yakov for ages about everything under the sun. And we liked playing chess together."

"You don't know it, father, but I've got something I can tell you about your friend Kosman."

* * *

The political charges against my father and Kosman were under the same article 58. First of all I had to clarify for myself what article 58 was. At first I didn't

know that this was a catch-all for a large number of counter-revolutionary offences. It always has a specific sub-section: article 58, section such-and-such. All of the republics making up the Soviet Union had their own articles. My father's sentence, for example, stated: "... the case under articles 71/1 and 69 of the Criminal Code of the Azerbaijan SSR was heard in court."

I searched in vain for a long time for the exact content of these articles. So I approached a professional: the deputy director of the security service of Armenia, lieutenant general Vrezh Harzumanyan. In a few hours I received an envelope with the text of all the relevant articles and a note expressing appreciation for not forgetting about our fathers and grandfathers.

As I discovered, each republic of the Soviet Union had its own Criminal Code. Articles 69 and 72 section 1 of the Azerbaijan code corresponded to article 58 section 7 and article 58 section 10 of the Russian code.

Article 58 section 10 became well known, because, as I understand it, it enabled the prosecution lawyers to make clever use of demagoguery in court and to advance any accusations they wanted against the defendant. Anything you had ever said could be perceived as propaganda and agitation against Soviet power and made to sound like a call to overthrow it. And if the defendant disagreed and insisted that his words were being interpreted absolutely incorrectly, he was told that according to article 58 section 10 his very insistence could be perceived as a call to carry out counter-revolutionary crimes.

And if anyone tried in court to ask the question: "What do we mean when we accuse someone of counter-revolutionary propaganda?" – he would at once get a stupefying reply such as this: "If you expressed surprise that the only cow could be taken away from a single mother with five young children, then that means you are conducting counter-revolutionary propaganda." I copied this example from typed archive documents in Ukhta.

Millions of people lost their lives or received maximum sentences as a result of the "liberal interpretation" of this article which began with the words: "Subversion of state industry, transportation, trade, monetary circulation or credit system..." The whole sentence fills about a quarter of a page. But I didn't immediately realise that this article was, as was later noted in an official document, "one of the most sinister".

As early as the time of Yezhov, it was used so widely against innocent people that even the Plenary Session of the Supreme Court felt obliged on 31 December 1938 to adopt a resolution "limiting the zeal of the punitive organs which use all means to attribute a counter-revolutionary character to all violations of the law". However, this didn't mean that there were any less people repressed or shot.

At that time the punitive organs had unrestricted freedom of action. Article 58 alone had 14 sections. They were listed under the heading "*Crimes against the state*", with the sub-heading "*Counter-revolutionary crimes*".

Haik Balayan and Yakov Kosman were sentenced under both separate and shared sections of article 58. The two prisoners became friends. They played chess. They talked. What about? One can only guess.

* * *

"I feel obliged, father, I want to tell you about Yakov Kosman, if only because I discovered what happened to your friend after 13 February 1939.

"In one of your very brief letters you found space for the name of a man who, along with thousands of others, found himself with you. In the next letter you mentioned his name again, saying that you played chess together, that he was a true poet and that you got pleasure from hearing his poetry. I began to look for your friend as soon as I had the opportunity."

I found him with the help of my friends in Ukhta, thanks to the Herculean efforts of the authors of the "*Repentance*" martyrology, who stubbornly work away in

the North, where hundreds of thousands of prisoners were buried in the frozen ground. It's thanks to them that I hold in my hands today the documents relating to a man who was with my father at the end of his life. And I'm amazed at what tragic fate so often befalls talented, well-educated and decent people.

"Let me read to you, father, what is written about him: Yakov Kosman, born in 1907, a Jew, son of a bank manager in Odessa, was first sentenced in 1929 by the Special Session (that's the official term) to three years. At the end of the three-year sentence his term of imprisonment was extended for a further three years for Trotskyite activities, again by the Special Session. The sentence ended, but the Special Session imprisoned him for five more years in a corrective labour camp. He served his sentence in the oilfield section of the NKVD Ukhtizhem camp. Exactly two years later you sent to Karabakh your first letter with the return address 'Oilfield of the Ukhtizhem Camp'.

"You can see, father, how much I now know about your friend. I read an article about him by the wonderful writer V. M. Poleshchikov '*The poet's fate ended by a bullet*'. He really was a poet and played chess well. But I started searching only because of what I read about him in your letters. And now I can admit to you honestly: when I read his poetry, his letters, especially his letters to his wife Berta Novogorodskaya-Kosman, and learned about what happened to him, I again thought of you with gratitude. My life would have been much poorer if I knew nothing of this person. But I still have to tell you about what happened to him after you were dead.

"Yakov survived you by three years. On 22 June 1941 the USSR was drawn into the Second World War. Soon your friend wrote an official declaration. I want to read it to you:

'The world has been split between two camps: the first is the camp of communism and democracy and the second is the camp of Fascism. At this historic moment nobody who remains dedicated to the banner of the October Revolution can stay on the sidelines, washing his hands and stepping aside. That would be like desertion from the battlefield. You are either in one camp or the other. There is no third camp. Standing to one side is objectively aiding and abetting Fascism.

'At this moment of the consolidation of all anti-Fascist forces, I must declare that my place is irrevocably determined – it is in the camp of communism and democracy.

'For many years I have been subjected to repression for my convictions. In the past I had significant differences with the policy of the Communist Party on the issue of workers' democracy. But now in the light of the struggle against Fascism all these differences have faded and dimmed and have lost all importance.

'In one month, on 14 September 1941, my term of imprisonment ends. For five years I have conscientiously served my punishment both in unskilled work and among the lower ranks of technical staff. Now I ask you to give me the chance to use my good qualifications, my knowledge, my literary and organisational abilities and my whole-hearted devotion to Bolshevism anywhere on the front line or in the rear.

'I have the right to count on your trust, since in all the fifteen years since I joined the former communist opposition I have never submitted any declarations and never tried to be a double-dealer.

'I am submitting this declaration now, at the moment of greatest danger, when all the true friends of Bolshevism can be tested by their actions…'

"And then what happened to my friend?"

"I wanted to ask you, father, what would be the reaction not of Stalin or of Yezhov…"

"At my time it was already Beria…"

“Of course, my mistake. But what would be the reaction of the state system itself to a declaration of that kind?”

“I see what you’re getting at, son. You think that Yakov, just like me and millions of other people, was simply signing his own sentence by openly drawing attention to his significant differences with Party policy. After all, he knew very well that the people he was addressing had not forgotten a single trifling detail of his biography, his file. Just tell me, did they send Yakov to the front line?”

“Of course not. They shot him. It was September 1942. The Germans had two divisions facing Stalingrad. The nation and the country were in serious danger. But for the jailers an honest, thinking person posed an even greater danger, even had they sent him to a disciplinary battalion. They opened a new criminal case. They dug out those who could be considered his accomplices in previous cases. They arrested twelve people. Seven got additional sentences and five were shot.”

“And all this has come to light?”

“Yes, father. In time almost everything is revealed in the light of history. I told you how every detail of your last day and even your last hour was described. I now know that your heart stopped beating in the operating theatre at 15.10, on 13 February 1939. The talented writer and historian of the GULAG V. M. Poleshchikov found in the file on case no. 1020 a document headed: ‘Top secret. Ukhta, Komi Autonomous Republic’. This document is typically precise. How succinctly and terribly it reflects the signs of the times. Here it is:

> ‘*We, the undersigned* (I am leaving out the names of the executioners if only because probably their descendants are alive today and they would feel very uncomfortable if they found the names of their forebears in the execution lists) *… compiled the present report of the implementation on this day of 20 September 1942 of the sentence of the Judicial Collegium of the Supreme Court of the Komi Autonomous Republic at the NKVD Ukhtizhem camp to execute the following prisoners sentenced under article 58 section 10.*’

“That was your article, father! And I should definitely give the names of those who were shot. It’s possible that you knew some of the others apart from your friend: Yakov Kosman, Konstantin Shibaev, Adam Leitan, Zinaida Kozlova, Yelena Konakhevich.

“That’s not the end of the text. After this comes the obligatory part of every document that illustrates and demonstrates the special discipline and diligence of the officials and the particular fear they had of all GULAG instructions and orders, of constantly changing legislation and finally of the leader himself.

> *‘Altogether five people were shot. The bodies of those executed were buried in the ground in a place specially set aside for the purpose. Before the sentence was carried out the identities were checked against the materials of their file and the observation file. This record is compiled in two copies. Of them, one copy is for the Judicial Collegium of the Supreme Court of the Komi Autonomous Republic at the NKVD Ukhtizhem camp and the second for the file of the operations department of the NKVD Ukhtizhem camp.’*

“And at the end the signatures of the five people who carried out the sentence.”

“Tell me, son, have any of Kosman’s verses survived? He complained to me that the most difficult for him were poems to be read out loud to a large audience. He liked to read his new poems to me quietly as we pushed wheelbarrows of black slag, which we tipped over the edge of a gully. Unfortunately, I managed to remember hardly any of them, although a few lines are etched in my memory for ever.”

“The poem written by Kosman just before his execution was preserved. His biographer notes that he managed to write this poem a few hours before his death. He wanted people to understand his mood, he believed that their lives were not lived in vain and in the name of all victims he declared that nobody disappears into

Nothingness and that when the nation rebels it will step over their unmarked graves into real life."

The dying wish of my soul
Is written on modern tablets of stone,
Which bear my songs to be burnt
On the saturnalian throng of leaping flames.
I need no monument, no thunderous salute
At this my funeral hour;
Another sacred wish bores through me so fiercely
That the blood in my temples throbs with emotion.
Let them bury me secretly at night,
So that there is no trace of my grave,
And only a bird groans plaintively
And the bank of black storm clouds mass.
Nevertheless, with unvanquished strength
I hold fast to my one and only certain dream,
That over my unmarked grave
The rebellious nation will march forward.

"Thank you son."

"I thank you, father. You revealed to me a poet who helped me to see your – and our – time in a new way, and who brought us even more closely together. Furthermore, he was your friend, and an absolutely wonderful person, fearless and just. And I want to tell you as well that now a handful of his remains is buried alongside you. When Boris and Haik and I were digging a little soil from your grave to take to bury with mum, we gathered literally a handful from the other mass graves. So there next to you in your native Karabakh is buried a symbol of the memory of your friend the poet Yakov Kosman. And flowers will always grow on your graves.

* * *

Sometimes it seems to me that I shall never finish working on this book. I could, I think, put the final full stop quite soon, maybe even sooner than I expect. But I would be doing a disservice. Now, with a huge amount of material about the tragic fate of millions of innocent victims literally crying out to me from the papers in the files that surround me, I have identified over a hundred topics which I simply must cover. Whole worlds perished and passed into eternity along with these people. For a long time they have lain patiently in mass graves. A terrible taboo extended over them, seemingly for ever. Time has passed, taking with it human memory as well. These painful thoughts are impossible to suppress when you see boys and girls being welcomed into the young pioneers under portraits of Stalin or Lenin. Or when unexpectedly and incomprehensibly for the majority of people, the name of the tyrant is put forward as a symbol of mighty Russia. Who should get to grips with all this? The relatives of those punished, killed or left to die? Academic historians, doctors or even psychiatrists?

And what should those who managed to survive do? And those who know the details from what their relatives have told them or simply from literature, from the books of Shalamov or Solzhenitsyn? Should they just forget? Try to blot out the memories? And what kind of life would that be? What will we talk about, worry about, think about? Who will we feel sympathy for? And who will share our pain with us?

* * *

As I later discovered from the documents, the first to learn of father's death was his eldest sister Nakhshun, who lived in Baku. At the end of 1939 she wrote a letter to the Komi republic to the last known address saying that she had had no news of her brother for a whole year. A year later an answer came from Ukhta to the KGB in Baku. And in turn aunt Nakhshun received from the KGB a standard form on which in the column headed "contents" had been written the brief information: "died, 14.2.39". For some reason the date indicated was a day later than the actual date.

Nakhshun did not immediately share this information with my mother or with her sisters in Karabakh. There was a certain wisdom in her decision. On the one hand there was her twenty-one year old sister-in-law with two young children on her hands, and on the other hand her sister Sofya, who had recently lost her elder daughter. To write to the other sisters was not at all sensible, as they might not keep it to themselves. Nakhshun decided to wait for a more auspicious moment. But a year later the Soviet Union entered the war. Sofya's three sons were soon in uniform – with the youngest Arto signing up voluntarily. Kind, loving aunt Nakhshun decided to hold back even longer with the tragic news.

When in the course of two years her sister Sofya received three death notifications from the front line, Nakhshun lost any sense of peace. Time and time again she reproached herself for taking such a stupid decision. Her sisters, who had no news of their brother, were writing letters to every possible agency. But there was a war on, and the only post was from the front-line – either letters or death notices. Admittedly, mum once admitted to Boris and me that she had found out about dad's death much earlier than the sisters in Karabakh. But soon she was arrested herself and she took the secret with her to Siberia.

Only in 1947, goodness only knows how, aunty Sofya happened upon the notification of her brother's death. I never saw this document which, so to speak, dotted the "i", literally putting an end to all doubts and hopes by confirming the death of Haik Balayan. And so we gathered for the ritual of remembrance. As a twelve-year old boy I didn't get to see this paper. And at the time Boris was living and going to school in Agorti. But some memories remain with me forever. I was on my way home from school really hungry. As I passed the high fence that separated our little garden from the pavement, I realised that something terrible had happened again. I could remember clearly three such instances. The first time was when they brought me home from kindergarten, and the other two times were when I came home from school.

I opened the gate and saw men standing talking under the trees in the yard. Many of them were smoking. They were all somehow downcast, with sagging shoulders. Granddad Markos saw me and indicated that I should come over to him. He hugged me, putting his arm round my shoulder and pressing me to himself. After a minute he said to me quietly: "Go indoors to the women. Then later on you'll come back to me."

I didn't really make out what he was saying. Rather I felt what he wanted to say. His voice was drowned out by the wailing of the women. I remembered how a few years earlier when the women had been wailing in this way in our house, granddad Markos had asked me to take a glass of water to granny. At the time I didn't understand why he had done that. But later on I understood completely. Granny should see me and realise that life was continuing. She was responsible for me. And now granddad Markos, his lips moving inaudibly, was asking me to go to the crying women and, of course, first and foremost to "granny" Sofya.

I put down my bag with my schoolbooks on the pile of firewood by the gate and went in through the open door. The room was full of women. At this moment one of them was wailing, or rather singing. It was real music, with a beautiful and expressive melody, but painfully sad. And the singer's voice was absolutely professional. This was our relative whom I had known since childhood, aunt Asya. She always covered her hair with a black headscarf. And only one lock of white hair

stubbornly escaped onto her forehead. I can't say exactly how she was related to us, I just know that she was somehow related to granddad Markos. But she visited us fairly often.

As soon as aunt Asya noticed my presence she sang out louder and called, or rather sang, my name. They all began sobbing loudly and even more intensely. It seemed to me that quite a long time passed. Then aunt Asya turned her gaze to the portrait of father hanging on the wall and began her song of lament in which she literally told father about all of us, especially his two sons. Among the women I suddenly noticed aunt Zanazan and aunt Akhshen, father's younger sisters. "So," I thought, "they have been summoned urgently from Agorti, they weren't here in the morning." At that moment I had not yet realised what had happened, just as I had known nothing of the death notices from the front line. All that I heard was aunt Asya pronouncing some much needed kind words and the other women, as though agreeing with her, first hysterically wailing in chorus and then quietening, now cautiously singing along with her and then again wailing together.

I did not feel any awkwardness. Rather, I understood at once that they very much needed to do what they were doing, that this was how things should be. And it was also what was needed by the downcast men with their bowed heads, smoking outside the door. When one of the men came into the room and touched me on the shoulder I realised that granddad had sent for me.

A man had appeared in the yard whom I did not know, well shaven and in a new suit. He came up to granddad, greeted him and pronounced some strange words:

"I have something to tell you, Markos." He looked at me, but granddad held me even more tightly to himself and I understood that I shouldn't leave him.

"I want to give you one piece of advice," the man added, "but for God's sake understand me aright. It's for the best."

Granddad Markos said nothing, and I distinctly felt that inwardly he did not like this man.

"You know, it would be a good idea to hang a portrait of Stalin in your room," said the man.

"Then we'd have to take down the photograph of Haik. They can't be in the same room together," granddad replied spontaneously.

"I just want the best. Who knows… If anything happens, the portrait will make things easier. It's not just that it's a religious ceremony but it's one committing the souls of the dead. As for Haik, well you understand. Someone might denounce you. They might say, at Markos' house…"

"You won't denounce me – nobody will denounce…"

"I certainly won't…"

"I know. I knew your father."

I understood nothing of this strange dialogue. But at the same time it seemed to me that I had picked up what it was about. I remembered what I heard, word for word. And a few years later I reminded granddad Markos about that smooth-shaven man in the new suit. It was before Stalin died, I was still in the seventh grade.

Granddad, clearly not wanting to talk about it, replied that the man had been ill with tuberculosis and had died soon after. I dared to ask about being denounced. Grandfather avoided a direct reply. But he praised the man's father.

… That man was wrong. The ritual of mourning is not religious, just wise. The people created it and these verses have been polished down the generations. The person leading the mourning sings a tragic song in which there are lots of specific details that are drawn from the funeral service. But at the same time there is improvisation. And everyone in the choir, every one of those who has come to offer their condolences, feels that they are part of the grief of their hosts, and the hosts feel it too.

The unforgettable aunty Asya, as she was singing, looked me in the eye and several times spoke the name of my mother Gohar. She sang that mum was a long way from home, from her family, where it was very cold. And now it had been made known that she was a widow as well.

I didn't then know that word. In Armenian it has two versions: "*airi*" and "*vorbn-airi*" ("widow" and "orphaned widow"). I learnt that only later. Then, it seems to me, I just picked up the theme of the sorrow of orphanhood. Aunty Asya continued her thought in this way: "How many orphaned widows we have, how many unhappy, broken lives." And, probably so as not to give ammunition to possible informers, she cursed the war which had just ended.

I remember the day when I first heard this sad word "widow". Since then I have not forgotten its meaning, nor have I forgotten mum or the tens of millions of women, the absolute majority of whom were still quite young (often they were nursing mothers) and who mostly remained alone to the end of their days.

What statistics can convey this terrible tragedy? Millions of widows.

* * *

On the eve of New Year 1959, as a second year student of Andizhan medical institute, I became the regional weightlifting champion and in three additional attempts broke four records at once – in the squat, the bench press and the deadlift and for the combined total of 335 kilograms. Sportsmen know well what it means not just to become champion but to break a record. We had an excellent team. We were all preparing for the republic competition, which was to take place in the middle of January. For this reason we decided to be abstemious at New Year and not drink a drop of alcohol. On 31 December we had a training session a few hours before the midnight chimes from the Kremlin.

In Uzbekistan we usually celebrated New Year twice with an interval of three hours – at midnight local time and Moscow time. After our training session my middle-weight friend Volodya Kamenetsky (known as the Brick) proposed modifying the absolute ban on alcohol since a glass of champagne at New Year could be considered a sacred ritual. We all agreed.

From our training we all headed straight to aunt Arevat, mum's eldest sister. It was our custom to hold all celebrations in her house. Aunt Arevat's son Alyosha was a master builder, and in Andizhan he had built the family a substantial house with all modern conveniences. And in the yard he constructed a real *banya* (Russian sauna), where I so adored spending time that they named it after me.

That day as usual I first of all headed for the *banya*. The day before it had snowed, which was pretty rare in Andizhan. After a good steam I rubbed myself down with snow until my skin was red, shrieking as I did so. Hearing my shrieks Alyosha came out and dragged me into the house at once. He threw open the door to a small pantry off the kitchen, where I was to quickly make myself presentable. When I came in there was nobody about. Suddenly from the kitchen I heard female voices. I listened carefully to hear whether mum was among the women who had arrived. No, I couldn't hear her voice.

To my surprise, I heard several sentences which were obviously about mum: "It's easy to say it… but this is Gohar." "Gohar is one of a kind…" "Life carries on. It will pass." "Both sons will get married and she'll be barely forty…" "She once said: 'Can you imagine me in one house with my sons and a strange man?' Have you forgotten that…"

I was afraid to move. These women were my beloved close relatives. They mustn't know that I had heard their conversation. Among them was aunt Arevat. She had lost her husband and gone through the horrors of the expropriation of the well-off peasants and the harsh journey into exile. She had brought up and educated three daughters and a son and helped them all to stand on their own feet. She was not

only loved, but regarded with special respect. So, it was no surprise that the women fell silent as soon as aunt Arevat spoke: “It’s time to get on with things. And please change the subject. You never know, Gohar might hear what we’re talking about. And we’ve got to get the food ready. Don’t forget that Alyosha invited Zori’s friends today.”

Alyosha had actually come to support us at the last regional championships. To celebrate he had invited my close friends to see in the New Year. Again I felt grateful to aunt Arevat for welcoming my friends. I had even wondered whether I should phone “the Brick” and suggest postponing their visit to another day. I had even thought up an excuse: after all New Year is a family occasion. It’s a time when you should be at home with your family.

In the pantry where I had unexpectedly got trapped there was a trestle-bed covered with an old faded carpet. I couldn’t go into the kitchen as long as the women who had been talking about mum were there. God forbid that they should guess that I had heard their conversation! I thought that it would be awkward and shameful not just for me but for all of them too. I might even spoil the whole evening for them. I lay on the bed and pretended to be fast asleep. Alyosha would without fail come to find me.

I didn’t sleep through the New Year. Of course, Alyosha came for me. The guests gradually arrived, close and distant relatives, all dressed up for the occasion, freshly shaven and smiling. And each of them felt duty-bound to congratulate me on my records, which the whole town knew of from the newspapers. And for some reason all of them, as if they had conspired together, asked me one and the same question: “Why are you so sad?” In reply I smiled at each of them and repeated like a parrot: “No, everything’s fine.”

Of that New Year’s Eve I remember only the Uzbek and Armenian New Year. I can’t remember the Moscow one at all. I was afraid to look mum in the eye. Now it seemed to me that Boris and I were to blame for everything. She was so unhappy because of us. At twenty she had lost her husband. She couldn’t marry again because she was sorry for Boris and me. So as not to appear a miserable villain I decided to cheer myself up and emptied a glass in one gulp. The usual chain reaction followed – the second glass and then the third. “If I can’t cheer myself up, at least I’ll not spoil the mood for everybody else,” I thought.

Everybody laughed happily at my alcoholic record-breaking and only mum frowned, not understanding what was going on. Finally I simply passed out. I was completely gone. So I never did see in the New Year with our guests. It was a good thing that there were holidays from first to fourth January. Mum hardly spoke to me all that time. She just gave me tea with honey to drink and made rice soup with Cornelian cherries. Admittedly, she did once tell me that she was ashamed at my behaviour before all the guests, and especially Arevat. Mum didn’t know how ashamed I felt…

* * *

Mum, indeed, never did remarry. When I had the opportunity I told father this, but I understood that he knew it without my having to tell him. I recalled mum’s occasional words about her relationship with father, about their love. Short phrases came to the surface in my memory from father’s letters about how he was concerned for her health. Father’s eldest sister, aunt Nahkshun, told me that father was madly in love with mother for her beauty and wise character. I could easily imagine what father might say to me on the subject.

“My sisters in Karabakh treated Gohar strictly and even coolly. They were jealous of her. And I understand that. But Nakhshun was different, especially when you and Boris were born. She was always provoking me to be open and I would happily yet very seriously declare my love for my own wife to my eldest sister. When I

was arrested, my first thought was that if Gohar had been different it would have been much easier for her to bear everything. And that thought particularly tormented me. After all, if I'm honest, she was my first love."

"Your sisters in Karabakh, as you say, hid a lot from me. And I didn't know any details of your first marriage."

"They were wise women. You and Boris were too young for mum and me to be able to tell you anything…"

"Aunt Nakhshun told me a bit. But of course, it was when I was grown up, after my military service."

"Your grandfather brought my bride Arevat from the neighbouring village of Ningidjan. She was much older than me and had a daughter. I, an eighteen-year old lad, hid in the closet and lay down on an old wooden divan. It was Nakhshun who found me there. Afterwards my sisters and I always laughed about it, but at the time, I remember, I wanted to die. To oppose my father in this situation was impossible. Of course, I gave in. Norik was born to us. And then a girl, whom we named Nazik. She was still quite small when she suddenly took ill and died. Not long after my sister Sofya had a baby girl and she was named Nazik in honour of my dead daughter.

"Arevat was an intelligent and serious woman and she considered me to be just a boy. My father, and especially my mother, very soon realised that nothing would come of what they had planned. But Arevat herself was aware of it most of all. In a word, everything seemed fine: our parents were in agreement, I was a son for both sets of parents, we had a good house. The only thing missing was love. And when we parted, I was sure that she would marry again. And that's what happened. Everybody was happy about it. Not long afterwards I went away to Moscow to study. In those four years I never once thought of her, though I constantly thought of Norik. And it was at such moments that I thought of my father with gratitude, that things had worked out as they did."

"After you separated, did you never meet her again?"

"I went away to Moscow almost immediately, and for a long time. I returned in thirty-three and a short time later met Gohar. I met her and fell in love. I was so in love that I remembered Arevat with gratitude and was able to wish her happiness. I remember you sleeping in your crib under the mulberry tree in Agorti and Norik rocking you. I looked at this idyll and I wanted to shout out: 'God, what would things have been like for me if life had worked out differently. Maybe really everything that happens is in accordance with God's will?' I think not only God's will…"

* * *

"I very much want you to know, father, how much the world changed for me and how much I myself changed, after I discovered you. This Komi land, so very, very far from Armenia, which welcomed us and so readily shared our bitter sorrow with us, has remained in our hearts forever. It's both because your earthly life ended there and because there are some very reliable people there – conscientious, warm and noble. They began creating their martyrology perhaps because before them almost nobody was able to do it. Those who had died or been killed were nameless and unknown. And after their death there is no possibility of determining what died with them.

"We searched for you so long and with so little hope… And now you have returned to us at last. You stopped being a name on a list. Your own biography emerged, even if it was a tragic one. But you didn't choose it. To your last breath you remained courageous and strong in spirit and you lived among many talented, thinking and highly educated people. And you all bore with great dignity what befell you – you betrayed nobody, you worked and lived honestly to the end and you wrote poems and reflected seriously on what was happening around you.

“From childhood I had an enormous respect for my ancestors, for national traditions and even for the law, although nobody taught it to me. I think I got it from you. And probably from other relatives also. After all, I saw how granddad Markos behaved in his so difficult life. Conscious of the essence of his behaviour, his actions and his decisions, I absorbed it all myself.

“I have already told how in the forest when I was chopping firewood for winter I always felt the presence of granddad Markos and your sister Sofya alongside me. I wanted them to see how all on my own, a schoolboy, I was working as hard as I could deep in the dark forest. And was then dragging the heavily laden little cart behind me. And now, decades later, when I brought flowers to their graves, it seemed that you were with me. I admit, in childhood I didn’t think very often about you and mum. At that time in Stepanakert you were considered an enemy of the people and mum the wife of an enemy of the people.

“There’s one more thing. I never said anything to anyone about what I want to tell you now, not even to mum. I don’t think it was a matter of chance that when I was working in the forest or on the vegetable plot I saw before me granddad Markos and aunty Sofya. I felt responsible to myself. It’s not only a question even of natural duty. It was not just three sons who had died, but the three main bread-winners for the family. If they had still been alive they would hardly have allowed me to wander off into the forest on my own when I was so young. But I remember as if it were today how another feeling gripped my soul. I believed that these people who were your family had taken me in and therefore they were my family. But all the same I thought that I had to earn my keep.

“This feeling was heightened every time the sisters lamented you but never mentioned mum. However, there was another reason for me ‘earning my keep’. Later on I realised that it came from pride and a sense of responsibility. And it is because of these feelings that I want to tell you some more about some of the members of your close family.

“I’ve already said that of all four sisters (for me they really are saints!) the most terrible fate had been that of Sofya. She was the epitome of an Armenian woman with fantastic will-power and self-discipline. After their elder daughter and their three sons died, granddad Markos and Sofya had one last joy and hope, their beautiful daughter Nazik. As I have already told you, God gave her and her husband, the talented teacher Nobel Avakyan, three daughters – Ludmila, Karina and Nune. I’m sure that you know about them and are proud of Markos and Sofya’s granddaughters. God gave them only daughters, but praise God our Nazik has two sons-in-law who are true heroes. Ludmila’s husband is Mavrik Grigoryan who in the difficult days when the Karabakh movement was underground, before the Karabakh war, courageously carried on the struggle against the enemy and saved the lives of many of our countrymen.

“His heroic deeds are told by Russian officer Viktor Krivopuskov in the documentary book ‘*Rebel Karabakh*’ which is already in its second edition. Karine studied in the Andizhan medical institute and lived there with our mum. Now she is working as a doctor in Stepanakert. Her husband, building engineer Armen Seiranyan died a hero in the Karabakh war. Our Armen was a bomb disposal engineer. He was entrusted with the most difficult jobs. He died clearing mines from a road near Kyatuk, where our mum grew up and where beside mum’s grave we buried your last remains, father. The youngest daughter Nune works as an assistant lecturer in the faculty of Russian language and literature of the Karabakh state university. You can be proud, father, that in your native Karabakh, on the anniversary of the liberation of Shushi fortress, on 9 May 1993 the state university was officially opened with all the main faculties, for a country that very much wants peace and therefore seriously prepares to defend itself.

“It just remains to add that each time when I come to Karabakh, I always head to Kyatuk to you and mum, and to Stepanakert to granddad Markos and Sofya and

Nazik and Nobel. And each time when I happen to pass Agorti, Mshkapat and Gishi on the way, I always visit the grave of your colleague Tevan Djavadyan. In the villages, as you know, they don't sell flowers, and so I make an effort to gather flowers from the roadside for the man who was a living memory of you.

"Tevan Djavadyan was the last of those who not only knew you, but also worked and argued with you. He lived to over ninety and he is buried in his native Gishi where in the early thirties on your instructions he was appointed director of the school. I have written down quite a lot of Tevan's stories about you and your times, mostly about your work in the field of education. Your speeches to the teachers were marked, in his words, by a sense of particular responsibility and willingness to solve the most important issues of the time. I was very interested by his story of one of the regional conferences some time in the mid-thirties.

> *From all over Karabakh party and local government leaders at district level assembled in Stepanakert. But most of all there were people from the education system, as the issue of schools was on the agenda for the enlarged meeting of the regional executive committee. Haik was invited to speak. He stepped onto the rostrum. He began by saying that the school syllabus should not be seen as dogma. In essence, it was to acquaint the children with the essentials of individual subjects. A lot depends, of course, not only on the talent and experience of the teacher, but also on the abilities of the pupils and their inclination for particular subjects. But there are no subjects in the school syllabus which are essential for educating a well-rounded person and citizen. That means that the pupils need to develop a feeling of their own worth, pride and love for their country and responsibility for the future. In school, children should learn about the hard work that is involved in getting bread from the ploughed field onto our tables. In the school syllabus there is nothing about the importance of national traditions or that prepares a young man for military service before he is called up to the army.*

"Uncle Tevan stopped, gave a deep sigh, and continued with his story:

> *It seemed as if everything was going fine. The party first secretary particularly liked what Haik said about future soldiers. He had only just come back from Moscow where he had taken part in the work of the sixth congress of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. But Haik suddenly raised his voice and began speaking of educating youth in the spirit of internationalism. It was a passionate speech. It was 1935, the time when after the murder of Kirov a new wave of repression had begun. However, Haik considered it necessary to discuss the most controversial problems, fearlessly criticising people who permit themselves to break the just laws of international relations. This is what he said:*
>
> > 'We speak a lot about the importance of giving young people deep and serious knowledge, yet in the Armenian autonomous region the teaching of Armenian history is suddenly abolished. Or a commission comes to the autonomous region to study the issue of internationalism. However, on their return to Baku, the members of the commission report in the press that "the people of Karabakh wants to remain within Azerbaijan" rather than what they should have proposed after their investigations.'

"Uncle Tevan then told how the hall was in uproar, although it wasn't clear whether or not they approved of the speaker's words. Ignoring the noise Haik loudly asked:

> 'Don't our colleagues in Baku think that we had the October Revolution so that all peoples would be equal? Did the party not create first of all the Transcaucasian Federation so that we here in this region could work and live together as brothers? And finally, did not comrade Stalin swear to maintain our Union as the apple of the eye, in order that we should all feel ourselves to be members of one family?'

“At this, commented uncle Tevan, the hall fell silent. The delegates understood that after Haik’s speech they had to make up their minds one way or the other. Unfortunately, they didn’t decide either way. On the other hand ‘the colleagues in Baku’ very quickly got to grips with the arguments of the Karabakh education boss.

“Uncle Andranik also told me about this conference. And his impressions coincided with the reminiscences of Tevan Djavadyan. Father, I know that this speech served as an important lesson for you too. That’s what your most faithful friend Andranik told me.”

“Well, yes, son, looking back on this district conference and the very different reactions to my speech, I realised how careful I had to be on official platforms and even in private conversations when citing the most well-known propositions, established dogmas and even quotations from Stalin, if what I wanted to do was to illustrate my own thoughts. For only a free person can have his own thoughts.”

“In this book, father, I often mention my and your great contemporary, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Once he honestly admitted publicly that in 1936, as an eighteen-year-old lad and already a student in Moscow, he began to believe in socialism, in Lenin and therefore also in Stalin. In his inimitable way he summed it up: ‘By the start of the war I already trusted in them myself.’ So, you don’t need to be ashamed that at different times you thought and reasoned in different ways.”

“I’m grateful to him. It is indeed an honest admission. After such an admission one cannot fail to believe that the future will honestly evaluate our stubborn desire to remain true to all our principles and ideals.”

* * *

“Father, I tried to talk about you not only with those who knew you, although the people I felt closest to were the ones who had been with you. I want to read a note from my diary and tell you about a person who grew up with you in Agorti – this is very, very important for me.”

In childhood, especially when I spent the summer holidays in my father’s home village of Agorti, it seemed to me that the whole world knew my father. At any rate in Agorti and in the district centre Martuni all adults reacted with a smile at the mere mention of father’s name. Sometimes they stressed that they knew Haik Balayan well and used to talk with him. As the years went by such people (or such reactions) became fewer and fewer. And when decades later, returning from distant parts, someone said to me that they knew or remembered my father, it was especially awe-inspiring for me. Sometimes people phoned me and introduced themselves as acquaintances or even close friends of my father and we always met and talked. Admittedly there were times when I was travelling and sadly such telephone calls resulted only in a phone conversation. But there was one instance, of which years later I was constantly ashamed. Someone phoned me, who was a contemporary of my father and said that he had known him since childhood. He introduced himself as Grigori Ioanesyan, deputy head of the history faculty at Yerevan State University. It was in 1981. I don’t know whether it was from extreme modesty or out of tactfulness, but he didn’t go into a lot of detail and I promised to meet. But we didn’t manage to meet – I was too late.

I was really upset. Grigori Ioanesyan, from the same village as my father, was only two years younger. They were born in Agorti. They grew up together and ran around the meadows, mountains and dales of the legendary village. They were two years apart in the same school in Agorti. They graduated two years apart from the Shushi pedagogical college. In 1935 he was the editor-in-chief of the Martuni district newspaper “*Bolshevik victory*” in which articles and the text of speeches by my father were published. When father was the head of the education department in Karabakh, Ioanesyan was the director of a model ten-year school in Martuni.

So, it's not difficult to imagine how much I would have gained from meeting this man. It was only later that I learnt that Grigori Ioanesyan had worked in jobs where his path must have crossed with father's. And then he became an academic and got a doctorate in history.

But I had a wonderful opportunity to make up for my omission: by God's will things worked out that one of the editors of this book is Grigori's daughter Inga Ioanesyan. I should add that she has edited over ten of my books, all published by her husband Arkadi Asyan.

I didn't know any of this. I discovered it only now.

I felt deeply that first and foremost I needed to confess my involuntary lapse to father.

"It's good that you told me about Grigori from the Gyulunts family. In early childhood we grew up together, as teenagers our paths separated, but after a while we met often. It really is good that you remember him even if you didn't see him."

"It was me that needed to talk about him. Now that I've told you about 'Grigori from the Gyulunts family', I feel better."

* * *

"There's one more thing I want to tell you, father. It's not my fault that I am often overcome by thoughts of which we say glibly that history does not tolerate conditional constructions. Knowing mum, and now knowing you too, it's not hard to guess that if things had worked out differently you wouldn't have stopped at me and Boris. I can imagine how happy we would have been if there had been another brother (or brothers), or there might have been a sister (or sisters). It's a nightmare what was done to a whole nation, to its future, to its gene pool! But there is nothing that can be done. It's the reality of life. It's about you, father. And it's about God having mercy all the same. I want to remind you of the mark you left behind you, of how leaving this world you nevertheless remained. You stepped into tangible immortality. You have three sons – Norik, me and Boris. From Norik you have two grandchildren – Larisa and Yuri. From me, three – Susanna, Lusine and Haik. And from Boris, three – Anush, Arsen and Artur. You have great-grandchildren – Albert, Robert, Natalya, David, Margarita, Zori, Levon, Nelly, Mary… and there are more on the way. All this is your and mum's immortality. And you know why I decided to name them all, doing it not just for you and mum, but for the countless millions who seemingly vanished into oblivion. After all, many of them had children and then grandchildren and great-grandchildren whom they didn't see and didn't even know about. I want them to know that we remember them all, while not wanting to curse the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the tyrant and the petty tyrants, the executioners and the executioner-in-chief. After all, many of them really didn't know what they were doing."

* * *

The unexpected appearance in our life of my father, the reliable location of his grave, his life story and reminiscences of him, actual documents and photos literally brought us all closer in a special way. The veil of secrecy that had prevailed for many years and had separated political prisoners and their families had at last been lifted. This secrecy was also part of Stalin's plan. A person without a real life story is just as ethereal as someone without a shadow on a bright sunny day. This was especially true for sons and other relatives who might never even see the person who had previously been sentenced. A whole system of officials with various qualifications worked hard to transform into enemies these slandered and hunted individuals who had been excluded from normal life.

How could one not mention father's friend, the poet? I feel a chilling sensation, as though part of me had died, when I read the letter of poet and communist Yakov Kosman, who asks to be sent to the front line (when just a month remained of his sentence!). He wrote the letter not long after the day that the Soviet Union entered the war.

He wasn't sent to the front, but shot, along with other totally innocent people. There was another political trial. Ugly malice and fear for one's own skin defeated purity of intentions and nobility. Kosman was weakened, exhausted by his long time in camp. Why should he go to the war? But he was ready to die. His country was in danger. And I remember how, when I read this letter by Kosman, I hastened to tell father about the final events in the life of his friend, who did not survive much longer than he did. It looked as if it had become a habit to discuss with my father the things which provoked the most complex reflections and questions.

And mum, I feel, can only approve, even though it leaves much less time for lively discussions with her. I think mum realised a long time ago how much I discovered about her after we found my father.

* * *

The work on this manuscript lasted many years. It was difficult to write. At the beginning almost everything connected with my father was in the realm of the unknown. Then there was a breakthrough that was so crucial that I had to work through and restructure everything again myself. At last, so it seemed, there was the chance to analyse the past calmly and to write up my researches. But, no: as if it was not enough that my father had disappeared (like millions of others in the same situation), for years even we, the children, felt under that mysterious and terrible taboo which for so long had been imposed on all of us from above. To look for information, to ask questions or even to speak with close family about those who had been repressed were things we shouldn't do. It was only possible to guess at the good attitude, respect and sympathy towards my father, to pick up hints without discussing directly and without showing any interest in details.

The years passed and the labels apparently changed to their opposites. "Enemies of the people" became "victims" and judges became butchers. However, the state was in no hurry to make public any decisive conclusions or matters of principle: the whole process was quite openly sidelined. And the steps and measures taken by the authorities changed so whimsically that specific plans and actions were left hanging in mid air and lost any meaning.

A free and open discussion, the opportunity to have one's say about the issues that are the most controversial and awkward (especially for officialdom) – that is the way to expose the real truth which is fully capable of defending itself. Let's recall once more the famous words of Aristotle, who expresses in a different way the thought of Socrates: "Although both Plato and the Truth are dear to me, my sacred duty obliges me to give preference to the Truth."

For truth to triumph one needs only to create the opportunity for everyone to express their opinion freely. After meeting my father in the Komi lands I realised that many of my notes and many of the facts and documents I had gathered would be hard to place on the pages of this book as I had long ago conceived it. So, I will place part of the materials and documents which I have gathered and researched, not without considerable effort, into an appendix to this book. I see it as my duty.

EPILOGUE

I shouldn't complain that while mum was alive we didn't talk much about life, that I paid little attention to her advice and to her words and that when I was a long way from home I didn't read her letters very carefully. In fact, I really shouldn't reprove myself for all this. After all, as long as I can remember I talked with her in my mind. I argued, agreed, disagreed, justified myself and asked forgiveness. In short I can say that this telepathic contact of ours was uninterrupted. And the same happened after her death.

However, after I found my father it turned out that I spoke mostly with him. I'm sure that mum was not jealous. After all, she knew that previously it was difficult to talk with my father on a specific subject. Everything was in a kind of fog. Earlier I had not seen photos of my father with a shaven head and unshaven beard face on and in profile. By the way, I don't know why it was that this "dual portrait" evoked some kind of additional respect for him. Probably it was because for me the title page of his weighty GULAG file augmented the authority of the "enemy of the people" rather than making him seem guilty of something. And probably it is not by chance that it was from that very moment when I began to leaf through his file and study it that father's image was revealed in a real way and I made ever new discoveries. And more and more often I had a need, a thirst to talk with him.

I am sure that now this is forever. As long as I live, I shall quench my thirst with endless conversation with my father and with my mother. And now that I have finished this book, I want to say a few words to mum. I want to say these few words without stopping for breath. But when she interrupts me I shall stop to listen. Of course, I want her to have the very last word.

* * *

"Mum, you remember how in Andizhan I praised a professor for his lectures not on medicine but on the theme of '*Love and Friendship*' and you, having listened to what I had to say, immediately began talking of father, how when he was giving a lecture in the medical college he often would unexpectedly change the subject, say from Engels or Feuerbach, to the theme of duty. Father spoke of the duty of Soviet man, of the communist, the young communist, the soldier and others. You, as a diligent student, took accurate notes of your husband's lecture. The one thought which really struck home and which remained firmly in your memory was that a person's heroic deeds are not only on the battlefield or at work, but also when at a moment of sorrow or misfortune they remain faithful to their duty. I want to remind you once more literally word for word what he told you that evening that he had not been able to say at the college. He said that everything in life comes down to duty – duty to oneself, to one's family, to the state, to other people, to the past and to the future. And the most important thing, the whole of the Bible is a lesson in duty. The Bible says 'thou shalt'. Thou shalt love, thou shalt honour, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal. Everywhere there is duty and that means obligation and responsibility. And when I 'got to know' father, I understood why you remembered him so infinitely and faithfully. I realised that you were very alike. Both of you had strong feelings of duty, of responsibility, of obligation. This was your good fortune, and maybe, forgive me for saying it, mum, your misfortune also. For you father was incomparable. You continued to love him as much as ever after his death and even after your death. You always had a philosophical attitude not only to life but also to death. This philosophy of yours was a help not only to you, but also to me…

"Now that I have finished this book, I am not leaving you, of course. In all the years that I was working on it I often thought that death is not the end. Maybe it was God's will that I should work for so long on this book and be so often absent from my desk. I think that is why I wondered about the genre, why in the course of telling the

story I so often was confused, confused in time and space. I want to say again that even when I was a long way from home I never stopped thinking about you, never stopped talking with you and meeting father. And these conversations and meetings not only revealed many mysteries to me, but they were in themselves a mystery.

"If you knew, mum, how often I tore up pages that I had written, how much black ink I used crossing out particular sentences. How I used to jump up from my desk and go to the window talking out loud to you and dad. And all this was quite natural and normal for me. I would write, say, that the tyrant not only tortured you, not only tore your souls apart, but did the most terrible thing, he killed your love, although I was always sure that was impossible. It's impossible to kill your love. And talking with you I had a quite tangible feeling, not at all a mystic feeling, that even now you continue to love one another. And, after all, the same could be said about millions of other husbands and wives whose fate was similar to yours. That's the kind of thing that statistics don't reveal…

"Talking with you and father, reading the archive materials and dad's files (both from the GULAG and from university) and studying hundreds if not thousands of documents that have been made public, I came to the conclusion that there is one genre to describe my book – modern history. If you remember, I confessed to you a number of times that I was born to be a historian. After all, everything that I write about happened not only to you but it is the history of the whole of our huge country. And in the last analysis my narration is based on facts that I gathered for several decades. And every time, apparently to console me, you said with a smile that you were convinced that no academic degree can force someone to dig around in the archives if they do not have a calling to it from God. I think the most important thing is when you realise that history is not everything. I am sure that many think that way, especially those whose childhood was in the thirties and forties.

"Was it not about us that one wise man wrote: 'I found myself between poverty and the sun. Poverty prevented me from believing that in history everything under the sun worked out fine. The sun taught me that history is not everything.'

"I think I guessed what this wise man meant. He wanted to say that history is not everything because it tells of the heroic deeds, the barbarity, the vandalism and other deeds of the living. That is the task of history. But there is also death, which one should respect."

… I didn't want to tell mum that about five years after she died I got interested in Albert Camus. He is that wise man who had death in mind when he said that "history is not everything". Reading Camus, I thought of mum. After all, he is not only a great philosopher, but also a great writer, a Nobel prize-winner. He revealed the secret of all of Europe's tragedies, emphasising that what he had in mind was the Europe created by such "evil geniuses as Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche". It seemed to me that he was talking about mum, when in about 1945-46, just at the time when she was contemplating suicide, he wrote: "Man cannot become free until he overcomes the fear of death. But not through suicide. You cannot overcome by giving in." Remembering this, I continued:

"Do you understand, mum, what is happening to me now? Reading the wise man I was somewhat consoled. I now know that even in the camp you were free and father died free, and for me that is also the most important thing. I also know that you were able to overcome yourself because you did not give in. And by doing that you made your sons happy. It is so important to conquer oneself in order not to be enslaved. By the way, the tyrants executed one wise slave, Aesop, not for his sarcastic fables with their very pointed hints, but for alleged criminal acts, so that in the eyes of the people they would appear to be democrats. I think that this is also very familiar to you and your comrades in suffering from Karabakh. I want to tell you, mum, that Boris and I never felt you to be a widow. We didn't even know the word. You never said anything to us, but we could see that you had not a shadow of doubt that you would meet our father again. That could not have been possible without

strong love. And when we found father, when we got to know him, we couldn't fail to see how you and father loved one another, even after death. And I repeat once again, that is not some mystic feeling. It's reality. It's a fact.

"The awareness that you, as I have said so often, believe in God quietly and without pathos made me feel good. This was part of your reality. For you it was a fact. I always saw in you a certain hatred, I would say, of obsequious attempts to please. You always placed your hope in a healthy spirit. I don't want to be a materialist or an idealist, let alone an atheist. I want to believe like you in life in heaven. It's very important. I need it, if you want to know, it is even to my advantage. For I want to believe that my parents will always be alive, I want to believe that my wife and my children will always be alive. My ancestors will always be alive, and my family. And I want you to know this. I especially want that all mothers should always be alive, even the mothers of my enemies, as the boy sings in the ancient song. Even if it is in heaven, but let them live. For almost half a century now I have been dreaming of sailing round the world on the sailing vessel '*Armenia*' flying the Armenian flag and with your portrait hanging in the ward-room, along with the portraits of all my friends' mothers. And I think that I am already close to realising this dream, but if I don't manage it, then I am sure that others will realise my passionate dream, which is like a sacred duty to our homeland. And they will definitely dedicate their journey around the world to the mothers of Armenia, who in inhospitable foreign lands, for long centuries of tragedy, deprived of their homeland, nevertheless preserved not only their children but also their native language – the native language which the grateful Armenian nation calls its 'mother tongue'. You know that in Armenian schools that is the name of the main textbook – 'Mother tongue'.

"I always noticed and took note that you, like all Armenian mothers, like my Nelly, the mother of my children, are special, I would say, your own person, unique and one of a kind. However, I really got to know you in a deeper and sweeter way when I found father. Yes, I'm grateful to all those who helped me to find him. But believe me, however strange it may sound, I am most appreciative and grateful to you that I found father. I fulfilled your testament. And what happened is not a dream, not a fairy tale. It's real life. I now know everything about father. I know his handwriting. I know his style, his way of writing. I know how he thought, how he spoke in public, how he argued. I know how he struggled, how he tormented himself and how anxious he was about losing his way in the awful contradictions of the ideology of the 'ordinary Soviet person', in the contradictions of the times. I know a lot about father, but, mum, there's one thing I don't know – what his voice was like. I knew and loved your voice, but among all the different voices in the world I would not be able to recognise the voice of my own father. That's a great sorrow. If only for that one thing I don't want to forgive, I cannot forgive those who are responsible for that sorrow."

"I don't know whether I told you or not, but first of all I fell in love with your father's voice. You couldn't mistake it for anybody else's," mum whispered almost inaudibly.

"Look after yourself, mum. Look after father. Look after each other. God forbid that I should lose you again. It was so hard for me to get this far…"

"*Tsavyt tanem*," still more quietly came mum's loving voice.